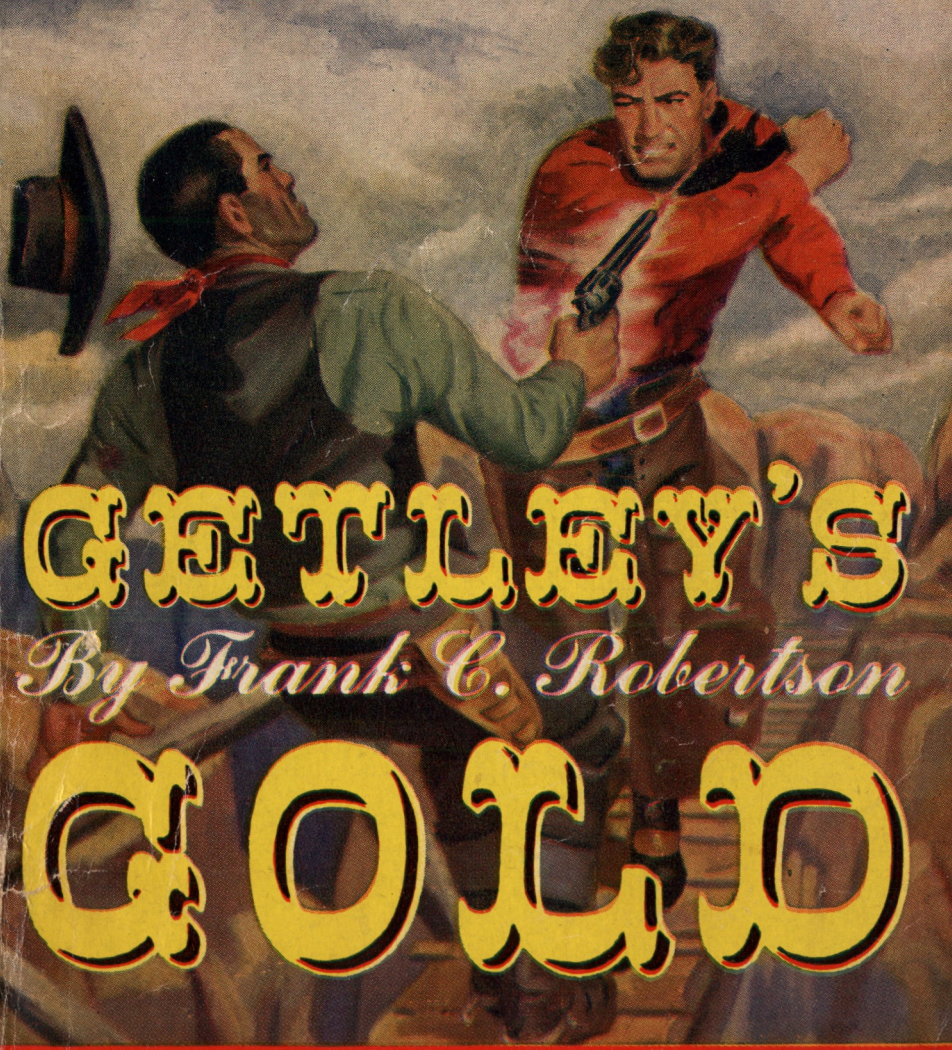


Good
A Gunfire

WESTERN NOVEL

25
CENTS
NO. 15

A HILLMAN PUBLICATION



GATLEY'S

By Frank C. Robertson

GOLD

A FULL LENGTH WESTERN NOVEL

GETLEY'S GOLD

by **FRANK C. ROBERTSON**

Here's a hot-barreled Western written in true Robertson style, with enough gun-play and sudden death to satisfy Robertson's most exacting fans.

West Morgan, honest, ambitious young rancher, finds himself the victim of as neat a frame-up as a crooked cowman ever staged. Complications begin when Bugs Getley, an eccentric old friend of Morgan's, finds a cache of gold. Bugs does a disappearing act before he can reveal where the gold is hidden. Suspicion centers on Morgan, who was the last to see Getley alive.

A damaging chain of evidence is forged against West. His only friend in the enemy camp is Lola Durrant, beautiful daughter of a rival rancher, who believes in his innocence.

A rousing saloon brawl, two attempted lynchings, just the right salting of love interest and plenty of suspense round out this exciting GUNFIRE WESTERN NOVEL.

NOVEL SELECTIONS, INC.

New York

GETLEY'S GOLD

by Frank C. Robertson



COPYRIGHT, 1943, BY FRANK C. ROBERTSON

PUBLISHED BY ARRANGEMENT WITH E. P. DUTTON & CO., INC.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED BY NOVEL SELECTIONS, INC.

This Gunfire Western Novel represents an abridgement of the original to speed the action.

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

THE BENT, creaking boom pole of the derrick swung high overhead, and the Jackson fork tripped directly over West Morgan. Unable to dodge West did the only thing possible. He flung himself face downward on the stack and a couple of hundred pounds of wild, sweet-smelling meadow hay descended upon his back. The six sharp steel teeth of the Jackson fork bucked and quivered as though disappointed at having missed their human target.

West burrowed out from under the hay and gazed balefully at the forker on the wagon, and then at Dusty King, doubled up with laughter on his horse.

"Call yoreself a stacker an' can't dodge a ton of hay," Dusty jeered. "One them tines gonna ketch you by the seat o' the pants one o' these times an' toss you right out into the calf pasture."

It was the forker's fault—a neighboring homesteader West had hired to help put up his hay. The man hastened to explain.

"The dang trip-rope caught around my foot an' upended me," he apologized.

"I know," West replied. "You was listenin' to the alleged funny cracks of that monkey on a horse. If the lazy lout would hang himself onto a pitchfork—"

"Who, me?" Dusty protested, a pained expression on his face. "You think I'd demean myself with sordid, common labor?" He cocked one leg jauntily over the saddle horn and began to build a smoke.

"Hey, don't strike a match around this stack, you grinnin' hyena," West called in alarm. Dusty was the only regular hired man he kept all the year around. He was fond of Dusty, and even allowed him to come and laugh at the hard labor he and the other men did in haying season when there was little or no riding to do, but Dusty was careless.

"Okay, Dusty goes bye-bye," the puncher said, and turned his horse. Then he stopped. "Hey, look, would yuh?" He pointed up the road.

West looked. There was reason for Dusty's astonishment. An old man, bareheaded, and with long white whiskers had just come into view. He ran a few yards, then, as if on the very verge of exhaustion, fell headlong, picked himself up and came on at a run.

"It's old 'Bugs' Getley, an' it looks like he'd blew his top fer fair this time," the forker announced.

"Let me down," West ordered. He seized two tines of the Jackson fork firmly and swung into the air as the forker pulled the trip-rope, and the kid driving the derrick team backed his horses. He was a fine figure of a man as he hung there; overalled legs dangling, blue cham-

bray shirt stretched tight across the bulging muscles of his broad back. His short black hair showed a rim of gray dust beneath the broad brim of his Stetson.

West dangled in the air a moment before his feet struck the bottom of the hayrack. He let go the fork and leaped to the ground as old Bugs Getley stumbled again and fell just outside the gate to the stackyard.

Dusty King reached the old man ahead of West. All the other men came running up. Even old Pablo Guitierrez, driving another wagon in from the field, climbed down and came running.

"What's wrong, Bugs, you sick?" Dusty asked, as he dismounted and tried to raise the old man's head.

The old man shook him off impatiently, and staggered to his feet. He was panting almost too hard to speak.

"I gotta see West," he squeaked out. "Right now—alone."

"All right, you pelicans—back to work," West ordered good-naturedly. His gaze fell upon Dusty, who at once busied himself adjusting his latigo. "Hang yoreself onto that Jackson fork, an' try some honest labor for a while."

"Me—you mean *me*?" Dusty stammered.

"I don't mean your Uncle Phineas. And pour it onto him, boys. If he can't keep on top of the stack let the stack get on top of him."

With a woebegone expression Dusty tied his horse to the fence and reluctantly seizing the tines of the Jackson fork, as though they might be hot, was carried into the air. The kid derrick driver, pleased at the chance to have some fun, swung Dusty almost to the top of the boom pole, high above the top of the stack, and let him hang there kicking and cursing until West ordered the kid to let him down.

West turned his attention to the panting old man, who was clawing nervously at his shirt.

"West, I've found it! I've found it!" the old man cried. "Gold! Gold from the old Portneuf robbery that I've hunted fer years. There's thousands—"

"Wait a minute, Ben," West interrupted. He was the only man in the world who didn't call the old man Bugs to his face. "You need a drink of water. Let me help you into the house."

Even though he believed the old man's mind had cracked at last West found himself glancing around suspiciously. All the other men had gone back to work, but old Pablo Guitierrez was painfully climbing up the Jacob-staff of his rack, and it was just barely possible that he had heard what Getley said. West made a mental note of the fact, although it meant less than nothing. He didn't have a better friend in the world than old Pablo, and the chances were that one day the old fellow would be his father-in-law.

He helped Ben Getley into the small but neat ranch house he called

home, seated the old man on a kitchen chair, and brought him a drink of fresh water from the well.

"Now what's this about gold, Ben?" he asked amiably.

"Don't you laugh at me, West Morgan," the old man said fiercely. "I ain't crazy if they do call me Bugs. Ain't I told yuh fer years I'd find that dust before I die? I thought you believed me—yo're the only man ever treated me like I had good sense, an' yuh've grubstaked me."

"Of course, Ben, but that robbery happened fifty-five years ago," West said.

"Fifty-seven," Getley corrected. "I was 'leven then; I'm sixty-eight now. I tell yuh, West, I *saw* that gold hid—two hundred pounds of it in a leather-covered trunk, there was, an' some valuables. An' now I've found it again. An' it's our'n, West! Our'n!"

"It's mighty hard to believe, Ben," West said.

"Be it? Then take a look at this!" From his pocket Ben Getley extracted an enormous gold watch that had been the height of fashion sixty years before. It was suspended from a heavy chain with a jeweled charm that must alone have been worth a hundred dollars.

Getley snapped open the back of the case. The initials, L T had been elaborately engraved.

"This watch belonged to Lew Tendahl, the gambler. I seen him open it many's the time," he asserted.

West could no longer doubt. "Where did you find it?" he asked almost in a whisper.

A strange and sudden change came over the old man. His faded eyes filled with crafty suspicion. "Fust we got some business to fix up," he said. "Do we split her down the middle?"

West hesitated. There were angles to be considered. "I certainly don't want very much of it, Ben," he said to allay the old man's suspicion. "But there may be other people with claim on that gold, yuh know."

"Nobody's got a claim on it," Getley said harshly. "I was on that stage. There was seven other passengers it belonged to. Ever' one of 'em was killed by the road agents less'n two hours after they got scared an' hid the trunk. How many o' them yuh reckon got heirs livin'? They was all single men. Besides, nobody now knows how much gold belonged to which."

"You may be right, but I don't know how the law looks at it."

Getley began the old, familiar story of the robbery, and West let him ramble on, chiefly because he wanted time to think.

"I was jist a kid up there in Virginny City, Montany," old Ben said. "My dad left me there while he went back to bring in a train load o' freight. He was caught in the mountains and froze to death—Disaster Gulch they call the place to this day. Only folks I had was an uncle an' aunt back in Ohio. Come spring the miners tuk up a collection tuh

send me back to 'em. That's how come me to be on that there stage-coach.

"We left the main stage road an' come over the Portneuf divide 'cause we'd heard they'd been a lot o' holdups near Robbers' Roost. Then—I remember like it was yesterday—a frien'ly Injun come along an' told us they was some armed white men been watchin' that road fer a coupla days.

"It was too late tuh turn back, so the men talked it over an' decided to hide the trunk with their gold and val'ables in the brush, an' come back after it later. I ricolect jist how they buried it under the roots of a big, spranglin' ole willow bush.

"We went on, an' shore nuff the road agents helt us up. They was a mess of 'em—anyway a dozen. I was jist a scar't kid, layin' on my belly in the bottom o' the coach where Lew Tindahl had tol' me to lay, when somethin' went wrong, an' all at onct the shootin' started.

"I tell yuh, West, hell shorely popped. Not a man in that stage lived. In the excitement I jumped out an' skeedaddled into the brush, an' bein' a kid I reckon nobody seen me light out. I hid there a-remblin'—too scart tuh cry—while them road agents was a-cussin' an' a-huntin' fer the treasure box, which they never did find because it was ten mile back.

"By-n-by they set fire tuh the stage tuh make it look like Injuns had done it an' pulled out. I crawled out after dark, an' the nex' day some Injuns picked me up, an' finally I got to Salt Lake. A Mormon fambly tuk me in an' emigrated to Arizony to help found a colony. I lived with 'em fer ten years, an' it was nearly thirty years before I got back up here to look fer that trunk."

"And another thirty years to find it," West put in grimly. "You've always said it was buried in the J Bar J swamp, an' you've went over it inch by inch a hundred times. How come—"

"*But the swamp itself had moved,*" Ben Getley said triumphantly.

West gave a start. "What?" he exclaimed.

"Tuk me a long time to figger it out but I finally done it," the old man chuckled. "Watchin' a cloudburst give me the idee. Yuh see, West, what happened was there come a big cloudburst many years ago an' cut a channel that drained the swamp. Musta spread out an' formed a dam below, an' natcharal a new swamp forms. The willers in the old one all died, an' after while it become meadow."

"I see. And so you think the trunk must be somewhere on the J Bar J ranch?"

"Think hell!" Getley yelled. "I've found it! I figgered out where the old stage road entered the swamp an' where it left. At that I reckon I had luck, er Providence was on my side, because I fair stumbled onto it. I been huntin' up there fer weeks, but it was a badger led me onto it."

"A—a badger?"

"Yep, a badger. I was walkin' 'long the aidge o' the meader when I noticed where a badger had been operatin' quite some. I see where he'd started him a hole, quit some sudden an' dug a new one right alongside. 'Fer why should a badger change his intentions right in the middle of a hole?' I asks myself. I leans over 'an looks down, an' I sees somethin' that looks like leather. I starts diggin', an' in twenty minutes I has dug out forty thousand dollars in gold dust."

The old man's eyes gleamed, and his lean old chest heaved in his excitement. West could no longer doubt. Bugs Getley *had* found the treasure for which his thirty years' search had caused people to think him crazy.

"You opened the box?" West asked, although the evidence of the gold watch answered the question.

"It was easy. The lock was rusted."

"Then what did you do?"

"I covered her over with a few shovels of dirt an' breezed on down here. You see I was afoot. That dang pony o' mine hid out on me agin this mornin'."

"I'll say you breezed," West laughed. "Forty thousand dollars. Holy Smoke!" He sobered. Such things had to be handled legally. He wondered if he could make the old man understand.

"Listen, Ben: we can't just take that gold and start to spend it. First thing, the government has to be notified. And another thing: the new owners of the J Bar J may have some rights, you know. The gold is on their land."

Bugs Getley leaped to his feet. "An' mebbe you wanta think o' some way to beat me out of it," he rasped.

Before West could recover from his astonishment the door slammed, and the old man was gone.

2

FOR A MOMENT West was minded to go in pursuit of the old man and bring him back, by force if necessary. Then he realized that it wouldn't do to create a scene in front of his men. He knew that Getley had a terrible temper, and the old fellow would fight like a wildcat. The best thing was to let him cool off.

West watched the old man head for home, then went out to the stackyard.

"Gosh, we was just about to go in and see if old Bugs hadn't murdered you some," Dusty King said. "By the holes in grandfather's hat he shore went away mad. You musta insulted his ancestors."

"He was just mad because Sheeps run off again, an' got madder when I wouldn't tell him he could kill the pony," West said easily, giving the most plausible excuse he could think of for the old man's tantrum. Some time before West had given old Bugs a gentle little worn-out cow pony called Sheeps, which had recently developed a trick of hiding from his master at various and sundry times, and everybody knew about it. The boys laughed and accepted the story at face value.

It was nearly quitting time. West sent the wagons back for one more load and kept Dusty on the stack while he prepared an early supper. He wanted to get away from the ranch as early as he could without having to answer questions.

When he called supper, however, old Pablo Guterrez led his pony out of the barn.

"Ain't you stayin' for supper, Pablo?" West asked.

"No, *Senor* West. Some clean socks I need. I ride in an' eat the supper with my daughter Rosa."

There was nothing unusual in the action. Pablo frequently did that. "Okay," West laughed. "Rosa is a better cook than I am so I don't blame you. You tell her I'll be in to see her right soon, Pablo."

"She weel be ver' glad to see you, *senor*," Pablo winked.

"Aha!" Dusty said after Pablo had gone. "Rosa she like *Senor* Morgan ver' mooch. Mebbe so, but she likes Charley Trail a hell of a lot better."

West was jarred. "Hunh? What's that you said?" he demanded.

"Oh, mebbe she loves yuh all right, but Charley Trail has been hangin' around her place a lot lately, an' she shore ain't hatin' his admiration."

West aimed a hot biscuit at his employee's ear, and barely missed. But he was more worried than he seemed. He had been fond of Pablo's daughter Rosa for a long time, and she had seemed to care for him. He had thought seriously of marrying her. A young rancher such as he really needed a wife, but he would not marry for that reason alone.

It wasn't altogether jealousy which made him resent what Dusty had just told him. If Rosa didn't want to marry him that was her own business. But he didn't like to see her throw herself away on Charley Trail, a man whom West wholeheartedly despised—the man who was as near to being an enemy as he possessed.

At the moment he worried more about old Bugs Getley. He didn't care about the treasure getting away from him, but he feared that Getley would get into trouble. He meant to ride up and see him. It wouldn't be easy for the old man to wrestle a two hundred pound box alone.

He kept wishing, too, that old Pablo hadn't gone home. He kept remembering how close the old man had been when Getley gasped out his astonishing news. Yet he knew Pablo was honest, and his friend.

Sometimes he suspected that Rosa resented her father's obvious partiality for West.

It was closer to the Jewkes' swamp, where Getley claimed to have found the gold, than it was to the old man's isolated cabin, but that was now a part of the J Bar J holdings, and since the owners were newcomers West didn't care to trespass without good cause. Besides, he half hoped the old man would repent of his outburst of temper and come back to square things.

Bugs Getley was not at home. West's hail awoke only echoes. Without entering the cabin West rode out to the little straw-covered stable and looked in. The old man's saddle was not on its accustomed peg.

It seemed clear then that Getley had found his pony, Sheeps, saddled it, and gone back to remove his treasure before it fell into other hands, presumably West's.

The young rancher was disappointed and half angry at the old man's attitude. He had been good to old Bugs. For years he had practically grubstaked him. He had treated him with deference and respect, and should have earned the old man's complete confidence. He was disgusted over Getley's sudden decision that West had just been trying to beat him out of the gold he had found.

"To hell with him," West shrugged. He turned his horse, and although the hour was late he headed toward a place where he would find congenial company—a little settlement at Skull Creek, where Rosa Guterrez ran a small store and kept the post office.

He was to wish many times that he had acted differently.

Skull Creek, though small, was a money town. Center of a vast region devoted to livestock and ranching, with a considerable freight and lumber business thrown in, its stores and saloons did a thriving business. West was not surprised to find the streets lined with saddle horses. Nor was he particularly surprised to note in front of Hall's saloon one of his own horses with Dusty King's saddle on it.

He rode on down the street to Rosa's little notion store which she kept in conjunction with the post office. The girl usually kept open until eleven or twelve o'clock, partly for the convenience of men who came long distances to town, and partly because she loved company. This night, although it was not yet eleven, the store was dark.

Disappointed, West was about to turn when he heard his name called. Then he saw Pablo sitting in the shadows where the store and living quarters of the Guterrez family joined.

"You are late looking for my Rosa, *Senor West*," Pablo said a little reprovingly.

"Yeh. Rosa gone to bed?"

"I theenk not. She take her pony and go for a ride. She say, 'Pablo, *padre*, you mind the store,' but I mooch rather sit in the dark an' smoke. Eef you like to wait for Rosa I open bottle of *vino*."

"No, thanks, Pablo, it's getting pretty late."

"Rosa ride alone tonight," Pablo said a little anxiously. "*Senor* Trail an' two of hees frien's were 'ere earlier, but they leave."

"I guess Rosa can take care of herself," West laughed. That was one thing over which there was no cause to worry. The black-haired, attractive Rosa knew how to take care of herself. West understood Pablo's solicitous attitude. Pablo was very anxious to have Rosa marry West and settle down. And he disliked exceedingly West's principal rival, Charley Trail, the foreman of the J Bar J. Now Pablo just wanted West to know that Rosa was not out with Trail.

"Perhaps you not mind too mooch eef I no come to work tomorrow?" Pablo asked. "The fingers on my feet—they purty seeck. They blister too many."

West laughed. "All right, Pablo, you take it easy."

West rode back up the street, hesitating which side to take. There were two rival establishments in Skull Creek. One, the larger, was the property of Burr Hall, the acknowledged boss and bully of the town. Many men had tried opening up rival saloons, but only one man had managed to stick. That was Al Dollarhyde whose places of business; store, saloon, and hotel were just across the street from the similar places owned by Hall.

Many men had been beaten up when they crossed the street from Dollarhyde's, and warned not to be seen in the Dollarhyde saloon again. As a consequence the respectable element in the country patronized Dollarhyde almost exclusively, while the rougher element hung out in Hall's.

There were some, however, West Morgan among them, who insisted upon their constitutional rights to go where and when they pleased. Although preferring Dollarhyde as a man West frequently did his trading in Hall's store, for Hall, though a bully, ran a good store. It was fear of losing the young rancher's not inconsiderable trade which perhaps caused Hall to tolerate West's incursions into his rival's saloon.

It was Dusty's presence inside of Hall's which decided West to stop there. The good-natured puncher had a habit of getting into trouble at unexpected times and places. Also, when he got a few too many drinks his tongue rattled.

West did not see Dusty when he entered, and then as he reached the bar Burr Hall bore down upon him. Hall was not an unusually large man, but he was powerfully built on the short plan, and many a larger man had gone down before the assault of his punishing fists.

"Hi, ya, West Morgan," Hall greeted. "You're getting in kinda late. Where yuh been—over at that squeak-easy on the other side of the street?"

West found his hand caught in a punishing handclasp, which Hall

seemed minded to maintain. At the same time he noticed a rather breathless hush come over the saloon. Everyone was watching him.

"No," he said, "I ain't been over there yet, but when I need a drink I'll cross over." He smiled, and suddenly putting all his weight forward he moved his fast numbing fingers enough to exert a bone-crushing pressure of his own. It was plain that Hall was feeling him out.

As a matter of fact there were but two men in the country who might be called respectable opponents whom Burr Hall had not defeated. West was one of them; Charley Trail the other. Hall's reason for not tangling with Trail was obvious. Trail made no bones about the fact that he did his fighting with a gun—or a knife if a gun didn't happen to be handy. West had long expected that some day Hall would force a fight with him. Was this, he wondered, that time?

He was getting the worst of that silent dual of grips. His hand felt as though it was being crushed. Hall's mouth, beneath a small, straw-colored moustache twisted into a grin.

"Didn't you know I serve drinks in here?" Hall demanded.

"Poison," West retorted. "And if you don't let go my hand, Burr, I'm going to punch you one right in the belly."

For a long moment the men measured each other, then Hall abruptly let go. West's hand was numb. He rubbed his bruised knuckles with the other hand to restore circulation. Hall laughed gleefully.

"Lookit this hay-digger," he said loudly. "Can't even stand to shake hands with a *man*."

"Where's Dusty King?" West asked. "I see his horse out front."

"Dusty King?" Hall turned to his bartender. "You see Dusty in here, Mac?" he asked.

"He was here, but he went out," the surly looking bartender replied.

Something about the faces of the bystanders made West believe that the men lied. "You mind if I take a look in your back room?" he said.

"Sorry, but there's a private party goin' on in there."

"They won't mind if I just look in," West said coolly, and started for the back door.

He saw Burr Hall's hands double into fists, while Mac, the bartender, reached under the bar for a bung starter.

3

WEST KNEW instantly that Dusty was in the back room, and Burr Hall didn't want anyone to find him there.

"My hand is all right now, Burr," he said quietly. "If I don't see whether Dusty is in there or not then you and me are going to tangle."

Burr Hall drew a long, quivering breath to subdue his anger.

"All right, West," Hall said. "Take a look. But that idee of you an' me tanglin' kinda interests me. One of these times we'll see what we can do about it."

"Whenever you feel lucky," West said shortly, and striding over to the back door he flung it open.

Dusty King was in there! The boyish looking puncher sat at a card table, but there were no cards. And three husky ruffians, all employees of Burr Hall, hovered over him.

"Don't give us that," West heard one of the men called "Pack" Saddler say. "Why should Morgan be givin' away beef?"

"Maybe Morgan'll answer that himself—if there's any reason why it should be answered," West stated coldly as he entered the room.

The three roughs whirled angrily, but seeing their boss behind West they decided to leave it to him.

"Yeh, maybe you can," Burr Hall said. "We ain't got nothin' against Dusty personal, but we want some information outa him about the beef that old Bugs Getley eats. He's been tryin' to make us believe you give it to him."

"What's wrong with that? I did."

"Aw, come off," Pack Saddler sneered. "Nobody gives away beef."

West saw that Dusty had been drinking, and he had been roughly handled. He swung angrily upon the saloonkeeper.

"What the hell is this all about Burr?" he demanded. "I've been givin' Ben Getley beef for years, and it's nobody's damn' business. Even if I was stealin' it for him what business would it be of yours?"

"Might be quite a bit," Hall replied. "Maybe Getley ain't the only one stealin' beef. Charley Trail is complainin' that the J Bar J has been losin' a lot o' good beef stuff. An' I know my competitor across the street has been sellin' better beef than I can afford to buy. An' Dollarhyde is justice of the peace. Maybe you ain't smart in admittin' that Getley's been gettin' his beef from you."

The thing seemed so absurd that West could scarcely believe his ears. Yet he could see where it all knitted into a pattern. Hall was out to get Dollarhyde, and Charley Trail hated West. If a frame-up was being planned it was logical for them to get together. But it seemed a bit queer that innocent old Bugs Getley should be brought into it at this particular time.

"I don't know what you're drivin' at, Hall," he said, "but if you think you can frame a cattle rustlin' or beef stealing job on me and Dusty you're crazy. Come on, Dusty, we're gettin' out of here."

Pack Saddler and the other two bullies looked at Hall for their orders, but Hall made no sign. Dusty got uncertainly to his feet and staggered to the door.

As West turned to follow, Burr Hall said, "If old Bugs ever does

find that stagecoach gold he's been lookin' for all these years it might pay you to see me."

The remark struck West like a dash of cold water.

Burr Hall followed them into the barroom. "Better have a drink on the house before you go, boys," he called genially for the benefit of the bystanders.

West offered no reply. He steered Dusty out to his horse.

They reached the outskirts of town before West spoke. "You were shootin' off your mouth about old Ben Getley," he said harshly. "What did you tell 'em?"

Dusty groaned. "How kin I tell? That was the talkin'est whisky I ever drank. Musta been somethin' in it."

"It don't need anything in it to make a fool out of you. I want to know what you said."

"Well, all I kin remember is I just told about how ole Bugs came a-runnin' in, an' then went a-runnin' out again. Mebbe I said he acted like he'd found that ole leather trunk he's been huntin' for all these years."

"You said plenty," West said ironically. "That's exactly what he did find, and now all the bloodsuckers in the country will be on his tail—thanks to you."

"Oh, my lord," Dusty said repentantly. "Why don't you fire me?"

West let that pass. "Anyway," he said, "it's already been broadcast that old Ben has found the gold, and there's people would cut his throat, or anything else to get it away from him. And you shot off your big mouth."

Dusty was utterly crushed. He knew that he should have been at his camp on Briar Creek instead of in town, and this shirking of duty had got both him and West into trouble.

"You go on to the ranch and try to sober up," West told him. "In the morning hang yourself onto a pitchfork. Maybe it'll sweat some poison out of you and some sense in. I'm going to try again and find old Ben."

Although it was long past midnight when West reached the old man's cabin Getley still was not at home. Nor had he been there. West was about to leave when he heard someone coming. Assuming that it was Bugs coming home at last he decided to wait. His horse was standing in the yard in front of the stable, and he left it there while he waited in front of the cabin.

It was too late to remove the animal when he made the discovery that more than one man was coming. He waited until they got closer, but before they were close enough to recognize they saw his horse. They stopped instantly.

West waited in silence for them to come nearer, but panic seemed

to overtake them. They suddenly wheeled their mounts and raced back the way they had come.

"Hey!" West yelled, and then he saw that they had left a saddled horse behind. He stepped back inside the cabin and fumbled for Getley's rifle. Before he found it and got outside the men had disappeared from sight. He took a chance and sent a bullet skytearing after them. He heard the fast thrum of their horses' hooves for a moment then all was still.

The saddled horse the men had left behind was old Sheeps. West was not surprised. The wolf pack had gathered far faster than West had thought it would. Something had happened to Bugs Getley.

The pony stood still while West went up to it. He examined the saddle for blood, but there was none. He led the pony back to the stable, unsaddled and turned it loose.

He thought hard. The men who had brought back the pony had not been at Skull Creek when he was there. They might be somebody whom Burr Hall had sent out earlier, but he didn't think so. On a mission of that kind Hall would have sent his most trusted lieutenant, Pack Saddler. It had to be somebody else.

For some reason West thought of Charley Trail. Trail had been in town earlier in the evening. Pablo had seen him. He had called on Rosa, but the girl had failed to make a date with him—or so her father claimed. For the first time that long night West felt a spasm of jealousy. If Dusty had seen enough to talk about, old Pablo had seen more. He would have told his daughter, and she might have told Trall. That might account for Trail leaving town so early that night. It might account, too, for Burr Hall's effort to get something out of Dusty which could be made the basis for charges against the eccentric old-timer.

West returned Bugs' rifle to its pegs and mounted his horse. There was no use trying to follow the two men, but he had the uncomfortable feeling that poor old Bugs Getley was in serious trouble—or dead. He had surely gone to remove the gold from where he had found it, and he had met up with the two men. And they were bringing Sheeps back to turn loose in order to allay suspicion.

That night was too far gone for any sleep that he might get to do him any good. He would not sleep anyway. He rode away toward the J Bar J ranch, and the last part of the way he rode cautiously.

At that he didn't approach within sight of the buildings. He had no business there. He had not visited the J Bar J for six months—not since the place had changed hands.

The ranch, and the Jewkes family which had pioneered and developed it, had alike run down. West had not been surprised when Joe Jewkes, grandson of the Joseph Jewkes who had first homesteaded the ranch, had sold out. Joe had never been much force. His daughters had all married strangers, and his sons hated the ranch. Joe couldn't

be blamed for giving up the struggle and selling out to an Easterner who was said to have paid a great deal more than the outfit was worth.

Claude Durrant, the new owner, had at once hired Charley Trail to be foreman. Trail had been deputy sheriff at the time, but had resigned his office to take the new job. That was the main reason West had stayed away from the place. Another reason was that Durrant had suffered an accident soon after buying the place and had been bedridden ever since. Durrant was not a friendly person anyway.

The active boss of the outfit was said to be a girl, Durrant's daughter. West didn't approve of women bosses on a cattle ranch. All he knew about her was that her name was Lola, and she was said to be remarkably pretty, and as arrogant as she was good looking. Although she had been around for six months she and West had just not happened to meet.

It was on the J Bar J property that Bugs Getley had, after so many years of tiresome search, found the long-lost treasure-trove. West didn't know what legal right Durrant might have, but he would surely have the right to prevent trespass upon his property. Nevertheless, West intended to have a look at the place where old Bugs claimed to have found the long-hidden leather trunk.

The J Bar J was a big ranch, and the buildings were several miles below the old Jewkes swamp. West knew of a gate near the upper end and he decided to enter by that rather than take down the fence.

The bawling of cattle suddenly beat upon his ears. West knew that only the smell of blood could make them bawl in exactly that way. Spurring up he came suddenly upon a small bunch pawing and bellowing around some object in the bottom of a swale. The animals retreated reluctantly before his doubled up lasso rope, but continued to bawl.

West knew relief when he saw that it was not the body of a man they were bellowing about, but also a premonition of danger when he did see what it was. A six months old calf had been killed, and its hindquarters removed. The pool of blood where its throat had been cut indicated that it might have been butchered within the hour.

West glanced about nervously. He wished then that he had a gun. Things were adding up to something, he didn't know what.

The earmark of the dead calf showed plainly that it belonged to the J Bar J. He felt a cold chill stealing over him as he might have felt at the clanging of steel bars behind him.

He rode on without dismounting, passed through the strong wire gate and entered the edge of Jewkes swamp. The first faint grayness of dawn lay upon the eastern foothills.

It was a little hard to believe that this swamp had been developed, and another one disappeared during the fifty-seven years since Ben Getley had first seen the country. No one else remembered the change,

but he realized that after all old Joe Jewkes, the first settler, had homesteaded less than thirty years ago. It was possible.

There was little use to look over the old site of the swamp before daylight, and in the meantime the new swamp offered the only shelter in that vicinity.

The grayness increased, grew light, and then suddenly the blackness of night disappeared as though someone had drawn back a curtain. A halo of approaching sunlight added beauty to the morning.

West started to ride forth, then suddenly changed directions and spurred back into the shelter of the swamp. Two men had just ridden through the gate he had recently used and were riding across the meadow like men with a purpose. One of them was Charley Trail!

4

ONLY SOMETHING unusual could have brought the J Bar J foreman out at this hour. West wondered if Trail, like himself, had been in the saddle all night. Furthermore, he weighed the possibility that Trail and this other man, a J Bar J rider by the name of Cluff Kinney, might have been the men he had seen at Bugs Getley's cabin. That, too, was possible.

The men rode briskly, hugging the north end of the swamp. They passed within a hundred feet of where West stood, but the dense willows protected him, even though he stood in water up to his ankles.

They rode on and then veered toward the narrow pinch which divided the present swamp from the site of the former one. Unfortunately for West's purpose, the upper meadow could not be seen from the swamp. If he watched the men's movements further he would have to come out of the willows.

He was glad he hadn't yielded to temptation when after only half an hour the two men returned. They stopped at the end of the swamp and appeared to deliberate. There was one overgrown cow trail through the center, close to the sizable creek which flowed through, and various branch trails which might lead anywhere, but West knew that the swamp had never been thoroughly explored, except by Bugs Getley, for a good many years. For twenty years now nobody had taken any stock in the old man's story, but good-natured Joe Jewkes had allowed him to pursue his search any time he wanted to. Since the arrival of the Durrants, however, the fences had been decorated with "NO TRESPASS" signs.

Presently the two men took the one trail along the creek and disappeared. West waited nearly an hour but they didn't come back. He had never been afraid of Charley Trail, but this was not the time or

the place for a conflict. West had no weapon, and Charley Trail never went unheeled.

Convinced at last that the men had gone on through the swamp and continued on their way to the J Bar J ranch West left his hiding place and rode through the pinch to the upper meadow where once long ago, according to Bugs Getley, the passengers on the fateful stage trip had hidden their gold and valuables in a swamp, only to lose their lives because of it.

Even the town of Skull Creek had received its name because a skull, supposed to be that of one of the victims of the robbery who had managed to get a little distance from the scene of the massacre, had been found there.

It had been a dry summer, and this meadow, never used for anything other than pasture, was burnt down until it was hard to see where the outlines of the old swamp might have been. It was alive with squirrels, and there were badger holes everywhere where the industrious animals had dug out the rodents.

West had no means of knowing on which side Getley might have found the treasure. The exact location of the swamp might have been anywhere within a length of several miles. The only thing to do was ride around it, zigzagging back and forth, looking for a badger hole from which a large iron-bound leather trunk might have been dragged.

He had never seen badgers so busy. There were literally hundreds of holes, many of them so fresh that the clay was still moist. It would be impossible to examine them all without setting stakes and covering the ground with painstaking care. That task would require several days, and was not to be thought of.

He spent a couple of hours riding back and forth, and having been twice around the meadow without having seen anything that resembled the place Getley had described he decided to go home.

He had just come in sight of the gate when he saw that another rider was there before him! It was too late to withdraw, so he rode on. The rider waited for him. At first he thought it was a rather slender boy. When he got closer he saw that it was a girl wearing a boy's outfit. Long brown hair showing from under a dusty gray sombrero gave proof of the rider's sex. A pert face, burned brown as a berry gave every evidence of an arger too stupendous for such a small person to hold. This straight-backed young lady could hardly be anyone else than Lola Durrant, although West had expected to find her older.

"Who are *you*?" the girl asked.

"I have an idea. I'm a neighbor of yours, if you are who I think you are, Miss Durrant. My name is West Morgan."

"Didn't you ever learn to read?"

"I can read a little, and even write my own name."

"Then you ought to be able to read the signs on this fence," the girl retorted.

"Frankly, miss, I did manage to make out what they said, and so far as I'm concerned they don't exist. It's the custom of the country whenever you think some of your stock may be inside your neighbor's fence to ride in and look for 'em."

"The custom of the country means nothing to us. The law gives us a right to keep people off our land and I intend to see that's it's enforced."

West looked the girl over somberly, and with growing dislike. What she needed more than anything else, he thought, was a good spanking.

"You want damages for any grass my horse may have stepped on?" he queried.

"No—but I do want an explanation for that butchered calf just outside the fence. I think you know something about that."

"And I think you're probably the biggest little fool ever disgraced a pair of spurs," West retorted hotly. "If I'd stole your beef do you think I'd be hangin' around the vicinity hours later?"

The girl's brown face turned deeply crimson.

"I've been warned against you, Mr. Morgan," she asserted. "If you aren't personally killing our calves you are aiding and abetting those who are."

"Do you really want to know what I was doing inside your infernal fence? I was looking for the body of a man I have a lot of reason to think may have been murdered here last night," he shot out at her like a whiplash.

He touched womanly curiosity beneath youthful arrogance at last. "A man—murdered—here? What are you talking about?" she gasped.

"Fifty-seven years ago all the occupants, but one, of a stagecoach were murdered near this place. But before that happened they buried all the gold they carried with them. The one that escaped was a little boy. He's an old man now, and he's devoted most of his life to trying to find that gold."

"I've heard that myth before," Lola Durrant said.

"Nevertheless, that old man whom people call Bugs Getley, discovered that gold yesterday."

"What?"

"He came to my place to tell me about it and ask help in removing it. Because I told him that you folks, as owners of the land, might have some claim upon it, too, he got mad and went away. And I've got considerable reason to believe that he came to harm."

"If—if that's the case why don't you notify the sheriff?"

"I probably will. And now, Miss Durrant, if you'll tell me how much damage you think I've done ridin' over this burnt-up range I'll pay you."

The girl flushed deeply. He was making no effort to conceal his contempt and it burned like a red-hot iron.

"I won't charge you anything this time," she said, "but I'll make it my life's business to see that you pay dearly for that remark."

West opened the gate and rode through. "Well," he said as he loped away, "it looks as if I'd got me a first-class enemy."

When he reached home haying operations were on in full swing. Dusty King was sweating copiously.

5

WEST MORGAN shaved, bathed, changed clothes and rode into Skull Creek to report the absence of Bugs Getley. He hunted up Al Dollarhyde, the local justice of the peace.

Just why Dollarhyde had been able to hold his own against Burr Hall when more formidable characters had fallen was something of a mystery. Dollarhyde was a small man, sloppy in build, and sporting a paunch. He wasn't a fighting man in any sense of the word, and save for a silent and sinister bartender named Dee Herrick, had not surrounded himself with fighting men. Yet Hall had never beaten him up, and despite the bitter commercial rivalry between the two men they always spoke courteously enough when they met on the street.

Dollarhyde shambled out of his office in the back of his store when West called for him.

"Anything I can do for you, West?" he asked solicitously. He had been trying for a long time to get the young rancher's trade.

"Maybe yes—in an official capacity," West replied. "I want a private talk with you."

They entered the merchant's private office at the rear of his store and sat down. West told what he knew of Getley's disappearance. There was now no reason that he could see why the discovery of the treasure should be concealed since it was the core of the old man's disappearance.

"I still don't see any real reason to get alarmed, West," Dollarhyde said. "After all it's only been twenty-four hours since you saw the old man. Chances are he's in some out of the way draw huggin' that gold."

"But those fellows bringing his horse back in the night?"

"Possibly found the pony, and got scared when you saw them bringin' it back. Anyway, there's nothin' I can do about it. I'm only justice of the peace here. Why don't you see the deputy sheriff?"

"Ek Lester would probably say the same thing you do, but I'll have to hunt him up," West said glumly. "And I know that something has happened to Ben Getley."

"Well, if I can help you in any way you let me know," Dollarhyde said cordially.

West went into the saloon next door. Dee Herrick, a lean man of forty-five with a thin, dry face and a meager moustache, gave him a friendly nod.

"Where can I find Ek Lester?" West asked after he had had a drink.

"Prob'ly out where you come from," Herrick answered. "Cluff Kinney rode in in a big hurry a while back an' got him, but he didn't say what for."

West was startled. Then he remembered the butchered calf. That, doubtless, was why they wanted the deputy. He recalled, too, that Ek Lester had long been a close friend of Charley Trail, and had been appointed to succeed Trail as deputy through the latter's influence. That was the main reason he had not hunted the man up in the first place.

West told the bartender substantially what he had told Dollarhyde.

"I'm not surprised," Herrick said. "It's all over town that he found the lost gold from the Portneuf robbery. An' it ain't surprisin' that the wolves have got him already."

"I can't see how they found out," West complained. "After all Dusty King didn't really know anything about it."

"Maybe Dusty ain't to blame," Herrick said. He seemed to change the subject abruptly. "Better watch that girl o' yours; she's gettin' mighty thick with Charley Trail lately."

"Guess I'd better go see about it," West grinned.

He rode down to the Guterrez place, and went in. The post office was boxed off in one corner of a not very large room, and the rest of the space was given over to the notions which Rosa sold. The girl was behind the counter waiting on a customer. She was a beautiful girl with the olive tint of old Spain in her cheeks. Both of her parents had been nearly pure Spanish, although Pablo showed a trace of Indian blood. Rosa had found it effective to affect the Spanish style of wearing her sleek, black hair combed straight back, gathered at the neck, and held in place by huge, jewelled combs. Her flowing sleeves fell away from smooth, beautifully rounded arms as she reached up to remove a hat from a high shelf.

"West!" she exclaimed. "Hello."

"Hello, Rosa. Will you see if I've got any mail when you get through with your customer?"

"Is that all you come for?" she pouted. "My father told me you were in town last night, but you wouldn't wait the few minutes for me to come back."

"What is this?" the customer giggled. "Lover's quarrel?"

"I was in a big hurry," West said.

"And you seem to be in a big hurry now," the girl protested.

"I can wait," West grinned.

The customer left presently, and Rosa started around behind the counter toward the post office. There was an opening through the counter into the main room, and the girl stopped there. When West went over she wound her arms about his neck and pressed a kiss upon his mouth. West crushed her to him, and returned her kiss with a vigor that made her gasp, and try to wriggle free.

"There, you little devil, maybe that'll pay you for last night," he said. "You probably were out with Charley Trail anyway."

She sprang back and dropped the hinged shelf which blocked customers from behind the counter, thus separating herself from him.

"You're jealous," she charged.

"Well, why not? You've been getting mighty thick with Trail lately, I hear."

"Maybe. Anyway, he is not a stick-in-the-mud who never does anything but work."

West's romantic moment was over. He couldn't feel sentimental toward the girl while she was comparing him odiously with the man he disliked. A stronger term might have expressed his feelings better.

"Rosa, did Pab—did your father say anything to you about Bugs Getley coming to the ranch yesterday?" he asked.

"Bugs Getley? Let me see. Oh, yes, he said he acted queer. Has he gone crazy at last?"

"I have an idea he's gone dead," West said shortly.

He wasn't prepared for the girl's reaction. She paled, and her hand went up to her throat. "Oh, no!" she cried, "that is not possible!"

"It just depends, I think, on whether or not he got his gold hid before certain people caught up with him."

She was suddenly angry. "Who are you accusing of murder?" she demanded.

"I've called no names."

"You act like you were accusing me," she cried. "I think you are a fool."

"I'm waiting for my mail," he said coldly.

"No, no. Don't be angry with Rosa, West. I didn't mean it. I just don't know what to think. You act like you love me, but you never tell me so. I go out with Charley Trail because I think that will make you jealous and you say you love me, but you act like you don't care." Tears showed in her stormy black eyes.

"I'm sorry, Rosa," he said, and bent and kissed her. But, the kiss lacked the fire of the first one on both sides. She handed out his mail, and to West's relief a couple of lady customers came in, permitting him to make a graceful escape.

There was nothing more he could do about calling in the law. He hadn't enough to go on to justify calling on the sheriff at the county

seat, fifty miles away. If a search for Getley was made he would have to make it himself.

He had got but a few steps from the post office when he heard his name called. Old Pablo shuffled up.

"You see Rosa?" he asked. "I geeve heem hell for not be at home when you call last night."

"That was all right, Pablo."

"Long time I tell that girl you are bes' man in whole damn' countree, an' some day you will be reech."

"Well, I don't know about that," West said. Sometimes the old man's partisan spirit in his behalf irked him, and he had an idea that it affected Rosa the same way. "How about those sick fingers on the feet? Are they so you can ride a horse?"

"I ride lak anything," Pablo said eagerly.

"Then get your horse and go see if you can find anything of Bugs Getley. He's missing."

"That money he fin'—she missing, too?"

"If he ever found any it's missing," West answered, and didn't bother to ask how Pablo knew about the money.

He was riding down the street in front of Hall's saloon when Burr Hall himself hailed him. West stopped, and Hall came out to his horse.

"West, you was kinda mad last night about us quizzin' Dusty King. You didn't give me a chance to tell you how I got the tip that somebody had been sellin' slow elk from the range, an' that Dusty knew something about it. I'll tell you now. Charley Trail claims the J Bar J has been losin' a lot of stuff an' he claims Dusty has been helpin' old Bugs Getley an' two or three other nesters git away with it, an' they claim they get the beef from you. They say you give it to 'em."

"I have given Getley all the meat he could eat for years. I've given some of those other poor devils a quarter now and then. I've never made a secret of it. And if there'd been anything crooked goin' on I'd have heard something about it," West said.

"Just the same Al Dollarhyde has been doin' a hell of a big butcher business lately. He gets his beef from somewhere."

"Why don't you ask him where he gets his beef?" West challenged.

"I don't need to. I know," Hall said.

"You insinuat'in' that I've been selling Dollarhyde J Bar J beef?" West's voice was cold, level.

"I ain't sayin' a thing—except that if you've got any more beef to sell come to me," Hall replied with a mocking grin.

West rode on out of town. It was nearly sundown when he reached home. The haying crew was done for the day, and the work horses had been turned into the pasture. He noted with careless approval that another half day would finish the work. Then he saw that he was going

to have visitors. Three men were coming, and they were not bent on a social call.

They were Ek Lester, the deputy from Skull Creek, Charley Trail and Cluff Kinney. West braced himself for trouble.

6

DUSTY KING and the two transient hay hands were in the house, and oblivious of the fact that their boss had returned. The other men, nesters who lived near by, had gone home.

West dismounted and left his mount standing with the reins on the ground. He wondered if jealousy because of Rosa Guiterrez had anything to do with his hatred for Charley Trail. He no longer tried to fool himself that his feeling toward the man was only dislike. He hated the J Bar J foreman. Hated everything about him.

Trail was a striking looking man. He stood six foot three, and had the angular regularity of a rail fence in his tall frame. There was said to be Indian blood in Charley Trail, and his coal-black hair and eyes, arrogant nose, and high, bony cheekbones corroborated the story.

Had it not been for the presence of Charley Trail, Ek Lester would have attracted attention. He was a bigger man than West Morgan, heavier than Trail, and handsome were it not for the sly cruelty of his expression. Beside Trail, the only thing that distinguished him was the silver star of a deputy sheriff on his breast.

The third member of the trio, Cluff Kinney, was a tough kid of twenty-one. Short, heavy-set, and blond, he had become Charley Trail's satellite with all the hero worship of a gun-crazy kid. He was the sort of lad who would try anything once, especially if the thing were lawless.

"Looks like you'd been doin' some ridin'," Ek Lester said, with a glance at West's horse. "Where you been?"

"You askin' because you want something to say, or are you talking business?" West retorted.

"You might call it business," Ek answered lazily. "I want to check up on your movements lately. Miss Durrant up at the J Bar J wants me to arrest you for killin' her calves, but I want to hear what you have to say first."

"Just this: if Trail, or anybody else, thinks they can make a charge like that stick go ahead and arrest."

Thus directly challenged, Trail spat. A thin stream of tobacco juice narrowly missed West's foot. "He said it was my boss," the man said. "I ain't got to the accusin' stage yet. When I do you'll know about it."

"You been sellin' any beef lately?" Ek asked.

"Not for two months, and then on the hoof. I sold forty head of young beef to Dollarhyde then to supply the grading camps."

"Two months ago. Humph! Remember that cloudburst we had about two weeks ago?"

"Yes. Why?"

"It washed hell out of a ravine midway between Bugs Getley's cabin, and Bill Clover's place. I was ridin' up that way about ten days ago, and I see where a lot of hides an' heads an' entrails had been washed out from under a cutbank. When I examined 'em I found they all wore a J Bar J brand, an' from the looks of things most of 'em had been killed in the last two months."

West had not been expecting this. He was mentally bôwled over. The frame-up, if it was one, had been building for a long time, and not just since Bugs Getley's discovery of the gold, as he had thought. He knew how it would look if the deputy were telling the truth. They would claim that no beef had been delivered to Dollarhyde on the hoof, but that it had come to him piecemeal. Even if it could be proved that the animals had been delivered there would be no way to prove that the merchant hadn't bought more beef.

Bill Clover was one of the men who was helping West hay. There was a possibility that he and Bugs Getley had been killing and selling J Bar J stuff but West didn't believe it. If anyone had killed that beef it was Charley Trail and his men.

"Well, you got anything to say?" Ek Lester demanded.

"What is there for me to say?"

"Just what were you doin' inside the J Bar J fence this mornin' when Miss Durrant caught you?"

"I don't like that word 'caught,'" West said crisply. "I had my own reasons for being there. I was looking for Ben Getley."

"Right close to where another J Bar J calf had been killed," the deputy said. "I think I know why you were lookin' for him, too. You found out that Burr Hall had been askin' Dusty King some questions about stolen beef, and Dusty bein' drunk you didn't know what he might have said. You high-tailed back on the range to find old Bugs an' tell him to keep out of sight, didn't yuh?"

"You're a double-damned liar, Lester," West shot out. "And anybody else who says so is the same." His eyes clashed with those of Charley Trail.

A spasm of rage crossed the face of the J Bar J foreman. His hand moved swiftly to the butt of the gun at his side.

West stood there. He was unarmed, and he knew that in another moment he might be shot down. He braced himself for a leap at Charley Trail if the man drew his gun. He could at least go down fighting.

The three horsemen started as a door slammed. Their eyes turned

toward the house. They saw Dusty King step to the end of the porch with a rifle.

For a minute nobody said anything. Charley Trail's hand came slowly away from his gun. They were too far from the house to be sure of hitting Dusty with their six guns, but if West was shot down Dusty would certainly go into action with his rifle—and he would hit somebody.

"We'll see about that liar business, Morgan," the deputy said. "I want more evidence before I make an arrest, but you're in a tough spot. And your cock-and-bull story about old Bugs Getley havin' found a trunkful o' gold ain't goin' to help you explain what's become of him. Let's go, boys."

The three jingled spurs and rode away.

Dusty King strolled out as West was unsaddling.

"Callers didn't stay long," he remarked laconically.

"You scared 'em away, and I ain't guessin'," West grinned faintly, "just how come you to walk out with that rifle anyway?"

"Hunch. Any time Charley Trail an' Ek Lester shows up here it's time for somebody to pack a gun."

"They wasn't making any social call," West admitted. "At the minute you stepped out Charley Trail was flirtin' with that smoke-pole he carries."

"Which I observes some myself," Dusty said.

"Dusty, we've got to find Ben Getley—dead or alive. I don't suppose it'll do us much good, but he's got to be found or his body will be turnin' up one of these days, and we'll swing for murdering him," West said soberly.

Dusty's boyish face turned grave.

"I don't want to scare you," West said. "I'm the one they're after, but I'm afraid they'll try to rope you in on it." He told Dusty the whole story.

"And you see," he finished, "it didn't begin with old Bugs finding that gold as I thought until a few minutes ago, but that just gave them a lever to spring the trap."

"But why?" Dusty bleated. "What're they after?"

"I can only guess. What's obvious is that Charley Trail is after my hide because he probably hates me as much as I hate him."

"And because you're both after the same girl."

"That might have something to do with it," West admitted, "but I think there's more, and it probably has to do with greenhorns taking over the J Bar J. Trail may see an opportunity there, although if he does I'd think he would go after the Durrant girl instead of making a play for Rosa. Anyway, the other angle is fairly clear. Burr Hall can put Dollarhyde out of business if he can only create a suspicion that Dollarhyde has been buying rustled beef."

"So it puts us squarely at war with Burr Hall and the J Bar J," Dusty said. "All right, we'll give 'em all the war they want. Hereafter, nobody ketches me without a gun."

"You just be sure that nobody ketches you," West told him.

West was clearly aware of the gravity of the situation. He kept thinking about the Durant girl, and a sort of sullen rage rose within him. It was her assumption that she knew how to run a cattle outfit which had given his enemies their chance. If she and her father hadn't been fools they never would have hired Charley Trail as their foreman.

The remainder of the hay crop had to be put up, and the range riding had been neglected. Until something broke ranch affairs had to be carried on as usual. In the morning West instructed Dusty, much to that young man's relief, to go back to the neglected riding.

"Keep your eyes open and your nose clean," he told the puncher. "If you see Charley Trail or Cluff Kinney polluting the landscape you go away from there."

Dusty grinned, and strapped on his gun.

When Bill Clover came to work West sized the man up with new interest. He was a short man with a black beard, and bulging calves which made his legs look almost deformed. He was strong, and a good worker, and a man who seldom talked. He was not married, and he had been in the country two years. West realized that he didn't really know much about the man.

They got the top on the last haystack a little after noon. West figured up the men's time while the two transients cooked dinner. From now on West and Dusty would be able to do all the work with a little extra help from old Pablo, or perhaps a day of work now and then from Clover or some other neighbor.

When dinner was over West gave all of them their checks. Then he said to Clover, "Bill, I'm riding past your place and I'll ride over with you."

Clover nodded. He was riding a broken-down cow pony. West detoured to look over some cattle, and Clover appeared to enjoy playing cowboy.

West was maneuvering to find the scene of the recent cloudburst where Ek Lester claimed to have found the evidence of range depredations. The marks of the flood were unmistakable, and Clover seemed entirely innocent of any alarm when West led the way up to the bottom of the wash instead of along the rim where the going was easier.

"Feller get caught in here while that cloudburst was on he'd have had to hurry like hell to keep from gettin' drowned," the man commented once.

The banks of the wash were from eight to sixteen feet high. Being crooked the flood had swirled from side to side, thus cutting deep under-

cuts on either side. In some of these, West noted, the overhanging bank had collapsed but recently.

It was an ideal place, he realized, for stolen cattle to be killed, and the evidence concealed by burying it beneath a bank. Then another thought flashed into his mind. It was also a good place to conceal a body if a murder had been committed. He scanned those fresh cave-ins with renewed interest. Under one of them might be the body of old Bugs Getley.

Rounding a curve in the wash they came suddenly upon a mass of putrid offal—heads, hides and entrails of slain animals. Some had been washed out by the flood, but there was evidence that more had been dug out by human hands. Ek Lester had not lied about that.

West's eyes were upon his companion's face. Clover was genuinely astounded.

"Could you beat that!" the man exclaimed. "There's been rustlers workin' here!"

"There sure has," West agreed. "Have you lost any animals?"

"Nope," the man said slowly, "I keep my few stuff right around the cabin, an' I ain't missed a thing. Who yuh reckon these belong to?"

"J Bar J. The easiest way to get stuff into this wash is through your place or past Bea Getley's cabin."

Clover looked up quickly. "You think I had anything to do with this?" he demanded.

"No, Bill, I don't. But the odds are about ten to one you'll be charged with it. You see: Ek Lester was the man found this."

"So you knew what we'd find?"

"That's right. I wanted you to see it because I figger that certain people are going to try to hang this on me, and because you've worked for me a lot they may bring you into it."

Bill Clover's face became grotesque with rage. "No dirty son o' sin is goin' to frame me an' git away with it," he said with a bitter oath. He made his pony scramble out of the wash, and without any farewells at all he spurred toward his cabin.

Neither West nor Clover saw the lone horseman who had been watching them from the time they entered the wash. But soon after Clover's precipitous flight the man turned back from the fringe of aspens where he had been hiding and galloped toward the J Bar J.

The man was towheaded Cluff Kinney.

7

WEST found Bugs Getley's cabin lonely and deserted. At his approach the Sheeps pony nickered and came trotting up as if it wanted com-

pany of any kind. There was something pathetic about the pony's lonesomeness.

West went through the cabin thoroughly, but there was nothing in the old man's pitifully few belongings to give any clue as to his whereabouts. West felt new anger at the thought of the harmless old man being murdered just at the successful end of his thirty years' search.

When he left Sheeps followed him for some distance, and nickered until he was out of sight.

He was riding down a small, brushy stream called Pass Creek when he suddenly heard voices. He stopped, then turned off into the brush. An instant later he heard a girl's voice cry out, "Let go of me, you coward."

There was the sound of a man's coarse laughter, a smack, and then the man rumbled an oath.

West delayed no longer. He spurred down the trail and came suddenly upon two people in a tiny open spot where the creek made a sharp bend against an abrupt rock wall.

Lola Durrant's horse was backed into the creek, against the rocks where it could retreat no further, and was pinned there by the weight of a far larger animal. There was a big man on the big horse, and at the moment his arms were around the girl, and he was pressing rude lips against the fighting girl's mouth.

"Stop that!" West barked.

Taken completely by surprise the man let go the girl and started to turn his horse. Before he could do it Lola's hand slapped him squarely across the mouth. Small girl though she was, the blow hurt and it brought blood. The man bellowed with rage and pain and reached for her again. He had just caught her shoulders when West's horse struck the bigger but awkward gray breast to shoulder, and the gray went down. The girl was almost dragged from the saddle before the man let go, and he did it only when the ends of West's bridle reins rapped him smartly across the face.

The big man was Burr Hall's bully-in-chief, Pack Saddler. He failed to right himself in the saddle and landed on his feet in the water while his horse floundered over him. Man and beast stumbled to the bank, and Saddler, hurt and angry, reached for his gun.

West had buckled on his own six gun that morning, but he didn't use it now. He wheeled his nimble pony and drove it straight at the man. Saddler failed to get out of the road quickly enough and was knocked down.

West landed on his feet, and kicked the gun out of Saddler's hand as the weapon cleared the holster. When Saddler got up West knocked him down. It was a blow that would keep the fellow's jaw in bandages for the next two weeks. Saddler lay there.

Lola Durrant had flung herself from her horse as if to take a hand in the fight in case her services were needed. Finding that they were not she began rearranging her rumpled attire.

"You hit like the kick of a mule," she told West.

"You don't measure your wallops in a fight," he replied. "You just whang away with everything you've got, don't you?"

"He would have used a gun on you if he could. You were charitable not to shoot him."

"I can still shoot him—if you say so."

Pack Saddler sat up hurriedly, one hand caressing his cracked jaw, the other extended defensively.

The girl appeared to consider. With something akin to delight West saw that she had a sense of humor. He never would have believed it.

"I guess we'd better let him go—this time," she said. "The next time I meet him I'll shoot him myself."

"I didn't mean any harm," Saddler mumbled.

West picked up the man's gun. "You were just going to show us the pretty pistol, I suppose," he said, and tossed the weapon into the creek where it would be next to impossible for the fellow to recover it. Saddler got shakily into the saddle and rode away.

Lola got herself organized by now, and West remembered the hard words of their previous and only encounter. He supposed the feud was going to break out again.

"This time," she said, "I suppose I'm the one that's trespassing."

"Not that I know of," he drawled. "This used to be a free country where a man could ride anywhere he pleased so long as he behaved himself. So far as I'm concerned it still is."

"If you weren't stealing our cattle I think we could be friends," she said astonishingly.

"Now that's something I wanted to speak to you about," West replied without offense. "If I'm going to make a success of being a cow thief I ought to have a little more cooperation. You see my little outfit, running just a few hundred head, would be a push-over for a big spread like the J Bar J."

"But we don't happen to be cow thieves," she said.

"It's kinda news to me that I am," West stated.

She glanced up quickly. "I'd like to believe that, but the evidence—"

"I'd like to go over that with you," he said boldly. "Won't you sit down? Here's a nice, clean white boulder."

The girl seated herself, and West dropped on the grass at her feet, his arms wrapped around his knees.

"You want me to offer my defense before you present the evidence?" he asked.

"No. The evidence is that we have been losing cattle ever since we bought the J Bar J. My father was badly injured by someone roping

his horse's front legs one night in the dark. We were warned long ago that you were probably responsible."

"Go on," West smiled.

"Our first actual proof was the discovery of a place where many of our animals had been killed. The location indicated that it was a favorable spot for you to drive the animals and do the butchering while two of your retainers, the old man Getley and a man named Clover, delivered the beef. Next, I myself caught you near a slaughtered animal on our land, and the most damning of all is the alleged disappearance of old man Getley just as soon as you saw yourself being trapped. Were you afraid he would give you away?"

"You don't believe my story about him finding forty thousand dollars in gold?"

"No."

"Well, I hope I can keep out of the pen long enough to convince you. You got any more of what you laughingly call evidence?"

"Mr. Hall, who has been very good to us, assures us that his competitor, Dollarhyde, had been selling stolen beef which he has reason to think came from you. As a matter of fact the fellow who just left here was telling me the same thing after we happened to meet here, but he—sort of—got off the subject."

"I noticed," West said grimly. "If I were on a jury I don't think I'd convict on that kind of testimony. It does look a little bad about Getley, but he did find that gold, and he did disappear. I'm afraid he has been murdered. But here's a point for our side. Old Ben, or Bugs as some people called him, lived here for over thirty years and nobody ever accused him of being a thief. I've had fifteen years in the country myself and my record is pretty good. If you don't believe it write to Joe Jewkes, the man you bought your spread from."

"You may not have seen the opportunity before."

"Well, I guess we've covered the ground pretty thoroughly, and without much result," West said as he got to his feet. "Thanks, anyway, for listening to my side of it. It looks like I'd have to hustle if I find out what's happened to old Ben before you have me thrown in jail. So if you don't need me any more I'll be on my way."

Lola got up, too. "I shall hate very much to see you go to prison," she said.

West watched her ride away. He could say for her, anyway, that she had fearlessness, candor, and, he believed, honesty.

He rode onto his own range, ran across Dusty King and the two of them rode until nightfall in a fruitless search for some sign of Bugs Getley.

West could only wonder how long it would be before Ek Lester came out with a warrant for his arrest. If Lester came alone he would sub-

mit, but if Charley Trail was along he had the feeling that if he went to jail at all it would be for murder.

Already he felt himself a fugitive, and he didn't like it. The best way to combat the feeling, he knew, was to go where there were people. Skull Creek was the place. He had reasons for going there anyway. Al Dollarhyde should be warned of what was up. And he had another reason. Ever since he had talked with Lola Durrant the day before he had been unable to get the girl out of his mind. He needed to see Rosa in order to forget Lola. He would find out now just how deep Rosa's loyalty lay.

It would be dangerous he knew. He was now more or less at open war with Burr Hall and his gang, and there was always the possibility of meeting Charley Trail in town.

The next morning, for one of the very few times in his life, he wore a gun to town.

As he rode down the street he saw Pack Saddler on the sidewalk in front of Hall's saloon with a bandage around his jaw. The fellow looked at him a little stupidly, then darted inside the saloon.

From the other side of the street Al Dollarhyde waved at him, but West only waved back and kept on going. He dismounted in front of the post office and went in.

The upper part of the door was glass. That early in the morning there were not likely to be many patrons or customers, but as West looked through the door he saw a man there, and Rosa's arms were about that man's neck, and her lips were pressed to his. The man was Charley Trail.

West was about to withdraw when the couple ended their embrace, and Trail turned around. Both saw him. Trail's hand made a spasmodic jerk toward his gun, but Rosa caught his wrist.

West couldn't retreat then. He opened the door and stepped inside. Rosa's face had gone white; her voluptuous bosom heaved with excitement. He stood there, eyeing the couple stonily. A single word might result in a swift exchange of shots. West almost hoped that the tall, ungainly man in front of him would start something.

Then, without a word, Charley Trail disengaged the girl's hand from his wrist and strode toward the door. West stepped aside to let him pass.

The girl leaned against the counter as though her legs would not sustain her weight, but her black, stormy eyes glared defiance.

"Well, Rosa," he said in a low voice, "it looks as if you and Charley are getting pretty thick."

"What's it to you if we are?" the girl demanded huskily.

"Not a thing, Rosa, not a thing."

She stamped her foot. "So that's all you care about me? You don't even care if I am kissed by another man."

"I don't call Charley Trail a man," he said.

"You wouldn't have dared say that when he was here."

"How long has this business with Trail been going on?"

"You don't own me. You got no right to ask me questions."

"Not on the grounds you mention, but on a little matter of murder, I have," he said quietly.

"What you mean?"

West stepped forward and placed his hands on her shoulders. Angry as he was he could not help feeling her wild, untamed beauty. He had seen her melt out of rages before, reducing him to putty as she did so. He was on his guard. And there had never been anything so serious between them before.

"When I came in here the other night you had been out with Charley Trail. The reason was your father had told you he overheard Bugs Getley tell me he had found the lost gold from the Portneuf stage robbery. You told Trail and he went out and murdered Ben Getley for the gold. You were indirectly responsible for that murder. What I want to know is whether you actually had a hand in it?"

She tried to strike his hands from her shoulders, but his fingers clamped down on the soft white flesh until she moaned from pain.

"You beast," she moaned. "I wish I let Charley kill you."

The pressure increased. "Answer me," he said sternly.

"I ask *you* question," she cried. "What you do with my father? You send him on the range and he don't come back."

West's grasp involuntarily slackened. Rosa gave a quick turn and twisted free. Like a flash she was behind the counter.

"*You* kill Bugs Getley!" she cried. "You kill him so he won't tell you steal cattle. Now I think maybe you kill my father."

"You little fool, I haven't seen your father since I saw him right here. You know Pablo was my friend."

She stood back and looked at him reflectively. "You think I helped murder old Bugs Getley. Why can't I think you would murder my father?"

West's first outburst of wrath had passed. "Listen, Rosa," he pleaded, "let's be sensible. Perhaps I was wrong in saying what I did. I think you and your father both talked too much and Charley Trail has murdered Ben Getley. I know he's done other things. But I can't believe you would have any hand in it knowingly, so I'm sorry. And you know I wouldn't harm a hair on Pablo Guiterrez's head."

The ready tears came into the girl's eyes. "I know," she said. "I am a little hothead. Charley Trail he make me believe that you talk my father into helping you steal cattle, and that you would kill him like he say you did Bugs Getley so he wouldn't tell."

She came swiftly from behind the counter, and in a moment her arms were about his neck, her soft lips pressed against his.

After all, West thought, she was only an innocent child, and he had been unjust. He returned her kisses with vigor and interest.

Neither of them heard the door open, and they didn't know of the presence of a third party until they suddenly heard Lola Durrant's icy voice.

"When you have quite finished, may I trouble you for my mail, Miss Guitierrez?" she asked.

8

WEST MORGAN was speechless, disconcerted.

Rosa ducked into the post office while Lola walked over to the delivery window. It was marvelous how a person so small could parade so much dignity and hauteur as Miss Durrant displayed.

West managed a bow and beat a retreat. He felt that if he had gained inches of ground the previous day he had lost feet, yards and rods now. He remembered that Charley Trail was in town, and deadly as a rattlesnake. He had to get his mind off women.

He was aware that it would look bad if he went to see Al Dollarhyde. Their enemies would say that they had to have a conference to try to save themselves. On the other hand he had to see Dollarhyde, and it was better to do so in the open.

When West entered the saloon, it was empty save for Dee Herrick.

"Whiskey?" the dour barkeep asked.

"Just one. Where's the boss?"

"In there." The man jerked his thumb toward the office at the rear of the store.

"I've got to break the news to him that he's been selling stolen beef. Or so Ek Lester says."

"He knows it. Listen: don't expect any help from him. Know why he's been able to stay in business here while Burr Hall has run better men out?"

"I've never been able to figure it," West admitted.

"He's too soft to hit. Burr Hall is afraid if he stuck his fist into him he wouldn't be able to pull it out. I heard the first conversation they ever had."

West leaned over the bar rather eagerly. It was the first time he had ever heard the morose Herrick really open up.

"If you hit me, Hall, I'll only have you arrested for assault and battery, and I'll keep on doing it as often as you hit me.' That's what Dollarhyde said. Hall just walked off. He didn't know what to make of it. He's tried to pick a row plenty of other times, but Dollarhyde just smiles at him and tells him to go ahead."

"How come Hall ain't taken it out on you?" West queried.

"He would like to, but he knows that I'll shoot his everlastin' gizzard out if he ever comes in here."

"Just what will he do when he finds himself framed for selling stolen cattle?"

"Same thing. Already he's stopped Ek Lester and told him to go ahead and have him arrested if he had any evidence."

"What did Ek say?"

"He said he had plenty of evidence. The only thing he lacked was a complainin' witness. From what I gather the only reason you and Dollarhyde both ain't been arrested is because the Durrants for some unknown reason have refused to file charges. Since it's their cattle supposed to have been stolen there ain't nothin' Ek and Trail can do—except shoot you maybe."

West wasn't so sure. If, as he believed, Charley Trail had murdered Bugs Getley the men could uncover the body some time and accuse West of the murder. Trail, Lester, or anybody else could file a complaint for that.

"Well, things standing that way I guess there's no use for me to trouble Al," West said. "I suppose he knows that J Bar J carcasses have been found on my range close to Ben Getley's cabin."

"He knows. So does everybody else."

Arrested or not West knew that every place he went he would stand marked as a cattle thief. Helpless fury welled up within him. He could only take another drink. Although he knew it was a bad thing to do he took a third one.

Fifteen minutes later, with alcoholic fire in his brain, he crossed the street and entered Hall's saloon.

There were few people in the saloon when West entered. Pack Saddler was at the bar talking to the man behind it, one "Baldy" Thompson. Most of the men in the saloon were transients who happened to be in town looking for work. Among them were the two hay pitchers West had let go the day before.

Baldy said something to Pack out of the corner of his mouth, and the latter whirled. Saddler's eyes popped out of his head, and he unconsciously fingered his cracked jaw. Then Baldy ostentatiously slid a loaded piece of hose across the bar, which Saddler pocketed—and left his hand in his pocket.

West stood for a moment in the middle of the floor. He satisfied himself that Burr Hall wasn't present, then he turned to the two transients who had worked for him.

"Hello, Matt. Hello, Jack. Come on up and have a drink on me. I owe you one."

The men sensed trouble and they hesitated. But West had been a good boss, and they liked him. They got up and joined him at the bar.

"What're you drinkin', boys?" West said. "Mine'll be whiskey, Baldy—without the accustomed Mickey Finn."

It was an insult, but Baldy ignored it, waiting for Matt and Jack to give their order. They took whiskey.

Pack Saddler stood by the end of the bar for a moment, then walked swiftly toward the door which separated the saloon from the store.

"Haven't you found jobs yet, fellows?" West asked companionably.

"Not yet," Matt answered. "We're thinkin' of ketchin' a freight this afternoon."

"Well, here's to you," West said, raising his glass.

"Here's to you," the men chorused. They drank.

"The next one is on the house," Baldy said as their glasses touched the mahogany. He opened a bottle of Old Crow and placed it on the bar.

West knew when he had had enough. His hand curled over the whiskey glass as he poured his own. He scarcely covered the bottom of the glass, and he drank it without removing his hand.

Each of the transients bought a round, but West contrived to keep his drinks small. He wasn't taken by surprise when Burr Hall himself came in from the adjoining store with Pack Saddler at his heels.

Out of the corner of his eye West saw Baldy hold up four fingers to indicate how many drinks he had had. Burr Hall came on, smiling a little.

"Why, hello, West," he said. "Ain't you in town a little early today? Have a drink."

"Maybe I'll have a drink with you, Burr," West said softly, "when I hear you deny that you started some story about me selling stolen beef to Al Dollarhyde."

"Dollarhyde ain't denied it—why should I?" Hall said, his smallish eyes seeming to recede warily under his bushy brows. "Did you come in here to pick a fight with me, West?"

"No, I came in to tell you to stick to your own knittin', Burr, and not be hornin' into a fight that looks like it was going to be between me an' Charley Trail."

"Trail happens to be in town, West—if you're lookin' for him," Hall said cynically.

"I've seen him."

"What's between you an' Trail don't mean anything to me, but Dollarhyde bein' able to cut my prices on fresh meat does," Hall stated. "An' when I send a man out on the range to see about it I dislike havin' somebody come along and break his jaw."

"He'll get the other one broke if I ever catch him manhandlin' a lady again," West said quietly.

Hall's look showed West that Pack Saddler hadn't told the truth about his jaw. Hall turned upon the fellow ominously.

"I wasn't manhandlin' the Durrant gal, I was just foolin' with her," Saddler said defensively.

Burr Hall moved like a cat, and the next moment Saddler lay stretched in the sawdust, his hand on his other jaw.

"He lied to me," Hall said to West. "My error. Shake hands and have a drink."

West wasn't fooled. He knew the man was in a towering passion, but Hall knew how to conceal his feelings when he wanted to. Not all his rage was directed at Pack Saddler.

"We'll cut the handshake, Burr," West said. "I've shaken hands with you before. But I'll have a drink with you if you like."

"Best in the house, Baldy," Hall said.

Pack Saddler had got to his feet and started to slink away. "Wait a minute," Hall called to him. "Go an' find Charley Trail. Tell him West Morgan is lookin' for him."

9

WEST REALIZED instantly how he had been outgeneraled. If Saddler got to Charley Trail with that message the J Bar J foreman would come looking for him—and one or the other would die. West knew that it must come to that sooner or later, but he wasn't anxious to hasten the thing along.

Pack Saddler was already scampering for the door, his swollen-jawed face contorted in an evil, satisfied grin.

"Wait a minute," West shot out. "When I want to see Trail I'll go looking for him myself. That's right neighborly of you, Burr, but I run my own errands."

"All right," Hall said. "Come on back, Pack. You know, West, you're pretty lucky. There's plenty of evidence to send you to the pen, an' Ek Lester is anxious to serve a warrant, but the Durrant girl won't sign a complaint. I couldn't understand that till you said what you did about Pack. Evidently you've got a way with the women."

"Let's leave the women out of this, Burr."

"I should think you would want to leave Rosa Guiterrez out of it," Burr Hall sneered. "That gal is makin' a sucker out of you."

The man knew what effect that remark would have on West, and even as he spoke he started to throw the whiskey in his glass into the rancher's face.

He didn't get the chance. West's left hand stabbed out in a lightning jab at the mouth and rocked the saloonkeeper back on his heels. The whiskey missed West completely. With a roar Hall gathered himself and rushed back, flailing away with both hands.

West moved back from the bar, blocking as many blows as he could with his right, jabbing with his left. Somehow he was able to keep Hall from landing a solid blow though he caught many a glancing one that hurt. Meanwhile he drew blood from his opponent's mouth and nose with that stinging left.

Suddenly West slipped on a patch of wet sawdust and went down on one knee. Hall plunged in with a devastating swing to the head which West couldn't block. West rolled with the blow, but bells pealed inside his ears. He sensed rather than saw Hall diving for him with both hands open for a clutch at the throat. He jerked up his knees just in time for Hall to plant his broad stomach upon them. The saloon-keeper missed his hold and grunted from pain.

West started to get up when something struck him upon the head with paralyzing force. He went down on his face, fighting off the blackness which threatened to engulf him.

Somebody cried out a protest at the treacherous blow which Pack Saddler had struck with the loaded hose. It was the transient named Matt. Instantly somebody hit Matt, and then his partner, Jack, went to his rescue. Then Baldy Thompson came over the bar with a bung starter to join the fray.

There were more transients in the saloon than there were natives. Matt and Jack were their own kind; the bartenders and bouncers their natural enemies. They grabbed chairs or whatever else they could find and joined in lustily.

West felt the toe of a heavy shoe kick him in the short ribs. It hurt, but had the effect of clearing his head. He rolled away just as Burr Hall launched a second kick. He scrambled to his feet and met the enemy with a straightarm jab and rocked him back on his heels.

They went at it again while the melee raged around them. Burr Hall was never a defensive fighter, and he didn't know how to block those punishing left jabs which West kept coming into his face. They harried and hurt, kept him off balance.

Meanwhile, the tide of battle had definitely turned against the saloon forces. Baldy Thompson and Pack Saddler were knocked out of the fight.

The transients surged toward the bar, breaking glasses and seizing bottles. For the moment they were victorious, and they meant to make the most of it.

West and Hall had the center of the saloon to themselves, which was all to West's advantage as he circled and jabbed. Then West suddenly saw an opening and he brought up his right to the butt of his foe's ear. Burr Hall went down.

The doors of the saloon swung inward at that moment and Ek Lester burst in, followed by the local marshal and Charley Trail.

"It's a riot!" Lester yelled. "Use your guns!"

It was murder if those guns were turned loose. West knew that, and knew that it was intended to be such. He went for his own gun, but to his amazement Ek Lester and Charley Trail suddenly let their guns fall and their hands shot toward the ceiling. West saw Dee Herrick right behind them with a sawed-off, double-barreled shotgun in his hands, but he hadn't heard the bartender from across the street say.

"Drop them guns or I'll blow yuh to Kingdom Come!"

At the other side of the door stood Dusty King! He, too, held a gun. His boyish face looked scared but determined.

There was a sudden scramble for the back door on the part of the transients. Almost every man carried a bottle in his hand. Many of them two bottles. No one made a move to stop them.

As Burr Hall started to get up, West said, "Stay down—till your head clears." Hall saw the gun in the rancher's hand and subsided.

"Look here, we're the law," Ek Lester suddenly protested.

"Law don't call for yuh killin' people for havin' a little innocent fun," Dee Herrick told him.

West put his gun back in the holster and walked toward the door. He stopped for just a moment in front of Charley Trail, and his steady gray eyes clashed with the pinched-in, hate-filled black eyes of his enemy. Neither spoke.

West found himself on the sidewalk with Dee Herrick and Dusty King. There were groups of people—at respectful distances—who had heard that there was a massacre of some kind going on in Hall's saloon. But one person rode calmly down the middle of the street between the two saloons as if entirely unaware that anything out of the ordinary was going on. It was Lola Durrant, and she looked neither to the right nor to the left.

"Thanks, Dee," West said sincerely. "I don't know how you happened to be here, but it was lucky you were."

"I don't like Ek Lester," Herrick growled. "I knew you were in hot water over there an' I wanted to see the fun. When I saw them two comin' I figgered I'd better bring along Betsy." He patted the smooth stock of the shotgun.

"And just where did you come from?" West asked witheringly, as he turned upon Dusty.

"Funny thing," Dusty replied. "My horse stampeded with me. Got headed this way an' all hell couldn't stop him."

West snorted. "Some people would fire you for that."

Dusty only grinned.

They crossed the street to the other saloon, where Al Dollarhyde stood in the doorway. "I hope there hasn't been trouble," he said.

"Not too much," Herrick answered dryly. "West here give Burr Hall a-trouncin', an' some hobos made off with his best whiskey, an' I had

to make Ek Lester an' Charley Trail lay down their guns. Outside o' that everything was peaceful."

"I don't like violence," Dollarhyde said acidly, and turned away.

"I hope you don't get into trouble because of this," West said to the bartender.

"I won't," Herrick promised. "I'm just as peaceful as Dollarhyde—only in a different way."

West and Dusty had a drink with the man, then mounted their horses and headed for home.

"You licked him," Dusty said at last, no longer able to conceal his admiration.

"It wasn't finished," West said seriously. "It's only just started. It's not child play, Dusty. Before this is over somebody is going to get killed, so watch your step. No more trips to town without orders."

Dusty's young face sobered. "I suppose you're right, West," he admitted. "I think Charley Trail meant to get you today."

"If he killed old Ben, and I think he did, then he's got to get me, sooner or later—or I'll get him. Something has got to break soon. Nobody can go around throwing cattle stealing charges, and forty thousand dollars in gold and a man everybody knows, can't disappear without something coming of it."

"If somebody should happen to kill off Charley Trail I don't believe there'd be much trouble," Dusty opined.

"The man that tackles that job has got to have cool nerves, a fast gun—and plenty of luck," West said grimly.

They spent the remainder of the day on the range, and loped into the ranch after sundown.

"You catch up a couple of night horses, Dusty, while I cook—" West stopped abruptly. "What's that?" he asked sharply, pointing to a place in the dust where something had been dragged. The object, it might have been a sack of grain from the looks of it, except for certain accompanying scratches at the side, had been dragged in a zigzag manner, and it disappeared around the corner of the stable.

They spurred around the corner and stopped. The breath seemed to leave their bodies as though frozen by horror of what they saw. The dragged object was no sack. It was a man! The clothes were torn, the features mutilated almost beyond recognition by being dragged through the brush. And the left ankle had been thrust through the stirrup in such a manner that it couldn't possibly come out. In spite of this both men recognized the dead man at once. It was old Pablo Guterrez!

The dead man's horse, finding itself in a corner between the stable and the corral, was standing still, though still trembling violently. It had been standing there a long time, though the dried sweat showed that it had been running hard, or had come a long way.

It wasn't hard to know why it had come here, since West had sold the animal to Pablo only a few months before.

Dusty spoke of something West had already noticed. "Old Pablo was too good a rider ever to be caught with his foot in the stirrup. His foot was shoved through there by somebody else."

"He was murdered," West agreed, his voice thick from mingled shock and grief because of this tragic end of an old friend. "I asked him to go out and hunt for Ben Getley. If he didn't find Getley he at least found something."

"When do you think it was done?" Dusty queried.

West dismounted and examined the body. He was not surprised to find a bullet hole through the old man's body. "I'm inclined to think it may have been nearly twenty-four hours ago," he said. "Chances are Knuckles ran in a circle for a long time before he got over his scare enough to come home."

"Gosh, this is gonna be hard on Rosa."

West was thinking the same thing. And he knew that his enemies were certain to lay the crime to him. It was not entirely improbable that Rosa would believe them. Something had to be done to forestall that, and quickly.

"What're we gonna do?" Dusty queried helplessly.

"Tie Knuckles to the fence, and carry him some hay and water," West directed. "We'll carry Pablo inside, but be sure to see that no marks are disturbed. I'm going to town to get Ek Lester—and to tell Rosa."

10

CLAUDE DURRANT propped himself further up on half a dozen pillows and listened. He was a small-boned man with a lean, aesthetic face emphasized by a small brown moustache and goatee. Confinement to his bed for nearly six months had taken the color from his face and made him look less than ever the cattleman he was presumed to be.

"That you, Lola?" he called as he heard light footsteps in another room.

"Yes, Dad," the girl answered. "Why aren't you asleep?"

"Do you think I could sleep with you out riding around alone in a wild country like this? It's past ten o'clock."

"How do you know I was alone?" the girl laughed lightly.

"Trail got in a long time ago. He said he had seen you in town. I'd have felt better if you'd rode home with him."

"All right, Dad, I'm sorry." She crossed the room quickly and kissed him on the forehead. "Have you had supper?"

"Yes, Mrs. Wilkin served me long ago. You?"

"Yes. I had supper in town—with a girl friend."

"I didn't know you had any friends of your own age. Who was she?"

Lola laughed and stroked his hair. "You are terribly afraid that I'll associate with someone 'beneath' me, aren't you?"

"I'm not a snob," he denied promptly, "but you do come from two good families, and you're not likely to meet social equals out here. I never intended for you to have to ride the range and take over the business. If it hadn't been for my accident you would be in the East now."

"I'm sorry about the accident, but, in spite of the cattle stealing and the botch I'm making of everything I love it."

"Seems to be quite a late development," he said dryly. "Who was the girl did you say?"

"A Miss Guiterrez—that awfully pretty girl who runs the post office. You've seen her."

"Isn't she the girl Trail is sweet on?"

"I believe so. I think there are other men in the same boat."

"Do you think it is quite proper for you to be associating with an employee's sweetheart—as a social equal, I mean?"

"You *are* a snob," Lola charged laughingly.

"I am not," Durrant denied. "Somehow, this thing might lead to Trail trying to put himself on equal footing—"

"You really don't know much about the West, do you, my esteemed Pater? It would never occur to Charley Trail for a single moment to question that he was fully our equal in every way."

"What? Why, I'll send the fellow packing—"

"As a matter of fact," Lola interrupted sweetly, "Charley asked me to marry him before he had been here a month."

"Why, the insolence—"

"Calm yourself," his daughter laughed. "It was more in the nature of a trial balloon. When it didn't work he took his attentions elsewhere. I was considerably flattered."

"I don't understand you, daughter," Durrant said helplessly. "Sometimes I wonder if you are losing your pride."

"Let's be reasonable for a moment," Lola said. "Why are you out here? Why did you want to buy a ranch? Because when you were a young man and your health wouldn't permit you to study medicine your father sent you out West for a couple of years. You liked it. You've always looked back on it as the best years of your life. And when you saw that the Durrant Soap Company was going to go broke you saved what you could from the smash-up and bought this ranch. It was a dream come true."

"A bad dream, I'm afraid."

"No. The trouble is in spite of your two years you were a greenhorn

—and I was a worse one. People took advantage of us—and you had your accident.”

“Which was caused, remember?”

“I know. Well, either we’ve got to quit and admit we’re licked; that we’re too soft to compete with these people, or else we’ve got to learn to live the way they do. I’m not soft, and I’m not a quitter, and I don’t believe you are,” Lola argued.

“That’s all very well, but we’re paying Trail a good salary, he was highly recommended, and he ought to be able to solve this cattle stealing business. As a matter of fact he told me just this evening that he had solved it, and that his efforts had been blocked—by you.”

The lamp was turned low, and he couldn’t see her face. She was glad of it, for she knew it was red.

“I don’t believe it is solved,” she said. “I won’t sign any complaint until I’m sure.”

“Then I shall. Trail tells me he has positive proof that this man Morgan and his associates have been killing our beef. The offal has been discovered right at his back door. One of the guilty men has, he believes, been put out of the way so he won’t confess.”

“That’s what Charley and the deputy say,” the girl acknowledged. “But there’s really nothing to connect Morgan with it.”

“But you said yourself you caught him inside our fence, and there was a butchered calf right outside,” her father protested.

“That’s just it. There’s always a fence between. We’d only be making fools of ourselves if we had the man arrested before we know we can win the case. But—”

“But what,” Durrant asked as she hesitated.

“Nothing. I came very near to signing a complaint today, but I’m glad I didn’t.”

“I think you’re wrong. Trail told me rather darkly that unless Morgan is arrested at once there is liable to be bloodshed. Morgan himself would be safe in prison.”

“He doesn’t act like a criminal.”

“You mean you’ve seen the fellow?”

“And talked with him. He almost changed my mind about him—for a while.” She was thinking of the pleasurable feeling she had after talking to him, until she had seen him kissing Rosa Guiterrez.

“One of those plausible scoundrels, eh? I wish I was out of here,” Durrant grated.

“Well, you’re not, and if you don’t quit worrying and twisting around you won’t be for a long time.”

“Yes, and Trail tells me he is almost certain that it was this Morgan fellow who tripped my horse and gave me that spill.”

“If I were sure of that I think I’d shoot him myself,” the girl said.

"Tell me about this Guterrez girl. How did you happen to reach friendly terms with her?"

"I did it deliberately. I'll tell you, Dad. When I walked into the post office this morning I found Miss Guterrez and—and Morgan in an—an embrace. Naturally I was angry. I—"

"Why were you angry? What business was it of yours?"

"Well, perhaps it wasn't, and perhaps I wasn't angry. But I was, er, disgusted maybe," Lola said hastily. "Anyway, right after that there was some trouble in town, a saloon brawl or something that Morgan was mixed up in. I rode out of town, but I got to thinking and I went back. I—I—thought I might get some information about Morgan from the Guterrez girl."

"I see."

"Well, she was crying as if her heart would break when I went in. I was sympathetic, of course. First, because I thought it was my chance to get something out of her. Later, I really felt sorry for her."

"Seems to be something of a flirt, keeping company with Trail, and kissing Morgan," Durrant commented.

"She explained that. She was engaged to Morgan before she fell in love with Charley Trail. Her father's wish, you know. He clings to the old Spanish tradition that the parents should make the matches, you know."

"And not a bad tradition," Durrant commented.

"Fiddlesticks! Anyway, you can see what a position the poor girl is in. She doesn't want to hurt her father's feelings by breaking with Morgan, yet she is in love with Charley Trail. Also, she told me that Charley himself had asked her to be nice to Morgan on the chance of finding out something against him."

"Which was just what you intended to try to get her to do, wasn't it?"

"Yes, it was. But it seems sort of treacherous and underhanded, doesn't it?"

"I would say so," Durrant replied. "In fact I should say that the less you have to do with this Spanish girl the better."

"She is attractive, but let's not talk about it," Lola said. "Good night, Dad."

She had wanted to talk to someone, and her father was the only person she could unburden herself to at all, and yet there was a slight but growing rift between them. The truth was she didn't know what her feelings were toward Rosa Guterrez, or toward West Morgan. She had been secretly pleased when the girl told her she wasn't in love with West, but she didn't know why.

Neither did she know why after going back to town to try to find out something about Morgan from the girl, she had tried her best to influence Rosa against playing the spy.

West Morgan was plainly in love with Rosa Guterrez, and Rosa hated him. She felt sorry for the man. Of course he was a criminal, and rightly belonged in jail, but it was a pity for a man like him to be so fooled.

She went to sleep thinking of West Morgan. She was awakened by someone out in the yard in front of the bunkhouse. A full moon was shining and she had no difficulty making out the figure of Deputy Sheriff Lester.

She heard the man call: "Charley! Charley, wake up."

She held the face of her watch to the moon and saw that it was a quarter of three. Something of importance had happened to bring the deputy there at that hour. She hastily flung a robe over her fleecy nightdress and descended the stairs.

She opened the front door a crack, wondering why they didn't come to the house. Her curiosity mounting, she was about to go out to the bunkhouse when she saw the two men approaching. She had made no light, and she decided swiftly to wait for them to knock lest she appear over-eager.

They stopped for a moment just outside the door, and their voices, though extremely low, reached her ears.

"Remember now," she heard Charley Trail warn, "this girl ain't as big a fool as she was six months ago. It would be easy for her to find out too blamed much. Don't say anything to make her go pokin' around on the range now that I'm gettin' her about discredited with her old man."

"What would happen if she did find out what old Pablo did?" the deputy asked.

Charley Trail's tone when he answered, even far more than his words, sent a chill through the girl's body.

"She would have to git the same thing Pablo did," Trail replied.

The door had been open perhaps two inches: Trail stepped up to knock loudly and the door gave way before his striking fist and swung wide open.

"Hell! It's open—" Then he heard the girl gasp, and made out her form in the darkened room.

Trail stepped inside, and Lola had never been so conscious of her small stature as he towered menacingly over her. But his voice was a soft and deadly purr as he asked, "How long have you been standing here?"

"I—I—you startled me," she said, desperately trying to control her chaotic thoughts. "I saw a saddled horse out in the yard. What is the matter? Has something happened?"

Ek Lester stepped forward. "Yes, Miss Durrant, something has happened. There's been a murder."

"A murder!" Her hand went up to her throat.

"Yes. And in view of what has happened it's very dangerous for you to leave your doors open. Or were you just going out?"

"No," she said. "That is, yes. I left the door open on purpose tonight because I couldn't find the cat. But what difference does that make? Tell me what has happened."

"Old Pablo Guterrez has been murdered," Trail said, watching her intently.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "Who—who did it?"

"The same man who's been raising all the other hell in this country, West Morgan. He reported the murder himself. Claimed the old man's horse dragged the body to his door. But if it wasn't him it was that puncher of his, Dusty King."

"But—but Pablo was his friend," the girl said.

"Sure. So was old Bugs Getley. Too damned friendly, miss, if you'll pardon the language."

"What do you mean?"

"Just this," Charley Trail said. "Both of 'em were helpin' Morgan steal cattle. Guterrez was about to break down on account of Rosa and tell the truth, but Morgan got at him first."

"It—it's incredible. It's hard to believe anyone could be so—so depraved."

"He's dead. Somebody murdered him," Trail said.

"Why did you come here?" Lola asked after a period of silence. "What can I do?"

"You can do this, Miss Durrant," the deputy said. "I asked you before to sign a complaint against Morgan, and leave the matter of conviction to me. Now it's absolutely necessary that you do. We haven't got evidence enough yet to arrest him for murder, and he may leave the country, or he may bluff it out and kill somebody else. But if you'll sign a cattle stealing complaint we can hold him on that charge till we can prove the murder."

Had Lola not heard that fragmentary conversation she would have signed the complaint at once. But Trail's words kept ringing in her ears. If she found out what Pablo had found out she would get the same thing Pablo did—and Pablo had been murdered.

There was a murderer at large, but she now doubted very much if it were West Morgan. But if she refused to sign the complaint they asked she felt that it would be confirmation of Trail's fear that she had overheard too much talk, and it would put her life in danger. If she agreed she might be helping to destroy an innocent man.

"The deputy is waiting, Miss Durrant," Trail reminded.

"I still see no reason to change my mind about the cattle stealing," she answered. "And if there is evidence enough against Morgan to make you so certain he is the murderer then it ought to be enough evidence to hold him."

"If you won't sign the complaint then we'll have to wake up your father and have him sign it," Trail said shortly.

"You will not," Lola defied. "I'll not allow you to disturb him. And if you did it would do you no good, for I have the power of attorney to do all business for the J Bar J."

11

THE ORDEAL that West dreaded most of all was breaking the news to Rosa. He circled the town to avoid being seen too much on Main Street and approached the darkened post office. There was a light in the Guterrez living quarters and he hoped desperately he wouldn't find Rosa with Charley Trail.

Rosa answered his knock. She wore one of the many bright red dresses she owned which went so well with her dark beauty. West knew that she had been entertaining, or was expecting company. He decided it was the latter when he saw her look of surprise.

"West!" she exclaimed. "What has happened? Your face looks so solemn. Is anything wrong?"

"Something has happened, Rosa," he told her bluntly. "Your father is dead."

The girl gulped, and clutched the side of the door with both hands. "My—my father—dead?" she gasped. Her manner changed abruptly. Her hands became curved claws, her lips writhed back from her white teeth in a tigerish snarl. "If he is dead, West Morgan, you have killed him. And now I kill you."

She whirled and darted across the room.

West leaped after her. She was after a gun. She was opening a buffet drawer when West seized her around the waist and swung her around. She started to scream; he clapped his hand over her mouth. Her teeth sank deep into the side of his hand. He placed the heel of his other hand beneath her chin and thrust upward so that she had to let go or suffer a broken neck. Blood gushed from his hand when he pried her loose.

"Shut up and listen, or I'll turn you over my knee," he threatened grimly, and meant it.

"Why did you murder my father?" she panted. "I told you, you would do it just this morning."

"Because someone else put the idea into your head—somebody who knew then that Pablo was already dead, or who intended to kill him. Use your head, Rosa. That should let you know who did murder your father—and my friend."

The girl sank onto a couch. "You know that I hate you," she said,

her black eyes smouldering. "Even when I let you kiss me I want to tear your eyes out."

"Why, Rosa? We were good friends. I thought some day we might get married. I've done nothing to make you hate me."

"You make my father a crook, and now you have murdered him."

"That's a lie," he stated evenly, his chivalry exhausted. "Have a care, Rosa, that you don't see your hand guiding the murderer's gun. When you sent Charley Trail out to get Ben Getley's money you sentenced your own father to death. I wonder if you can be greedy enough to marry his murderer."

She was too unstrung to be listening with more than half her mind, yet her eyes dilated with horror, and she shriveled onto one corner of the couch.

"Charley did not kill my father," she said in a low tone. "But he will kill you for saying so." Her voice, however, had lost its explosive certainty.

"He was shot about twenty-four hours ago, but they crammed his foot through the stirrup and allowed his horse to drag the body around for hours," West stated evenly. "Knuckles, because he was raised on my ranch, finally got in there. Dusty and I found him when we got home from town this afternoon. I'm going now to notify the law."

West left and presently got Al Dollarhyde out of bed and told him what had happened.

"Too bad, too bad," Dollarhyde clucked. "Poor old Pablo was a harmless citizen. I wonder who could have done it?"

"I'm more interested right now in knowing how it was done," West answered. "As coroner for this part of the country you had better get Ek Lester and get out to my place."

"Yes. Yes, indeed. You want I should see Ek?"

"Right. I'm going on out to the ranch. I've already notified Rosa."

He swung onto his horse and loped rapidly out of town.

West found Dusty in a highly nervous condition. He had been gone only a little over two hours, but Dusty complained bitterly at his slowness.

"You take a lantern and follow those tracks where Pablo was dragged just as far as you can," West directed. "I'll wait for the company I'm expecting."

It was barely half an hour before the majesty of the law arrived. Dollarhyde and Lester were accompanied by a dozen men from the town who morbid curiosity had brought along.

"Where's the body?" Ek Lester demanded importantly.

"Right here in my bedroom," West answered.

"His horse drag it in here?"

"Dusty and I carried it in from the corral."

"Why didn't you leave it in the position you claimed to have found it?"

"Because it was where the horse would have stomped it. It had been mutilated enough."

"That's your story," Lester sneered.

"The marks are in the dust for anybody to read. Even a deputy sheriff ought to see that."

"I'll have some questions to ask you later," Ek Lester said darkly.

Al Dollarhyde examined the body. It was such a mess of bruises it was impossible to tell whether Guterrez had been shot more than once. The condition of the left leg showed how the man had been dragged.

"One think quite certain: he was shot some time last night," Dollarhyde said.

"And whoever shoved his leg through that stirrup and turned a horse loose to drag him all that time should be taken out and hanged the minute he's caught," a man stated, and there was a howl of approval.

"Where were you last night, Morgan?" Ek Lester asked in a nasty tone.

Attention focused upon West.

"I was right here at the ranch," West answered.

"And I suppose you can prove it by that nitwit puncher of yours."

"I can prove it by Dusty King."

"Yeh, that's what I thought," Lester said with an ugly laugh. "Just where is King now—out coverin' up calf hides in some wash?"

"Will you make that remark a little more definite, Lester?" West challenged.

"Why?" the deputy blustered.

"Because if you'll put it into plain English that you are accusing me and Dusty of stealing cattle, or me of killing Pablo Guterrez then I'll tell you that you are a dirty, lying yellow skunk," West said evenly.

"When I get evidence to prove what I think I'll let yuh know," Lester mumbled.

"Then until you do get some evidence back up your talk or keep your mouth shut."

Lester had no reply to make, but he had made West an object of suspicion, even though he hadn't looked at all well while doing so.

"There's no evidence here to indicate who done it," Dollarhyde said.

"None at all. Until there is evidence of some kind it would be wise to avoid making remarks of any kind."

"That sounds all right, coming from you," Ek Lester chirped again.

Dollarhyde ignored the remark. "I'll take the body back to town in West's buckboard," he said. "The rest of you had better go home."

"Where's his daughter?" someone asked.

No one answered. "God help the murderer if she ever gets a chance at him," someone said.

"Find who's at the bottom of the beef stealin' an' you'll have the murderer," another man spoke up. His name was Cal Brewer. He was an employee of Burr Hall and a friend of Ek Lester's.

The party headed back for town at last, and West gave a sigh of relief.

Dusty King returned perhaps an hour after the posse had left. "No luck," he reported dismally. "Old Knuckles crossed the Three Mile meadows, and they're black with cattle. I couldn't find any sign of where he struck the other side."

"I was afraid of that," West said. "Ek Lester accused me of killing Pablo."

"Why, the freckle-bellied so-and-such! If I'd been here I'd fed him six slugs so fast the last one would have been in his gullet before he got the first one swallowed. You let him git away with that?"

"Not much I could do," West shrugged. "Better get yourself some sleep."

West was awakened from a light sleep by the rhythmic thumpty-thump-thump of a galloping horse's hooves. He was out of bed in an instant, shoving his feet into his boots. Otherwise, he was fully dressed, having decided that it would be criminal negligence to take chances on being caught without his clothes. He strapped on his gun belt and stepped to the window. It was just coming light.

He felt a measure of relief when he verified his guess that there was but one horse. What puzzled him was that it was coming from the direction of the J Bar J, which was farther up the river.

The unknown rider pulled down to a trot, and then suddenly appeared on the near bank of the river. West recognized the rider at once. Only one person in the country so small could sit a horse with such regal dignity. That was Lola Durrant. He was standing in the yard waiting when the girl drew her horse to a halt.

"Miss Durrant!" he cried. "What brings you here this time of day?"

"I had to see you," she said, "and I must get back to the ranch before I am missed."

"You're in trouble?"

"No, but I greatly fear that you are. You know that Pablo Guitierrez was murdered."

"I found the body."

"Something happened last night that makes me not nearly so sure as I was that you are a criminal. But you may be."

"Thanks, anyway, for the benefit of the doubt," he bowed.

"If you aren't guilty then I'm afraid you are in terrible danger."

"What happened, Lola?" he asked, using her name with perfect naturalness.

"Ek Lester came to the ranch a few hours ago and had a talk with Charley Trail. Then they both came to the house to see me. Maybe I

shouldn't tell you this—maybe it doesn't mean a thing—but I was waiting for them, while they thought I was in bed. They stopped outside for just a minute and I heard what they said."

"Yes?"

"What they said was in effect that I wasn't quite the fool I had once been and that I might go to poking around the range and find out something. And Charley Trail said if I found out what Pablo did then I'd get the same thing he did."

"Good Lord, Lola, then you're the one that is in danger!"

"I don't think so. I don't have to go 'poking around' you know. It was the manner in which he said it, and the way he looked afterward which made me think he wouldn't hesitate to—to cut my throat if I mixed into his affairs."

"I'm glad you told me that, but why did you come here to do it?"

"What they wanted was to have me sign a complaint against you for stealing our cattle so they could arrest and hold you till they got more evidence about the murder. I'd have done it, too, if I hadn't overheard what they said."

"And you didn't sign the complaint! I still say you are the one in danger."

"They will get around that refusal. They know more about Pablo's murder than they pretend. They want to convict you of it. If you are innocent I want you to have warning. You ought to go into hiding," she said earnestly.

"You've made me happier than I can say," West told the girl. "It's the first streak of light in a pretty dark night. It helps a lot just to know that someone else suspects the real truth."

"And what is that?"

"Someone—I won't name names just now—has been stealing J Bar J beef, and planting evidence so that I and two or three of my friends would be suspected. No doubt they intended it to go on for a long time with nothing more than suspicion because that was a cloak they could hide under. Then old Ben Getley found that forty thousand dollars in gold, and that brought things to a head. That was worth a lot more than all the calves they could hope to steal. They had to murder poor old Ben, or at least make him disappear, and somebody had to be blamed. So they pulled the trigger of the frame-up they've been building. Pablo's murder was directly connected with it."

"It—it sounds fantastic."

"Well, it's either that or I am the world's most vicious and depraved criminal."

"I'm more bewildered than ever," Lola said. "Charley Trail was well recommended."

"By Burr Hall, who's got his sticky fingers into this mess someway."

"Well, I've told you all I could," the girl said. "I must be going now."

"Thanks a lot," West said sincerely. "You've made me feel a lot better. But you watch your step. Don't take any chances with Charley Trail. The man is poison. And if they ask you again to file charges against me go ahead and do it."

"But you may go to prison."

"That's better than having them think you are suspicious of them."

To West's surprise the girl extended her hand. It felt cool and firm in his grasp. "I don't know why," she said, "but I believe in you. It sounds idiotic, but I even believe that the old man found the gold as you said he did. Good-bye."

She wheeled her horse and swiftly disappeared from sight.

12

JAKE WILKIN, the ranch handy man, was up doing chores when Lola reached home. He looked up with amazement when the girl rode into the corral.

"Good morning, Jake," she smiled. "Will you please take care of my pony?"

"Of course. Gosh I had no idee you was out ridin' this early. Where yuh been?"

"Nowhere in particular," Lola replied. "I just felt the need of some fresh air." She started toward the house, then stopped and smiled sweetly. "Oh, Jake. It would please me very much if you didn't say anything to anyone about my being out this early. It might get back to my father, and he'd worry."

"Sure, miss, I won't say a word," the man promised.

"I think," Mr. Durrant said, when she brought him his breakfast that morning, "that we ought to have a serious talk. Jake tells me that a man was brutally murdered on the range yesterday, presumably by this man Morgan. I want you to co-operate with Deputy Lester after this, and stay off the range till this fellow is safely behind bars."

"I'll co-operate with the law in any way I should, Dad, but I just can't hole up like a hibernating bear because somebody was killed."

"Trail is being paid to look after things, my dear. I can use your company here. I get pretty lonesome, you know."

"I'm sorry, Dad I know I've neglected you, but I simply must go to town this morning."

"But you went to town yesterday."

"I know, but I've got to go again. I told you about Rosa Guterrez."

It's her father that was killed. The least I can do is tender my sympathy, and offer to help."

"I suppose so," he granted reluctantly. "It seems to me you're taking up the ways of the West pretty fast lately."

"I think I'm just coming to understand the West," she smiled.

She wanted to see Rosa, but she also wanted to take a ride over the range before something happened that would prevent it. Riding a fresh horse she rode into a section of the range with which she was unfamiliar. It was the foothill region where nesters such as Bill Clover and Bugs Getley lived. Here it was, she had been told, that J Bar J cattle had been driven and killed.

Through being on the alert she saw the two oncoming horsemen before they saw her. She couldn't retreat without being seen by them, and she couldn't go on. The only avenue of escape that presented itself was to spur through the thick timber and underbrush to her right into what appeared to be a short spur canyon.

She got as far as she could before the men's voices warned her that she would be heard if she tried to go farther. She dismounted hurriedly, and holding one hand on her pony's nose peered through the brush back the way she had come. She felt rather foolish when she caught a glimpse of two of her own employees, Cliff Kinney and Fletch Bovard.

She was about to call out when she remembered having been told by Charley Trail that the two men, who had not been at the ranch for some time, were at a line camp on the Blackfoot River thirty miles distant. She remained quiet.

She was just about to move when her eye fell upon something that glinted in the brush. It was glass. Walking over to it she was surprised to find it one of the ornamental rosettes she had often noticed on the men's bridles with cunningly painted pictures in the glass; usually, she had noted, of nude females. This one, however, was different. It was a madonna and child.

It was caught on a limb, where plainly it had been broken from the bridle as someone crowded a horse through. What on earth, she wondered, had anyone been doing in there on a horse? She put the article in her pocket, and convinced that the two punchers had passed on she led her pony back to the trail.

As she passed by old Bugs Getley's pasture a little brown pony trotted up, and accompanied her till it reached the end of the fence. She could hear it whinnying until she passed out of sight.

Beyond this chance near encounter with two of her own men Lola found no other adventures. Toward noon she turned her pony toward Skull Creek, and immediately wondered what new tragedy she would encounter when she reached there.

The streets were full of men when she arrived, with no women in

sight. As the men gathered in groups it was not hard to guess that there was but one topic of conversation, the murder.

Riding on toward the post office she saw Charley Trail and Ek Lester in one of the largest groups of men. She didn't like the dark look Trail gave her as she passed by. She went a little farther and stopped. When she turned Trail left the group and came over to her. He eyed her horse critically. She realized suddenly that he could tell at a glance that she had been riding for a long time.

"Did you want to see me, Miss Durrant," he asked.

"What are all these men doing in town?" she asked.

"You ought to be able to guess that. They're talking up a neck-tie party for the man who murdered Guterrez."

"And I presume they don't know any more about who did it than they did last night."

"They think they do."

"There is no evidence at all against West Morgan."

"A lot of folks don't agree with you, miss."

"Has any effort been made to arrest him?"

"You stopped that, Miss."

"If I get this right the deputy sheriff wants to arrest Morgan for cattle stealing, without any real evidence, yet he knows that if he is arrested he will probably be hanged by a crazy mob."

"I couldn't say about that," Trail said coldly.

She could get nowhere with the man. He had surprised her once by asking her to marry him. Since that time he had been courteous enough, and she could find no reason to complain of his work, yet he always seemed to silently let her know that he intended to do as he pleased.

"How is Rosa?" she changed the subject abruptly.

"I'll just say this, Miss Durrant: I wouldn't stick up for Morgan to her if I were you."

"I'll decide that for myself," Lola said icily. "And, by the way, if you should ever happen to find time to get out on the range again to see how our cattle are getting along you might inquire why Kinney and Bovard are hanging around the Getley place when they are supposed to be camped on the Blackfoot."

That got under the man's skin, but he betrayed his feelings only by a narrowing of his eyes, and a momentary lack of speech. Lola took advantage of her victory to ride on, leaving him standing in the street.

"He hates me," she thought to herself, and remembered West Morgan's warning. In the future she intended to be very, very careful around Charley Trail.

She had come to town to see Rosa Guterrez, and she wasn't going to be balked by what Trail said. She entered the post office, but there was only a fat woman behind the delivery window.

"I can give you your mail, but the store part is closed," the woman said.

"I would like to see Miss Guterrez," Lola said.

"She's in the back. I'll ask her." The fat woman waddled through a back door. She returned in a moment. "She says come in."

Lola found herself in the Guterrez living room. The curtains were drawn, and for a moment she had difficulty seeing the huddled figure at the end of a sofa. Rosa didn't get up.

"I am so sorry, Rosa," Lola said. "I wanted to see if there was anything I could do."

"You could let them arrest West Morgan," Rosa said angrily.

"May I sit down?" Lola asked. "Of course if you'd rather I leave—"

"No, I want to talk to you," Rosa said. "West Morgan killed my father and they are going to catch him and hang him. And when they do it is I, Rosa Guterrez, who is going to put the rope around his neck."

"You are not going to do anything of the kind," Lola said. "You've got no evidence at all that West killed your father."

"He did kill my father," Rosa cried. "Charley said so."

"And do you believe everything Charley Trail says?"

"Everything," Rosa said positively.

"I saw you kiss West Morgan. What kind of a girl are you?"

"You don't like me you can go."

Lola recovered from her anger quickly. "That's just the trouble," she said. "I do like you. I hate to see you being misled. Can't you see that there is no evidence against West, either that he stole cattle or killed your father? West was your father's friend."

"And he talked my father into becoming a thief," Rosa blazed. "Then, to keep him from talking, he killed him."

"Do you know what you are saying?" Lola asked incredulously.

"My father was old. He had not worked much for a long time. I know every dollar he make. How then it is I find one hundred dollars under his mattress? It don't grow there. All the time he is telling me to marry West Morgan."

Lola was stunned. Everywhere she went, it seemed, she was bumping into new evidence of West Morgan's crookedness and criminality. Yet none of it, by itself, was conclusive.

"I'm afraid all I can say is that if you have anything to do with any mob that you will be very sorry," Lola said. "If you would like me to do anything I'll be glad to help."

"All I want is to see West Morgan hanged," Rosa said bitterly.

Lola was at the door before Rosa moved. "Wait," she said, and crossed the room swiftly. "You're not what I thought you'd be. Charley told me you were high-hat and wouldn't have anything to do with people like me. Yet you have been to see me twice, and you offer to help."

"Mr. Trail may have got that idea because I refused to marry him," Lola said, and was instantly sorry she had said so as she saw the look of mingled pain and anger which swept the other girl's face.

13

It was soon apparent that there was no chance to find where old Pablo had been murdered. West and Dusty tried to pick up the trail again, but failed. They spent the entire day in the search, and on their way home stopped to see Bill Clover. It was dusk when they rode into the man's gate and started down a draw toward his cabin. Dusty was starting to roll a smoke when they heard a shot.

"That came from the cabin," West exclaimed, and stabbed in the spurs.

Dusty tobacco scattered in the breeze, and the puncher galloped after his boss with an empty cigarette paper clinging to his lip.

West pulled up suddenly within a hundred yards of the cabin. He could hear horses' hooves as they clattered over a rocky bar onto the small meadow that was Clover's hay field.

"Dusty, see if anything's wrong here," he yelled, and raced on in pursuit. As he rode between cabin and stable his mount threw a kink which would have unseated an ordinary rider. The animal had shied at the body of a man lying in the yard. West pointed, and yelled back at Dusty again; straightened his horse out and kept on toward the meadow. He soon lost the horsemen in the darkness and so he turned and loped back to the cabin, dreading what he might find there.

Bill Clover had been shot. Dusty had the man's head propped up, and Clover was not dead.

"Some buzzard ricked me," the man said.

"Nicked you? It looks to me like they had some idea of planting a crop by the furrow they ploughed along your chest," West said, as he hastily examined the wound.

Apparently Clover had heard the bushwhacker and thrown up his left arm, and partly turned, for the bullet had gone through his arm and laid open the flesh across his chest. It was a painful wound, but by no means fatal. West was so relieved that he wanted to laugh.

"Know who shot at you, Bill?" he asked.

"Hell! Wasn't it you?" Clover queried.

"Why, you damned old badger, if you say that, I will shoot you," West threatened, and then realized by Clover's grin that the man was joking.

"Whoever it was, brushed up over there by the creek," the man said.

"An' there was another one lower down. I heard that one ask the other if he got me, an' then they both high-tailed toward the meader."

West told the man how the bushwhackers had escaped in the darkness while they got him into the cabin and started to dress the wound.

"Who the devil would want to shoot me?" Clover wondered. "I ain't mixed in no fights."

"Just the same parties killed Pablo Guterrez and maybe Ben Getley," West said. He didn't bother to explain that the attacks on all three men were designed to prove that West had been stealing J Bar J cattle and was now trying to kill off his accomplices to prevent them turning state's evidence.

"I don't need no doctor," Clover declared after West had bandaged up his wounds. "All I need is a gun."

After an argument he compromised by agreeing to ride to Skull Creek to see a doctor. He declared himself entirely fit for such a ride.

"Of course I'll go with you," West said. "Dusty, you go on home and do the chores."

They were obliged to ride slowly, and they took a cut off trail which intercepted the road some three miles from Skull Creek. Because Clover was suffering considerably West failed to notice a strange absence of the usual number of horses tied along Main Street until they were almost between the two saloons.

"Well, I wonder where everybody is," he murmured.

"Hey! Hey!" he suddenly heard a boy shout, "There's West Morgan! Right *here*." The boy's excited astonishment could not be mistaken.

There were but few persons on the street, and almost no horses. West saw a little knot of local citizens looking at him with obvious amazement, and he started toward them. They beat a hasty retreat.

"What the hell?" he murmured. A man came out of Dollarhyde's saloon, and West called out to him, "Say, do you know where Doc—"

The fellow vanished back inside the saloon.

West stopped. Skull Creek's one doctor was usually to be found in one or the other of the saloons, and Bill Clover had stood about all he could. Everybody on Dollarhyde's side of the saloon had disappeared, but several men had now come out of Hall's place across the street. West turned in the saddle and shouted across to these men.

"Is Doc Macon over there?"

"Who've you shot now, Morgan?" a man called back.

West was relieved when Dee Herrick appeared in the saloon door with his sawed-off shotgun in his hands.

"Where the damnation did you come from?" Herrick blurted.

"I've got to find Doc Macon. Bill Clover has been shot."

"Doc's out at Ten Mile. Some woman out there is havin' a baby."

"I've got to get Clover to a bed somewhere, and it had just as well be here," West said. "Help me get him upstairs, Dee?"

"Sure. Say, don't you know there's a mob out huntin' you to hang you?"

"Hunh?"

"Why, they've been talkin' it up all day across the street. They claim you killed old Pablo."

"They can't get away with that," West said without much concern. "Give me a hand here will you?"

They got Clover out of the saddle, and assisted him up the stairs to a room in Dollarhyde's rooming house over the saloon.

"I guess he'll be all right till Doc gets back," West said, "But you send Doc up the minute he hits town."

"Look here: you don't seem to savvy the burro," Herrick said. "That's a lynchin' party after you an' they ain't foolin'."

"They've got no evidence against me. Reasonable men don't act on mere suspicion."

"They ain't reasonable men—after Burr Hall fillin' 'em up on free whiskey all day. It's that girl got 'em all worked up. She's even with the mob, and says she'll put the rope around your neck herself."

"You mean Rosa? I can't believe it."

"It's true, an' I ain't sure I can hold 'em off you with this shotgun if Bull Hall an' his gang take a notion to come over. You gotta git out of town."

"I'll get out of town all right, but I'll hunt up that mob and tell 'em where they get off," West said furiously.

"That would be foolish. Even if you could talk the mob out of it there'd still be Charley Trail. That buzzard means to fix your clock, one way or the other."

"I'm getting a little peeved with Mr. Trail myself," West said grimly.

"From the sounds of things that mob out there may not get a chance at you," Herrick said. "I can hear Burr Hall downstairs, an' he certainly ain't alone."

"All right. Lend me that sawed-off for about two minutes and I'll be out of town."

Had his horse not been in front he might have tried getting out the back way, but he couldn't go where he was going on foot.

"I'll keep the smoke-pole—and I'll use it," the lantern-jawed, cadaverous bartender stated. "You go first. I kin shoot over your head when you hit the bottom of the stairs."

Half way down the stairs they heard an altercation. Burr Hall's voice was raised in anger.

"You arrest him? You make me sick. You're a bigger thief than he is, Dollarhyde."

"I warn you to be careful, Hall," came Dollarhyde's voice. "If you force my hand you will be sorry. I'll have no mob led by you entering

my place. If Morgan is in my buildings I'll issue a warrant for his arrest and hold him if any of you will sign a complaint."

"All right, I'll sign one against him for assault an' battery," Hall said.

"Pretty small charge after talking so much about me being a murderer, ain't it, Burr?" West suddenly asked from the bottom of the stairs which opened onto the street.

"Let's grab the dirty killer an' hold him till Rosa an' the posse gits back," someone at the rear cried out.

There was not more than a dozen men who had dared follow Burr Hall. West stepped out on the sidewalk. "All right, who'll be the first to grab me?"

"An' the second an' third an' fourth?" Dee Herrick inquired, and the crowd heard the ominous click of the shotgun hammers.

The mob fell back, leaving Burr Hall standing alone.

"You want to try holding me, Hall?" West challenged.

Hall glared a moment then started to turn away.

"Wait a minute, Hall," West ordered. "The story you've been circulating is that I've been head of a cattle-stealing gang that has been delivering beef to Al Dollarhyde. A couple of men have been killed and you've peddled the story that I killed them to keep 'em from spilling the beans. Well, there's a man upstairs who was shot tonight from ambush. And I didn't shoot him. He happened to live to tell the truth about it. For once your killers slipped up. Now I'm going to find those men, and when I do they're going to tell—Charley Trail and his gang have been stealing J Bar J beef, and selling it to you, and putting these murders onto me to cover up their own crookedness. And if the rest of you men want the truth there it is."

Burr Hall seemed to puff up with anger, but without a word he strode across the street. The rest of the small mob melted away, but West's words had made a visible impression.

"You may get away with that with the big mob, but I doubt it," Dee Herrick said.

"Anyway, I'm certainly going to try," West said.

As he swung onto his horse he saw Dee Herrick climbing awkwardly into Bill Clover's saddle.

14

DUSTY KING didn't go into the house until he had done the regular ranch chores. He was thinking hard about the near tragedy he had just witnessed, and the actual tragedy of Pablo Guitierrez's murder. He blamed everything onto the J Bar J outfit—Charley Trail and the men he had hired.

There were two men on the J Bar J whom Dusty particularly despised—Cluff Kinney and Fletch Bovard. Though scarcely older than he, and certainly no more experienced, they were hard cases, and treated Dusty as if he were a little boy whom they might spank whenever they felt like it. Cluff Kinney, in particular, loved to parade his toughness in imitation of his idol, Charley Trail.

"I bet if the truth was known that that damn' Cluff Kinney was the one shot Clover, an' mebbe Pablo," Dusty ruminated as he finished the chores. "For two cents—" he didn't finish saying what he might do because he wasn't sure himself.

When finally he entered the house and lighted a lamp it was several minutes before he noticed the note sticking out of a book on the table. He opened the note and read, "West, they are forming a mob in Skull Creek to hang you. You must keep out of town, and be on your guard at the ranch for they may come here. Lola."

"Well, I'll be—" Dusty stared at the signature. West had told him nothing about his various encounters and growing friendliness with the Durrant girl. At first he couldn't believe that the warning was genuine. Then he remembered that West was even now on his way to town, and if there were a mob there was no telling what the boss might get into. Hastily cramming the note into his pocket Dusty scrambled onto his horse and lit out down the road.

Where the road turned to ford the river Dusty had to slow down. As his horse splashed up the farther bank men suddenly crowded out from the willows on both sides.

"Throw up your hands," a voice ordered sternly. Against such a force Dusty had no choice but to obey. The first face he recognized was the dark, ironical features of Charley Trail.

"Hell, this ain't the bulldog, it's only the pup," Trail said with a disappointed sneer.

"If Morgan is guilty he is, too," shouted a man with a bandage around his face. That was Pack Saddler.

"If Morgan oughta hang so had his hired man," another yelled.

"Hey, you fellows, wait," Ek Lester raised his voice. "I'm the law here. We can't have no violence."

The mob roared with drunken laughter.

Dusty turned pale. He knew that with Charley Trail's six gun pressed against his ribs, and Ek Lester holding his bridle he hadn't a chance.

"Look you," Charley Trail grated, "you ain't got a chance unless you tell us where yore boss is."

"You go to hell," Dusty defied.

"Is he at the ranch?" Ek Lester asked.

"He might be, an' he might not," Dusty stalled desperately for time.

"Now look," Trail said. "West Morgan killed old Pablo, or hired you to do it. Anyway we know you were in with him. If you tell us

where he is it may go easier with you, but we're goin' to hang Morgan. If you don't talk we'll string you up."

"You're a liar," Dusty said. "West didn't kill Pablo, an' you know it. So does Ek Lester."

"Now, Charley, you can't talk that way. As an officer of the law I won't stand for no lynchin'," Ek Lester said loudly.

The deputy's voice was drowned by catcalls. "If you don't want a hand in it you kin go somewhere else," somebody jeered.

"Where's Rosa?" a man queried.

"She's at the back. Tell her to come up. If she says hang this critter by Gawd we'll hang him," Pack Saddler bellowed.

Dusty felt a little better. If Rosa was there she would know that West wasn't guilty. The mob parted as the girl rode up. She had a heavy dark veil over her face.

"We've caught one of the rats, Rosa," Trail said. "He won't tell us where Morgan is."

"Then go on and find West Morgan. What I care about this one?" the girl said viciously. "West Morgan is the man I want to see hang."

"My God, Rosa, West didn't—" Dusty exclaimed. Charley Trail struck him across the mouth.

"Ride on," the girl cried imperatively.

Lester reached out and removed Dusty's gun. Someone turned his horse around. The mob was soon back at Morgan's ranch.

"Dark!" Rosa Guterrez exclaimed. "He's not here!" She turned savagely upon Dusty. "Where is the man who killed my father?" she demanded.

"Right there beside you, I reckon," Dusty replied. "It was Charley Trail."

He might have died that instant if Lester hadn't been between him and Trail.

"I guess Morgan has got scared out," the deputy said. "I'll arrest King an' take him back to jail."

The mob broke into wild cries of derision. Someone rode close and took the deputy's gun away from him, and another removed his star. Lester offered only mild protest. It was all part of a cut and dried scheme. Professing himself helpless and disgusted the deputy rode away.

The mob searched the house but found nothing to aid them.

"Morgan is hiding out," Charley Trail declared. "We'll give you three minutes to tell where he is, and then if you don't talk we'll swing you up on the boom pole of that derrick."

"Swing an' be damned," Dusty said defiantly. "I'll never tell you anything." He was thinking: West will be in town now. He'll hear about this mob, and he'll be able to dodge it. But I won't let this dirty mob make me talk if I do hang.

"Have you searched him?" somebody called.

Charley Trail, acting on the suggestion, went through Dusty's pockets. He found the warning note which Lola Durrant had written. His face flushed angrily as he read it, and he uttered an oath. He handed the note to Rosa.

"So-o, that's why he escaped," the girl said bitterly. "If I had my hands on *her*."

The mob was excitedly demanding what was up.

"Morgan has been warned that we're lookin' for him, an' has hid out," Trail told them. "The only chance we've got to get him now is to make this kid tell. Which is it, King: sing or swing?"

"I've talked all I'm goin' to," Dusty said.

"Who wants to know where Morgan is?" a steady voice demanded from the end of the haystack.

Charley Trail whirled, but all he could see was the darkened side of the stack.

"Don't move, Trail, or you'll get one right in the guts," West Morgan's voice came coldly.

"An the rest of yuh—stay where yuh are," came a voice from a small granary behind the men. Most of them recognized the rasping tones of Dee Herrick, and they wanted no truck with the contents of his deadly sawed-off shotgun.

For half a minute no one moved. Then West spoke again. "Take Trail's gun away from him, Dusty, and come on out of there."

Dusty turned and reached for Trail's gun. Trail made no effort to retain his gun. Dusty whirled and backed into the shadows beside his employer.

"You cowards, are you going to let them run a bluff like that?" Rosa's voice rose in a scream.

"Shut up, sister, or I'll rake you with buckshot," Dee Herrick spoke from the granary.

With Trail disarmed none of the mobsters knew what to do.

"You fellers are ridin' the line now," one of them called out. "Tell us what to do."

"The first thing is listen," West told them. "I didn't kill Pablo Guiterrez or Ben Getley. If I can't prove who did do it in a week I'll come in and stand trial. Go back to Skull Creek and ask who shot Bill Clover. The same people who killed the others tried to murder Clover, too, and say I done it. But they missed this time, and they put a noose around their own necks when they failed. And how do you like that, Charley Trail?"

"Some day I'll kil you, Morgan," the J Bar J foreman hissed.

"You haven't even got the nerve to kill from ambush, Trail; you have to hire others to do that for you. Now all of you get together in the middle of the yard. You, too, Rosa. Don't anybody move till I give the word."

Slowly, reluctantly, the mob got together. Charley Trail said something which silenced Rosa as she started a tirade.

"Go back to the horses, and wait for Dee," West whispered to Dusty. "Then both of you ride like hell. Wait for me at the old Moss cabin."

At intervals during the next five minutes West called out a warning, or pretended to talk to Dusty. Then he burrowed swiftly and silently under loose hay that had fallen from the stack, and was right under the side of the hayrack when he heard Dusty and Herrick depart.

"There they go!" somebody yelled, and there was a concerted rush for their horses. The pursuit was halfhearted, as West had known it would be. The men soon gave it up, and turned toward town. But Charley Trail and Rosa Guterrez didn't join the others. They were standing not more than twenty feet from where West lay.

"I didn't know before that you were a coward," West heard the girl say bitterly.

"You don't know it now, and don't say it again," Trail warned coldly. "I had no chance. But Morgan is a fugitive now, and I'll get him."

"He said *you* had my father killed," the girl said, a trace of doubt in her voice.

"Would you believe a murderer?" the man demanded. "Of course he'd accuse me because he knows I'm the man who exposed him. And how do you get around that hundred dollars you found under your dad's mattress?"

"My father would do anything West Morgan asked him to," the girl said doubtfully. "Oh, Charley, I love you so much!"

West couldn't see, but he knew that they were in an embrace. But it was Rosa who uttered most of the words of endearment. West found it in his heart to be sorry for the girl. He could see now that her pretended affection for him had been largely to please her father.

"Charley, listen," Rosa said suddenly. "Who got Bugs Getley's gold?"

"How should I know that? If he had any gold West Morgan must have got it."

"But I told you about it. My father heard him tell West he had found it, and he told me—to make me want to marry West, I suppose. And I told you."

"Well, I tried to get it for you, but Morgan had beat me to it."

"If you could have got that gold maybe my father would not have objected to us getting married. I think West Morgan killed him because he thought Father had told about the gold."

"May have had something to do with it," Trail said. "Well, I ain't given up hope of gettin' it yet, but we ain't findin' it by standin'."

around here. You had just as well go home. Here comes Ek. He will go with you."

"And where will you go, Charley?"

"I'm going back to the ranch to see Durrant. I think this paper we got off King tonight will put an end to his daughter runnin' things."

They moved away where West could no longer hear them. He pawed the hay away from his face and saw them talking to Ek Lester for a minute or two, then they all rode away.

West crawled out of the hay. He was a little surprised to see that Dusty's horse, still saddled, had been left standing in the yard. He mounted the animal and struck out for the old abandoned Moss cabin some two miles distant. He knew a little more about Rosa Guitierrez than he had known before. He was a little piqued to know that she had preferred Charley Trail to him, even though he realized how lucky he had been not to have married the girl before she fell in love with Trail.

Right now, however, he was more interested in finding out what was in the note Trail had taken from Dusty King.

15

DUSTY KING and Dee Herrick were where West expected to find them.

"Kinda close call the kid had tonight," the latter commented.

"For a few minutes I shore thought I was a gone catfish," Dusty admitted. "Funny thing though, I wasn't scared—then, I'm so damn' scared now my teeth is chatterin'."

"How did they happen to grab you?" West asked.

"It was the note from Miss Durrant I found on the table. It was a warning that the mob was after you. I started to overtake you."

"Miss Durrant left a note warning me? Did she sign her name?"

"Shore did."

"And now Trail has got it!"

"Which means she'll soon be in bad with her dad," Dee Herrick remarked.

"I think I'd better see Mr. Durrant," West murmured.

"Are you crazy?" Herrick demanded.

"Maybe. Anyway, I'm not going to let those buzzards make me hide in the grass—any more. I've still got hay down my neck. I don't want any more of it."

"When do we go?" Dusty asked.

"You don't go. I'm going alone—tomorrow morning. And then, if I come away from there alive, I'm going to Skull Creek."

"Yo're crazy to do it," Herrick said.

"I can't help that. I've got to clear my name, or else. And sooner or later I've got to have it out with Charley Trail."

"Well, don't let what happened tonight fool you. Trail is no coward, and he's forked lightning with a gun," Herrick said.

"I know. I hope you won't get into trouble for what you did for me tonight."

"Don't worry about me. I've got protection that you don't know a thing about. One of these days I may be able to crack this case wide open for you."

West looked at the bartender with new interest. "What do you know?" he asked.

"Nothin' that would do you any good yet. For me it's life insurance."

West knew better than to question the man further. It was enough to know that Herrick was his friend.

They parted presently; Herrick to return to town and West and Dusty to go back to the ranch. They got blankets and slept in the hay. They did their chores in the morning in complete leisure. They ate breakfast, and then looked over the scene of last night's near tragedy—Dusty out of sheer curiosity, and West because he entertained a faint hope that he might find some clue that he might use.

He was about to give this up as hopeless when he happened to kick a bit of hay away from one of the base logs of the derrick and his eye fixed upon a scrap of yellow paper. When he stooped for that he saw a pencil and a white, fine-toothed comb such as certain frontier dudes used to comb their moustaches.

He glanced casually at the yellow bit of paper. He had seen many of them—slips for merchandise issued by a merchant to a time customer. He was surprised by the name of the customer, for the merchant's name printed at the top of the bill was, "A. DOLLARHYDE. The customer's name was Pack Saddler! But if this surprised him he was astounded by the list of articles. They were:

1 pr. gloves	\$1.85
1 butcher knife	2.50
2 skin'g knives	4.25
1 cleaver	4.00
1 whetstone	.65
<hr/>	
Total	\$13.25.

Why, he asked himself, was Pack Saddler, who was an employee of Burr Hall, buying merchandise from Al Dollarhyde? And why should Pack Saddler be buying tools used in the butcher's trade—particularly tools which would be necessary for butchering animals on the range?

He looked at the moustache comb. Pack Saddler was bald as a billiard

ball, but he owned an abundant and profuse moustache of which he was inordinately proud.

"Dusty," he called, "looks like Pack Saddler lost something."

"What?"

"Oh, nothing important. Just a lead pencil."

"Look, West, you've changed your mind about goin' to the J Bar J, ain't you?" Dusty inquired.

"No, Dusty. But you're not going along. I know you hardly ever obey orders, but this time I want you to do as I say. First go over to Bill Clover's and do his chores. See that everything is all right. Then come back by Ben Gottle's and bring old Sheeps back with you. The feed may be getting pretty short in that pasture. When you get back here, stay here. Keep your eyes open, and don't let anybody surprise you. But if Ek Lester comes along you talk to him, and if he wants to arrest you go along peaceably."

"Otherwise, I'm to run like hell," Dusty said disgustedly.

"Exactly."

"All right, but I hope he leaves me out of jail long enough to go to your funeral, for you're shore puttin' in yore bid for a shroud when you go where Charley Trail is."

"I'm not," West denied. "Why do you think I've been killin' all this time? He'll be gone before I get there."

"In a pig's ear," Dusty said.

Dusty was hopeful that Trail would be gone, but if not he would have to take his chances. He had things to say to Lola Durrant, and he suspected that the girl might be in trouble.

When he rode into the J Bar J yard he realized that he hadn't waited long enough. There were three saddled horses outside the corral and he recognized Charley Trail's highly ornamented saddle on one of them. The other two saddles—and West knew every saddle on the range—belonged to Cluff Kinney and Fletch Bovard.

Just as he rode up to the small gate leading to the house the three men stepped out of the front door of the big J Bar J barn. Their surprise was greater than his. He saw Cluff Kinney reach spasmodically for his six gun, but Trail put out a restraining hand.

West didn't go to meet them, but he waited on his horse for their next move. They hesitated a moment, then came on.

The bunkhouse was midway between the corral and the house, and the two punchers veered away toward that building while Charley Trail came on. Ten feet from West he stopped.

The two men measured each other.

"Came to thank Miss Durrant for sendin' you that note, I suppose," Trail said.

"Well, yes," West drawled. "It was a neighborly act. You didn't have much success with your mob, did you, Trail? I'd been led to

believe that you liked to fight your own battles, but it seems I was mistaken."

Trail's brow darkened. "I fight my own fights," he said in a low tone. "Don't ever think that I don't."

"You'd have done better to have gone after Bill Clover yourself instead of sending those two," West retorted in a casual tone, with a flick of his thumb toward the bunkhouse. "Now there's no chance at all for you to claim I'm killing off all the witnesses."

"I don't know anything about Bill Clover, except that he's one of your cow thieves, an' one day I'll prove it."

West nodded. "Unless I beat you to it and prove that you're the man that's been slaughtering J Bar J beef."

"Did you come here to shoot it out with me?" Trail demanded in low, ominous tones.

"No, I don't want to kill you, Trail," West answered. "I'd much rather see you hanged."

There was no telling what might have happened then had not Lola Durrant appeared in the doorway of the house. Trail stepped past West and entered the front yard.

"Morgan wants to see you, I believe, Miss Durrant," he said. "I'm going up to see your father."

Lola hesitated a moment before she stepped aside to allow the man to enter the house. Then she came hurriedly and anxiously out to where West waited. He lifted his hat courteously, but didn't dismount.

"Why did you come here?" she gasped.

"I came to thank you for leaving that note, Miss Durrant," he said. "There wasn't the danger you thought there was, but it was a brave thing for you to do just the same."

"Trail showed that note to my father, and now—how did he get it anyway? He said he frightened Dusty King into giving it up, but what happened?"

"Dusty found the note and tried to warn me before I got to Skull Creek, but I'd taken a short cut and the mob caught him. They were going to hang Dusty, but I was lucky enough to arrive in time to prevent it. I hope the note hasn't caused you any trouble."

"My father is furious. Trail told him they were only going to try to scare young King into a confession, and says they would have succeeded if it hadn't been for me. So Father has revoked the power of attorney I had, and he has signed a complaint charging you with killing our cattle. Charley Trail has it in his pocket to give to Ek Lester."

"That's bad—you losing out, I mean. I'm not worried about being arrested."

"But you will be. And in spite of what he told Father I think they would have hanged you if they had got the chance."

"I think that, too. That is unless Rosa would have weakened. She

actually seems to think I murdered her father, but I believe I can talk her out of it. I don't suppose it would do any good for me to see your father?"

"Oh, no. He thinks you are Lucifer himself. In fact I'm not sure myself that you aren't. Please go away before—before you get hurt."

"All right, Lola, but some day I'm coming back and convince you that I'm not Lucifer, or even one of his imps."

"Where are you going now?"

"Now? Why, I'm going back to Skull Creek. I've got business there."

"Oh, no," Lola cried impulsively. "Please don't. If you do you'll be arrested and—and robbed."

Her obvious concern gave West a warm thrill.

"Don't be alarmed," he said. "Something happened last night which my enemies didn't figure on." Before he could say more the front door opened and Charley Trail appeared.

"Miss Durrant," he called, "your father wants to see you in his room. He said, 'instantly.'"

"I must go," Lola breathed, "but I won't go until you are safely out of the yard. Then, please do not come here any more—ever."

Dismissed, West could only turn his horse and ride away. When he knew that he was beyond danger from the bunkhouse he turned and looked back. She was still standing there, a trim but forlorn little figure.

16

CHARLEY TRAIL had entered the Durrant home while Lola and her father were at breakfast. The girl was already having rather an unhappy time trying to explain away the nervousness she was not able to conceal from her father.

Had anything happened to West Morgan, she wondered, or had she been foolishly alarmed?

"Lola, what is wrong with you this morning?" Durrant finally asked impatiently, as he pushed back his wheel chair.

"Why, I told you there was not a thing—"

At that moment Charley Trail entered the room.

"May I see you a moment, Mr. Durrant?" the foreman asked. He had to duck his black head to enter the doorway. As always Lola felt very small as he towered above her.

"Why, yes, Trail, have a chair," Durrant invited cordially. "How are things going? Any more range butcherings?"

"Well, I don't think we've lost any calves lately."

"Well, I'm glad to hear that, but until the culprits are properly punished our immunity won't last," the peppery Durrant said.

"That's what I know. That's why I've come to hand in my resignation," said Trail.

"What?"

"You see, I could end this stealin' overnight if I had a free hand, but since yore daughter chooses to interfere I'm quittin'," the foreman said flatly.

"Interfering. I don't follow you," Durrant said coldly.

Trail leaned over and handed Durrant a piece of paper. Lola recognized it as the note she had left in Morgan's cabin. For a moment her heart stopped beating. How had Trail come by that?"

Durrant scanned the note puzzledly. "Lola, this is your handwriting. What does it mean?"

"What it appears to mean," the girl answered. "This man and a lot of other drunks were trying to organize a mob yesterday to lynch Mr. Morgan, and I left this note as a warning."

"I never drink," Charley Trail stated, and no remark he could have made was better designed to set her back on her heels.

"What happened?" Durrant demanded impatiently. "What is this all about?"

Trail deliberately rolled and lighted a cigarette. "Nobody tried to hang anybody," he said. "We did form a posse. The object was to catch Morgan or his hired man and scare them into a confession. Thanks to your daughter's note it didn't work. That's why I'm quittin'."

"I don't blame you," Durrant said. "Lola was wrong all along. I should have signed a complaint against that man when you asked me to—perhaps that poor old Mexican wouldn't have been murdered."

Lola got to her feet. "There seems to be a pretty general agreement that I am the one should step aside," she said.

"I told you this was no job for you," her father said. "I'm revoking that power of attorney you talked me out of and giving Trail full powers. If you've got any complaints you want signed, Trail, come to me."

"I'm here," Trail said. "I've got the complaint Lester wants signed, but I'm not stayin' on here unless I get a free hand—and more money."

Lola could stand no more. She hurried into her own room. Durrant would raise the man's pay, and then tax her for having incurred the extra expense. He would renew his demands that she go back East to school, yet that she wouldn't do. After all her father still needed her care. But when he did recover, she told herself, the J Bar J would never see her again.

She could be glad, however, that her warning had saved Morgan's life. She was not fooled in the least by Trail's pretext that he had only meant to scare somebody.

Presently she heard Trail leave the house, and she watched him cross the yard. Her father called to her, but sight of Cluff Kinney and Fletch Bovard riding into the yard caused her to ignore Durrant's imperative summons.

She could see that the two punchers were greatly excited, and Trail seemed disturbed. They soon disappeared from sight, and she re-entered her father's room.

"Lola, there's no use you taking this to heart," he said. "You're a girl. This is no job for you. Just forget the whole business and leave it all in Trail's hands."

"If I didn't believe that Trail himself was the thief, as well as a murderer that would be easier," she was surprised to hear herself say.

"What? Why, you've taken leave of your senses! Trail was an officer of the law before he came here. And all the evidence is against this man Morgan. What's got into you lately to make you even think such things?"

There was no use to repeat to him the thing she had overheard Trail say. He would pooh-pooh the idea that it meant what she thought it did.

"Anyway, I'm glad I have no more responsibilities—except to take care of you," she smiled faintly.

"That's just the trouble," he declared. "What you need is a vacation. You've got to go away. This is no place for a girl like you anyway."

"We'll see," she said forestalling an argument, and left him. It was not long after that, when she was terrified by the totally unexpected appearance of West Morgan.

She was prepared for a summons to her father's room after Trail left the house that morning for the second time, but she had the satisfaction of knowing that West had come and gone in safety.

"Lola, I'm worried about you," Durrant said. "Trail says that outlaw, Morgan, came here to see you. He says he and his men could have arrested the fellow had it not been for you."

"I have my doubts about that," she replied, almost flippantly.

"Lola, if you know anything that will help apprehend that man it's your duty to tell me what it is."

"He came to thank me for writing that note."

"You don't know where he's hiding?"

"When he rides right in here in open daylight does it look as if he's hiding?" she countered.

"I can't understand it, but they'll surely have him behind bars soon. I'd have had him there before this if I could have been out. What kind of a country is it where a man can go on stealing and murdering, and nothing done about it?" Durrant complained.

"Father, I think I shall ride into town again," Lola said.

He looked at her suspiciously. "Why?" he demanded. "There's no need. And it isn't safe until this man Morgan and his gang are arrested."

One thing he could not do was keep her on the ranch when she wanted to leave. He wasn't the tyrant type. He would never use lock and key on his own daughter.

"I am not in the least afraid of Morgan," she said.

"At least promise me one thing: keep off the range, and stay away from Morgan's place." His voice sounded tired.

"Very well, Dad," she said, and kissed him.

The feeling that something of direful importance was about to happen persisted after she was well on her way to Skull Creek.

Trail and the two punchers had left the ranch ahead of her and she would have felt better if she had known just where they were. She assumed, however, that they would go by Morgan's ranch if they were on their way to town, and since she had passed her word that she would avoid the place she left the main road and cut through the hills.

She was startled suddenly, when riding over a small ridge she saw the three men grouped together in the bottom of a gulch. For a moment she was limned against the sky line. Had they looked in her direction they couldn't have failed to see her. For some reason the greatest personal fear she had ever known came over her. She wheeled her horse quickly, and in a moment was out of sight.

Her momentary panic passed, and curiosity took its place. The side-hill where she had stopped was dotted with sarvisbrush. Acting solely upon impulse she dismounted, fastened her pony to a bush with a short rein, and ran back to where a solitary sarvisbrush stood sentinel upon the top of the ridge.

The men were still there, but their discussion seemed about finished. Once more she knew panic. What if they caught her spying upon them? She had the feeling that Charley Trail would unhesitatingly carry out his threat to give her what Pablo Guterrez had got.

Kinney and Bovard had started to ride away, but Trail called to them and they stopped. He rode over to them, but the hiding girl couldn't hear what he said. They nodded understandingly, then went their way. Trail looked around, suspiciously, Lola thought; then he touched his mount lightly and rode on toward Skull Creek.

Nothing had happened. Lola was surprised to hear her own breath come with a quiver. It was relief. And suddenly she felt very bold again.

There was something queer about those two punchers. The J Bar J had other men, but these two were much closer to the foreman than the others. They were supposed to be camped somewhere on the Blackfoot Breaks, guarding that end of the range. Trail had once refused to explain why they were at the ranch when they were sup-

posed to be elsewhere. They did a lot of riding around, but very little work. If they were up to crooked business, and she could just find it out—

She found herself breathing hard again. Following them would be anything but safe. No telling what might happen if they caught her, but if they didn't she might learn the answer to what had become for her the most important question in the world: was West Morgan lying, or was he telling the truth?

She was a free woman, she argued with herself. Her father had relieved her of all responsibility and turned everything over to Trail. Very well, since her time was her own she would spend part of it trying to follow Cluff Kinney and Fletch Bovard.

17

EVERYONE in Skull Creek knew that a mob had gone out the night before to hang West Morgan, but few except the members of the mob itself knew exactly what had happened. They knew Morgan had escaped in some manner and that was all. Consequently the peace and complacency of the town was visibly shocked when West rode down Main Street an hour before noon.

No one ventured to hail him, but whispered speculation followed in his wake. The news was carried to Burr Hall, and that mighty man came out on the sidewalk to see with his own eyes.

Amazement increased when the rancher rode straight to the post office. It was known that Rosa Guterrez had been with the mob, and that she had gone out threatening to shoot Morgan herself unless they allowed her to adjust the rope. Somehow, no one cared to follow to see what happened.

Ek Lester was in town and the word was quickly carried to him, but he didn't leave his office in the front of the town jail. He mumbled that the papers for Morgan's arrest were not yet complete, but that the moment they were he would take action.

Several people had asked the deputy, "Who shot Bill Clover?" To that Lester had no answer. Clover, it was learned, was weak, but doing well, "considering."

West was aware of the sensation his arrival created. He was coming in, not with a chip on his shoulder, but with the determination to have his right to walk the streets a free man either admitted, or openly denied.

He didn't expect to find Rosa in the post office, and he had often entered the house from the side door. It was Rosa herself who responded to his knock. She was wearing a pale-blue silk robe, and her

heavy black hair hung over her shoulders in two long braids. She was caught completely off guard. She clutched at her robe and gasped.

"May I come in, Rosa?" he asked quietly.

"You—What are you doing here?" As always her voice sounded a little shrill.

West stepped inside as though assuming he had been invited. The girl fell back.

"You think because you got away last night you can come here and nothing happen to you?" she blazed.

"Come off your high horse, Rosa," he said calmly. "You couldn't even work yourself up to kill me with a mob at your back. The reason is that you know in your heart that I never harmed your father. You happen to be stuck on Charley Trail, and for fear you'll find out the truth and lose him, you try to make yourself think I killed Pablo. But it's no use. You can't do it."

"What about the hundred dollars I found under his mattress?" she blazed. "You paid him that."

"You know better than that, too. If you did find a hundred dollars it was 'planted'—probably by Trail."

"Why did you come here?"

"Because I want you to stop this childish talk about putting a rope around my neck. I've liked you and your father—a lot. I don't want to see you getting hurt. Before the day is over the truth will be out about this cattle stealing as well as your father's murder. Don't be caught on the wrong side."

She looked at him speculatively, but said nothing.

"I realize now that you have been in love with Charley Trail for quite some time—"

"And you are jealous," she said.

"Maybe. Anyway, I'm going to expose Trail for what he is—a murdering thief. Whether he kills me or not doesn't matter—much. But whether you stick with him or not after it's proved that he murdered your father does. If you do that you'll never be satisfied until you reach the lower depths of hell. I just don't want that to happen to you."

The girl breathed hard as she nervously clasped and unclasped her fingers.

"What proof have you got?" she demanded finally.

"I only came to tell you I had the proof, not to show it to you," he said. "Good day, Rosa."

He walked back to his horse, and rode back up the street. He stopped in front of Burr Hall's saloon and dismounted. Men fell back as he stepped upon the boardwalk and his spurs jangled across the lumber. There was a set to his broad shoulders, a look in his grayish eyes which made the bystanders hold their tongues. And many of them were men who had been in the mob.

Burr Hall stood in front of his bar, belligerence in every line of his heavily muscled frame.

West stopped directly in front of the saloonkeeper, and to Hall's amazement he smiled. "How come you wasn't at the party the boys put on at my place last night, Burr?" he asked. "I missed you."

"You've got yore nerve to come here, I'll say that," Burr growled. "Yo're gonna be arrested for murder. Before that happens I wish you'd take off that gun an' meet me in a fair fight. I'd like a second chance."

"All right, Burr, on one condition," West replied. "If you'll let me have a private talk with you in your office first I'll give you as many chances as you want—and you'll never be able to whip one side of me."

"Why, you—" Burr bellowed. He balanced on his toes a moment, then sank back on his heels. "All right," he grumbled, "I'll even talk to you for the chance of beatin' yore blamed head off." He turned, and West followed him into his private office, while the spectators gaped in amazement.

"If yuh need help, Burr, sing out," the barkeep called.

"I won't need no help," Burr rumbled.

"You want I should take my gun off now?" West asked as the door closed behind them. "I don't want to make you nervous."

"You make *me* nervous? Yo're the one to be nervous. Yuh ain't gittin' outa town again. What did you want to see me for?"

"To apologize first. I had you figured as a thief. I think now I was wrong."

"What?"

"Look, Burr: you've been thinking that me and my friends have been killing J Bar J beef and selling it to Al Dollarhyde. I've been thinking that Charley Trail and his gang have been killing J Bar J beef and selling it to you."

"What?" Burr Hall roared again.

"We were both half right—and half wrong."

"What're you drivin' at?" Burr asked more moderately.

"When that mob came to my place last night one man took off his coat to whip Dusty King. When he picked it up a piece of paper, and some other things, fell out of the pocket. Recognize these?"

West placed the fine-toothed moustache comb and the pencil on Hall's desk.

"Why, them's Pack Saddler's. He's always combin' that moustache o' his with that comb."

"Yeah. Now lay your eyes on this." West smoothed out the yellow merchandise bill on the desk. "Did you know that Saddler patronized the fellow across the street?"

"Well, I shore as hell didn't! Why, I'll fire that bum—What the hell? These is butcher's tools!"

"Exactly. Didn't you know that Saddler had been a butcher by trade?"

"He was a jack-of-all-trades. But why did he buy these tools from Dollarhyde?"

"You'll get it through that thick head of yours eventually," West smiled grimly. "You paid Saddler to poke around on the range, didn't you?"

"Yes, but—You mean Saddler has been killin' beef for Dollarhyde?"

"You're beginning to get it."

"But you said Charley Trail was guilty."

"Trail and Saddler have been thick as thieves. I've got no evidence against Trail yet, but Saddler can supply it. I want you to help me work on him—and Dollarhyde."

The hostility and disbelief slowly faded from Hall's face. An almost seraphic smile beamed upon his face. "O happy day," he murmured. "I can make Pack Saddler squeal like a pig. I knew Dollarhyde was a crook, but I sure thought you were in with him. Let me git a-hold o' Pack."

"Now wait," West said. "Saddler is only a tool. Trail is the man I want—not for a few piddlin' thefts, but for murder. You go off half-cocked and we'll bag a rabbit and let the moose get away. You never did have many brains, you know, Burr."

The insult was made deliberately. West stood watching the man with a half smile on his lips.

"Danged if I don't believe yo're right," Hall grinned suddenly. "You can have Trail, but I want that sneakin' Dollarhyde. Ever since he's been here he's rubbed my fur the wrong way. What could I do? Take you, for instance. If I didn't like you I could beat the whey out of you."

"Like fun you could," West jeered.

"We'll see some time. Just because you was lucky once—This Dollarhyde, though. I just never could bring myself to dirty my hands on him."

"Especially with Dee Herrick around," West commented.

"Dang you," Hall roared, "I ain't afraid o' nobody."

"Well then, listen: I've got more of a stake in this than you have. My neck's involved. I've got to find out who murdered Pablo, and what become of Bugs Getley. It'll be a lot easier with Saddler on the loose. You can work him over any time. If I land in jail on a murder charge, or they happen to bump me off go after him. In the meantime keep this junk of his in your safe."

"Yo're dang right I will," Hall promised.

"All right, Burr, I reckon that finishes our business for the present. Now to save your face about lickin' me. I ain't proud. We'll let 'em

think I wouldn't fight you. When it's all over I'll correct the impression."

West backed out of the room. All eyes were upon him as he re-entered the barroom. Instead of crossing directly to the door he circled the wall, traveling twice the distance necessary to reach the door. Burr Hall did not appear.

West had almost reached the door when the bartender shouted, "Burr, you all right?"

There was no answer.

"Mebbe that murderin' cuss has stabbed him," a man said. The crowd surged forward.

"Stop where you are," West warned them. His six gun moved slowly from side to side.

Then Burr Hall appeared. "He's too yaller to stay an' fight me like a man," he yelled. "Let him go."

West laughed. "It's just that I ain't got the time, Burr," he jeered. "When you and me fight it's got to be in the middle of the street where the whole town can see you get your licking."

He stepped out on the sidewalk and glanced hurriedly up and down. A leaderless mob was one thing; Charley Trail was another. Neither Trail nor his satellite, Ek Lester, were in sight. He crossed the street to Dollarhyde's.

Everyone had gone out on the street when West entered Hall's saloon, and now only Dee Herrick and Dollarhyde were in the latter's place. It was a little strange for Dollarhyde to be there. Ordinarily he preferred to potter around his store. Dee Herrick, a twisted grin on his grim visage, was mopping up an already spotless mahogany bar. Dollarhyde's fat little paunch pressed against the bar as he toyed with a small glass of beer.

"I don't know whether I ought to allow you to come in here, West," Dollarhyde said anxiously. "If—"

"It's a free country, and I'm an American citizen," West retorted.

"I know. But I don't want any riot in here. You attract too much attention." The merchant's attempt to smile failed dismally.

"Well, you and me are in this together," West said blandly. "Burr Hall was just telling me he had the goods on you for selling stolen beef which he claimed I killed."

"He can't prove a thing," Dollarhyde said harshly. "How's anybody going to prove that I knew it was stolen"—

"So you have been selling slow elk," West said. "That's all I wanted to know."

"Now look here, West," Dollarhyde cried furiously, "I don't take that from anybody. I bought beef from you on your word it was your own. Dee, here, can back me up."

"Sure," Dee said, "I heard you fellows make the bargain. Of course

I couldn't say whether it applied to the wagon loads of beef that went out in the nights with sacks of grain on top of the wagon sheets that covered the carcasses."

Dollarhyde had drawn his paunch up to where it faintly resembled a chest. At his bartender's words it became a paunch again. His fat little jowls quivered. Without a word he passed through the middle door and disappeared inside the store.

"That," West remarked, "was the most unkindest cut of all. How long have you known about this?"

"I don't know nothin'," Dee said. "I just work here." He walked to the door and looked out. He was back inside in a moment.

"The bright thing for you to do, my friend, is to head out the back way," he said. "I see Charley Trail an' Ek Lester headin' this way—an' this ain't where them buzzards buy their drinks."

18

LOLA had no intention of following the two punchers clear to the breaks of the Blackfoot. That would be twenty-five miles anyway over the roughest part of the whole range. She was sure to be seen long before she got that far, although, knowing where their camp was supposed to be, she could have ridden directly to that place. But the feeling persisted that these boys were not on their way to camp.

She knew it before she had followed them a mile, unless they were going an unnecessarily long way around. They were heading directly toward a breach in the foothills over Spring Creek Pass, toward a section of range that had been given up to sheep.

Right now the sheep herds were a hundred miles away on summer range. There might be cattle there, but it was well beyond the bounds of the J Bar J ranch, which lay to the north.

It was easy to keep out of sight through Spring Creek Canyon. She allowed her horse to walk fast, and constantly peered ahead toward the next bend, but she saw nothing.

She reached the top of the pass at last and looked down over the long sagebrush slope on the other side. Save for a few scattered clumps of aspens or sarvisbrush the view was unobstructed for many miles. She could see the line of stubby yellow hills against which the Blackfoot curved before entering the frothing canyon among the breaks ten to twenty miles below.

She saw nothing of the two riders she had been following. The landscape was broken by many shallow arroyos leading toward the river. Kinney and Bovard might be in one of them. She waited.

Off to her right lay a heavily timbered region of deep canyons known

as the Grave Creek Basin. Its farther side was marked by a high, forbidding line of hills. A mile or so inside the basin Lola could see the roofs of the Grave Creek ranch buildings; now, supposedly, abandoned.

She had heard how a big sheep outfit had bought the Grave Creek ranch, and by means of it was able to dominate the entire basin, and the country west clear to where she now stood. There had almost been a range war, but the sheepmen's claim was too strong to contest.

Suddenly as she looked two dots appeared on a small ridge near the Grave Creek buildings. They disappeared a moment later, but Lola knew they were her men. Why, she asked herself, were they going in that direction? They had no business there.

She hesitated a long time before she moved. She waited for the men to appear again, but they didn't. Then, although she felt a curious thrill of danger she went on across the pass.

The main trail was really an old emigrant road. The old ruts carved in the loose soil had become veritable washes, in many places ten feet deep. It ran straight toward the river, and the girl followed it. Well below the old ranch a more recently used road ran out to join it, but there were no recent tracks here. As near as the girl could tell nobody had been on either road for a month.

She turned now, and putting her horse to a trot, headed straight toward the buildings a mile away. Fortunately for her Grave Creek was lined with a heavy growth of willows, and the ridge on her right was well covered with sarvisbrush. There was little chance that anyone would see her until she was within a few hundred yards of the old buildings. Here she stopped and peered ahead. No sign of Kinney or Bovard.

She was on the point of turning back when a horse stuck its head out of an old shed beyond the house. She recognized it instantly as a J Bar J saddle horse used by Cluff Kinney, but it wasn't the one he had been riding. There was no sign of the cowboys, and she rode on in.

Eight saddle horses stuck their heads out of the shed as she approached. Her own mount tossed its head and pranced as literally dozens of horseflies pounced upon it. The girl's eyes narrowed. She was not such a tenderfoot that she couldn't read certain signs. This wasn't the first day, by any means, that this part of the J Bar J cavy had used the old shed as a refuge from flies and insects during the day-time. At night they probably grazed upon the sheep company's meadow.

The horses were twenty miles from where they belonged. Either they had got away from the cow camp and Kinney and Bovard were hunting them, or the two men had a camp where they had no business to be.

Excitement made the girl breathe abnormally fast as she opened a stable door and allowed her pony to take refuge from the assailing

hordes of horseflies, which would never enter a building. She walked over to the shed, and except for two or three half broken colts, the animals merely stood and watched her. The broncos moved a few rods away and stopped.

She moved on to the corral. The tracks of high-heeled boots were plain in the dust. Somebody had been catching fresh horses in that corral every morning!

Lola felt that she was on the trail of something important—she didn't know what. But she did have the feeling of imminent danger. She didn't want her two employees to catch her there. Curbing her panicky impulse to get away from there as rapidly as possible she went to the house. The windows had been boarded up, and the doors were fastened with heavy padlocks. No one was living there. There was nothing to indicate that anyone had entered the building since the sheep herds had departed the latter part of June.

She stood and made a lively deduction. Kinney and Bovard kept their horses in the sheepmen's pasture, so they must have a camp close around. And they were drawing wages for looking after J Bar J cattle, and there wasn't a cow within ten miles.

The two punchers had cut across the foothills, but they had struck the creek above the buildings. The sensible thing was to get away from there before something happened. She didn't know what she was looking for, but she didn't like these fellows' actions.

After all, she determined with a resurgence of Durrant pride, she still had a right to demand what they were doing here. She tried to tell herself as she led her horse from the stable, and headed on up the creek that they wouldn't *dare* molest her. That line of thought was weakened considerably by remembrance of her unpleasant experience with Pack Saddler.

The region hereabout was completely strange to her. She knew this isolated ranch had at one time been quite famous as a base of supply on the old emigrant trail, but of late years it had run down so badly that it had been abandoned until the sheep company bought it up for taxes. Lower than that it could not fall.

Soon a canyon with deeply wooded sides closed around her. Then where the old wood road crossed the main creek she saw where two horses had splashed across not long before her.

For a quarter of a mile it was easy to follow the tracks, then they ended abruptly. It took a minute or so for the girl to diagnose that they had turned into a smaller side canyon, but had passed a perfectly plain trail to turn off where the grass was thick enough to obscure their tracks.

Lola had come too far to turn back now. She turned her horse and after a brisk climb up over a drop-off in the canyon found herself upon a little narrow flat. The first thing she saw was a pile of old, rotting

sawdust. Just above that were some crumbled timbers, and the remnants of an old slide track. On the slope above were several old skidways, with half a hundred old, half rotten saw logs lying about.

It had been twenty years since the old mill had ceased to operate, but Lola didn't know that. For the moment she was fascinated by her discovery. Then, beyond the sawdust, she glimpsed the tail of a horse as it switched at a horsefly.

Once more fear came over the girl like a wave. She started to turn back, then the old pride asserted itself. She wheeled her pony and headed directly for the two saddled horses which had been tied in a clump of aspens.

She had reached the old slide-track when she heard a sound that stopped her blood from coursing, then sent it on as though it had turned to ice water. It was the most ghastly, unhuman scream she had ever heard, and yet she knew it had come from a human throat!

An instant later it came again: weird and unearthly, reeking with anguish.

This time the girl knew where it came from, but she was powerless to move. Had certain death come to meet her then she couldn't have lifted a hand.

The sound had come out of the ground only a few yards beyond where the two saddled horses were tied. She saw that the animals were frightened, too. All she could see were a number of old logs lying close together on the ground, but the wild shrieks of pain were coming from there. They continued intermittently, and suddenly the girl saw a tiny spiral of smoke seeping out between two of the logs.

Her paralysis passed. Every humane instinct urged her to ride forward and interfere with whatever was going on. But, fortunately, she also possessed a good fund of common sense. Her reason told her that if what she thought was going on there was indeed going on, then an unarmed girl would not only get herself into serious trouble, but might further increase the danger of the victim.

She wheeled her pony, and by using all the self-control she had *walked* the animal back to the trail.

Instinct warned her to keep off the trail. She rode above where she had left it, crossed it quickly and presently found a place where she could cross the creek. Sheltered then by the brush she let her fly-bitten pony have its head, and the animal broke into a gallop.

She was past the ranch buildings before she dared to stop. Then she accused herself of cowardice. Someone was being brutally tortured or murdered under those logs—and she had run away.

"But what could I do?" she asked herself aloud. "I—I've got to have help."

Once more she put her pony to as hard a pace as it could stand up the slope to the head of the pass. Not until she was headed down the

pass on the other side at a brisk trot did the sense of her own danger subside.

Now she could think more clearly. She was sure she had been wise not to try to interfere. She would do more good by going for help than by getting herself killed. But who, she wondered suddenly, was she going to get to help?"

She had automatically thought of the law. But the law was represented by Ek Lester, who was a bosom pal of Charley Trail. And whatever brutal, heinous act was being done by Kinney and Bovard she was sure was being done at Trail's express command. That eliminated the deputy sheriff.

Her father? He was helpless. He would think she was the victim of overwrought nerves—and he would consult Trail.

She didn't know many people in Skull Creek. The only one she could think of in whom she might confide was the storekeeper, Al Dollarhyde.

Delay was the one thing to avoid. If the punchers noticed her tracks, as they were likely to do, even though she had kept to the grass wherever possible, they would finish their gruesome business and go elsewhere. Going clear to Skull Creek would mean the waste of several hours.

If only she could find West Morgan. It was going to be dusk before she could reach even his place. After what had happened West would be foolish to stay there, but he was a stubborn individual. She might find him at home. If she didn't she would ride on to Skull Creek and tell Al Dollarhyde what she had run across.

19

WEST's horse was out on the main street, and he had no liking at all for running away from his enemy. But if he stayed and had it out with Trail he would either get himself killed, or he would be accused of killing a man while resisting arrest.

He had little doubt that his foes had at last got out a warrant for his arrest on some of the charges laid against him. He knew that Dee Herrick was right in urging him to get out the back way while there was still a chance.

"'Dolly' keeps a saddle horse in the stable out back," Dee said. "Grab it and travel. I'll hold up the parade long enough for you to get out of town."

Dee could have no more than reached the stable before Trail and Lester shouldered their way through Dollarhyde's swinging doors. Char-

ley Trail's black eyes appeared to bore into every corner of the saloon at once.

"Where's West Morgan?" Ek Lester demanded.

"Morgan?" Herrick answered slowly. "Lemme see: I believe he was in here not long ago."

"Stop stallin', Herrick," Trail rasped. "You know damn well he was in here not two minutes ago. Where did he go?"

"What d'ye wanta see him for?" Herrick asked foolishly.

Trail's six gun suddenly pointed at the barkeep's head. "Start talkin', damn you," he said. "Which way did he go? Where's he hidin'?"

Herrick's rhythmic swipes of his bar rag over the already glistening mahogany did not cease. His other hand was in plain view, resting upon the bar.

"Gettin' a little jumpy, ain't you, Trail?" he retorted. "For why should I talk about a customer?"

Death passed Dee Herrick by like the light touch of a feather. Trail's murderous rage was so near the breaking point that the weight of a thumbtack would have discharged his weapon.

"Because we got a warrant for that murderin' hyena's arrest," Ek Lester thundered.

"For murder?" Herrick queried, wiping away an imaginary fly speck.

"No, damn you, for stealin' cattle," the deputy snarled.

"Talk fast, Herrick," Trail breathed heavily, and cool customer though he was Dee realized that he had to talk or cease living.

"I ain't sure," he said, "but I think he went upstairs to see Bill Clover."

Trail's expression radiated unbelief, but at that moment Dollarhyde appeared at the inner door.

"You seen Morgan?" Lester asked the merchant.

"Yes, he was here a few minutes ago, talkin' to Herrick."

"You see him go upstairs?"

"No, but he could have."

"You watch his horse, Dollarhyde, an' if he shows up you holler," Trail ordered. "Come on, Ek, we'll damn' soon find out if he's hidin' in here."

The men stormed upstairs into the rooming house. Dollarhyde gave his bartender a look surcharged with hatred, and went out on the street. Herrick went on wiping, but he kept one ear cocked. He was rather glad that the doctor happened to be with Bill Clover at the moment, even though it meant the men would find out instantly that West hadn't been there.

They were back in a minute. Trail stared coldly at the bartender, then followed the deputy down into the cellar through a trap door at the end of the bar. It was a strong temptation for Herrick to close the door and fasten it, but he wisely refrained.

They emerged and looked out to see if West's horse were still at the hitching rack.

"I wonder," Dollarhyde said, "if he could have gone out the back way an' stole my horse."

"Go see," Trail ordered.

The merchant was back in a minute, his little belly shaking with excitement. "It's gone!" he yelled. "The dirty crook stole my horse."

"Then let's git a posse organized an' git after him," Lester said. But Charley Trail walked slowly over to the bar.

"This is twice you've messed into business that didn't concern you, Herrick," he said coldly. "Don't do it the third time."

Herrick kept on polishing.

West didn't take time to throw the saddle onto Dollarhyde's little buckskin cayuse. The stirrups would be far too short for his long legs, so he preferred to ride bareback, and he had no time to spare.

He discovered at once that the buckskin was lazy and could be got onto a gallop only by diligent application of heels and bridle reins—a far different proposition from the good horses West was used to riding.

Fortunately, there were only one or two houses back of the saloon, and if the good housewives were a little astonished at seeing a long-legged cowpuncher leaving town on a barebacked buckskin pony none of them did anything about it. In Skull Creek anything might happen.

Three hundred yards from his starting point West crossed the railroad track, and galloped down the borrow pit on the other side until he struck a swale running out into the five mile waste of sage and lava rock which lay between town and the fertile ranches on the Portneuf.

He expected pursuit at any moment, and consequently he changed his course wherever it was possible without having to ride over a ridge.

Three or four miles from town he came to a lava reef and followed it until he came upon one of the numerous blowholes which dotted the flat. He drew the panting, unwilling, lazy little buckskin to a halt, slid off, and with extreme difficulty persuaded the little beast to slide into the bottom of the blowhole. Here, except for sheer accident, there was practically no danger of discovery.

It had happened at last. Now he was a full-fledged fugitive from the law. What next? If they caught him he supposed Burr Hall would work over Pack Saddler until he got a confession of some kind, but it probably would not implicate Charley Trail, and anything other than that to West, was chaff in the wind.

Practical things came first, and the most important thing was to secure a better horse. After that would come food, and then a place to hide out. He was worried about Dusty King. The chances were that a warrant had been issued against Dusty, and they would pick the

puncher up at the ranch. He believed that he could trust Burr Hall and Dee Herrick to see that there was no lynching business this time.

He saw nothing of the posse, and as it began to grow dusk he dragged the buckskin out of the blowhole, mounted, and rode slowly and circumspectly on toward the ranch.

The posse would be there ahead of him, but he wanted one of his own horses. There was a chance, too, that Dusty had brought Ben Getley's saddle to the ranch that day.

It was long after dark when he warily approached his own house. He had had enough of the buckskin. He slipped the bridle from the animal and turned it into his hay meadow. He went forward on foot. The house was dark. That, however, meant nothing. He heard a horse nicker, and presently a loose animal trotted toward him. A moment later he recognized Bugs Getley's temperamental old pony, Sheeps.

The pony stopped twenty feet away, and West walked up to it. Its presence meant that Dusty had at least returned to the ranch.

"You little devil, if you'd behaved yourself and let old Ben catch you that day none of this might have happened," West reproached the pony, as he slipped the bit into its mouth.

He tied the pony to a fence post and crept on toward the house. If there was a trap it was well hidden. But there was no sign of Dusty. He reached the stables and inspected them carefully. Then he moved on to the house. He circled the building, listening intently, but not a sound came from the inside.

Convinced at last that there was no danger here he opened the door and went in. Again he listened a minute before striking a light. The house was empty. What he saw was Dusty's half-eaten supper on the table. Dusty had been arrested!

He felt a surge of anger as he moved over and pulled down all the blinds. He was hungry and there was enough cold food cooked to stay his hunger. He had just finished when he heard the regular beat of a galloping horse's hooves on the road from Skull Creek.

West blew out the lamp instantly, closed the door, and ran out toward the road. He crouched down in the shadows where he could see without being seen. The horseman came closer, stopped abruptly in front of the gate; then, after a moment, started to ride on.

"Lola!" West called softly.

The girl's start frightened her horse. She controlled it instantly and turned back.

"West—is that you?" she asked.

He stood up. "Yes. What on earth are you doing here at this hour? Why aren't you home?"

She didn't reply at once to his questions. "I half hoped I might find you here," she said, "but I heard in Skull Creek that—that the law was after you."

"I did leave town in quite a hurry," he admitted. "Do you know what has happened to Dusty?"

"Yes. He has been arrested."

"I was afraid of that. Dusty is no thief."

"I don't think so either. In fact—"

"What were you going to say?"

"I—I—don't know whether I ought to tell you this," she said. "I—I—don't want you to get into any more trouble. But I had an experience today, a terrible experience. But it—it may clear things up for you. Anyway, I hope so."

"Lola! Where have you been?" West gasped. It was hard to think of the girl who had once accused him of trespassing, and who had coolly fought off a brute like Pack Saddler being so distraught.

"I've been to the old sawmill above the Grave Creek ranch."

"But why there, of all places? That's just sheep range."

"I followed two men. Cluff Kinney and Fletch Bovard."

"I still don't get it." His voice was gentle. He saw that she was having difficulty controlling her feelings enough to talk.

"They were torturing somebody," she got out at last. "The—the screams. I'll have nightmares the rest of my life."

"Bugs Getley!" West exclaimed. "Of course. Quick, Lola. Tell me everything."

"But you can't do anything, West. The officers are after you. And I've already reported it. That's why I went to town."

"You—reported it. To whom?"

"Why, to Mr. Dollarhyde. I was afraid to trust Ek Lester, but Mr. Dollarhyde is the justice of the peace."

"Dollarhyde! My God!"

"West, did I do wrong? What's the matter with Mr. Dollarhyde?" she cried.

"Nothing, darling, except that he stands in with Trail and those other fellows. By this time Trail knows that their hide-out has been found."

Neither of them noticed the word of endearment that had escaped his lips. It had slipped out because of the wave of tenderness toward the girl which swept over him, yet he knew that he had sounded angry.

"Oh, I've been such a fool," she moaned. "If only I had been brave enough to go right in and stop them."

"Then you would have been a fool, my dear. Thank God, you kept your head and did the only sensible thing to do. Those men murdered Pablo, Lola, and tried to kill Bill Clover. If you had gone on you would be a dead girl right now."

"I almost wish I were," she sobbed.

"Don't talk that way. None of it is your fault. Maybe it isn't too late

yet. You've got to calm yourself. Tell me just what you saw and heard."

She told him. "At first I couldn't tell where the screams were coming from. Then I realized it was from under a pile of logs. And soon there was smoke."

"They didn't get the gold poor old Bugs found, and they're trying to make him tell by torture, by fire. Damn their foul souls to hell, if I ever get my hands on them— What did Dollarhyde say?"

"He said he would get some reliable men right away and go out there. He warned me not to say anything to anybody for fear some word would leak out to friends of Kinney and Bovard."

"Yeah," West said bitterly.

"And he insisted that I have supper with his wife."

"So he could get out here and see Trail. No wonder there was nobody waiting for me. Oh, my lord!"

"West, what is it?"

"I'm afoot—or practically so. And your horse is all in. Right now I'd trade this whole ranch for a good horse, and all I've got is Sheeps."

His own horses were somewhere in the pasture, unless his enemies had thoughtfully turned them out. But it was dark, and by the time he found them, and ran them into the corral on Sheeps, if he could do it at all, it would be too late. He could make it to the old sawmill on Sheeps if he let the pony take his time, and he would arrive about noon. At that Sheeps was better than Dollarhyde's buckskin.

"We have good horses," Lola said. "But, West, what could you do? I'm so afraid something will happen to you."

"I'll be all right," he said. "If you can let me have a horse let's be going."

He ran over to get Sheeps and sprang on bareback. Sheeps kicked up indignantly when West rapped him under the belly with the bridle reins, but another rap brought him out of it, and he struck into a gallop. Lola urged her tired mount to a gallop, and they made the ride to the J Bar J in almost record time. Sheeps was puffing like a porpoise when they arrived. It was the fastest the pony had had to move for a good many years.

They had exchanged few remarks during the ride. West was trying to estimate his chances of saving Ben Getley's life, if the old man were not already dead, but there was always an undercurrent to his thoughts concerned with the small girl who rode so manfully at his side. He had called her darling, and though the word had risen to his lips spontaneously it had not been used lightly. She had not been offended, nor even surprised. Somehow, there was a closer bond between them than there had ever been between him and Rosa Guterrez.

There was a light in Durrant's bedroom. "Father will be fuming," Lola said, and that was all.

She led the way to the barn and handed him a lantern to light. A tall, sorrel horse snorted and stamped as the light flashed.

"My father's favorite horse, Brigham," Lola said. "Father's saddle is right here."

"Your father won't like this," West said. "I hope you won't get in trouble on account of it." He saddled the horse, and let out the stirrups. The sorrel horse danced out of the stable behind him.

"He's only been ridden a few times since Father was hurt," Lola said. "Then Charley Trail rode him. One thing about him, he never has bucked."

"I'm glad of that," West said.

He was ready to go, and time was pressing. Still, he delayed. He looked at Lola. Both of them knew it might be the last time they would ever meet. She made a step forward, and her arms went slowly around his neck. He drew her gently to him and kissed her softly upon the high spot of her cheek. She clung to him a moment then her soft, sweet lips were upon his. He held her close for a moment then let her go. She stepped away.

"Good-bye—darling," he said.

"Take care of yourself," she breathed softly.

West stuck his foot in the stirrup and swung into the saddle. The next moment he felt himself rising in the air as the sorrel reached for the stars. His whole anatomy was jolted as the animal came down. There was nothing in front of him but a wisp of mane. The sorrel's head was somewhere down between its front feet.

Brigham bellowed hoarsely as he struck the ground, and once more climbed the atmosphere. Each time the horse came down he gave a bellow. West was a good rider, perhaps the best in the country unless it was Charley Trail, yet he had his work cut out. He wasn't riding for an audience now. He grabbed the post grimly and hooked both spurs in the saddle cinch.

Lola had said the sorrel horse had never bucked, yet West had never straddled a harder animal to ride. Brigham put in at least twenty terrific jumps before he suddenly gave up and let the hump out of his back.

West looked back. He saw Lola standing there, and waved. She waved back, then ran toward the house. Brigham's mighty bellows had made themselves heard in there. She was going to have some hard explaining to do.

Once settled down West realized that the Brigham horse was as fast and easy-gaited an animal as he had ever had a leg over. Why, then, if the horse was so gentle and well broken, had it pitched?

It didn't take long to figure out the answer. Charley Trail was the only man who had ridden the horse since Durrant's injury. He had known that about the first thing Durrant would want to do once he

got outside was ride his favorite mount. With deliberate, malice aforethought the J Bar J foreman had made a buckner out of Brigham, and a good one. The first time Durrant tried to ride the animal he would go back to the hospital for a long, long time.

20

WEST DIDN'T spare the sorrel. He realized that he was probably too late to do poor old Bugs Getley any good, but there was a chance that he might meet up with some of the old man's murderers. If they hadn't succeeded in making Getley tell them where he had hidden the gold they might keep him alive for future torture, but that was not probable. If they hadn't been able to torture it out of him by this time they would know that he never would tell. West had the feeling that no amount of torture would cause the old man to betray his secret.

In any event they would remove the old man, either dead or alive, from the old sawmill, and Dollarhyde would claim his investigation proved the girl was mistaken, excited and hysterical. West knew that she wasn't anything of the kind.

Trail, he estimated, would have at least two hours start of him, probably three. He might gain an hour by fast riding, but that would not be enough.

He wondered if Al Dollarhyde would accompany Trail. It was not likely. The merchant would sneak back to town, and claim he had been over the mountain. Or he might pass the buck to Ek Lester. The deputy probably had accompanied Trail. West no longer had any doubt that Lester was as crooked as Trail himself.

He met the moon almost face to face as he reached the top of Spring Creek Pass. It was suddenly almost as light as day. He saw a solitary horseman silhouetted on a low ridge beneath the pass. The man was coming his way.

West whirled and stopped behind a mammoth sarvis. The lone rider drew rapidly nearer, and when he was a hundred yards distant West recognized him. He waited with his hand on his gun until the man was a scant twenty feet away before he reined Brigham from behind the bush. The steel barrel of his six gun glittered in the moonlight.

"Good evenin', Ek," he said coolly.

The deputy sheriff was caught completely off guard. His hand moved spasmodically toward his gun, but didn't finish the draw. His hand came back up, into plain sight. His breath sounded in a frightened whistle.

"You—you—startled me—jumpin' from behind a bush in the middle of the night like that," he stammered.

"Is he dead?" West asked.

"Is—is who dead?"

"Bugs Getley."

"H-how should I know, West. I—I—ain't seen him since he d-disappeared."

"You lie, Lester. You just came from seeing him. I want to know if he's still alive."

"You're crazy," the deputy said weakly, but he was beginning to get his nerves under control.

"I ain't got much time to fritter away, Ek," West said. He rode close and lifted the unresisting officer's gun from the holster. Then, acting upon impulse he reached out and tore the star from the officer's vest and hurled it into the brush. "You've disgraced that badge long enough," he stated.

"Now, look here, West, I got a warrant for your arrest. Why don't you just give up peaceably an' come along with me? You're just gittin' in deeper all the time. That—that's Mr. Durrant's horse you're ridin'. I suppose you stole it, too."

"No, just borrowed it—like I did Dollarhyde's buckskin. I ask you again, and you'd better, by God, answer. Was Getley dead when you left the old sawmill?"

"You've been talkin' with the Durrant girl. She's crazy," Lester said. "Al Dollarhyde told me she claimed she had heard something there so I went over to investigate. There hadn't been nobody there."

"Then why didn't Trail come back with you?"

Lester gave a start. His frightened eyes looked everywhere except into West's face. He was a badly scared deputy. Had he not known West Morgan as an ordinarily peaceable, good-natured man he would have been groveling in the dirt, begging for his life.

"Trail?" He got out. "Trail wasn't with me. I went alone."

"I don't just know what ought to be done with a liar like you," West said. "If I knew for sure Getley was dead I think I'd blow your damn' brains out an' let you lay. Get off."

"You mean—"

"I mean get off that horse before I shoot you off," West snapped. "Kinney and Bovard have been havin' some fun with poor old Bugs Getley. Now I think I'll have some fun with you."

He swung down, and although Lester was a larger man than he was, he jerked the deputy bodily from the saddle. Lester stood cowering before him.

"West, you ain't goin' to—to—" the fellow pleaded.

"I don't quite know yet. It depends on how much you want to say," West answered grimly. "Start walkin' toward that pine tree over yonder."

West led the two horses, and kept the deputy covered. He made the

man back up under a low limb about even with their heads. He let the horses stand, took down Lester's rope, ordered the man to put his hands behind him, and slipped the noose over both wrists. He followed this with a pair of deft half hitches, then tossed the rope over the limb, and drew the officer's arms up behind his back as far as they would go. Lester cried out in protest that he couldn't stand the pain, but West gave the rope another jerk that brought a howl from his victim, then made the rope fast.

"If this rope was where it ought to be, Ek, it would be around your neck," he said evenly. "And that's just where it will be if you don't start tellin' the truth for a change."

Lester was in a tough spot. His arms were twisted until they hurt badly. To relieve the pain he would raise himself on his toes, but when he tired of that and let down it would strain his arms just that much more.

"I don't know anything," he protested. "I'm only an officer."

"You're a dirty cow thief an' a liar," West told him. "An I ain't forgot how you tried to get Dusty King hanged. You're as much responsible for old Pablo getting murdered as the men who done it. For all I know maybe you did kill him. Who, besides you, Trail, Saddler and those two cow rann'es were in with Dollarhyde in stealin' J Bar J beef?"

"D-Dollarhyde," the man mumbled. "Y-yuh mean Hall, don't you?"

"I mean Dollarhyde, damn you. I've not been asleep."

"I won't talk," the deputy said sullenly.

"All right then. There's no use wasting any more of my time. You'll at least strike the balance for my friend Pablo."

West stepped over and removed the rope from his own saddle, and began to fashion a hangman's noose.

"What're you goin' to do?" Lester screamed.

"Hang you, you skunk."

"Don't! Don't, West, I'll talk," the fellow caved suddenly. "I was in on it. We planned to break the J Bar J or scare Durrant into sellin' for nothin'. Trail an' Dollarhyde were goin' to buy him out. They planned it so that you'd be blamed for the stealin', an' Burr Hall for the sellin'."

"I know all that," West said impatiently. "How was Pablo murdered?"

"Kinney an' Bovard killed him. He run across—well, what that girl did."

"I see. It was them who tried to kill Clover, too, wasn't it?"

"Yes. Kinney done the shootin'."

"Now we're gettin' places. What about Bugs Getley? Rosa Guitierrez told Trail Bugs had finally found the gold he'd been lookin' for, so you an' Trail went out to find him. Go on from there."

Physical fear had its effect on the deputy, but the surprising thing which West already knew had almost as much effect.

"We went to his cabin first, but he wasn't there," he admitted. "I'm tellin' you the truth, West. Trail said the safe way was to wait at the cabin for the old man to come home. But if we done that, he said, he might not have the gold with him, an' it might be hard to make him tell. So Charley said for me to go after Cluff an' Fletch, while he rode over toward that swamp to see if he could pick up Getley. He said if we didn't find anything we'd come back to the cabin before daylight and grab the old man if he was there."

"Go on."

"The cow camp wasn't very far away, an' I got the boys. When we got back to where Charley said we was to meet he wasn't there, but in just a little while he came in with old Bugs. He'd roped the old bugger, but the old cuss had hid the gold somewhere an' was on his way home.

"And he wouldn't tell where it was."

"No. He was an ornery old coot. Charley told the boys to take him back to their camp an' stake him out somewhere. They was supposed to be over on the Breaks so their camp was out of sight. Charley an' me led the old man's pony home, an' almost bumped into you. The next night they moved Getley over to the old sawmill. The sheep had pulled out, an' we didn't think there was any danger of anybody findin' the place," Lester finished.

"And since then they've amused themselves by tryin' to make Getley tell where he had hidden the gold," West said. "Has he told?"

"No, the damned old so—"

"Where are they taking him now?" West whipped out. This was the vital question; the one he had been leading up to.

"I don't know. He was still there when I left."

"Alive?" Somehow, West believed the officer was telling the truth. The man's pain was getting unendurable, and under the circumstances he was not likely to lie.

"Yes. Charley was tryin' to make him tell."

West had one more question to ask. "If he don't tell, then what?"

"Then I think Charley intends to knock him in the head an' throw him in the river. He thinks we'll be able to find the gold anyway, sooner or later."

West slackened the rope so that the deputy could stand flat-footed without straining the muscles of his arms. He knew that the officer would repudiate every word of his confession as soon as he was free, and West didn't know whether he would ever see that pass again, but he revolted against giving Lester his immediate freedom. The deputy, he decided grimly, would keep until somebody came along.

He mounted Brigham again, and rode away, leaving Lester's horse

grazing in the pass with dragging bridle reins. The man's screams and curses followed him until he was out of earshot.

West had wasted a precious half hour with Lester, a half hour in which Ben Getley might be suffering; yet he didn't feel that it had been wasted. He was sure of his facts now at any rate. And in view of what Getley must already have suffered a half hour could make no great difference.

The moon was getting higher. A good slice of the night still remained. Time enough to see what he could do. But he had three desperate, murderous-minded enemies to deal with. The odds were strong against his being able to do anything.

21

LOLA'S SURPRISE at the antics of Brigham, an animal she had always thought gentle enough for any child to ride, momentarily drove other things from her mind. Then the horse stopped pitching, West waved reassuringly, and she waved back. She knew there was commotion inside the house, so she ran for the door. She managed to compose her facial muscles, but inside her breast everything was tumult and disorder.

She was in love. It had struck her with the suddenness of a bolt of lightning from a blue sky. That was, the knowledge of it. Now she thought she must have been in love with West Morgan ever since he had saved her from Pack Saddler. Nor did she doubt that he loved her. But he was the man her father believed to be a thief and a murderer. He was a hunted man. And now she knew that he might be riding to his death. She might never see him again. And with all this inward commotion she must now face the questioning of an irate parent. She could think of many things she would rather do.

Claude Durrant, the housekeeper, Mrs. Wilkin, and the housekeeper's big, dumb husband, Jake, were all in the front room. Mr. Durrant was spinning his wheel chair about rapidly when Lola opened the door.

"Lola! Where have you been? What's going on out there?" Durrant shouted. "Jake says he saw somebody riding away on a horse that looked like Brigham, and the horse bucked. It couldn't have been Brigham. He never bucks. Why haven't you been home hours ago?"

He was out of breath and had to stop.

Lola stood by the door and removed her gloves. She walked over to a rack and hung up her hat.

"Answer me," Durrant shouted.

"You touched on a lot of subjects. Which one would you like me to discuss?" she inquired with purely artificial calm.

Durrant struggled silently with his exasperation. "I don't know what

to make of you," he said. "Don't you care *anything* about putting gray hairs in my head?"

She walked over and patted his cheek. Sight of his long, frail, too white hands on the arms of his chair brought a lump into her throat.

"I'm sorry, Father," she said. "I wouldn't have worried you if I could have helped it. But there is no use to keep Annie and Jake up. Why don't you folks go to bed?"

"Wasn't that Brigham I saw buckin' out there in the yard?" Jake asked.

"Yes, it was."

"Well, he sure was puttin' 'em in," the man grinned widely. "Who the heck was a-ridin' him? I'd have sworn it was West Morgan."

"It was."

"What? You—you mean that thief, that murderer was right out here in my own yard?" Durrant squalled squeakily. "He came right here and stole my best horse out of my stable? Jake, you hustle to town and notify the officers."

"Jake, wait," the girl ordered crisply. "You and Annie go to bed. If we need you we'll call you. I want to talk to my father alone."

Durrant opened his mouth like a gasping fish. Finally words came. "Go into the kitchen and wait," he ordered. "I'll talk to my daughter."

When the door closed behind the Wilkin couple he clutched his daughter's wrist with a surprisingly strong grasp. "Now, out with it," he commanded. "What were you doing with that outlaw? Did you lend him my horse?"

It seemed hopeless to try to convince him of anything, but she had to try.

"I held the lantern while West saddled Brigham," she said. "He needed a horse very badly. To save a man's life."

"His own, of course. Lola, what's come over you?"

"Not his own," she contradicted. "He is risking his life. Father, did you ever know me to lie to you?"

"No, but—"

"Then listen. Listen quietly, and don't keep firing half a dozen questions at a time at me. I have every reason to believe that West Morgan is as innocent as we are."

"Of all the nonsense!" he roared.

"Very well," she said, suddenly freeing her wrist, "if you don't choose to listen I'll go to bed. Send Jake Wilkin to town. Be one more to try to dip your hands in West Morgan's blood. Good night."

"Lola, wait!" he cried. "I don't know what kind of an evil spell that criminal has cast over you, but I'll hear what you have to say."

"Today I accidentally happened to catch two men brutally torturing a helpless old man—with fire."

"What?" Durrant ejaculated.

"I have every reason to believe it was the crazy old man who has been hunting that cache of gold all these years, the man you have been thinking West Morgan murdered. But it wasn't West torturing him. It was two of your own men—Cluff Kinney and Fletch Bovard."

She paused to watch the effect. If that didn't shake him out of his complacency nothing would.

"You—are sure of this?" he asked in the mildest tone he had yet used.

"I am deadly sure," she said. "And that is only the beginning. I saw Charley Trail, the man you have been trusting so much, giving them orders to do it."

"Sit down," Durrant said. "Tell me quietly everything that happened."

She seated herself before him, and kept her eyes on his thin aesthetic face while she talked.

"You didn't actually see the man they were tormenting then," he said when she had finished.

"No. But those screams I heard were not faked. They were hardly human."

"My girl," he said pityingly, "you have been deceived. You were right in one respect. The sounds you heard were not human."

"What do you mean?" she gasped.

"Jake Wilkin told me a long time ago about Kinney's cruelty," he said. "One time Jake said he came upon Kinney with a coyote which he had trapped chained up to a wagon wheel. Kinney was tormenting the poor brute with a red-hot end-gate. As a matter of fact he had burned out its eyes, Jake said. I should have discharged the fellow then and there."

"What," came Lola's dragging words, "has that got to do with it?"

"Don't you see? What you heard were the screams of a coyote. Had you investigated more closely you would probably have found those two scoundrels down behind the pile of logs you spoke of having fun with some coyote they had managed to catch. Probably they had the animal backed into a hole. I'll have Trail fire them the first time I see him. Don't you see, they couldn't have kept a man concealed behind those logs for days at a time as you think? You were deceived by your own ears, and this outlaw, Morgan, took advantage of it to steal my best horse."

There was a choking sensation in the girl's throat which would have dammed off any words she might have spoken had her brain been capable of thinking coherent thoughts.

What her father said sounded plausible. It might have been a coyote. West Morgan might have lied to her about everything, including his statement that Mr. Dollarhyde was a crook. That was the one thing

she had found hard to believe. The merchant had seemed so kind, so anxious to please.

She drew a shuddering breath and started for her room.

Durrant smiled tolerantly. "You see, dear," he said, "even Brigham knew that scoundrel was a crook and tried to buck him off."

She tried to straighten things out in her mind, but everything was in kinks. If West Morgan was what her father thought she would never be able to look into her mirror and look at the lips that had been pressed to those of a murderer. If he were guilty of one thing he was guilty of all, including the brutal murder of poor old Pablo Guterrez.

She felt that she never wanted to leave the ranch again. She didn't want to meet her father at breakfast, didn't want to hear his dry, aristocratic voice no matter how innocuous the topic of conversation.

She remained in her room until Annie Wilkin knocked, to inquire if she were all right.

"I'm all right, Annie," she replied. "Just tired."

"Shan't I bring your breakfast to you?" the woman asked.

"No, Annie, I'll be down after while."

There was silence, but she knew that the woman had not gone away. "What is it, Annie?" she asked impatiently.

"I thought maybe you'd like to know. Jake went to town last night. He just got back. Terrible things have happened. Terrible!"

Lola sprang out of bed and flung open the door. "Come in, Annie," she cried tensely. "Tell me. What is it? Have—have they captured him?"

"You mean West Morgan? No, miss, not yet. But the whole country is lookin' for him now, an' they don't think he can possibly get away. But he won't last long after they do find him now," the woman said.

"Why do you say, 'now'?" the girl asked desperately. "What has happened?"

"Another murder, miss. One a lot more brutal than the other one. This time it was Ek Lester, the deputy sheriff. Morgan caught him, tied him up to the limb of a tree by the arms, and then riddled him with bullets. They brought the body into town just before Jake left."

A knife through her heart could have made the girl feel no more coldly lifeless than she felt at that moment. She didn't want to talk, but there was a question that had to be asked. She slowly forced herself to ask it.

"Annie, where did this—this murder occur?"

"Right on the top of Spring Creek Pass. They said Mr. Lester has been over there investigating some—They must have met right there and Morgan surprised the deputy. He took his gun away from him, tore his badge off and threw it away, and then tied him up to that tree and just practiced pistol shooting on him until he was dead."

Lola staggered over to her bed and fell across it. She closed her eyes

and clenched her fists, while she gathered a piece of the sheet into her mouth to keep from crying out.

"Miss Lola! Miss Lola!" the housekeeper cried anxiously. "You all right?"

"Yes, yes, I'm all right," the girl answered. "Please go away."

An hour passed before she could bring herself to face her father. He was in the living room, a smile of rather bitter triumph on his thin white face.

"You think I should go East, Father?" she asked.

"To be sure," he said heartily. "That's what I've been telling you. This rough country is no place for you."

"I guess you're right," she said. "I—I—just don't fit in."

"Now look, daughter: don't take it too hard because one cheap bad man pulled the wool over your eyes. I understand this Morgan is a pretty smooth specimen—for a Westerner."

She threw herself into his lap and pressed her face against his breast. "Oh, Father," she sobbed, "it wouldn't have been so bad if I hadn't caused Ek Lester's death. He wouldn't have been crossing that pass if I hadn't been so foolish, but the worst of it was I gave West Morgan a horse so that he could get there just when he did. I—I—feel like a murderer myself."

"Now now, you'll get over that," Durrant soothed. "It was just girlish inexperience. They'll soon hang this fellow Morgan, and then you'll feel better about it."

She sprang from his lap, and fled back to her room. Her father would never be able to understand her feelings. West Morgan no doubt needed hanging, but it wasn't going to make her happy when it happened.

22

WEST KEPT the tall sorrel at a fast trot straight across the range toward the old Grave Creek sawmill. At times he put the animal to a gallop at the risk of a bad fall if the horse struck a badger hole. He kept wishing that he hadn't been so certain Ben Getley was dead.

If he had only proceeded on the theory that the old man had been abducted he might, just possibly, have thought to look for him on the abandoned sheep range.

He was perfectly familiar with the basin, but there was one thing that puzzled him. Lola had said the men were behind a row of logs, yet she hadn't seen them. He recalled the ruins of an old cook-shack just above the mill. There had been a small cellar underneath, into which the broken and rotted floor joists had collapsed. But there had been no logs there.

He stopped at the main creek and anchored Brigham to a bush. He ascended the steep slope and came in sight of the old mill site. Moving closer he next observed some horses tied in a patch of aspens across the branch from the ruins of the mill. They were in such position that he couldn't tell whether there were two or more. He didn't have time to investigate.

He stopped and listened, his ears atuned to hear the horrible shrieks which Lola had described. The loudest sound he heard was the buzzing of a bloodthirsty mosquito.

He advanced. In a moment the detail which had bothered him was cleared up. There was a row of saw logs skidded tightly against each other right where the old cellar had been. He knew very well they had not been there six months ago.

Somebody, then, had cleared the debris out of that old cellar and roofed it over with heavy logs to make a prison for Bugs Getley, or else the sheepmen might have dragged the logs over the hole as the easiest way to keep their lambs from falling into it. It didn't matter. Despite the silence he knew that his old friend was in there—dead or alive.

He had moved cautiously, keeping to the brush as much as possible. Now he had to advance boldly across an open space. He drew his six gun, and started to walk. He had gone but ten feet when the sound of a shot split the night. He caught the flash of a gun among the aspens where the horses were tied, and a slug whispered past his ear.

A man in the aspens yelled, "Look out, Charley! Somebody comin'!"

The fellow emphasized his warning with another shot which burred angrily close to West's head.

Fifty yards lay between West and that pile of logs. Before he could cross it the man or men in the cellar could barricade themselves behind the logs and shoot him down as he charged. Suicide on his part would serve only his enemies. He turned and leaped toward the nearest shelter, as two more slugs from the trees sang over his head. Just as he reached the shelter of an old stump another bullet lanced out at him from the log pile.

He gained shelter and waited. A second later came another shot from the north end of the logs. He fired back at the flash, and instantly a bullet from the south end struck the side of the stump and filled his eyes with rotten wood.

His foes numbered at least three; Trail, Kinney and Bovard he was sure. He held his fire. He had to think. The mere presence of the men indicated that Bugs Getley was in the cellar, but if he were still alive it was strange that there was no sound from him. No cry for help.

Two more slugs thudded into the rotten stump. First one and then the other of the men at the log pile fired in order to draw his fire. He was not going to be tricked that easily.

Then he heard Charley Trail's voice. "Fletch, circle around an' git behind him."

West had been expecting that. "Why don't you come out and get me, Trail?" he challenged.

There was temporary silence. "I thought it was you," Trail called back. "This cooks your goose, Morgan."

"Or yours," West retorted. "You'll look nice on the end of a rope, Charley. I met Ek up on the pass. He made a nice, clean confession."

A staccato burst of gunfire made the old rotten stump tremble. Those shots had been fired in anger.

West knew that he had to move. Even if Bovard didn't get behind him immediately, daylight would make it possible for them to encircle him. It was unpleasantly light now. He had an idea that either Trail or Kinney would leave the log pile soon to circle out the other way.

The instant the shooting ceased he began to crawl backward, keeping the stump as much as possible between him and the logs. He had backed away twenty feet before they saw him. Instantly there came a reddish stab of flame and a bullet showered his face with dirt. He fell backward and rolled.

"Yuh got him!" Fletch Bovard yelled from somewhere near the old slide track. "No, you ain't! Look out!"

The old stump stood upon the top of a swell of the ground. Luckily for West there was a slight dip just behind him when he rolled. In a moment he was out of sight from the cellar, but not from the eyes of Fletch Bovard, who had misinterpreted his sudden flop. Bovard fired, but the shot went high. West's answering shot sent the fellow diving for shelter.

Not far below West, but between him and Bovard, was the old skid-way with a great number of unsawed logs lying about. West recalled with a vagrant flash of memory that the sawmill had burned down, which accounted for those logs being left to rot. If he could reach them—

The dip extended down to a huge log which was nearly four feet in diameter at the butt. He leaped to his feet, and covered the distance with a dozen prodigious bounds, and dived head first behind the log. He didn't count the shots which Bovard threw at him, but he was unscathed.

He didn't intend to waste any shots. He thrust in two cartridges to replace the ones he had emptied. He crawled to the small end of the log and peered around it. He couldn't see Bovard.

"Where is he?" suddenly came Cluff Kinney's voice.

West smiled.

"Right here around these—" Bovard started to answer.

West fired. The fellow was out of sight. He knew that he couldn't hit him, but it would keep Bovard down. While the sound yet echoed

he changed position and reached an old skid pile where a dozen logs were scattered about. He was nearer to the site of the mill itself, and he hadn't been seen.

"He—he's behind the big old log," Bovard called out, a bit uncertainly.

West exchanged an empty cartridge for a loaded one. Now he could begin to plan what strategy to use. There were two things that he might do. The one he wanted most to do was move about among the logs until he got a shot at Fletch Bovard, and then try to reach their horses, or at least prevent them from reaching them. That meant coming to grips with them, and that was what his long standing enmity for Charley Trail made him want to do.

But a saner course also suggested itself. He could keep moving down this small branch until he reached the main creek, and thus avoid getting surrounded. If he stayed to fight it out where he was he might get Bovard, but he couldn't hope to be lucky enough to get the others. When daybreak came the advantage would be all with them. He could expect no help. They could get into the timber above him, and sooner or later they would pick him off.

He had no intention of running away. The thing he had come to do was find out what had become of Bugs Getley, and he didn't intend to leave the place until he found out whether the old man was alive or dead.

Caution and common sense prevailed. He began to move from log to log, all the time working toward the lower end of the yard. He took his time about it, moving with the stealth of a marauding cat, and watching constantly for one of his foes to show himself.

Several times he caught sight of some dark object that he thought might be Bovard, but he held his fire. The chance was not worth the risk of revealing his own whereabouts. He was certain that Trail and Kinney were no longer at the cellar. They would be hunting for him. He had to be careful that he would see them first.

He reached the last log, but he was at the edge of the brush which lined the creek. He kept going, moving much faster now, yet probing the brush carefully. There had been time for one of them to get below him.

The brush thickened out when he reached the main creek, and he started back to where he had left Brigham. He wished now that he had left the animal farther back, but he had been in a great hurry. He had to approach warily lest one of his foes be waiting for him beside the horse.

He heard the thud of a horse's hooves, and realized with a sick feeling that they had found Brigham. A moment later a man on the sorrel appeared in a break through the trees for just an instant, and a couple of hundred yards away. There was monkey business in the sky as

clouds of various degrees of darkness chased each other playfully across the moon, so that such light as there was fluctuated constantly, making anything resembling accurate shooting impossible.

He blazed loose at the man on the horse, holding high so as not to endanger the animal. He saw the man grab at his hat and sink in the spurs. Then came a bellow from Brigham, and thereafter West caught only an occasional glimpse of horse and rider as the animal bucked.

Brigham was too tired to buck as hard as he had with West, but he was doing a good job. His rider was doing a better one, staying on top like a bobbing, weaving puppet on a string, but never once showing daylight or losing a stirrup. Only one man that West knew could ride like that—Charley Trail.

The horse suddenly straightened out and began to run. So did West, in another direction. Now, if they got away with all the horses and left him stranded his situation was going to be bad. Just how bad he didn't realize.

He was too late. When he came in sight of the mill again he heard horses running on the other side of the draw, and caught a glimpse of two men. One was leading a riderless horse.

This was the nearest to panic he had been all night. He fired four shots, even though he knew he couldn't hit anything at that distance, and stopped only when he realized he had but one cartridge left in his gun.

Although he felt like swearing he remained silent and hastily reloaded his gun. He didn't know whether Trail and his men would come back to renew the battle or not. They were gone now, and he broke into a trot toward the cellar.

He saw that the old cellar was completely covered with logs, but at one end they apparently had been skidded apart leaving a hole large enough to admit a man's body. He leaned over and peered into the blackness beneath.

"Ben!" he called softly. "Ben Getley—are you there?"

A faint moan sounded from the excavation in the earth.

West looked around. There was no sign of his enemies. He let himself down. When his feet touched earth his head bumped against the bottom of the logs.

"Ben, this is West," he said. "Can't you hear me?"

Again came that faint moan.

He struck a match, and almost dropped it from the shock of what lay before his eyes.

IT WAS THE middle of the afternoon before Lola could again force herself to go down stairs. She spoke briefly to her father and went out into the kitchen. She saw that Annie Wilkin was ironing some of Lola's own dresses.

"Why are you doing that?" she asked.

"Well, miss, your father said I'd better. He said you would be going East tomorrow," the woman replied.

"Tomorrow!" Lola exclaimed.

"That's what he said. He sent Jake to town again today to send a telegram to your aunt back there to expect you."

"He did?" He wasn't losing any time getting her away, she thought.

"And to see if they had caught the murderer, of course," Mrs. Wilkin added.

Lola winced. "I think I'll make some coffee," she said.

"Don't you want me to fix something for you?" the woman asked.

"No, Annie, I'll wait on myself."

"You got any clothes in your room you want me to do?"

"None. I'll take things just as they are."

She drank her coffee and went back into the living room.

"Under the circumstances, my dear, I thought you had better leave at once," Durrant said. "I instructed Jake to ask for reservations for you."

"Thank you, Father."

"I wish the fellow would come back. I'd like to have some news."

"Of the man hunt, you mean?" she asked.

"I suppose you can call it that, if you want to be cynical. Anyway, the ends of justice demand that that outlaw be hunted down and destroyed."

"You seem very sure that he is guilty."

"Of course. There's never been the slightest doubt in my mind. I don't see how you can be skeptical after what happened last night."

"After what happened last night," she murmured. "Oh, to be sure." They hadn't been thinking of the same things. She had been thinking of the way West Morgan had kissed her out there in the yard. Rebellion swept over her. He couldn't be the villain they claimed. He couldn't be a cold-blooded murderer.

"Father," she said rapidly, "I'll not be going East. Not now. Not until this whole business is settled. I'm going to see it through."

"See what through? Don't be absurd. They can convict the fellow without your testimony. That's the thing I'm trying to get you away from. I don't want you to have to mix with this rabble in a courtroom."

So, no more nonsense. You get ready to leave tomorrow morning," he ordered firmly.

"I hate to disobey you, Father, but I'm not going," she stated evenly. He was a man accustomed to being obeyed. He reared back in his wheel chair as if to thunder an irrevocable command, then suddenly changed his mind, and spoke in a low, quiet voice.

"I will go ahead with the arrangements as planned."

She went back to her own room, unable to stand human society. She soon found that she couldn't stand her own. She slipped outside and petted her pony. As she was doing so Bugs Getley's little Sheeps pony came up and nuzzled her arm.

"If you could only talk," she murmured, as she stroked the pony's face. "Maybe you might explain a lot of things."

The evidence against West Morgan seemed conclusive, but if it were true he had a heart blacker than Satan's. Not only had he brutally murdered the deputy sheriff, but he had murdered crazy old Bugs Getley and Pablo Guterrez. Every crime that had been committed in the country could be laid to him.

No, not every crime, she thought suddenly. "Someone had tried to murder Bill Clover and failed. And Clover had completely exonerated West and Dusty from that. It was a crack, tiny but definite, in the mass of evidence which seemed closing in around West Morgan and his hired men."

She was still in the corral when Jake Wilkin returned from town.

"Jake," she called.

He came over to her. "Yes, ma'am."

"Have they—have they caught—anybody?" she queried breathlessly.

"You mean the murderer? Not yet. But there's shore a lot of excitement. Near ever'boby, I guess, is out huntin' him. They're bettin' ten to one in town that he'll be lynched before twenty-four hours if they do catch him."

"Oh," Lola gasped, and turned away.

"An' if they don't ketch him," Wilkin went on, "it's a dead sure sinch they'll lynch that man o' his that's in jail. They all think King was just about as guilty o' some o' the crimes as Morgan. In fact Rosa Guterrez is sayin' now that she thinks it was King killed her dad instead o' Morgan, but on Morgan's orders."

Lola whirled upon the eager Jake. "Can't that girl get enough bloodshed to satisfy her without stirring up a mob?" she cried angrily. Jake fell back a step, and his mouth gaped open as though she might be going to strike him.

"I dunno, miss," he mumbled. "But she shore does act as if she was enjoyin' herself. She made Charley Trail promise not to hang Morgan if they caught him until she could get there."

"Go on to the house," she said hoarsely. "Father is anxious to hear the news."

She still couldn't bear to go in. When Jake came out to do the chores she moved to the farther side of the corral. Her Pepper pony and little old Sheeps followed her like a pair of puppies.

She knew she would have to go in soon, or her father would send for her. She was about to slide off the fence when she saw a horseman dismount awkwardly at the ranch gate, lead his horse through, then climb awkwardly back into the saddle. He was nearly to the corral before she recognized him. He was about the last visitor she would have expected. Her father had steadfastly refused to have any business with the burly, bullying saloonkeeper, Burr Hall.

Lola slid down off the fence. "Good evening, Mr. Hall," she said coldly, "did you want to see my father?"

"Maybe, later," Burr said. "Right now you're the one I want to talk to."

"Me?" She wondered what business a saloonkeeper could possibly have with her.

"Yes. Do you mind if I git off this hayburner? I ain't used to ridin', an' this critter shore ain't no rockin' chair."

"Of course," she said. "We can go over here and sit down—"

"Please," the saloonkeeper grinned. "If it's all the same to you I'll stand."

"What business could you possibly have with me, Mr. Hall?" she asked.

"Damn serious business, Miss Durrant, if you'll pardon the slang. Unless something is done pronto an innocent boy is goin' to git his neck stretched tonight." His voice became deadly serious.

"You mean Dusty King? But why cor 'o me?"

"I mean Dusty, as nice a kid as ever put foot on the brass rail of a bar. He didn't kill Guterrez, Miss Durrant, an' he didn't steal any of your cattle, no matter what you an' your dad think. An' neither did West Morgan."

Lola's brain spun. A sense of such intense relief swept over her that she wanted to leap and clap her hands like a little girl. The feeling lasted no more than a second, but hope wasn't quite killed.

She saw that Hall was braced for an argument. Her hand touched his brawny, muscular arm. "Oh, I hope so," she said. "Can you prove it?"

He looked at her with amazement. "I thought you folks hated West Morgan. I thought you might be easier to convince than your dad."

"Have you got proof?" she cried out impatiently.

"No. But if I could get my hands on Pack Saddler I'd git it," he ground out. His great fists balled into knotty lumps.

"Pack Saddler? I know him." She could still turn cold whenever she remembered the time he had forced her into the creek.

"The heathen has disappeared. But he was the man who done the actual butcherin' of the cattle you lost, an' it wasn't West an' Dusty who rounded 'em up for him. An' they sold 'em to Al Dollarhyde. Look, miss: See this yellow merchandise slip? Saddler worked for me. He claimed to hate Dollarhyde, yet he was buyin' butcherin' tools from him. West found this an' some other things at his place the night they tried to lynch Dusty before. He damn' near had to lick me to make me listen, an' he's the only man in this country that ever done that. He licked me fair an' square in a stand up fight. But that happened before."

Why was he wasting time telling about his fights, she thought wildly. Why didn't he *do* something?

"Miss Durrant," he went on less excitedly, "they've been buildin' up a mob all day. That Guitierrez gal is doin' most of the talkin', but somebody is puttin' her up to it. If I could git hold o' Saddler I'd beat the truth out of him. But he's missin'."

"But you can show this slip," she said.

"An' be laughed at. Everybody would merely say I was tryin' to get Dollarhyde in wrong."

"Then what are we going to do?" she queried helplessly.

"Look: they say West got a horse from you last night. Do you know where he is?"

"No. He said he was going to the old sawmill in Grave Creek Basin. I sent him there. I thought I overheard a man being tortured. It seems I only heard a coyote, and that Morgan met Ek Lester in the pass and brutally murdered him."

"Don't you believe a word of it. Ek Lester was the biggest thief unhung. If West knew the danger Dusty King was in all hell couldn't stop him from gittin' there."

"Oh, Mr. Hall, I want to believe in West," Lola said passionately. "I'd do anything in the world to help him. Anything."

"Well, by golly, I never guessed things was like that," Hall said. "I don't know what we can do, but we can try. I come out here on a kind of last, desperate chance. I thought if I could show you folks there was a reasonable doubt maybe you could kind of talk the mob out of it since it was your loss started the whole thing. I knew your father couldn't come, but a good lookin' gal might do more anyhow."

"I'll go with you, of course," she said. "But isn't there something else we might do to prove how things stand?"

"There ain't much time," he warned. "All they're waitin' for is the gang out huntin' West. When they git back to town they'll march on the jail. If they should git hold of West first they might hang him, an' let Dusty off, but—"

"Then they mustn't find him," she cried out. "Wait for me. I'll change, and be back in a minute."

"You'll tell your dad."

"No. He wouldn't understand. He thinks West is the worst man in the world."

She ran up to her room and changed rapidly to her riding clothes. Her father kept shouting her name, but she didn't answer. But when she came down he intercepted her.

"Lola, where are you going?" he demanded. "What is that saloon-keeper doing out there?"

"I'm going to town, Father," she said, trying hard to keep her voice sounding unexcited.

"I forbid it!" he yelled.

"I've got to go, Father. A mob is going to lynch Dusty King, and he's innocent. I've got to try to stop it."

"What? A daughter of the Durrant family mixing with a drunken mob! You're out of your mind. Take off those togs."

"You don't understand, Father," she said, as if speaking to an irritable child. "I love West Morgan. I'll never believe he's guilty. Dusty is his friend, and West would want me to do everything I can to save him."

Durrant's eyes seemed about to pop from his thin face. His hands shook excitedly. "You love West Morgan? That murderer! That *cow hand*."

"You speak as if being a cow hand was worse than being a murderer," she retorted in a tone which to him seemed flippant.

"I absolutely forbid you to leave this house," he roared. "As for that saloonkeeper—Annie, go out and order that hoodlum to get off my premises."

"Yes sir," the frightened housekeeper replied tremblingly.

As he turned to give the order Lola caught one wheel of his chair and turned the vehicle around. In a moment she had slipped past him, and gained the door.

"Please calm down, Father," she begged. "I'll be all right. This is something I've got to do."

She ran out and got on her pony. "Come on, Mr. Hall," she urged. "Let's ride."

Burr Hall climbed into the saddle and pounded along behind her. She opened the gate without dismounting and waited for him to catch up.

"Please," he begged, "I can't ride at a run all the way back to Skull Creek. Nobody's life is that important to me."

WEST HAD found old Bugs Getley! Or at least what remained of him. Had it not been for those faint moans he would have thought the old man dead.

Getley was lying upon the floor on an old, tattered quilt. His feet were bare, and hideously blistered and swollen. There were burns, too, upon his face and his hands, and his whiskers were matted with blood. He had been severely beaten about the head. The old man's eyes were open, but they stared dully at nothing.

All this West saw before his match burned out. But he also saw a lantern in one corner and lighted it with another match. When he held up the lantern Getley's eyes rolled toward him, but whether there was recognition or not he didn't know.

Directly over the old man the end of a log chain swung down from a log overhead. It had been used, West knew, to chain the old-timer up like a wild animal when his persecutors left him alone. But it was not necessary to chain him now. West had only to listen to the rattle in his old friend's throat to know that Bugs Getley was dying.

In that moment West could have killed any of several people with his bare hands could he have got hold of them—and Rosa Guiterrez would not have been spared. He dropped upon his knees, and there was a sob in his voice as he cried, "Ben! Ben! Don't you know me?"

Getley's lips moved, but no audible sound came from them. West thought there was a flash of recognition in the eyes, but they continued their dull staring at the seasoned logs overhead.

"Ben, isn't there anything I can do for you?" West begged.

The old man didn't move. The death rattle in his throat became more noticeable.

"I'm too late," West moaned. But he knew that any time within the last couple of days would have been too late. The frail old man had probably been mis-treated so badly the first night of his imprisonment that he would have died.

There were several empty tomato cans in one corner of the cellar. They had been freshly opened. Evidently Getley had been given this much nourishment to keep him alive for further torment until he revealed the hiding place of his gold. Looking at him, West was sure that the old fellow had not weakened.

West took one of the cans out to the branch, rinsed it out as well as he could and carried it back into the cellar. Getley tried to swallow, but couldn't. West soaked a handkerchief and wiped the old man's lips and face. It was all he could do. He thought for a moment there was a hint of gratitude in the fading eyes, but that was all.

Once he thought Getley tried to speak, but no sound came. The only thing West could do was sit on the dirt floor, and raise the old man's head into his lap. Old Bugs at least looked a little more comfortable.

Just after the sun rose Ben Getley died. He had not spoken a single word. The secret of the gold for which he had searched so many years had died with him.

Anyway, West thought gloomily, his enemies didn't get it.

If only he had used more tact the time the old man came to tell him of his discovery, he thought bitterly. If he had even used force to keep him at the ranch until he had cooled down, Ben Getley might now be alive. He knew it was useless to blame himself. He had never wanted any of the old man's gold. He had used the best judgment of which he was capable at the time; yet somehow, he condemned himself. He might have saved Getley from the torture he had endured.

He laid Getley's head down and straightened his own aching limbs. Then he climbed out into the sunlight, and the clean, fresh air that had never seemed so good.

There was nothing he could do for Ben Getley now, except to tell someone where the body could be found—and try to avenge his murder.

He went into the cellar once more before he left to cover the dead man's head with his own coat. Then he got a pry pole and skidded the logs together so that no animal could get into the cellar.

He had scarcely thought about Ek Lester, but when he did he decided that Trail would have found the officer and turned him loose hours ago. He stood and thought. If he had to walk the nearest way to Skull Creek was to follow on up the basin, cross the main divide, and then cut across the foothills to the lava flat on which the town was situated.

Lola had seen some J Bar J horses at the Grave Creek ranch, but now the murderers would not be foolish enough to leave the animals there. The girl had missed their camp, but he knew it must have been concealed in the willows close to the old corrals. It would be very simple, and it would be gone, too. There was no use to waste time looking for help there. He turned and plodded up the canyon.

It was hard walking on his high-heeled boots, and it was a good twenty miles to town.

A mile or so from the old mill site he sat down to rest. Just why, he asked himself, was he going back to Skull Creek? There was a warrant out for his arrest and he would be thrown into jail the moment he arrived.

He wondered suddenly if his enemies could possibly contrive to accuse him of Ben Getley's murder. Not after what Lola Durrant had seen, he was sure. But what was Trail going to do about it? The fellow hadn't dared come back to try to finish off West. He must know that exposure awaited him. What West really feared was that Trail and his companions would skip the country before he could get hold of them.

Things would surely come out all right. His story, corroborated by Lola, would clear up the Getley mystery. And when Burr Hall went to work on Pack Saddler the evidence against Charley Trail and his gang would be complete. He got up and ankled on.

The farther up the basin he got the tougher the going became. He had to take to the timber, and the thick pine grass beneath the trees was slick as so much soap. He got many a fall before he finally came out on a high ridge when it was nearly noon. And still he wasn't to the main divide.

He stopped in the shade of a scrubby pine to rest again, and remove his boots to rub his aching, blistered feet. He had been there perhaps five minutes when happening to look up he saw a horseman just coming in sight on another ridge a good half mile away. West gasped, and then swore. The fellow was riding down into the basin, and he was leading an extra horse. Had he come out on this ridge he could have been held up, and the extra horse taken away from him.

The man was going to disappear in the timber in just a minute. There was no chance at all for West to head him off.

The man turned in the saddle, and West got a better view of him. There had been something very familiar about the fellow, and West had eyes trained to identify objects at great distances. Suddenly West knew who it was, and his hand automatically gripped his gun. The fellow was Pack Saddler!

West didn't draw the gun from the holster. He couldn't hit the fellow at that distance, and certainly he couldn't stop him. A shot would only make the man brush up like a scared steer. It would avail nothing for West to let his own presence be known.

But where, he wondered, was Saddler going? He decided presently that he had the answer. Saddler was Trail's man. Neither Trail, Kinney nor Bovard dared go back to the cellar under the logs, so they had sent Saddler. If the bouncer butcher found the coast clear he would certainly remove Getley's body, probably throw it into the river.

How could a murder be proved, West wondered, without a corpse?

He drew on his boots and staggered on. He was hungry and tired. He had no hopes of reaching town before dark; wasn't sure that he cared to.

He recalled presently that by detouring perhaps a mile he would pass the homestead of a man named Higginson, whom he knew had gone to the summer range with sheep. It was just a shack, but there might be food there that he could eat, and food was what he needed—next to a horse.

Two hours later he limped into the homestead shack. One glance told him someone had been living there, and he knew that it wasn't Higginson.

There were blankets on an iron bed that had been thrown back care-

lessly. Higginson would never have gone away for the summer leaving a bed unmade. There was a frying pan on the stove with half an inch of grease in the bottom, and a coffee pot containing a pint of cold coffee. West raised the lid of a bread box, and found half a loaf of bread, not very stale. On the back of the stove was a pot of brown beans that had not soured.

West attacked the bread, the cold beans and coffee without wasting any time, but while he ate he wondered who had been living there, and why?

The keen edge of his appetite dulled, he scanned the interior of the shack more carefully. Now he noticed a newspaper that had fallen to the floor behind the table, and he fished it out. It was the *Portneuf Tribune*, it was only three days old, and the subscriber's name in the upper right hand corner of the first page was Burr Hall.

West sat back and thought. It was Burr Hall's paper, but nobody would ever catch Burr in a place like this. Someone had brought it from his saloon. Someone who had spent at least two nights here. There was every indication of that. West had recently seen Pack Saddler coming from this direction. Saddler then must have been staying here. But why?

West gave it up, dipped the last bean out of the pot, and swallowed the last drop of cold, stale coffee. He felt better. He rested half an hour and plodded on.

He could not forget that he was a wanted man. He had entered the town of Skull Creek hundreds of times, but never on foot, and with a price on his head. He had left there the last time on a stolen horse ahead of a posse. It occurred to him that a lot of things which he didn't know about might have happened. And he was dealing with enemies who were clever and utterly without scruple. It withered him to have to skulk through the brush like a coyote, but he knew that it would be foolish to allow himself to be seen before he reached town and got in touch with someone he could trust. The trustworthy people he knew there narrowed down to one—Dee Herrick.

He had only one road to cross, and the place he chose was a deep wash known as the Big Coulee. It was easy to cross there. If anyone came along he had only to hide in the lavas. When darkness descended upon him he was only a mile from town.

His feet were killing him. He was a long time covering that last mile. He limped across the railroad track, and made his way to Dollarhyde's stable in back of the saloon.

He was somewhat relieved to find Dollarhyde's buckskin pony back inside its stall. "For all I care, horse," he said to it, "you can stay there."

How to get hold of Dee, that was the question? The bartender might be on duty, probably was; yet someone else might have the shift. He

couldn't walk into the saloon, nor would it be much safer to go sneaking around the rooming house trying to find Herrick's room.

He stepped outside the saloon and listened. Must be Saturday night, he thought, from the noise being made in the street.

The sounds were the sounds that a crowd made, noisy and inarticulate. Presently it dawned upon him that the yells he heard were angry rather than the senseless shouting of good-natured drunks. It was a little early for the habitual drunkards to have a full cargo aboard anyway. There seemed to be a subdued, ominous buzz rather than the usual hilarious whoops and hurrahs.

West saw several wagons and buggies with teams tied to the wheels in a vacant lot right next to Dollarhyde's store. It was not an unusual sight for a Saturday night, but when he came to think about it this was Thursday night.

He left the stable and moved cautiously toward the rigs. Soon he made out a white-topped mountain hack only a few feet from the sidewalk. It belonged, he thought, to a rancher named Hendricks. A gray horse was tied to each front wheel, and on the ground in front of each animal was a little pile of hay. West moved swiftly over to the rig, climbed in the back and crouching down behind the seat peered out through a slit between the side curtains.

There seemed to be forty or fifty people milling in the street between the two saloons. The mob seemed to revolve around someone in the center on a horse.

"What are we waitin' for?" someone yelled. "The so-and-so is guilty as hell. He killed poor old Pablo, an' everybody knows it."

"Sure," another shouted. "He's as guilty as West Morgan. We got a rope, why don't we use it?"

For one of the few times in his life West Morgan shuddered from sheer fright. It was purely involuntarily. He couldn't help it. There was something terrifying about the brainless brutality of an aroused mob.

For a moment the crowd veered toward him, and he had a panicky thought that his presence must have been discovered. Then he remembered that to reach the jail the crowd would have to pass before his impromptu reviewing stand.

"Wait," someone called out. "Let's hear what Rosa says."

The crowd quieted suddenly. The figure on the horse moved a few feet closer to where West knelt concealed. He recognized her then. It was Rosa Guterrez on Knuckles, the very horse which had dragged her father's body into West's ranch. When the girl spoke her voice sounded unnaturally high and shrill.

"We'll wait," she said loudly. "I think too that Dusty King murdered my father, but this West Morgan, he is more guilty. We know he killed Ek Lester."

The girl was momentarily interrupted by a dull, angry buzz from the crowd.

West's moment of panic had passed, but again he went cold. Not from fear this time, but from horror. If Ek Lester had been murdered, and the crowd thought he had done it, as they obviously did think, then Charley Trail had killed him. Murdered him mercilessly while he stood under the tree limb where West had left him tied. It was the last thing West had expected to happen.

The girl was speaking again.

"All afternoon I tell you—wait for the boys to come back. Maybe they catch West Morgan. Then we hang him. I myself will put the rope around his neck, and I will spit in his face."

"I say let's hang King, whether they ketch Morgan or not," a man shouted loudly.

"But not till Charley gets back," Rosa told them, in the grand manner of a queen giving orders.

It entered West's mind that he could shoot the girl off her horse if he wanted to, but it wasn't hate, or even malice he felt toward her, but rather irritation. She was dramatizing things, really enjoying herself. No doubt she believed that West and Dusty had murdered her father, but she was thinking more about the picture she presented rather than the consequences to the men for whose blood she was crying so loudly. Afterward, if her plans went through, she would be filled with bitterness and remorse.

"Well, if we ain't goin' to hang anybody yet, let's all get a drink. Shall I bring you one, Rosa?"

"No," the girl said, "I am going home. The minute Charley gets back to town send him to me." She turned and galloped down the street toward her home.

"It's not you Charley's going to see, my girl," West said grimly. "It's me."

25

THE Skull Creek jail was a claptrap affair from which any experienced jail breaker could have escaped with ease. It stood out in splendid isolation from the rest of the town, and consisted of just two rooms, a small one for the jailor, and a large one for the prisoners. They were separated by iron bars and nothing else. The meals for the prisoners had to be brought in, unless the prisoners were tractable enough to be taken out to a restaurant.

Ordinarily prisoners charged with serious crimes were taken at once to the county jail in Portneuf, but for some reason Dusty King was

still being held in the local calaboose. The reason was simply that as yet no county officer except Ek Lester had been notified of his arrest. He had been bound over by Justice of the Peace Dollarhyde on a charge of petit larceny.

Dusty King didn't understand about law. He knew he was accused of stealing cattle, and that was all. He didn't know that Dollarhyde had reduced the charge from grand to petit larceny because the more serious charge would at once have had to be reported to higher officials.

He fumed at his imprisonment, but the jail was strong enough to hold any ordinary cowpuncher. The hobo who shared the jail with him on a charge of vagrancy assured him that the place was all right—good chow, a fairly good bed, no lice. What else could a man want?

The local deputy sheriff and the town marshal shared responsibility for the jail. As a rule the prisoners were left alone in the building except at meal times, and when the night marshal came in to snatch a few winks in the wee, small hours of the night.

It was not until the marshal brought his supper that Dusty became aware of his acute danger. He and the hobo had been given no dinner at all. In fact they had seen no one since breakfast.

"What in the hell kind of a jail is this?" the hobo screamed as both the day marshal, Sam Davis, and the night marshal, Johnny Coffey, came in, each bearing a platter.

"Cut out yore damn' squallin' or yuh won't git this," Davis growled. "You got no kick comin'. It's King there who's really got somethin' to worry about."

"Worry about what?" the hobo asked. Dusty remained seated on his bunk, looking up curiously.

Dusty didn't like either marshal. They had been given the jobs because they were not able to hold down any other regular jobs. Sam Davis was an inefficient grouch with one leg four inches shorter than the other. Old Johnny Coffey was nearly seventy, and had been an habitual bar-fly before his elevation to an office which paid him just enough to live on. He was still a bar-fly.

"Just a little matter of gettin' his neck stretched before the night's over," Davis said sardonically. "Better git this grub, King, it's prob'ly the last meal you'll ever eat."

Dusty sprang to his feet. "What is this? What're you talkin' about?" he demanded.

"Yore boss, West Morgan, killed Ek Lester last night. Brutalest murder I ever heard of. They know now how you an' him have been operatin' with yore cattle stealin' an' murders."

"Yo're crazy," Dusty yelled.

"They're bettin' ten to one they hang you tonight, an' no takers," old Coffey volunteered.

"Say, you're more of a bad man than I thought," the hobo said admiringly.

"Don't be a fool," Dusty snapped. "I ain't killed nobody, nor stole no beef. Neither has West."

"Evidence ag'in ye is dead open an' shut," Davis said. "Either me or Johnny will be around all the time to try to stop the mob when it comes, but if you got any prayin' to do you'd better git it over with."

"You want this grub or not?" Coffey demanded.

"Put it in here," the hobo said. "If he can't eat it I can."

Davis limped away presently, and Coffey sat down in the other room to read an old *Police Gazette* someone on the local force had filched from the barbershop.

The hobo kept glancing at his cell partner while they ate. When finished the man went over to the window and listened.

"Hear that," he said. "That's a mob roarin'. I've heard 'em before. I saw a feller lynched once. Hey, Marshal, you let me outa here. Let me outa here."

Coffey looked up over his magazine. "What you yappin' about? 'Tain't you they're after."

"Mobs are blind, see?" the hobo chattered. "Some of 'em are likely to take me for him. An' somebody is liable to say, 'Let's make a cleanin'.' I don't trust no damn' mob a-tall. You let me outa here."

"Shut yore jib," Johnny Coffey ordered. "If they do take yuh won't be no great loss to society, I reckon."

The hobo flung himself upon the bunk. His face was white from fear, and he chattered under his breath. Dusty looked at the fellow speculatively, and with a measure of contempt. If a man had to die, he had to die, Dusty thought. Facing a mob wasn't a pleasant prospect, but he wasn't going to beg for mercy. Wasn't going to show the white feather.

Yet the sounds which floated in through the window began to send cold chills up his spine.

Once Sam Davis returned to hold a whispered conference with Coffey. The hobo howled loudly for news, but was told to shut up. Davis went away again, but thereafter even the pictures in the *Police Gazette* failed to hold Coffey's attention. He began to prowls up and down. Between him and the hobo Dusty's nervousness increased. The mob sounds from the street grew louder.

"Look here, King," Coffey shouted once, "why don't you confess everything? Maybe then they'd let yuh live for a witness against Morgan."

Dusty refused to answer.

The yelling in the street subsided at last.

"It don't mean nothin'," the hobo warned gloomily.

Suddenly there was a knock at the door of the jail. Dusty saw Johnny

Coffey fumble with his six gun, but the old man had no intention of putting up a defense. Dusty had understood that all along.

"Who is it?" Coffey barked.

Dusty and the hobo couldn't hear the reply, but Coffey cautiously opened the door. Dee Herrick stepped inside. He was carrying his famous sawed-off shotgun.

"What do you want, Herrick?" Coffey asked.

"There's a nasty crowd in town. I just came down to help you an' Davis defend the jail if they start this way," the bartender said.

"We don't need no help, Dee."

"The hell you don't," Herrick retorted. "You'd shiver yore pants off right now if they wasn't held up. I may not be able to stop 'em either, but I can sure have some of 'em pickin' buckshot out of their carcasses."

"Look, Dee, don't git into any trouble on my account," Dusty called. "I ain't done nothin', so I can't see why they want to mob me, but if they do come I can take it."

"I know it, kid, but these people ain't foolin'. I've been burnin' up the wires to Portneuf for help, but somebody has been workin' against me. I'm afraid the only chance you have, if I can't hold the jail is for 'em to catch West. If they do catch him they'll hang him sure."

"West didn't kill Ek Lester or anybody else."

"I ain't so sure," Herrick said. "West is a good friend of mine, but I couldn't blame him for killin' that no-good Ek—an' it looks like he did."

"You git outa here, Herrick," Coffey blustered. "When I need help to guard this jail I'll ask for it."

"Set down an' be quiet," Herrick said curtly.

"Sam'll fix you when he gits back," the night marshal stormed, but he sat down.

A few minutes later footsteps again sounded outside.

"I reckon that's Sam now," Coffey said eagerly, and leaped to open the door. An instant later he fell back with a startled look on his dissipated face. "Yu—you!" he croaked.

"Yes, it's me," came West Morgan's voice, and his frame filled the doorway of the jail. His six gun pointed at Johnny Coffey's stomach. Then he saw Dee Herrick, but his gun didn't waver.

"Nice o' you to come callin'," Herrick remarked.

"West!" Dusty exclaimed. "Great glory be!"

West closed the door behind him, and sprang the catch. "I don't want to hurt you, Dee, so I'll explain that I didn't kill Ek Lester. Didn't even know he was dead till I reached town a few minutes ago."

"Jeez!" the hobo in the back room gasped audibly. "Is that the killer they're so hell-bent to hang?"

Nobody answered him.

"Got any evidence, West?" Herrick asked.

"None. What happened was that I caught Lester, tied him up to a tree and made him confess. I went on to find Bugs Getley. I found him, but Trail an' his boys got away. They must have found Ek where I left him, and it was too good an opportunity for Trail to pass up."

West and the bartender eyed each other warily.

"Now what?" Dee asked.

"I suppose you came here to try to protect Dusty from that mob. I appreciate that, but it wouldn't be enough. They'd hang him anyway. So Dusty an' me are leavin'."

"I dunno about that, West. My duty as a citizen oughta work both ways."

"You can do a hell of a lot more good by tellin' Burr Hall where Pack Saddler is. He's been livin' in Tom Higginson's shack, but right now he's away somewhere disposin' of Bugs Getley's body," West said.

"You sure as hell do git around," Herrick murmured.

West reached out and removed Coffey's gun. "Unlock the cell door, Johnny," he ordered. "Otherwise I'll have to bat you over the head and do it myself."

Mumbling under his breath Coffey unlocked the door, and Dusty came out. The hobo was right behind him.

"Here, where do you think you're goin'?" Dee Herrick demanded, and swung the muzzle of his sawed-off weapon against the fellow's stomach. The hobo retreated, and West locked the door.

West handed the night marshal's six gun over to Dusty. "Don't try to follow us, either of you," he said. "When this mob fever dies down we'll surrender and stand trial for any charges they want to bring against us, but right now we got business elsewhere."

"Well, so-long," Herrick said.

They got outside, and backed away until they knew they were beyond range of Herrick's lethal weapon.

"Gosh, West, you shouldn't have come back here," Dusty said. "They're worse'n a pack of wolves. Where do we go now?"

"The railroad track. There ought to be a freight along soon. When it comes you grab a boxcar an' ride to Portneuf. When you get there go up to the courthouse and surrender."

"Surrender?" Dusty gasped.

"That's what I said, Dusty. This mob can't operate up there. There's no real evidence against you, and you're bound to come clear."

"But what about you?"

"I've got some unfinished business."

"It's mine, too," Dusty declared. "I'm stayin' with yuh."

"Nothing of the kind. Don't argue. I'll be leavin' town, too, but I've only got one horse—and I stole that."

"All right, I guess you're the boss," Dusty said. "They'll soon be

lookin' for us, so I'll mosey on down the track. But I hope that freight shows up in a hurry."

"Well, good-bye, Dusty," West said, and offered his hand.

The puncher gripped it. "Good-bye, West," he said steadily, "take care of yourself."

West began to circle back through the sagebrush which fringed the town. He had got Dusty out of a jam, but an equally important job remained. A vision of old Bugs Getley's tortured face was always in his mind. Charley Trail had beaten him at every turn, but there had to be one final settlement, and it had to come soon.

When Charley Trail returned to town he would be certain to call on Rosa Guitierrez—and West meant to be there.

He didn't know that just before he was out of sight Dusty King altered his course and followed him through the sagebrush with the stealth of a coyote sneaking up on a rabbit.

26

LOLA CHAFFED at the necessity of keeping pace with Burr Hall, but the saloonkeeper did his manful best by occasional bursts of speed. At such times, although Lola's mount held to an easy canter, Hall's kept to a hard, fast trot, and every effort of Hall's to make it go faster ended in dismal failure. He bounced high, and groaned piteously.

When they walked their horses they talked. The girl realized that Hall had no real evidence that would help West, but the mere fact that he believed in West's innocence was a bulwark to her soul.

Not the question of his guilt or innocence concerned them now, however, but the matter of frustrating a mob.

"Can't you get some men and help defend the jail?" she asked anxiously.

"Might raise two or three, but we wouldn't be much force against a couple of hundred drunken, excited men. And that jail is a cracker box," he declared.

"You think it will help if I talk to them?"

"Yes—if you could get them to listen. I don't think you can."

"Then what—"

"The whole thing is in the hands of the Guitierrez girl. She's established herself as the leader of the mob. We know that if West is innocent then Charley Trail has to be guilty. He'll be satisfied to lay back and tell Rosa what to do."

"Yes?"

"She's good-lookin' an' popular. Any man would be a fool to try to talk her down. The crowd wouldn't listen for a minute. You ain't so

pop'lar, but you're almost as good-lookin'. Anyway, you're a girl. If you was to start an argument with Rosa, you might have to stand a lot of abuse from her, but the crowd would be interested, an' it would listen. See what I mean?"

"Yes, and I don't think much of it," she said frankly. "I can't see where a fight between me and Rosa would help Dusty. The crowd would side with her instantly. I'm not deceiving myself about the Durrant family having either influence or popularity."

"People do think you're purty much snobs, an' Westerners don't like to be high-hatted by anybody," he admitted frankly.

She was glad that the darkness covered the flush of shame which she felt running over her face.

"Rosa is human," she said finally. "I rather like her. Her whole trouble is that she is madly in love with Charley Trail, and so she will do anything he wants. But if I could have a talk with her alone—If I could just persuade her that Dusty ought to have a fair trial, and let her know that there is a reasonable doubt about West's guilt."

"Yuh might tame a wildcat by ticklin' it between the ears, but I never seen it done," Burr said skeptically.

"Anyway," she asserted, "I am going to try."

The street was strangely deserted as they arrived, but the hitching racks were crowded with saddled horses, and the vacant lots with rigs. Tumultuous noise sounded from both saloons.

"Sounds like business was good in my place," Burr said, but with no elation. "I'll be watchin' for you when you come back. Looks like Trail was still out of town."

Lola rode on past the post office at a walk. The office was dark, and the blinds were drawn in the back rooms. A single saddled horse pawed impatiently at the public hitching rail. Convinced that Rosa was probably alone Lola turned back, tied Pepper at the rail beside Knuckles, and noticed that the two animals rubbed noses. They seemed to be friends.

Wish Rosa and I were that way, the girl thought, then steeling herself for a most unpleasant interview she marched boldly around to the door into the Guterrez living quarters. She was a small, martial-looking figure, and her head was high.

She paused only to draw one long, resolute breath, then rapped lightly upon the door. It was opened so quickly she was taken by surprise.

"Charl—" Rosa cried out excitedly, then stopped. Her face darkened, and for an instant she seemed minded to slam the door shut in the other girl's face. Lola stuck her small, booted foot on the doorsill as a precaution.

"What do you want?" Rosa asked, her tones grating harshly.

"I want to talk to you, Rosa," Lola said quietly.

"I'm sorry. I'm expecting someone else."

This time the door half closed, but Lola didn't retreat. "I know," she said. "Evidently you are expecting Charley Trail. But I've got to see you first. I want to see Mr. Trail myself."

"What have you to do with me, or Charley either?" Rosa demanded.

"A great deal when a man's life is involved. Must I stand out here and talk?"

"Come on in," Rosa shrugged. "But I warn you. I'm not in a very good temper. You may get hurt."

"I'll take my chances," Lola said quietly. For a moment the girls stood face to face, meeting each other's eyes unflinchingly. Rosa was the taller by half a head. There was enmity in her dark eyes.

"Well, you'd just as well sit down," Rosa said ungraciously. "But if you haven't finished your business by the time Charley gets here you had just as well go."

"I'd like to be your friend, Rosa," Lola said.

"Spare the soft scap," Rosa snapped. "You tried that the other day, but I didn't fall for it. You wanted something then and you want something now. You Durrants are snobs. You hold yourselves above everybody else in this country, and you wouldn't even speak to me if you wasn't in a pinch of some kind."

"That isn't true, Rosa, none of it." Lola's voice held the same firm, quiet tone. "You love Charley Trail very much, don't you?"

"If it's anything to you, I do."

"You'd suffer a great deal to save him if you thought he was in danger, wouldn't you?"

"What are you driving at?"

"I'm just trying to get you to understand my position. I love a man, too. His life is in danger, and I'm trying to save him."

Rosa stared unbelievably, and then she began to laugh.

Lola stood up, her face red. She was prepared to endure anything except being laughed at. "I see I'm wasting my time," she said coldly. "I won't detain you any longer."

"Wait," Rosa cried. "I don't get it. Do you mean to stand there and tell me you, a Durrant, are in love with West Morgan? Or is it Dusty King?"

"Yes, I love West." Lola replied simply. "I love him so deeply that I would die if anything happened to him."

Rosa stared at the smaller girl. Hard. For a moment Lola thought that she was going to laugh again. If she did Lola had the feeling that the taller girl was going to get slapped. Hard.

But Rosa didn't laugh. "I feel sorry for you," she said. "I laughed because Charley told me you were crazy about him. I've been jealous of you."

Lola waited. It could do no good to say what she thought about Charley Trail.

"I want West Morgan to hang," Rosa said in a dull monotone. "He murdered my father. That maybe I could forgive. But not for trying to accuse my Charley of the crimes which he committed."

"I see. Hasn't it ever occurred to you that West might be right?"

"I know he lies," Rosa cried shrilly. "When I see him fighting for breath with the rope cutting in around his neck I laugh, see? I laugh." She threw back her head and she did laugh; coarse, hysterical laughter which turned the blood in Lola's veins to ice water.

Lola understood the other girl better, and her pity increased. Rosa was a creature of intense emotions, that were utterly undisciplined.

"All I'm asking is that West be given a chance to prove his side of the story," she argued quietly. "Anyone should be given that. But they haven't caught West yet. There is no proof at all that Dusty ever hurt anyone. I came here tonight to plead with you not to stir up a mob against Dusty—as much for your sake as his. If you encourage that mob you will always know in your heart that you are a murderer."

For a moment she thought she had made an impression. A bit of doubt flickered in Rosa's dark eyes, then her face hardened.

"When a dog bites me if I can't reach his head I cut off his tail," Rosa said. "West Morgan told Dusty to kill my father; Dusty went and did it. If West Morgan will give himself up, then I ask the boys to let Dusty live till the law hang him."

"If West knew Dusty was in danger he would give himself up. I know it. Give me time to find him. Send this mob home. I know you can do it," Lola pleaded.

"So do I know it," Rosa said arrogantly. "And I won't send them home."

"Then you and your mob will find me waiting in front of the jail door," Lola turned evenly. "I may not be able to stop you, but I can try."

She turned toward the door, but stopped as she heard footsteps on the gravel walk outside. Rosa heard them, too, and sprang toward the door, her face alight with savage eagerness.

Then they heard a man's voice ring out. "Keep away from that door, Trail. I'm coming after you."

The voice was West Morgan's! Even through the closed door both girls recognized it.

An instant later they heard the dull, heavy boom, boom of exploding six guns—so close together they couldn't tell how many shots were fired.

WEST had gained the Guitierrez back yard without difficulty. There was a small stable where old Pablo had kept his own and his daughter's saddle ponies, with a small chicken coop at one end. There was a tiny garden between there and the house, and right back of the house, but even with the driveway, was an outside coal bin. It was within the shadow of this coal bin that West crouched when Charley Trail strode up the path to knock on Rosa's door.

Trail was not alone. West had seen him riding boldly down the street flanked by two companions—Kinney and Bovard, he was sure.

The three men had stopped at the hitching rail, and examined the two horses tied there. They had, of course, recognized both animals. But West hadn't seen either horse simply because the building stood between him and the hitching rail. He had thought, once or twice, that he could hear voices inside, but if there were anyone with Rosa it would probably be the fat woman who occasionally worked there. It had certainly not entered his mind that Rosa's visitor might be Lola Durrant.

The three men were out of his sight for a couple of minutes, then he saw Trail turn the corner and stride rapidly toward the door of the living quarters.

West tensed, then when his enemy was six feet from the door he raised up so that he could look over the top of the coal bin. He knew the moment had come at last. Ben Getley and Pablo Guitierrez were going to be avenged, or else Charley Trail was going to chalk up one more triumph in his career of crime. He was completely unconscious of fear, and the nervousness he had felt while crouching there had mysteriously vanished. He was as ready for the final showdown as he ever would be.

He stepped from behind the coal bin as he hurled his challenge. His six gun was in his hand, gripped easily, but with no muscular tenseness. Everything, he knew, depended upon the first shot. He couldn't afford to grip the weapon too tightly, or to jerk the trigger. Either one might tilt the muzzle of the gun too high, or jerk it to one side.

He had no illusions about being as fast on the draw as his foe. Charley Trail was a gun lover who had mastered the art. Despite his tall, slender build Trail moved with a certain effortless flow that was the acme of grace and bewildering speed.

There was to be no stalling in this encounter. West knew that. Trail's hand was striking at his gun butt the moment West started to speak. Yet West didn't hurry. He was fast, but he knew better than to crowd his speed. He saw flame spurt from his enemy's weapon as he pressed the trigger, just hard enough to make the hammer fall. He knew, even

as he felt a stab of pain, that he wasn't going to miss. And he didn't intend to cease firing so long as either he or his enemy stood on their feet.

He saw Trail's gun blaze again, but he felt no pain that time. Trail seemed to be charging in, but he wasn't. His long legs were getting tangled, and he was moving more sideways than forward. West fired a second shot, and a third. At the last one Trail seemed to trip over his own feet and fell headlong. The man's gun exploded once more as he fell, but the bullet struck the ground.

West knew that every shot he had fired had taken effect, yet an excited yell from out front stopped him from emptying his gun into the body of his foe just to make sure that Charley Trail had committed his last murder.

"Charley! Charley! What's wrong?" came Cluff Kinney's voice.

West moved swiftly along the gravel path, but the door flung open as he passed, and in the curtain of light he caught a swift glimpse of Rosa Guitierrez's frightened face. He started on, then jerked his head back to make sure that he hadn't just had an hallucination. He hadn't. Just behind Rosa stood Lola.

"Charley!" Rosa screamed, and flew toward the awkward, gangling figure on the ground.

West didn't stop. There were two men there on the street who had been guilty of unimaginable cruelty. They were as much or more guilty of Bugs Getley's murder as Trail. As he reached the corner of the post office a man on foot had just started away from the hitching rail. The short, bandy-legged figure told West it was Cluff Kinney. The puncher saw and recognized West. He reversed his course, and made a headlong dive toward the hitching rail.

West fired, and knew that he had missed. Instantly a slug from Fletch Bovard's gun came so close to his face that he rocked back on his heels and almost fell. West fired again, but Bovard was out of sight, and Kinney was scrambling to his feet among the frightened horses.

Something clicked a warning in his brain. He had only one cartridge left in his gun. He sprang back to the cover of the post office and crammed in more shells.

"West! West! What are you doing here?" he heard Lola call.

"You girls get back inside before you get hurt," he ordered.

He had time only to get in two cartridges when he saw Kinney swing up on a horse. With the grim purpose of making sure that this scoundrel at least did not make his escape he stepped out from the corner, drew a hasty but accurate bead and fired at his swiftly moving target.

Kinney lay low on his horse's neck, and West feared that his first shot was too high. He took a step forward and fired again. He saw the flash from Bovard's gun, and felt one leg suddenly crumple under him.

He didn't hear another shot that sounded almost simultaneously with Bovard's, nor see the puncher topple over under the hoofs of the frantic horses behind which Bovard had barricaded himself.

He raised up on one knee as Cluff Kinney righted himself in the saddle, and took aim. Kinney's mount was behaving strangely, whirling around in a circle as though its rider was pulling hard on one rein and couldn't let go. And that was exactly what was happening. Agonized by a bullet in his intestines Kinney was frenziedly trying to stay on his horse without knowing just what he was doing.

The last cartridge in West's gun exploded, and Cluff Kinney plunged headlong to the ground. West saw another man come around the front of the post office. He started to raise his gun, realized that it was empty, and recognized Dusty King all in the same second.

"Dusty!" he yelled. "Get to hell out of here. Can't you hear that crowd coming?"

Something gave way, and he fell over on his side. Dusty and Lola reached him at the same time. At the same instant Rosa's voice rose in a wild screech for help.

"Look out for Bovard," West said anxiously.

"Ne'mine him," Dusty said. "I got him."

"Then we got all three of the varmints," West smiled. "Lola, they murdered old Bugs. They beat his head and burned his feet. He died in my arms."

The girl dropped on her knees beside him. "Oh, West, I believe you," she cried, "but that mob won't. They're coming. What will we do?"

"Nothing to do now, I guess, except for you and Dusty to get away from here, pronto."

"You go, Dusty," the girl said. "I'm staying."

"Me, too," Dusty answered grimly.

"Don't use that gun, Dusty. We've got the men we want," West said.

"Give it to me," Lola ordered, and Dusty handed it over. The girl rose to her feet, and faced the leaders of the mob as they turned in from the street to the post office. The men saw the gun leveled at them and stopped.

"What is it?" a man asked. "What's all the shootin' about?"

"That's West Morgan there," Rosa screamed. "He killed Charley!"

The men started forward. The man at their head was a rancher named John Hendricks—the same man whose buggy West had recently occupied for a time.

"Stand back, you men, or I'll shoot!" Lola threatened desperately.

They stopped. "The Durrant gal!" a man said. "What the hell?"

"Never mind her. She's Morgan's sweetheart. Swing him up," Rosa screamed.

The mob was puzzled. They had been listening to Rosa's shrieks for vengeance all day, but the presence of this other girl opposing them

was bewildering. There was something about the small, trim, defiant figure before them that demanded respect, even from men with minds inflamed with liquor and the thirst for blood.

The man Hendricks was not drunk. He held the others back with a wave of his arm, and advanced a few steps.

"You'd better put the gun down, miss," he said gently, but implacably. "We know what West Morgan's done, and if he's killed Charley Trail that only makes it worse. He's got to swing."

"West is wounded," Lola replied. "He couldn't get away if he wanted to. Dusty could have escaped, but he wouldn't. Why can't you give them a chance to tell their side?"

"What's Dusty King doin' here?" a man blurted. "He was in jail."

The mob had milled around until it neared the horses. "Hey!" a man bellowed. "Here's another dead man! It's Cluff Kinney!"

"An' here's Fletch Bovard, deader'n any fish you ever saw," yelled another.

"It's wholesale murder," shouted someone at the rear of the mob. "Come on, let's hang 'em!"

The mob surged forward, literally pushing Hendricks ahead of it. Lola's nerve broke suddenly. She could stand up to the mob, but she couldn't fire a shot at the men bearing down upon her. She dropped the gun, and with a sob threw her arms around West's neck as he struggled to his feet.

"Here's your rope, Rosa," yelled a man from the middle of the crowd.

28

DEE HERRICK had heard the jail keys strike the ground just outside the door after West and Dusty made their escape. As soon as he was sure he wouldn't be shot at he stepped outside, groped for the keys, and went back in the jail.

"I gotta let Sam know about this," Johnny Coffey said with bustling importance after the danger was over.

"Wait a minute," Dee said. "Listen, Johnny, this will look mighty bad for you, lettin' them git away without even firin' a shot. I know how to do it better."

"Yeah? How?"

"We'll let this bum go to keep his mouth shut. Then I'll tie your hands behind your back an' lock you in the cell. I'll even tap you over the eye—like this—to make it look like you'd put up a fight."

Old Johnny howled, and reeled backward as Dee swung the bunch of heavy keys in a way that would surely leave a mark on the jailor's

forehead. Then Herrick stepped over to the cell door, unlocked it and sent the willing hobo on his way. Before Coffey could protest he found himself hustled inside the big cell and locked in.

Herrick locked the jail door from the outside and threw away the keys. About all he could do to help the boys, he decided, was to delay pursuit as much as possible.

Yet there might be one thing more. He circled wide of the crowd in the street and approached the rear of Burr Hall's saloon. It wasn't often he visited the competing place of business, but he was one of the few men in the country who wasn't afraid of the warlike Burr.

He entered the back room, and walked down a hall to the door of Hall's cubbyhole office. He knocked, and Burr called gruffly, "Come in." Burr was alone. He stared belligerently at his caller.

"Thought maybe you'd be out minglin' with the customers," Dee said. "What do you want, Herrick? What're you packin' that sawed-off for?"

"Not for you, Burr. Look: West Morgan is in town, and if something ain't done that mob out there will hang a couple of innocent men."

"What do you know about it?" Burr ground out.

"Not much, except that I'm darned sure West ain't the man who started this trouble. I work for Dollarhyde. Ordinarily I just tend bar, an' don't mix into nobody's business. But when a man's life's in danger maybe it's time to talk."

"I'm listenin'," Burr said.

"Dollarhyde is a very orderly man. He likes to keep books. I looked into 'em one day. He's got down every dollar he ever took in for the beef he sold, an' every dollar he ever paid out for what he bought. They don't jibe, if you get what I mean. In other words he can't explain by his books where he got all his beef."

"I've knowed that for a long while," Burr said. "I know my man, Pack Saddler, was butcherin' for him an' Charley Trail. West Morgan give me the evidence. If I could get hold of Saddler, damn him—"

"Dollarhyde is still in town," Dee said softly.

"Come on," Burr said. "What're we waitin' for?"

They crossed the street, avoiding the crowd, and entered the back of Dollarhyde's store. It had been closed for several hours, but Herrick had a key. A light showed under the door of the Justice of the Peace's office. Dee turned the knob and went in without knocking. Burr followed him.

Dollarhyde was seated behind his desk. He looked up angrily.

"What's the meaning of this, Herrick?" he demanded.

"We just came in to work you over, Dollarhyde," Burr answered before Dee could speak. "I've refrained from dirtyin' my hands on you for a long time, but now I'm goin' to do a real job."

He reached over the desk, seized Dollarhyde by the collar with both hands and jerked the man to his feet.

"Herrick! Help!" Dollarhyde squeaked.

"No, you won't get any help, you dirty little potbellied thief," Burr said. "I've just found out from Pack Saddler all about the dirty work you've been up to with Charley Trail, an' now I'm goin' to beat you to death—half way anyhow."

"You're wrong, Burr. It's all a mistake," Dollarhyde whined.

"Your books don't show it," Herrick put in mildly. "I've been lookin' at 'em."

"Yo're a spy. You're fired," Dollarhyde cried weakly.

"I think you'll be ready to sell out to me when Burr gits through with you," Dee said.

"Listen to me, Dollarhyde," Burr said. He still held the man's collar with one hand, while his other mighty fist was cocked, ready to strike. Dollarhyde's eyes rolled helplessly from one man to the other.

"There's a boy down here in jail who's goin' to be hanged tonight," Burr continued, "unless you tell the truth an' save him. Do you want to do that or—" The great fist went back, poised for a devastating blow, and Dollarhyde watched it with fearful fascination."

"Let him have it," Herrick drawled.

"Wait! Wait!" Dollarhyde screamed. "I'll talk."

"Then talk damn fast," Dee said. "I think I heard some shots. That mob must be movin'."

"I bought the J Bar J beef that Trail, Kinney an' Bovard stole, an' Saddler butchered," the man mouthed.

"Go on. Who else was in on it?" Dee demanded.

"Ek Lester, an' a couple of dry farmers who hauled the meat for us."

"That oughta be enough," Dee said. "An' I think we'd better be movin'."

"All right," Burr answered, "but remember, Dollarhyde: you try crawlin' out, an' your own mother wouldn't know yuh when I git through."

"An' if you should git loose this old sawed-off of mine packs an awful wallop," Herrick warned further.

They hustled the merchant out onto a strangely deserted street.

"The commotion is down by the post office," Herrick said. "Come on."

They made their prisoner trot as they hurried to join the crowd, which had left the post office and was moving toward the yard of the Skull Creek schoolhouse. The leaders had then reached a high swing frame that had been erected for the bigger pupils of the school. It was a natural scaffold.

All but three or four persons were on foot. One of those mounted was Rosa Guterrez. Just as Hall and Herrick arrived they saw the

girl fling the end of a rope up over the crossbar. They knew that the other end was around West Morgan's neck.

"Hold it!" Burr Hall's bellow rose above the animal cries of the mob.

The crowd stilled momentarily.

"No, no! Don't stop for anything!" Rosa cried shrilly.

"Drop that rope. Rosa, or I'll blast you right off that horse," Dee Herrick's voice rang out, the first time anyone in Skull Creek had ever heard him speak above an ordinary low conversational tone. Almost involuntarily Rosa let go the rope.

"What is this? What do you fellows want?" Hendricks demanded.

"These men are innocent, and we got the proof," Burr said, his voice booming out so that no one could fail to hear him. "We can prove that they never stole no cattle, an' if they didn't steal cattle they didn't kill anybody. Charley Trail and his men are the crooks—an' here is the man who can prove it. Speak up, Dollarhyde."

Al Dollarhyde began to talk, so low that Burr violently adjured him to speak louder. Even so those in the rear couldn't hear, and the merchant's words were relayed back to them.

When Dollarhyde finished his confession about the stolen beef Dee Herrick reminded the crowd that someone had tried to murder Bill Clover, and that Clover himself had exonerated West and Dusty.

"That was Charley Trail or one of his men, and if they'd try to murder Clover they wouldn't stop at killin' anybody else," the bartender pointed out.

"It's a lie! Don't believe them!" Rosa screamed wildly, but nobody paid any attention. But those in front stood back when Lola Durrant came from somewhere and removed the ropes from about the necks of the endangered men.

"We been wrong, men," Hendricks shouted. "Trail, an' Kinney an' Bovard are dead now. Go home, an' let the law take care of the rest."

The most surprised men in the crowd at that moment were Burr Hall and Dee Herrick.

"I guess we must have missed something," the latter murmured.

The mob dissolved sheepishly. Only Hendricks and two or three others had the grace to remain and face their intended victims.

Eventually Sam Davis, the day marshal, appeared but he didn't take anybody to jail. Soon after West Morgan was put to bed five or six men rode quietly out of town. Among them was Dusty King, Dee Herrick, John Hendricks—and Burr Hall. Although groaning with every step of his horse the saloonkeeper would not be left behind. Their destination was the homestead shack of Tom Higginson.

Lola could not bring herself to go home that night. She did not know that one unassuming, and nonparticipating member of the mob that night was Jake Wilkin, sent to town by her father to keep an eye upon

her. There was so much excitement that Jake, also, decided to stay over.

She learned from the doctor that West's wounds were not serious. Trail's first bullet had been too high to hit the heart, while Bovard's shot had inflicted a painful though not crippling wound in the thigh.

She was admitted to the room as soon as the wounds were dressed. West smiled up at her, and she went over to him. He took her hand.

"You were a plucky little devil to stand up to that mob the way you did," he praised.

"But I failed to stop them," she condemned herself.

"You delayed them—long enough for Burr and Dee to get there," he said soberly. "If you hadn't, it would have been just too bad."

She bent over and kissed him lightly on the forehead.

"I can't get things straight," she said finally. "Too much has happened. The Lester murder—"

"Don't think about it, dear," West interrupted. "Maybe it will all clear up tomorrow, but I didn't do it."

"Oh, I know you didn't," she cried.

"You know, Trail almost betrayed himself," the doctor, who was still in the room, declared. "He had one of his men pretend to find your horse way up toward the Blackfoot Breaks. That was to make the posse think you had left the country. I guess the last thing he figured on was your coming back."

"I wish—" Lola murmured presently.

"You wish what?" West prompted.

"That I dared go to Rosa," she said. "I feel so terribly sorry for her. It's bad enough to lose the man she loved, but to find out that she has been such a fool! What will become of her, West?"

"I wouldn't worry too much," he said gently. "I know Rosa. She can blow hot, or blow cold. She'll want to die for a few days, and then she'll perk up and start flirting with every man she sees."

"You are not, by any chance, still in love with her, are you?" Lola demanded.

"What do you think?" he inquired, and raised the one arm that was still usable.

"I think," she replied breathlessly, after a minute or so, "that you are just a little too energetic for a wounded man. I think you should get some sleep. Good night." She bent and kissed him.

When Lola came down from her room the following morning she found Burr Hall, Dee Herrick, and Dusty King awaiting her.

"Well," she said, smilingly. "Why the committee?"

"We just thought, miss, that maybe you'd like to know that all the murders have been cleared up," Burr said.

"Oh, I would," she said breathlessly.

"We caught Pack Saddler last night, an' threw the fear o' the Lord

into him. He talked plenty. He had just been to throw the body of old Bugs Getley into the Blackfoot. He said Trail told him to do it, an' Trail told him that the old man died from the treatment he got when Kinney an' Bovard tried to force him to tell where his gold was hid. Trail told him, too, that he had killed Ek Lester, an' it was Kinney an' Bovard who murdered Pablo, an' tried to kill Bill Clover."

"Thank God, it's all cleared up," Lola sighed.

"Everything except where old Bugs did hide his gold," Burr said, "an' that's a bigger mystery than ever."

"How do you mean?"

"When they searched the bodies of the men who murdered him they found the same gold watch that Bugs showed West in Cluff Kinney's pocket. It had the initials L T engraved in the back, standin' for that gambler, Lew Tendahl, who was good to Bugs when he was a kid. Had we found it before it would have been enough to hang Kinney, but now it only goes to prove Bugs did find the gold, and hid it again, and the chances are nobody will ever know where. Not for another fifty-seven years at least."

"The poor, lonesome old man," Lola sighed.

"Charley Trail was a bad one," Burr stated. "I never knew what a softie I was till I found out all the things he done. It was him who roped your dad's horse that night, by the way. An' the snake even planted a hundred dollars under old Pablo's mattress to make Rosa think her dad was crooked, an' blame West."

It was two hours later before she started home. She dreaded the ordeal of facing her father, and trying to explain things. She stopped in amazement when she entered the living room, and saw him greeting her with the fondest smile she had seen on his face for months.

"Why—why—Father!" she blurted out tactlessly.

"Come here, daughter," he demanded. "Are you still in love with this West Morgan?"

"Yes, Father, I am. I love him more than ever. If you only understood—"

"Well, Jake gave me a pretty good report of last night's doing, and from what I hear you're going to marry pretty much of a man."

"Oh, Father!" she cried, and flung herself into his lap.

"There, there," he said, as if she were a little girl. "He's going to get quite a wife himself."

West Morgan was able to ride around a little in three weeks. Lola was on hand to ride out to his ranch with him the first time. He was glad to be home.

"Do you think you'll like it here?" he asked anxiously. "That is after I get it fixed up a little."

"Oh, I love it now," she said. She stood looking the place over. "Whose quaint old saddle is that there?" she inquired.

"That? Why, that—that belonged to poor old Bugs. That's his bridle, too. I guess Dusty had just brought them in when that posse nabbed him."

The girl walked over for a closer look. Suddenly she began to fumble in the pocket of her jacket.

"West! West!" she cried excitedly. "Come here. Look!"

She was holding out in her palm a glass rosette with the picture of a madonna and child.

"Well, what of it?" he asked mildly.

"Don't you see? It matches the one on his bridle. I found this one day right after he disappeared, while I was hiding from Cluff Kinney and Fletch Bovard. Do you think—"

"We can darn soon find out," he said.

"Wait. Let's send Dusty," she said. "It would please him mightily to find that old trunk, and if he can't find it we can hunt for it later. I don't want you overdoing yourself. Besides, my father wants to see you."

"I'd rather do most anything than face him—but you're the doctor."

They were still at the J Bar J, and West was actually enjoying himself, when Dusty appeared. The puncher utterly failed to conceal his excitement.

"I found it!" he burst out the moment he was in the house.

West pretended not to understand. "You found what?"

"The old trunk! Some o' the leather's rotted off, but the frame's still good. An', man, it's *full* o' gold. You're rich," Dusty exclaimed.

"Where did you find it?"

"Within about twenty feet o' where Lola said she found the rosette," Dusty grinned. "Bugs couldn't have got much further because the timber was too thick. He'd stuck it under the top limbs of a windfell tree, but nobody would have seen it if they hadn't been lookin' for it."

"Where is it now?" West asked.

"At the ranch—an' dang well hid."

West turned to Lola. "How do you think we ought to divide it?"

"Why, that's simple," she said promptly. "You have half, and Dusty half."

"Amendment," West said. "Dusty takes half and *we* take half."

Dusty began to stagger. They looked at him anxiously. "Water!" he gasped. "Water!"

"Annie!" Durrant shouted. "Bring some water."

Dusty ceased to stagger. He held up an imperative hand. "No, wait," he ordered. "Why, with half that gold I won't ever have to drink water again!"

West and Lola laughed heartily, but Claude Durrant shook his head. "These Westerners," he sighed. "I'll never be able to understand them."

BE SURE TO READ THE LATEST **FIGHTING WESTERN NOVEL**

COYOTE HUNTER

by **DENVER BARDWELL**

Cowboy Bill Radkin seemed to be making a display of his two hip guns when he rode into the town of Windy. Bill was a coyote hunter, and he'd come to Windy because he'd heard that the ranchers were having coyote trouble.

The ranchers were having trouble; but the "varmints" were human, and they carried guns.

With the help of his huge wolf dog Caesar, the mild, towheaded youth became a manhunter and found that a killer's hide brought a bigger bounty than a coyote's and was considerably harder to get. Plenty of trouble stood between Bill and his reward, but the stakes were worth it.

Always a skilful writer, Denver Bardwell in this **FIGHTING WESTERN NOVEL** tells a warm, genial story with a plot full of speed, variety and surprise.

FOR SALE AT ALL NEWSSTANDS

WHEREVER MAGAZINES ARE SOLD

The image shows a bright yellow background with the text "A Gunfire WESTERN NOVEL" printed in a bold, red, sans-serif font. The text is repeated numerous times, arranged in a diagonal pattern across the entire surface. Each instance of the text is slightly offset from the others, creating a sense of depth and repetition. The words "A Gunfire" are in a smaller font size than "WESTERN NOVEL". The overall effect is a dense, rhythmic pattern of text.