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**LESLIE
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ABE UTLEY—An old-time rancher from the days of the covered wagon, he came to realize that the West was far from tamed.

CLATE DIXON—Not even twenty thousand dollars could pay off the pistoleer who clung to his footsteps.

GUS FLINT—He thought he had the town in his pocket, but wasn't satisfied even then.

DAVE CARTER—A mystery figure, he proved himself a trigger artist in more ways than one.

&

*TWENTY THOUSAND CATTLE ON
THE HOOF!*

BY LESLIE SCOTT

**THE BRAZOS
FIREBRAND**

ACE BOOKS, INC.

23 West 47th Street, New York 36, N. Y.

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HELL ON HOOFS (QUARTER HORSE)

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CHAPTER ONE

ON THE RIGHT BANK of the Brazos river, flowing southward to empty its turgid waters into the Gulf of Mexico, ran a trail flanked by occasional thickets. Just inside the outer fringe of a particularly dense clump lounged nearly a dozen men smoking cigarettes and talking together in low tones. One, who appeared to dominate his companions, was tall and broad-shouldered. A bristle of whiskers that showed fiery red even in the moonlight grew almost to his eyes. His hair, hanging down over his coat collar, was also red. He spoke the laconic colloquialism of the rangeland, but there was an innate something about his voice, a hint of culture, that differed it from the rough tones of the others. From time to time he glanced at the great clock in the sky that wheeled slowly westward. Once or twice he stepped from the growth to peer north along the moon-silvered trail.

"Ought to be coming along any minute now," he observed at length. "Better pinch out those butts. One of 'em might spot a glow and get suspicious. We can't afford to take any chances with that bunch. Young Neale Loring is bad medicine, and old man Loring isn't any slouch, either. If they get their guns before we down 'em, somebody will get hurt."

"Dixon," one of the men suggested, hesitantly, "couldn't we just get the drop on them and take the stuff. This is a mighty cold-blooded business, downing a bunch of fellers without givin' 'em a chance."

The big man turned his darkly glowing eyes on the speaker.

"Getting a yellow streak down your backbone, Brant?" he asked softly.

"I'm not, and you know I'm not," the other replied. "I was just thinkin'."

"Well, you let me do the thinking," said Dixon. "You figure the Lorings would give up twenty-five thousand dollars without a fight? You're crazy if you do. We're not holding up a stage this time, with the shotgun guard and the driver working for wages and not giving a real damn whether the stuff

they're packing gets through or not. We're tackling Texas cowmen packing their own money. One slip and this will be our last chore. And when every man's hand is against you, you hit back any way you can," he added, a sudden intense bitterness grinding his voice. "Now get set, and stop talking."

The order was instantly obeyed. Silence fell over the group that abruptly evinced a peculiar tenseness. Hands instinctively dropped to gun butts.

There followed a considerable wait, the silence broken only by the occasional rustle of a nervously shifted foot, the whisper of the wind through the leaves or the lonely cry of a night bird. The moon slid across the sky, the stars to the west paling in the silver light, those to the east deepening their glow. Flecks of cloud appeared. Dixon muttered under his breath as one obscured the moon for a few minutes and the shadows deepened and objects became illusory and unreal.

The cloud passed. Pale light flooded the landscape once more. Dixon held up his hand. "I hear 'em," he said in a hissing whisper. "Horses coming. Can't be anybody else but them. Steady, and wait till I give the word."

A faint clicking had blunted the sharp edge of the silence. It grew to a patter, a thudding. Around a bend a few hundred yards to the north bulged four horsemen riding rapidly down the trail. As they drew nearer, one proved to be an elderly man, stocky of build, with grizzled hair and a drooping mustache. His three companions were young men. All wore the homely but efficient garb of the rangeland—overalls, chaps, high-heeled boots, soft shirts, sagging vests and vivid neckerchiefs. Broadbrimmed "J. B.'s" shaded their eyes. On they rode, talking and laughing among themselves, lounging easily in their hulls with the unconscious grace of a lifetime in the saddle.

In the dark thicket, the waiting group tensed for action. The horsemen came abreast of the bristle of growth. A hissing whisper, a roar of gunfire. The killers rushed forth, shooting as fast as they could pull trigger.

Three saddles were emptied by that first murderous volley. The fourth horseman managed to draw a gun and fired point-blank at the bearded leader of the outlaws, who reeled back cursing. But even as he pressed trigger, he whirled side-

ways from his saddle as if struck by a giant fist to lie huddled on his side, his face visored scarlet by a trickle of blood.

"That did it," barked the bearded leader, swabbing a bleeding cheek. "Look 'em over, Brant, and make sure they're all done for. We don't want any witnesses. Catch those horses, the rest of you. The stuff should be in the old man's saddle pouch. See to it, Watson."

The man Brant, who squatted over the bodies in turn, straightened up and approached the leader.

"Did young Loring clip you bad?" he asked anxiously. "Blazes, but he was fast!"

"Just a scratch," growled Dixon, balling his bloody handkerchief. "They all done for?"

"All done for," Brant replied. "You got young Loring through the head."

"Damned glad of it," said Dixon. "His sort is dangerous; brains and a fast gunhand. Combination you don't often see. I want to be sure he's dead. If he isn't, I'll—"

A shout from the man Watson investigating the saddle pouches of a tall dun horse interrupted him.

"Come here, Dixon. I want to show you something," he called. "The money's here, all right, but for the love of Pete, come look at it."

Dixon hurried to him. Watson extended two sheafs of banknotes, one considerably thicker than the other. Dixon took them, held the thinner to the moonlight and riffled it. He exploded in a wrathful curse.

"Well, of all the goddamn things!" he raged. "Thousand-dollar bills! Twenty of them!"

The others crowded close. "Purty, ain't they," remarked Watson. "Never saw one before."

"Yes, pretty, goddamn pretty!" Dixon mimicked with savage sarcasm. "Trying to pass one of these goddamn things would be like leading a prairie fire in a silk hat."

"A bank would change 'em," one of the men suggested hopefully.

Dixon turned on him, furiously. "You infernal fool," he said, "these things have numbers on them. Those numbers are noted by the bank that pays them out. After what happened tonight, the numbers will be sent to every bank in the country. Trying to change one of them at a bank would be

walking into the sheriff's office and asking to be locked up."

Muttering under his breath, he riffled the thicker packet. He tossed it to Brant.

"More than five thousand there, in small stuff," he said. "Split it up among you. You can spend that, anyhow. I'll keep this bundle and figure some way to get rid of it. Will have to be done a long ways from here; down in Mexico, like as not, but I'll figure a way."

He unbuttoned his shirt and drew out an already plump money belt. He thrust the packet into one of the pockets, replaced the belt and buttoned his shirt.

"All right," he said, "let's get going before somebody comes along. I don't want another shooting tonight. We were lucky to come out of this one without anybody bad hurt. Let's go."

His attention centered on the thousand-dollar notes, he completely forgot the man who lay in the dust with a bullet "through" his head.

Without a glance at the silent forms, the outlaws strode back into the thicket, crashing their way to its depths. They unhitched horses tethered to the trunks and mounted with a popping of saddle leather and a jingle of bit irons.

"We've got a mighty long ride ahead of us," Dixon remarked as they got under way. "A long ride, but it'll pay off. We're going to team up with the smartest man in the whole Southwest. A fellow I used to work with. He sent me word to join him in something big. We'll make our pile, and then I figure to settle down and go respectable and enjoy it. You fellows would do well to do the same thing."

The others looked dubious. "Might do for some fellers, Dixon, but I'm darned if I can see how you figure to get away with it," Brant said doubtfully. "You're not exactly ordinary in appearance, you know, and there's a lot of folks on the lookout for you."

"I know, but that can be taken care of," said Dixon. "I've got it figured out."

"Growin' whiskers and lettin' your hair get long didn't help you in Dodge City," said Brant. "You were spotted from your picture on a reward dodger."

"Yes," agreed Dixon. "I slipped up in Dodge City, but I won't slip that way again. I've managed to keep my neck

out of a halter for the past five years, Brant. And kept yours out, too."

"Oh, you got brains, ain't nobody goin' to deny that," Brant admitted grudgingly, "but I'm darned if I see how you're goin' to work it."

"I'll work it," Dixon returned complacently.

"Aim to keep right on ridin' from here?" Brant asked.

Dixon shook his head. "Figure we'll stop off for a little spell, down to the south," he said. "I hear there's some good pickings down there. Might as well line our pouches a bit more before we shove on. Now shut up, and ride."

Silence followed, broken only by the rhythmic thud of speeding hoofs.

In the dust of the trail, one of the "dead" men moved. Young Neale Loring groaned, retched, raised his head. His face was caked with dried blood. His dark hair was matted and under it showed a raw wound. He glared about with wild eyes, uttered a choking cry. Moaning and gasping, he got to his hands and knees and began to painfully crawl toward where the elderly man lay on his back, arms wideflung, a blue hole between the unseeing eyes that stared up blankly at the glory of the dawn.

The wounded man reached his side, gazed down into his set face, his own countenance convulsed with grief and rage. He glanced toward the other rigid forms.

"Dead!" he muttered thickly. "All dead!" He reached out a jerking hand and caressed the old man's gray hair. Then for a moment he collapsed prone in the dust. With a mighty effort of the will, he drew himself to a sitting position and hunkered forward, his throbbing head clasped in his hands.

Neale Loring knew he was hard hit. His wound had bled but little, a bad sign. It hinted at concussion or a possible skull fracture. Not good, either, was the peculiar ringing in his ears and his lack of coordination. The movements of his hands were fumbling, uncertain. His thoughts whirled and fluttered like disturbed birds. Gradually they gathered in a tight focus about a flame of rage and hatred that enveloped his whole being. He passed a trembling hand across his bullet-creased head.

"Clate Dixon and his bunch!" he muttered aloud. "Couldn't have been anybody else. Clate Dixon!"

For long minutes he sat motionless, gathering his strength, while the east glowed scarlet and gold and the light increased. After three unsuccessful attempts, he got to his feet, to stand swaying and uncertain. He gazed down at his dead father. Only two emotions remained to him. All others had been drained away. Hate and vengeance! They showed in the grim set of his lean jaw, in the red flame that glowed for a moment in his pale eyes. He drew a long, hissing breath, glanced about. He weaved and stumbled to where a tall bay horse was cropping grass near the trail. After several vain attempts, he mounted the patient animal, twined his fingers in the horse's coarse mane, slumped forward. He got his feet in the stirrups and twisted his spurs in the stirrup straps.

"Get going, Rojo," he mumbled as he sagged forward onto the horse's neck. "Home, boy, home! We've got things to do!"

The red horse headed south at a good pace.

CHAPTER TWO

OLD ABE UTLEY, owner of the XT ranch sat on his ranch-house porch and listened to the cicadas buzz in the tinder-dry growth. He glowered at several of his little tin windmills that were in sight, for he knew the damned things were pumping air instead of water. All indications pointed to another dry summer and fall with corresponding losses for the cowmen of the section.

Utley's attention abruptly centered on the bent form of Sime Wheatley, his range boss, stumping stiffly toward the porch from the direction of the bunkhouse. Utley and Wheatley were about the same age, but while old Abe was still lusty with active and vigorous life, Wheatley was already pretty badly stove up.

The range boss climbed the steps and sat down, removing his hat and mopping his brow. Utley nodded, then speculated him for some moments without speaking.

"Sime," he said suddenly, "I'm going to pull out and move." Wheatley stared at the Old Man.

"Where you figure to go?" he asked "Panhandle?"

"Hell, no," growled Utley. "They have blizzards up there, and I never did like a flat country. This Nueces section is bad enough, but up there it's worse. I want to see a mountain now and then. I aim to head west."

"West? How far?"

"Quite a ways—over toward the Big Bend country."

"A mighty long drive," grunted Wheatley. "You'll lose a lot of cows on a trip like that."

"Not so many as I stand to lose if I try to weather another dry summer in this burned over section of hell," replied Utley. "If I figure to go bust, I prefer to go bust trying to better myself instead of just setting around and sweating and watching my herds dwindle. I'm going to do it, Sime."

"Okay," said Wheatley, "when you make up your mind to do something, there's no stoppin' you. But, Abe, I've been with you a long while, but on this deal you can count me out. And I've a notion that will go for the rest of the older hands. Me, I'm a little too far along in years to go in for such a move. I own a few cows and a little patch of land over here and I figure I'd better stick with 'em."

"Had a notion you'd say that," admitted Utley, "and it sort of leaves me on a spot for a range boss; and I'll be short-handed to make the drive, I reckon, but I intend to make it."

Wheatley nodded, and for several minutes neither had anything to say.

"Figurin' on any place in particular, Abe?" Wheatley asked at length.

Utley hauled a hunk of eating tobacco out of his pocket and worried off a chaw before replying.

"Quite a few years back, when I was scouting for Al Sieber, I ran onto a stretch of country over just east of the Big Bend section," he observed reminiscently. "It was fine country. Water, shade, cool canyons that would provide shelter against heat and storms, miles on miles of grass lands, and not a cow in sight. Not so far off was a trail up from Mexico. They called it the Comanche Trail, I believe. You came around a curve in another trail running from east to west and you passed right by the mouth of a canyon. Squatting in

that canyon was already what was a shack town and growing. Wasn't much of a town right then, but I had a notion she'd grow if there was ever anything to cause her to grow. And now there's something. The railroad is passin' right that way and I'm willing to bet that little town of Sanders is going to be a division point with shops and such. And that will mean a local market for cows in addition to ready shipping facilities. I'm gambling that nobody has squatted on the land over there as yet. I'm sure I can get title to good holdings."

Wheatley shook his gray head pessimistically. "That's Apache country over there, Abe," he said.

"Well," replied Utley, "I'm not scared of Apaches. I fought 'em when I was scouting with Sieber, and they didn't lift my hair. Haven't got as much now as I had then, but I figure I can still hold onto what's left."

Wheatley was still pessimistic. "Injuns, smugglers, outlaws," he grunted. "And the railroad will bring in another prize crop of hellions. Uh-huh, fine country! You better stay home, Abe."

But Utley's faded blue eyes were dream filled. He was seeing far-away places under brighter stars. He had the West in his eyes. Already his back was to the East. Westward the land was bright.

"I'm going," he said.

Another silence followed. The cicadas buzzed, the wind-mills whirled and clanked. Over to the left, *ladino* cows could be heard popping the brush, although not a critter was to be seen. The red rays of the sinking sun glinted on the parched leaves, turning them to flakes of fire. The dry air quivered with heat. Utley finally spoke.

"I'll pack along some of the furnishings," he said, "but I'll just turn over the land and the buildings to you and the boys who stay. Can't very well take 'em with me and there's no sale for 'em hereabouts."

"They'll be here waitin' for you when you come back," Wheatley promised.

"I'm not coming back," Utley said with decision. "Where I go I stay."

He paused again. Then—

"You not coming along sort of leaves me in the lurch," he confessed. "I'll need a competent range boss on the drive, and none of the young devils that will trail with me are capable

of handling the chore properly. Reckon I'll have to scout around and try and pick up somebody."

"There's one hand in the bunkhouse I figure could take over the chore," Wheatley remarked.

"Who's that?" asked the owner.

"That young feller Neale Loring."

Old Abe looked startled. "You mean that range tramp you hired in town last month?" he demanded.

"May be a range tramp, but he's a top hand if there ever was one," Wheatley replied composedly. "He's got a head on his shoulders and he's a heap better educated than the average. He'd manage your drive for you. He gets along well with the boys and I've a notion he can handle men."

"But we don't know a thing about him," demurred Utley.

"Not much," the range boss admitted. "He sure isn't the talkin' kind, and I ain't strong on askin' questions. Recollect he did mention, when I talked to him in town, that he was headed west but figured it wouldn't be a bad notion to stop off here a spell till he got together a little stake. He doesn't drink to amount to anything, and he keeps out of the card games, though I've noticed him eyein' a poker settin' like he hankered to get in. Seems to want to save his money for something."

"That's to his credit," admitted Utley. "Seems to be competent, all right, but did you ever notice, Sime, that fellow has a funny look in his eyes? Sort of like he'd looked on something he'd like to forget and is looking forward to something he doesn't intend to ever forget."

The unimaginative range boss grunted. "All I noticed is they're good shaped eyes and keen lookin'," he said.

Utley tugged at his mustache. "I always depend on what you have to say, Sime, especially where folks are concerned," he conceded. "Where's Loring?"

"Ought to be riding in any minute," replied the range boss. "I sent him and a couple of the boys down to the south pasture to see if any calves are bogged down in the waterholes there."

"You mean mud holes," snorted Utley. He spat reflectively over the railing and glowered at a windmill.

"Sime," he said suddenly, "that fellow Loring is a two-gun man."

This did not shake Wheatley's habitual composure.

"I've known other folks to pack two guns," he replied.

"Folks who pack two guns usually fall into one of two classes," Utley observed slowly. "Those who pack 'em for show, and those who pack 'em to use."

"Well," drawled Wheatley, "I've a notion Loring ain't the show sort. And," he added, "I've a notion, too, that on the trip you aim to take, a man that packs two guns and knows how to use 'em, and will use 'em when necessary, ain't a bad sort to have along."

Utley rumbled in his throat but did not otherwise comment.

"Reckon here come the boys, now," Wheatley observed a little later. "Uh-huh, that's them. Loring in the center."

"Well," growled Utley, "call him up here and let me talk to him."

As the three horsemen swept into the ranchhouse yard, the range boss raised his voice.

"Loring," he called, "come up here and set."

The man who obeyed the order was slightly under six feet tall. His shoulders were broad and he was lean and wiry in build. His nose was straight and high-bridged, his mouth a trifle wide, the lips meeting firmly but with a slight upward quirk at the corners. His gray eyes appeared pale and a trifle cold in his deeply tanned face. He crossed the yard with long, easy strides, mounted the steps and paused.

Wheatley motioned to a chair. Loring dropped into it. He removed his hat, ran his fingers through his thick, dark hair, and eyed the two oldsters questioningly.

It was characteristic of Abe Utley to force the other man to begin a conversation, if possible, no matter how trivial the subject under discussion. He sat and gazed at the windmills, his thoughts apparently fixed on eternity.

Neale Loring fished the makin's out of his shirt pocket, rolled a cigarette with the rather long and slender fingers of his left hand, lighted it and smoked in silence. He, too, appeared to find the windmills interesting.

Utley grunted, and moved in his chair. Loring said nothing. Sime Wheatley's lips twitched slightly.

It was also characteristic of Utley that when he did speak he went straight to the point, without preamble.

"Son, how'd you like to take a long trip west?" he asked.

That brought Loring's glance around. Utley started slightly at the sudden blaze of the pale eyes.

"I'd like it fine," Loring said, in a low, deep and peculiarly resonant voice.

"Well, you've got a chance to take one," Utley pursued. "I'm pulling up stakes and heading west. Sime here doesn't want to go, and he suggested I make you range boss in his place." He paused expectantly.

"All right," said Loring.

Old Abe stared. In fact, despite his usual aplomb, the XT owner was slightly jolted. He swallowed, tugged his mustache, and decided he could be as short spoken as this unpredictable young man.

"Sime will have a talk with you tonight and give you the lowdown on things," he said, and turned back to his survey of the windmills. Wheatley shook with silent laughter.

Loring stood up, seemed to hesitate.

"By the way," he remarked casually. "I killed a man down on the south pasture this afternoon."

Old Abe's boots hit the floor with a bang. Even Sime Wheatley lost some of his composure. He gaped at Loring.

"What-how-who—" sputtered Old Abe.

"Some fellows were running a bunch of cows south, running them fast," explained Loring. "There were four of them. Three got away."

"But-but," mouthed Utley, "they might have been hands from some other outfit rounding up a bunch of their stock."

"Maybe," conceded Loring, "but those cows were packing XT burns, and the men running them had handkerchiefs tied over their faces; and they waved me around when I rode into sight from a thicket."

"Didn't want you to come close, eh?" said Wheatley.

"Looked that way," Loring nodded. "When I did ride closer, one who was hanging back a ways put a hole through my hat."

"The hell he did!" barked Utley.

"That's right," said Loring. "I figured he wasn't exactly playing and threw some lead at him."

"And what did he do?" asked old Abe.

"He died!"

Sime Wheatley gasped. Old Abe gulped in his throat and stared at Loring.

"Then the other three did a little shooting," Loring went on, "and I shot back. One of 'em slumped forward onto his horse's neck and appeared to be hanging onto the mane to stay in his saddle. Another one yelled sort of loud. Then they all three streaked away from there. If I'd been riding my saddle horse, Rojo, I might have run them down, but they had mighty good horses and left me standing still. So I rounded up the cows and drove 'em back north a ways. Ran into Pete and Larry, who rode out with me this morning. We snagged a few calves out of the mud and came home."

With a nod he passed down the steps and headed for the bunkhouse, leaving his speechless hearers staring after him. Finally old Abe found his tongue. He turned to face Sime Wheatley.

"And that," he observed sententiously, "is what you talked me into making my range boss!"

But as the work of getting his big herd ready for the trail progressed, Abe Utley found no reason for regretting his decision. Neale Loring was undoubtedly a tophand, he knew his business and he could handle men.

"When that young fellow tells you to do something, you do it, knowin' it's the best thing to do," said Lanky Pete Edwards, one of the older riders who at the last moment decided to accompany Utley. "And if a gent is feelin' a mite obstreperous, he has a way of lookin' at you with those light-colored eyes that decides you that gettin' hostile wouldn't be exactly healthy."

As he was duty bound to do, Utley rode to town and reported the killing on his south pasture. The sheriff, the coroner and a few other citizens rode down to the pasture, scrutinized the dead man, an unsavory looking specimen, and decided he doubtless belonged to the notorious Vogle bunch that had been operating in the section of late. A brief inquest was held, after which the sheriff shook hands with Neale Loring and rode back to town. He lingered a moment before taking his departure, however, for a word with Loring.

"You want to keep your eyes open," he warned. "If that

fellow really was one of the Vogle bunch, the rest of 'em will be lookin' for you, and not with an opera glass, either."

Neale Loring smiled slightly and thanked the sheriff. Then he rode off to attend to his duties.

At last all was ready and Abe Utley's great herd took the trail. Near the head of the herd rode the point men, guiding, directing. A third of the way back, where the herd would begin to bend in a change of course, were the swing riders. Another third back came the flank riders whose duty it was to aid the swing riders to block the cows from sideways wandering and to drive off any foreign cattle that tried to join the marching herd.

Bringing up the rear were the drag riders, cursing the dust and the slower or more obstinate animals. The drag, or tail, was the home of the incompetents, the footsore, the weary and the lazy, and a hospital for the ill.

Following the cattle came the remuda of spare horses in the charge of the wranglers. After them rumbled the chuck wagons driven by the cook and his helpers. And last of all, something missing in the course of a shipping herd drive to market, came eight covered wagons loaded with furnishings, tools, and provisions. Old Abe was in a jubilant mood. "It's a long drive," he told Loring, "but not so long as the ones I've made north to Dodge City in Kansas, and other northern markets. The big difference is that the trail north is familiar and used by plenty, while we're on our own and have to scout out our own road. But we'll make it, son, we'll make it, and it'll be worth it. I got in touch with the land office and I'm all set to take up all the land I want and get clear title. I'll be just about busted, so far as ready cash is concerned, but there'll be plenty more to come. Far as I can figure, this is the first herd to roll over to those parts. We'll get first choice in everything, and I figure to tie onto some good markets in a hurry."

The first day and night of the drive passed without incident. Loring pushed the herd hard the first day out. He desired to get the cows off their familiar home range as quickly as possible. Once upon new ground the tendency to stray was diminished. After the first day he planned to reduce speed and take it easy. Time was of no particular importance and he desired to establish the cows on their new pastures in good

physical shape. Losses would also be lessened if the animals were permitted to feed well and were not exhausted by effort beyond their endurance.

"There's a couple of bad stretches of desert we'll have to cross," Uteley told him. "You'll have to speed 'em up over those sections, son, and you're right about building up their strength. I've a notion we won't lose as many as on one of the northern drives to market, where an owner is always hustling to make shipping dates. Go to it. You have the say about everything."

The first day out, Loring, following Uteley's directions, veered the drive somewhat to the north to skirt the bad desert country bordering the Rio Grande. The morning of the second day out, old Abe was distinctly uneasy, scanning the terrain ahead, studying landmarks, muttering under his mustache.

"Been quite a few years since I was up in this section, but I don't think I'll go wrong," he told Loring.

About mid morning he suddenly uttered a satisfied exclamation. "What you make of that, son?" he asked, pointing ahead.

Loring studied the wide depression flowing westward across the prairie as far as the eye could reach.

"I'd say," he replied slowly, "that it's an old buffalo trail."

"You'd say right," nodded Uteley. "That's just what it is—the track the buffaloes used to get to the grasslands over to the west. Can't miss our way just so long as we stick to it, and that's mighty important in the country farther west. Over there you can get all tangled in canyons and gulches till you end up like a purp chasing its own tail and getting nowhere."

"Do you know this trail all the way?" Loring asked.

Uteley shook his head. "Nope," he replied. "I've only cut across it, and followed it a ways, durin' my scoutin' days. I got the lowdown on it from oldtimers who knew it well."

Loring nodded. "Then I reckon it's still up to me to scout out bedding-down sites," he observed.

As, later in the day, Neale Loring rode far in advance of the great herd, his chief concern was water. This was not easy to come by in this dry land. And it was absolutely essential to the herd's welfare. A day's forced march without water could mean serious losses.

So Loring eyed with interest every gulch and canyon open-

ing onto the trail. Some he investigated in hope of finding a hidden spring. But as the afternoon wore on he began to have a disquieting premonition of a dry camp for the night.

He passed a wide, brush grown canyon, the sloping sides of which were also with growth. For a moment he hesitated, but decided against riding up it. No stream flowed from its mouth and the growth had a parched look that was not promising. He rode on, his keen eyes scanning the terrain in all directions.

Something less than a quarter of a mile farther on the trail curved around a bulge, then straightened for a considerable distance to approach a second bend. And suddenly from around that bend bulged half a dozen horsemen. A bullet yelled through the air scant inches from his head.

Loring did not hesitate. Odds of six-to-one were a little heavy on the wrong side. He whirled Rojo and went streaking back the way he had come, bending low in the saddle as lead screeched all around him. He swore angrily as a slug burned his arm. But already the range was too great for anything like accurate shooting from a running horse's back, and barring a lucky hit, the pursuers had little to bank on.

For a moment Loring was decidedly puzzled as to the explanation of the apparently wanton attack, then Sheriff Morgan's well meant warning flashed through his mind—

"You want to keep your eyes open. If the fellow you downed really was one of the Vogle bunch, the rest of 'em will be looking for you."

Yes, doubtless the attack was connected with his brush with the widelooping bunch in the XT south pasture.

Loring reached the bend in the trail, with the pursuers steadily falling behind. Rojo was doing splendidly and appeared to enjoy the excitement of the chase. He tossed his head, snorted happily and literally poured his long body over the ground. His glorious black mane tossed and rippled in the wind of his passing. The sunlight struck glints of smouldering fire from his red-gold coat. His irons drummed the grass grown surface of the trail. Loring chuckled as they rounded the bend.

And then what had been a rather exhilarating experience, became a deadly serious threat pregnant with all the elements of grim tragedy. Sweeping up from the southeast was a sec-

ond band of horsemen—Loring counted seven in all. His appearance was the signal for more puffs of whitish smoke and the lethal whine of passing lead.

Loring's mind worked at hair-trigger speed. He could not turn. Nor could he slant sideways into the south. The two bands would instantly have him on the long leg of a triangle and there would be a point of meeting before he reached the apex of the angle.

There was only one course left to him. On his left was a long steep slope flinging upward to a rounded skyline. This slope was slashed by the canyon he passed on his outward ride. Without hesitation he swerved Rojo into the canyon and rode at top speed.

"Now if this hole just isn't a box, I've got a chance," he muttered, peering ahead as he tore through the brush that clothed the floor.

But he had a disquieting feeling that the canyon was boxed. It looked that way as it began to bend gently to the east. Behind him sounded shouts and a crashing of the growth. He settled himself in his saddle and urged Rojo to greater speed. If the canyon boxed, it was imperative for him to get a head start. Then perhaps he might find shelter or even try to ride up the steep slope.

After a sweeping curve the canyon straightened out again. Loring swore under his breath. It was a box. Less than a half a mile ahead was a frowning perpendicular wall.

The rough going didn't help Rojo any. Here his weight was a handicap. The pursuers, more lightly mounted, were gaining. Loring scanned the terrain ahead with anxious eyes. The growth was beginning to thin somewhat. Then he saw that it practically ended a hundred and fifty yards from the beetling box wall.

But about a score of yards from the wall was a littering of huge boulders. He flashed toward them. They lay scattered clear across the width of the comparatively narrow gorge. Another moment and he was amid the weathered talus. He swerved Rojo behind one and dismounted, sliding his rifle from the saddle boot in the same motion. There were cracks between the scattered fragments and the rocks themselves provided good shelter. Lying flat and peering through a narrow opening, he waited.

Into view surged the pursuers, yipping excitedly. Loring cuddled the rifle stock against his cheek. His pale eyes glanced along the sights.

Smoke spurted from the muzzle. The clang of the report flung back and forth among the rocks. A man threw up his hands and plunged to the ground as if his horse had swallowed its head. Loring shifted the rifle muzzle the merest trifle and pulled trigger again. A second man went down. The others, with howls and curses, sent their mounts swerving into the thicker brush, hurling themselves from their saddles as they did so. The gorge rocked and trembled to a roar of gunfire. Bullets smacked against the boulders or ricocheted and whined off into space. Loring grimly raked the brush from side to side with a crackling volley. Crouching low, he stuffed fresh cartridges into the magazine.

A curious stillness had fallen, the more intense for the uproar that preceded it. The pursuers were lying low and holding their fire, realizing the futility of wasting lead against the granite barrier that sheltered the quarry. Loring also held his fire and lay tense and ready, every nerve strung to vibrating alertness.

Swiftly he estimated his position and calculated his chances. He was safe from a frontal attack, but his flanks were exposed and fatally vulnerable. The space between where he lay and the cliff face was empty of growth, while the encroaching slopes were thickly brushed. There was nothing to prevent the attackers from crawling up the slopes and working around until they had him for an easy target. It was only a matter of time. Intently he surveyed the brush clad walls.

On the slope to his right and some fifty or sixty yards down canyon, a bird suddenly whirled into view, darting and swooping over the bristle of thicket. Loring could hear its shrill, disturbed cries.

"There they go," he muttered, "working up through the brush. They flushed that bird."

A panicky wave swept over him, but he mastered it sternly and forced himself to think. Quickly he evolved a plan, a desperately daring plan with a thready chance of success. His hope rested on a single factor. He counted on the eagerness of all the outlaws, stimulated by the excitement of the chase, to be in on the kill.

"If they just left only one or two men down here to hold the front, it might work," he told himself. He removed his hat and balanced it on the muzzle of his rifle. Turning sideways a little, he thrust the hat beyond the edge of his sheltering boulder.

A rifle banged instantly. The bullet brushed the crown of the hat as he jerked it back. His keen eyes detected the tiny wisp of smoke rising from a patch of growth directly in front and a little to the left.

"Got *you* spotted," he apostrophised the hidden rifleman. "Now let's see if there are any more."

He wiggled the hat around the opposite edge of the boulder, striving to simulate a man peering out to survey the ground ahead.

Again the rifle cracked. Loring noted with intense satisfaction that the smoke wisps arose from the same patch of growth as had the first. He rose to his feet and glided to where his horse stood regarding him with questioning eyes. He thrust the rifle into the boot, loosened his sixes in their holsters and gripped the split reins.

"If I've got this thing figured right and there's only one of the bastards watching down there, I've got a chance," he told himself. "If I'm wrong, I'm dead."

He flung himself into the saddle, shouted to his horse.

Instantly the great bay shot forward. Loring swung far down to the right, behind the horse's neck, and drew his right-hand gun.

The unseen rifle cracked. A slug yelled past, fanning Loring's face with the wind of its passing. The big Colt boomed a drumroll of fire, raking the patch of brush with lead. Loring heard a yelp of pain. He swung over the other way as the rifle banged a second time, and jerked his other gun. He was right on top of the patch of growth when a man sprang into view, blood streaming down his face, rifle leveled. Loring fired the instant before the other pulled trigger. The rifleman pitched sideways to lie in a huddled heap. Loring roared to Rojo and the bay scudded down the canyon like a red lightning flash going places in a hurry. From the slopes on either side sounded yells and curses and the banging of guns.

But the growth was tall and thick and the outlaws could see

little to shoot at. Another moment and Rojo was swerving around the bend and still going like the wind. Loring straightened up, ejected the spent shells from his guns and replaced them with fresh cartridges, chuckling to himself. Behind, the clamor of the frustrated outlaws dimmed and lessened. He bulged from the canyon mouth a little later and rode east at top speed. Glancing back, he saw horsemen emerging from the canyon far behind. A wrathful fist was shaken at him, then the whole band turned their horses and rode west.

CHAPTER THREE

LORING DID NOT draw rein until he met the advancing herd. Tersely he regaled Utley with an account of what had happened. Old Abe swore in wrath and shook his fist at the limitless west.

"Tom Morgan was right when he told you to watch out for the Vogle bunch," he declared. "Sure it was them, out to even up for what you did to 'em down on my south pasture. Reckon they tailed us yesterday, saw that you rode out alone in the afternoon and fixed up a nice little trap for you. Well, one thing is certain, you're not ridin' alone any more. Not with that bunch of snake-blooded devils snooping around waitin' for a chance at you. I'll ride with you, and we'll take along Pete Edwards and one or two of the boys. Then let 'em try and tackle us! There won't be anything but Vogle talk sounded off in hell for the next week!"

Loring nodded, but did not otherwise comment. He rode thoughtfully for some little time. Abruptly he broke silence.

"Boss," he said, "this thing doesn't make sense."

"Eh? What's that? What you mean?" exclaimed Utley.

"I mean it just doesn't make sense," Loring repeated slowly. "No, it doesn't size up right for a bunch like that to go to so much trouble just to even up for that row in the pasture. That's not the outlaw way. By this time they would have forgotten all about it. They know the chances they take, and when they lose a trick they don't usually go around belly-

aching about it. No, there's something deeper than that in the wind."

"What you trying to get at?" asked the puzzled cowman.

"This herd," Loring replied, with apparent irrelevance, "stands for a sizeable sum of money."

"It does that, all right," Uteley agreed. He stared at his range boss. "You mean to say you think they might make a try for the herd. With twenty men guarding it?" he scoffed.

"Well," Loring replied grimly, "twenty men are no better than five if they happen to be gotten into a position where they can be mowed down without being able to fight back. Boss, I believe the only reason that bunch tackled me was to get me out of the way. You'd keep rolling along till you met me coming back or came to where I'd selected a bedding-down spot. You would have ambled right into an ambush. It isn't much more than a hard day's drive from here to the Rio Grande, and over a practically deserted section. And there's always a market down there for stolen stock. A bunch like Vogle's would have their connections lined up in advance."

Old Abe swore explosively, and glared ahead.

"What you say makes sense, all right," he was forced to admit. "But today they sort of tipped their hand."

"Maybe," Loring admitted. "But I've a notion they'll figure that we'll decide just as you decided a little while ago—that it was only a try for an evening up. I've a mighty good notion we haven't seen the last of 'Senor' Vogle and his bunch. And it's up to us to see them before they see us, or at least to be ready for just such an eventuality."

"Sometimes you talk like a college professor," grumbled Uteley, "but I reckon I get what you mean. Well, we'll keep our eyes open. But I can't for the life of me see how they'd figure to take us, with outriders on the job all the time and scattered along the herd. You can't ambush a bunch of gents strung along a mile apart, Neale."

"But there are times when we may be bunched," Loring observed. "I sure wish I knew the country ahead."

A dry camp was made that night, some miles beyond the canyon in which Loring took refuge. Loring chose a spot where it would be impossible for anybody to approach the sleeping herd without being spotted by the alert night hawks.

The following morning at daybreak the herd moved on. The cows were thirsty and restless and prone to stray. The riders had trouble keeping them to the trail.

Shortly after noon, Loring, Utley, Pete Edwards and a young puncher named Brown rode ahead in an anxious quest for water. As mile after mile was covered, their anxiety increased. Nowhere was there any indication of a stream or spring.

The country had changed. Now the old buffalo trail wound through low hills whose parched slopes rolled upward to the hard blue of the skyline. As they advanced, the encroaching slopes grew closer and closer together. They rounded a bend and saw, a mile ahead, the dark mouth of a narrow canyon with sloping, brush-covered sides. Into this the trail ran.

As they neared the canyon, Utley exclaimed with satisfaction. Flowing from its mouth was a narrow, swift stream that crossed the trail and turned south into another rift in the hills.

At the canyon mouth they dismounted to drink and water their horses. Standing on the creek bank and rolling a cigarette, Loring surveyed the gloomy canyon through which they would be forced to pass. It was narrow. On either side, brush grown slopes rolled gently upward. Its floor was covered by a tall and dense stand of chaparral. Even the surface of the old track was dotted with stray bushes. Some hundred yards beyond the mouth, Loring could see that the gorge curved somewhat to the south. He shook his head. The furrow between his black brows deepened slightly.

His companions did not need to be told what was in his mind. Their faces darkened as they gazed at the forbidding prospect.

"We'll have a bunch going through here," Loring observed. "No room for point men or flankers. It'll be everybody behind the herd while we're in that crack. Boss, I don't like it."

"It's a perfect set-up, all right," Utley agreed gloomily. "But we've got to go through. No running a herd over those sags. Too steep and too much brush."

Loring nodded, absently gazing at the hurrying water at his feet. Suddenly he leaned forward, concentrating on something that came bobbing and dipping over the ripples. It was a small whitish cylinder with one end seared to a rusty brown.

Even as Loring stared, it unrolled into a bit of thin paper from which spilled brownish particles that quickly sank. The paper whirled, grayed as the water seeped into its substances and a moment later was swirled from sight by the current.

"Did you see it?" the range boss exclaimed.

"Got a glimpse of it before it sank," replied Utley. "Looked like a cigarette butt."

"That's exactly what it was," Loring replied. "And it was chucked into the creek no great distance above here. Otherwise it would have opened up and sank before it got this far down. Boss, there's somebody up that hole. May mean nothing—just a chuck-line riding cowhand or a stray prospector, maybe."

"But it might be somebody holed up and waitin'," Pete Edwards interpolated grimly.

"Exactly," Loring agreed. He stared at the canyon mouth with narrowed eyes.

"Shall we slip in there and see?" young Brown suggested.

Loring shook his head. "Too risky," he said. "If there is somebody in there, waiting, they'll be keeping a sharp watch down canyon. Be almost sure to spot us."

He turned and gazed up the long brush covered slope to the north.

"I've a notion we could ride up that sag without much trouble," he said slowly.

"Reckon we could," agreed Utley. "What's on your mind, Neale?"

"If we can get up there without being spotted and then slide along parallel to the canyon, I've a notion we could work down the slope till we could see what's on the floor," Loring said. "If there are some devils down there waiting for the herd to come along, chances are they will be in the open. They would be able to hear the herd coming long before it gets here. Those thirsty cows are making plenty of noise. Then they'd take cover and be all set when we came ambling along behind the herd."

"But won't they think it funny nobody came scouting ahead?" asked Brown.

Loring shook his head. "What would you do if you were scouting a thirsty herd and came to this creek?" he asked.

"Why, I'd hightail back and tell the Boss to shove the cows along fast, that I'd found water," Brown replied.

"Right," Loring nodded. "And I'm playing a hunch that is just what they've figured out. They'd know the herd would be watered here and then shoved on—long time till dark—and bed down somewhere on the creek bank either in the canyon or beyond it. Come on, we'll play that hunch."

They mounted and sent the horses struggling up the slope until they were a good six hundred yards above the canyon floor. Then they rode parallel to the gorge, carefully taking advantage of all possible cover. They passed the bend in the canyon and rode on a little farther until they hit upon a cleared space walled about by dense thicket.

"We'll leave the horses here and slip down the slope on foot," Loring decided. "They'd be sure to hear the horses popping the brush if we stay mounted. I figure right here on the far side of the bend would be their prime spot for a hole-up. Careful, now, and don't make any noise."

They tethered the horses, hoping the animals would not take a notion to sing any songs, and diagonalled down the sag on foot, careful to break no branch, to dislodge no stone that might roll and announce their presence. It was slow and hot work through the dense growth, but as they approached the canyon floor the chaparral stand thinned somewhat.

Suddenly Loring, who was in the lead, pulled up with a low exclamation. He pointed through a rift in the growth. His companions crowded eagerly behind him.

Through the rift they had a clear view of the canyon floor. Their eyes gleamed as they saw, lounging about on the open space of the buffalo track, close to which ran the stream, a dozen or more men. Horses stood over to one side. The men were smoking and talking, but the cowhands were too distant to catch the words. The growth in the canyon had thinned greatly but was still ample to provide cover for the rustlers.

For long minutes, Neale Loring studied the idling group, his brows drawing together.

"It's them, all right," he whispered to Utley. "All set and waiting. Soon as they hear the herd coming, they'll take cover on either side of the trail. The way we would have been mowed down!"

Old Abe was cursing steadily under his breath. His face was black with anger.

"Shall we let the bastards have it?" he whispered back.

Loring shook his head. "Too many of 'em," he said. "They'd either take cover and smoke us out or they'd cut and run, and most of 'em would get away. No, I've got a better scheme. Brown, you slip back to the horses. Fork your bronc and hustle back to meet the herd. Tell the boys what is up. Tell them to cut out about fifty cows and send 'em along fast. Tell 'em to roll the critters up the canyon. Then when they hear us open the ball from up here, tell them to come a-foggin'. That way we'll catch the devils between fires and should bag every one of 'em."

Brown stole back into the growth. The others made themselves as comfortable as possible and waited, deadly rifles ready for instant action. In their hearts was nothing of mercy, in their minds no thought of giving the outlaws warning and a fighting chance for their lives. Men who rode with death as a constant stirrup companion held life cheaply. Grim and expectant, they waited for the first sound of the approaching cattle.

After a long and tedious wait it came, thin with distance, the querulous bleat of a tired and disgusted steer. They tensed for action.

The outlaws heard it, too. Instantly they were alert. Unconscious of the threat of those black muzzles on the slope above, they took up places in the brush. They were effectually concealed from anybody riding the trail, but easily spotted by the watchers on the slope.

Louder and louder grew the sounds of the approaching herd, the bleating and bawling, then the low pound of hurrying hoofs.

"Wait till you see the cows coming around the bend," Loring cautioned. "Then the boys will be right on top of them before they get over what we'll hand them!"

In the gorge below, the outlaws seemed to sense that something was not just right. The approaching cattle were coming too fast. The watchers on the slope could see them turning their heads to call to one another. One or two stood up, peering down canyon with outthrust necks.

Around the bend bulged a forest of tossing horns and roll-

ing eyes as the frantic cattle strove to escape the lashing of quirts and the snapping of slickers in their rear.

"Let 'em have it!" barked Loring. The crash of his rifle echoed his voice as he pulled trigger as fast as he could work the ejection lever. Men went down. Others howled their alarm, leaping from their places of concealment, terrified, bewildered, unable to ascertain from whence the storm blast of death was coming. And before they could recover from their demoralization, the charging XT cowboys were on top of them, sixguns roaring.

The canyon was a pandemonium, a shambles. Smoke fogged upward. The ground was dotted with bodies. The cattle surged and milled in wild confusion. The cowboys yelled and whooped and blazed away at running figures.

From the bedlam of sound and action burst three men, racing for the snorting, bucking horses tethered to the right of the trail. A bullet whirled the hat from the head of one, revealing a head of flaming red hair and a face bristling with equally red whiskers as he mounted a plunging horse.

Beside Abe Utley sounded a frightful cry, like to the howl of a maddened wolf.

"Cla-a-ate Dixon!"

Abe Utley did not need to be told the meaning of that long-drawn yell. It was the challenge of the western gun-fighter to his hated enemy, defying him to turn and talk it over through the smoke. Utley jumped a foot and whirled toward Neale Loring.

The range boss was on his feet, his pale eyes a frightful blaze in his distorted face. His lips were drawn back from his gleaming teeth, his whole bearing was hate and vengeance personified.

The tall, red-haired man heard the yell rising shrill above the tumult. He whirled in his saddle, glared up the slope. Then he drove his spurs home and went racing up the canyon, bending low to avoid the lead hissing after him. Behind him thundered his two companions.

Heedless of brush, thorns and rolling boulders, Neale Loring charged down the slope, both guns roaring. But long before he reached the canyon floor, the three outlaws had vanished from sight.

Loring bounded across to where the riderless horses were

still plunging and snorting. He flung himself onto the back of one and charged in pursuit of the escaping raiders. Instantly he was engulfed in the whirling tangle of the maddened cattle. It took him minutes to fight his way free and go clashing up the canyon.

It was long past dark when the cowboys assembled about the campfire heard the click of slow irons coming down the canyon. A little later Neale Loring rode into the circle of firelight. His face was lined and weary but he appeared to have recovered his customary composure and self-possession.

"They got away," he replied tersely to the questions volleyed at him. "About fifteen miles to the west this crack is all cut up by side canyons and gulches and there was no telling where they might have turned off. A few miles farther on the main canyon opens onto the prairie again. Besides, that crow-bait I grabbed wasn't much good. Appeared to be a little lame. He was blowing hard and limping before I'd covered five miles. I want some coffee."

A hand hurried off to procure coffee and food. Loring squatted beside the fire and lighted a cigarette.

"And now," said Utley, "would you mind telling us what this is all about?"

Loring glanced up at him, his eyes gleaming in the firelight, his mouth a hard line.

"That bastard Clate Dixon killed my father," he replied in a flat, emotionless voice. "Shot him down in cold blood. We owned a spread up on the Brazos. Dad decided to sell and move to the Panhandle. No use going into details, but when we were coming back home with the money from the sale—better than twenty-thousand dollars—Dixon and his bunch jumped us. We had two of the boys with us. They killed Dad and the two boys and creased me bad. You can see the scar up under my hair if I brush it back. They figured I was done for, I reckon. I trailed him to the Neuces country and lost track of him there."

He paused to sip some coffee.

"But up in a little shack town called Vego, about thirty miles to the north of your place, suh, I ran into one of Dixon's men."

"I know the place," interrupted Utley. "Regular hell-hole—hangout for bad characters."

"That's right," Loring nodded. "The fellow recognized me right off and reached. I pulled first. He was hard hit and begged for a doctor. I promised to try and get one if he'd come clean and tell me where to find Dixon. He tried, but his throat was bubbling blood and all I got out of him was—'Headin' west—Big Bend country.' He died after that."

"Tough luck," grunted Pete Edwards. "You might have dropped a loop on the bastard."

"Well," Loring resumed, "I was wore out and I didn't have a dime in my Levis. So when your range boss, Sime Wheatley, offered me a chore of riding for you, I decided it wouldn't be a bad notion to give it a whirl, rest up and save a few dollars before starting on again. You know the rest. I never connected Dixon with the Vogle bunch. Reckon I had my mind too full of the west and the Big Bend country, where that fellow I shot said Dixon was heading for. Funny he should have changed his name."

"I reckon I can explain that," said Utley. "Hank Vogle was the head of an outlaw bunch that operated in the section quite a few years back. He was a heller, but the Rangers ran him down, killed him and jailed his bunch. When Dixon's bunch began operating in the section a couple of months or so back, somebody sort of joked that it looked like Vogle had come to life. The name stuck, that's all. Nobody ever heard the name of Dixon, I guess. So you're riding the vengeance trail, son? It's a hard trail and often comes to a bad end."

Loring stared into the fire. "I aim to keep riding it," he said quietly.

"And figure to pull out now?" Utley asked. "You'll never catch them up if you stick with the herd. They'll do their fifty or sixty miles a day right along, and we won't average much better than ten."

Loring shook his head. "Nope," he replied. "First place, I took over the chore of getting you to your new holdings, and I aim to finish any chore I begin. Next, there isn't any sense in going off half-cocked again. I figure I've got a long trail to ride. And I figure Dixon will head for the section we're heading for, or somewhere close to it. You say where we're

going is right on the edge of the Big Bend and should be prime operating ground for his sort. No, I'll stick with you until I get a line on him. Then we'll see."

Old Abe nodded, but there was a worried look in his faded eyes. He had developed a decided liking for this efficient, quiet-spoken young cowboy. The trail Neale Loring proposed to ride ran mighty close to the outlaw trail and the temptation to step across sometimes became strong.

"I acted like a damn fool this afternoon," Loring resumed after finishing his second cup of coffee. "Letting Dixon know I was alive and on his trail. But when his hat fell off and I saw his red hair and whiskers, all I could think of was Dad lying there in the trail, up on the Brazos, with a hole between his eyes. Guess it knocked all the sense out of my head. Now Dixon will cover up and be on the watch for me."

Loring paused to roll a cigarette. Utley nodded sober agreement.

"Dixon isn't the ordinary brush-popping brand of outlaw," Loring continued. "He's smart, and an educated man, and he knows all the tricks. He was a mining engineer connected with a big outfit, so the story goes. Perhaps he was all right then, but I understand cards and women were his trouble. He got caught falsifying his accounts. He shot the auditor who confronted him with his crooked work. Didn't kill him, just wounded him in the arm. But he did kill a deputy sheriff who tried to arrest him and had to cut and run. Dropped out of sight for a while.

"Finally showed up in Dodge City, Kansas, with whiskers and long hair. He was spotted from a reward notice. Had to shoot again. That time he killed a deputy United States Marshal and was on the run for fair. After which he went altogether bad. Joined up with an outlaw bunch operating in Kansas. Had a row with the leader of the outfit, killed him and took over the bunch. Drifted down to Texas. Finally went completely mad-dog. Robbed and killed. Had the Rangers and other peace officers after him, but always managed to give them the slip. Brains and cold nerve."

"The ornery bastard!" growled old Abe. "Son, you've got your work cut out for you."

Loring nodded, and rolled another cigarette.

"Nothing he wouldn't try, and it seemed there was nothing

he didn't get wind of," he said. "He'd been operating in the Brazos country for quite a while before he jumped us that night. Somehow he got wind of Dad selling out and collecting the money. I wouldn't have minded the money so much, but I can't forget what he did to Dad and the boys."

"Reckon right after that happened was when you started packing two guns," Utley observed shrewdly.

"That's right," Loring agreed. "Before that I never carried but one, although I could always pull with both hands. I'm naturally ambidextrous."

"Ambidextrous?"

"Yes," Loring nodded. "I can do anything with my left hand I can do with my right. I can write with my left hand, and deal cards with my left. I've just got two 'right' hands, that's all. So I took to packing two guns instead of one, figuring I might need 'em."

"I've a notion you will, if you ever catch up with Dixon," Utley agreed drily. "Only hope you never do. Forget him, son. Let the Law take care of him, as it will sooner or later. Stop riding the vengeance trail."

"I'm riding it," Loring said quietly.

Old Abe sighed and stumped off to bed.

The following morning they left the scene of bloody battle and rolled on till they cleared the sinister canyon. Two days later they passed Uvalde with its pecan trees and its bee ranches. They continued westward with a northerly trend.

The days merged into weeks, and still the herd rolled on. They crossed the Neuces, then Devil's River above the canyon, and Howard's creek without incident. Next came the Pecos, the "deadline for sheriffs," winding and shining in the sun. The crossing was negotiated safely north of Eagle Nest Canyon, and the old trail flowed almost due west.

"We're in Apache country now," Utley told Loring. "Got to keep our eyes open. They're worse than the Vogle bunch ever thought of being. We'll lose cows, and men, if we don't look sharp."

Late in the afternoon an ominous incident occurred. Loring saw it first and quickly called it to Utley's attention.

From the shadowy hills to the north was rising a dark and slender column of smoke. Even as they gazed, it broke from its base, coiled slowly upward and melted into the vast blue

of the Texas sky. Then a quick, rolling ball tumbled upward. It was followed by a spiral shorter than the first, then another puff, then another short column. Then two puffs in quick succession.

The meaning was plain to see, this "Morse code" of the wastelands—

Dash . . . dot . . . dash . . . dot . . . dash . . . dot . . . dot.

Uteley, the former Sieber scout, could visualize the scene up there in the dark hills. Crouched over a brush fire was an Apache brave. Uteley could "see" the dingy white turban, the single eagle feather slanted low over the ear, the necklace of bear claws, the loincloth and high boot mocassins. And the dark, savage face outlined by the firelight as the warrior deftly manipulated a blanket or a deerskin, alternately smothering and releasing the smoke.

For some minutes the eerie "sending" continued. Then the column vanished, the dark smudges dissipated. Once again the sky was stainless blue.

"Indian talk," said Uteley. "Smoke signals. Sure wish I could read 'em, but only an Apache can." He turned in his saddle. "Uh-huh, thought so," he said quietly. "Here comes the answer."

Far to the south a second column was rising. This time the message was brief. "Okay," or the Apache equivalent, it doubtless said.

"Liable to mean trouble for us, son," Uteley said grimly. "They're watching us. They'll keep on watching us every minute for the next fifty miles, till we get close to Sanders and the grasslands. We sure got to be on our toes."

That night a double guard was set over the herd, and nobody slept any too much. But despite their vigilance, when morning came they received grim proof of the vicious stealth and cunning of the Apaches. One of the night hawks was missing. A search discovered his body under a bush. A long knife had been driven through his heart. He had been stripped of his clothing and equipment. His hair had been "lifted." Somewhere a bloody scalp dangled from an Apache warrior's belt.

The cowboys swore bitter vengeance as they buried their slain companion, and shook their fists at the sullen hills. But the hills remained silent, apparently devoid of life. Nothing

moved amid the growth. No more smoke signals rose. The early sun shone brightly and all was the peace and gladness of Nature's awakening life. It was not hard to be lulled into a sense of false security.

That day Neale Loring altered his formations. He shortened the marching herd as much as possible, bunched his riders more, drew the point men farther back.

"I'm not taking any chances, though I can't believe they'd tackle a bunch as large as ours," he told Utlely.

"They're almighty cunning, as you're liable to find out," old Abe cautioned.

Loring was due to find out before the day was over.

The hours passed and the herd rolled on. Noontime came and went. The cowboys, as was only natural, lost some of their vigilance as the time slipped by and nothing happened. The point men tended to straggle a bit. It was harder to keep the leaders in line when the point riders were so far back along the herd. Gradually the foremost riders drew nearer the head of the marching column.

With bewildering suddenness and utter unexpectedness it happened. The front cows were coming abreast of a narrow canyon mouth on the right when without warning, nearly a score of savage-faced horsemen mounted on shaggy little mustangs darted from the gorge with piercing yells. Straight for the van of the herd they charged, their shrill screeches seeming to shiver the sky.

The leading cattle scattered wildly with terrified bellows. Apache rifles spat fire. The two leading point men whirled from their saddles to be pounded and trampled by frantic hoofs. As their cursing companions surged forward, guns blazing, they found themselves entangled in the near-stampede of fanning-out cows. Before they could win free, the Apaches had deftly cut out more than a score of fat beefs and fairly hurled them into the brush grown canyon.

"Don't follow 'em—let 'em go—you'll run into a trap!" bawled old Abe as he and Loring raced forward, curving their horses to avoid the milling cattle.

But the point men either did not hear or were too wrathful to heed. They freed themselves from the tangle and went charging into the canyon in pursuit of the Apaches and the vanished cows. They had covered perhaps three hundred

yards when the storm-blast of death struck them. Hidden rifles roared. Arrows hissed through the air. Two men went down, riddled with bullets. The other three, realizing their danger, dragged their horses around and fled back down the canyon. The Apache rifles boomed again. A horse was hit and plunged forward, hurling its rider to the ground with a force that practically paralyzed his body. Writhing and jerking, he tried to rise, and could not. From the Apaches came exultant whoops. A prisoner was even better than a killing.

Neale Loring, on Rojo, quickly outdistanced his companions. He reached the canyon mouth just as the horse and rider went down. Without an instant's hesitation he sent Rojo thundering up the gorge.

The very daring of his move saved him. The Apaches, emerging from the brush to secure their victim for torture, were for a moment thrown off balance. Fearing a ruse, they dived wildly for cover instead of firing at the approaching horseman.

Loring left the saddle with Rojo going at full speed. By a miracle of agility he kept his balance.

"Turn!" he roared to Rojo, and scooped up the body of the helpless cowboy.

Rojo whirled "on a dime" and came charging back to his master. Loring flung the cowboy's limp form across his withers and hurled himself into the saddle. He was racing for safety before the Apaches recovered their wits. With wrathful screeches they surged from the bushes, firing wildly.

But now the main body of the XT hands had reached the canyon mouth. A storm of lead tore into the advancing savages. Howls and yells arose as the heavy bullets found their marks. The cowboys fired as fast as they could pull trigger, snapping shots past Loring as he raced toward them. More yells rose. The ground was spotted with dark forms. Another blazing volley and the Apaches had enough. They dived back into the brush. There was a prodigious crashing, then a drumming of hoofs fading up the canyon.

"Don't follow 'em," Utely bellowed a second warning. "There may be a hundred more up there somewhere. They know the ground and we don't."

This time the cowboys obeyed orders. They entered the canyon only far enough to recover the bodies of their two

slain companions. Then they returned and worked frantically to get the herd together and moving.

The remainder of the day the XT hands rode in a black and bitter mood. But violent death is too common to the rangeland to effect any lasting impression. Five good men had been killed but the survivors consoled themselves with the reminder that considerably more than twice that number of Apaches had paid the price as a result. By the time the herd was bedded down and the bodies of the dead men made safe against the coyotes, a cheerful air had begun to reassert itself.

"A few more days and we'll be done with this infernal drive," Loring told them. "I aim to push 'em fast from now on."

Old Abe had a word of commendation for his range boss. "Reckon you're a damn fool for takin' the chance you did, but son, I'm proud of you," he declared. "If it wasn't for you, Sawyer would be findin' out what it means to be roasted over a slow fire, about now."

"And if you ever want to borrow a chaw of eatin' tobacco or have a couple of gents shot, just say the word," Bill Sawyer, the rescued cowboy, added by way of thanks.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE TRAIL was steadily veering to the south, skirting the contours of a range of low hills that cut the southern skyline. The second day after the brush with the Apaches, they rounded the western terminous of the range and old Abe uttered exultant exclamation.

"Look there," he said to Loring. "See it?"

A couple of miles to the south were two gleaming threads that streamed westward across the prairie as far as the eye could reach, until their parallel lines seemed to meet in the distance.

"The railroad!" exclaimed Loring.

"The railroad is right," said Utely. "A couple more days and we'll be on our range and smack up against Sanders. Looks like we made it, son, and with less loss in men and cows

than often happens on a drive like this. And I reckon I've got you to thank for it. Never knew a drive to be handled better."

Loring's lean face was bleak as he stared westward, his eyes seemed even colder and paler than their usual wont. A disturbed look crossed Utley's face.

"Still thinkin' of that fellow Dixon?" he asked.

"Reckon I am. Reckon I always will, till one of us is pushing up the daisies," Loring returned.

Before noon the following day the hills began again, this time to the north. The trail ran close to their base, skirting cliffs and bulges and rolling on past dark canyon mouths and gulches. The rocks were streaked with deep mineral stains and farther up the slopes were ledges of glowing yellows, smouldering reds and sullen greens, with occasional curious marblings of black and white.

"Metal in the hills of this section," declared Utely. "Wouldn't be at all surprised if some big strikes were made hereabouts, sooner or later. Desert rats and mountain prospectors have been taking out gold in small quantities for years, but the surface has hardly been scratched. And it's even better down where we're going. Oh, it's a fine country, son."

The trail still paralleled the railroad, which ran about a mile to the south over the level prairie. But before long, broken ground appeared to the south. The right-of-way edged northward and ran embanked over the rougher terrain, the brush clad slopes to the south flanking it. The distance between the steel and the old trail was now less than half a mile.

"Wonder they didn't use the trail for the line," Utely observed.

Loring shook his head. "They would have had to fill this depression for miles and miles," he pointed out. "Get some bad storms in this section in the late fall and early spring. This ditch would have considerable water in it and the trains might have to grow fins."

Utely chuckled and admitted likely it was so.

From time to time the cowboys, riding beside their trudging charges, watched trains flash past, glittering passengers, long, rumbling freights. The trainmen would wave a greeting

and the punchers would wave back. As they progressed the country grew ever rougher and in several places the rails ran on high trestles spanning gulches and dry washes, over which the trains roared on.

"Plenty of business, all right," Utely observed to Loring. "Look, here comes another one, a short one this time—just an engine and one coach. Some big-wig's private car, I reckon."

Interested, they watched the short train come booming out of the east. It passed the herd, roared on toward a curve flanked by a steep slope split by a brush-choked gorge.

"Gosh almighty!" Utely yelled. "Look there!"

The speeding locomotive had just reached the apex of the curve. Suddenly it lurched wildly, plunged, bucked and seemed to fairly leap from the rails. Although nearly half a mile of distance intervened, the cowboys heard the terrific crash as it turned over on its side and went rolling down the low embankment in a cloud of steam. The single coach, snapped loose like the crack of a whip, careened, slewed across the rails and came to rest, leaning drunkenly.

As the horrified watchers stared at the catastrophe, from the brush flanking the right-of-way darted figures. Puffs of white smoke rose from their charging ranks. A stutter of shots sounded.

Answering puffs of smoke spurted from the coach windows, but the raiders swarmed onto the platforms. There was a crashing and rending, more shots, then silence save for the bellow and hiss of escaping steam.

For a moment the cowboys sat their saddles in paralyzed astonishment. Then Neale Loring's voice rang out.

"It's a robbery!" he shouted. "Come on men."

He sent Rojo flashing toward the scene of the outrage. His companions streamed after him, guns out and ready.

Busy inside the coach, the bellow of steam from the shattered locomotive dulling their ears, the wreckers did not hear the approach of the XT riders until they were less than a hundred yards distant. Then with startled yells they came swarming out of the coach.

"Let 'em have it!" roared Loring. Both his Colts cut loose with a crash that was drowned by the bellow of his companions' guns. Yells, screams and curses knifed through the

air. A man plunged over the platform railing. A second slumped to the floor boards in a huddled heap. Two of his companions fell over his body and went clattering down the steps to the ground. One stayed there, a blue hole between his glazing eyes. The others, cursing, shooting, fled wildly into the brush. As Loring sent Rojo scrambling up the embankment, hoofs pounded away into the gorge.

Rojo made it to the tracks, blowing and snorting. He floundered around the end of the wrecked coach, then Loring abruptly pulled him to a halt.

A man staggered out onto the platform, a gun in his hand. Blood was running down his face. A second man peered cautiously from a window.

"Hold it," Loring warned. "We came to help you."

"There's a badly wounded man in here," gasped the man with the gun. "Can you do something for him?"

Loring hurried up the steps. On the floor a man lay, moaning and retching. The whole front of his shirt was drenched with blood. Loring made a swift examination.

"High up and through the shoulder," he said. "Nothing to worry about except the bleeding, but that has to be stopped. Give me something to bandage the wound with. Your white shirt will do."

The other instantly ripped it off and handed it to the range boss. Loring tore it into strips and deftly treated the gunshot.

"He'll do, now," he said. "Give him a cigarette and find something to rest his head on."

The cowboys were crowding into the coach. "Go look after the engineer and fireman," Loring told them. "Now, suh, let me see about your head. Okay, nothing but a cut scalp—bone appears to be all right. We'll wrap it up and let it go at that for the time. Slammed you with a gun barrel, eh?"

Inside the grilled partition that extended the width of the coach was another crumpled form. A single glance convinced Loring he was beyond human aid.

"Got it dead center," he observed. "Now suh, what's this all about?"

"Railroad paycar, I'm the paymaster," said the man with the cut head. "Thousands of dollars in the safe. They hit me

when I refused to open it. That was enough and I was just going to obey when you rode up."

"I see," Loring said. "Regulation payroll robbery. By the way," he asked eagerly, "did you notice if one of them had red hair?"

"No, I didn't notice," the paymaster replied. "But I'm sure the one giving orders didn't. I noticed him because he was the only one masked. His hair was dark—dark as yours."

Loring nodded. "Too much to hope for," he told Utely. "But I couldn't help wondering. This looks like a job Dixon was said to have pulled up on the T & P."

At this juncture Pete Edwards stuck his head in the door. "Engineer has a busted leg," he announced. "Brown and Crabtree are patchin' it up for him. The fireman was just bruised and burned a mite. He hustled on ahead to stop anything comin' this way. The bastards loosened a rail and shoved it over to throw the engine off the track."

The brakeman had escaped with minor injuries sustained in the wreck, and had already gone back to flag the rear. The conductor, also not seriously hurt, swarmed up a pole and cut in on the wire with a portable telegraph instrument. He appeared a moment later.

"Wreck train from Sanders will get here in a couple of hours," he said. "They'll bring a doctor and the sheriff."

"Then I reckon everything is under control," Loring said. "Come on, boys, we've got work to do. Those cows are beginning to scatter."

"But won't you stay till the sheriff gets here?" protested the paymaster. "My company will want to thank you for what you did."

Loring shook his head. "Nothing to be thanked for," he said. "We've got to shove on and find water before dark. Lock your doors and have your guns handy, though I don't figure you'll need 'em. Those bastards will hardly come back. Reckon they got a bellyful."

Loring glanced at the three dead outlaws but there was nothing distinctive about them.

"Regulation brush-popping scum," he told Utely. "Maybe the sheriff will recognize some of them. I've a notion one or two more got nipped, from the way they yelped."

"Such a drive!" snorted old Abe. "Ambushings, rustlings, Indians, train robbers! I'll sure be glad when we get to where we're heading. I'm too old for such excitement."

"Well, anyhow it hasn't been dull," Loring smiled.

A little farther on the railroad crossed the trail and continued in a northwesterly direction. The buffalo track continued to veer to the south. The herd bedded down on the banks of a stream just as dark was descending.

The following morning, Utely and Loring held a consultation. "And you say the valley you're heading for is south of Sanders?" the range boss asked.

"That's right, south and a mite to the west," old Abe replied. "We'll drive right into it the way we're headed, but if we want to stop off at Sanders, we'll have to turn north."

Loring rolled a cigarette, and considered. "Boss," he said at length, "I don't see any advantage in stopping off at Sanders right now. We don't need anything from there and it would just be a waste of time. I figure the best thing is to head straight for the valley and first off get busy and run your lines and establish your monuments and get title without delay. As you say, this country is going to fill up faster than it ever has before. Other folks may have the same notion you have, and a clear title to your holdings, in a hurry, makes good sense. As I understand it, you have things lined up at the capital?"

"All lined up," Utely replied. "I have a lawyer friend over there who knows all the angles and who packs plenty of influence around the State House and such places. Him and me talked it all over before I pulled out. He has everything arranged and is only waiting for me to supply him with the necessary data. As soon as he gets that, he'll move on the Land Office and get me title in a jiffy."

"Then let's get busy and assemble that data," Loring said decisively.

They veered the herd still more to the south and rolled on, leaving behind the ancient buffalo track that had served them so long and so well. About mid afternoon, Utely pointed to the north, where a dark smudge hung against the sky.

"That's Sanders up there," he said. "Lots more smoke than when I was here the first time. Reckon the railroad folks

are busy building their shops and such. Oh, it's a comin' section, son, and we're tying onto the best rangeland here."

Loring was ready to agree when, shortly before sunset, they entered the wide valley for which they were headed. It was indeed splendid rangeland, level, richly grassed, with groves and thickets aplenty. There was evidence of considerable water for a dry land. To the east and west were hills that promised sheltering canyons. They rolled along the broad expanse for several miles and bedded down on the bank of a stream. Old Abe chuckled with satisfaction.

"Been a good many years since I was here, but this is the spot I thought of then as prime for a ranchhouse," he said. "Not too far from town, and not too close. Plenty of water, plenty of shade. Plenty of wood for buildin' purposes. Couldn't be better."

The "surveying" of Utely's holdings was begun the following morning. The time-honored method of the rangeland was used. Two riders stationed themselves at either end of a sixty-foot rope. When the rear horseman passed the point where the first began riding, he called off "Check!" This simple procedure was repeated over and over and a count kept of the number of "checks" called off. The total number of "checks" multiplied by the length of the rope registered the distance covered in the course of the ride. It was crude, inaccurate, but was an accepted practice.

Neale Loring superintended the operation. He insisted on piling monuments at strategic points, something usually dispensed with by the "surveyors." He noted the distances between them, various natural landmarks and their distances apart and relation to each other in detail that old Abe thought unnecessary and a waste of time and effort.

"Get into a court fight some time and you may be mighty glad you have all this to fall back on," Loring told him.

Utley was skeptical, but did not interfere. "Go ahead, you're running the show," he said.

There was another argument relative to the hills to the east and west of the valley.

"Include them," Loring insisted. "You'll want the canyons and the water, and there's no telling what else is in them."

Utley threw out his hands in a resigned gesture and gave in.

The cowboy surveyors cursed the hard riding over a rough terrain this last entailed, but they had learned not to argue with Neale Loring.

It took ten days to complete the survey. Meanwhile a ranch-house and other buildings were rising on the site Utley favored.

"But we'll need a lot of stuff from town to finish the chore," he said. "Suppose we ride up there tomorrow, Neale, and arrange for it."

"And get this data off to your lawyer at the capital first thing," Loring replied, looking up from the sheets on which he was tabulating figures.

"I'll write the letter right away," Utley promised.

But as they approached the town early the following morning, Loring had still another suggestion to make.

"There'll be a telegraph office in the railroad station," he observed. "Suppose instead of mailing this stuff, we send it by wire?"

"Looks like a waste of money," Utley objected.

"But a big saving in time," Loring countered. "And the mails are a little uncertain yet. Send it by wire and your lawyer will have everything he needs in his hands before noon. Then he can go right ahead and arrange to secure title. You can follow up the wire with the letter."

Utley shook his head, but reluctantly agreed. "You're a funny cuss, Neale," he chuckled a little later. "Looks like you think somebody may try to get the jump on us and grab off the land under our noses."

"Such things have happened," Loring replied. "Perhaps somebody other than yourself has seen opportunity over here—never can tell. You say there are a lot more people in this town than when you were here last. And the land you're taking up is undoubtedly the best rangeland in the section. No, you never can tell."

At the telegraph station they had no difficulty dispatching the long message.

"And we're liable to get an answer before dark, the way Randolph works," Utley observed as they left the station. "As I told you, he has everything lined up and just waiting to fill in with the stuff we sent him. Well, let's amble around and look the town over."

Sanders sat in the mouth of a deep canyon, one wall of which rose over the main street. It was sunburned and Stetson-hatted. Saloons, eating houses, gambling dens, dance halls and general stores lined the main street. To the south the big railroad shops and yards were already taking form and all about was a bustle of activity.

The town was undoubtedly prosperous. Already the coming of the railroad had boomed into hectic life what had formerly been a sleepy little village drowsing like an ancient hombra in the shadow of its canyon walls.

The rest of the day Loring and Utley spent loafing around the saloons and eating houses, absorbing and taking part in small talk with the avidity of men long out of touch with their fellows. Shortly after dark they repaired to the telegraph office, where a message from Randolph awaited them.

"Okay. Papers to you in mail. Glad
did not waste time."

"Now what in hell does he mean by that?" wondered old Abe, stabbing with a sausage-like forefinger at the last sentence. "Neale, I'm mighty glad everything is over and taken care of proper. You had me a mite worried with that talk of yours. And now Randolph comes up with something that sounds sort of in the same line. Wonder if something is up? Well, it don't matter now. We're all set. Let's have a couple of drinks and go to bed. I feel like I could sleep a week."

However, he and Loring were both up betimes the following morning. They had breakfast in one of the saloons and later engaged the bartender in conversation.

"Reckon your best bet is Flint's General Store," replied that worthy when they broached the subject of their business in town. "You can arrange for everything you need there, and for any dickerin' you might want to do with the railroad or anybody around here. Flint can fix it up for you. Gus Flint runs this town."

"You mean he's the mayor?" Utley asked.

"Nope, he ain't the mayor," the barkeep replied with a chuckle. "He's the fellow who says who can be mayor, or sheriff, or anything here and in other towns and counties of the section. He packs influence over to Marfa and Marathon and Alpine, and up to Fort Stockton, and even way

over east at the capital, or so folks say. He's considerable of a fellow, is Gus Flint.

"Showed up here about four years back, a while before anybody got word the railroad was comin' through this way. I reckon Flint knew it was comin'. Anyhow, he bought up considerable real estate and some buildin's cheap. When things started to boom and prices went up, he sold out a lot of his holdin's and swept in. He's been buildin' up and spreadin' out ever since. Uh-huh, he's considerable of a fellow, is Flint. He'll take care of you."

The barkeep winked knowingly and hurried off to attend to the wants of an impatient customer.

"I'd say," Loring remarked as they left the saloon, "that Amigo Flint is of the brand known as a political Boss."

"Never took much stock in politics, but it's usually good to be on the right side of that sort," Utley replied. "They most always can get things done. Let's get our business over with and head back to the ranch."

When they arrived at the general store and stated their errand, a clerk led them to a back room and ushered them into the presence of Gus Flint, the owner, who was seated behind a table desk littered with papers. The clerk announced their names and closed the door.

Loring glanced around with interest. Evidently Mr. Flint combined his office with living quarters. On a bunk built against the wall were tumbled and none too clean blankets. A half-filled coffee cup and a dirty plate occupied a chair.

The room was shadowy, almost dark. It was hard, at first, to get a good look at the man who sat behind the table. Loring was chiefly aware of a pair of eyes that flared up as the man spoke and died down again when he became silent. He gave each of them a hand like a woman's and invited them to sit down. He shot them a questioning glance from his strange violet-colored eyes.

"What can I do for you, gentlemen?" he asked in a quiet, toneless voice.

Old Abe fumbled some sheets of paper from his pocket and passed them to the storekeeper. "Here is what I'd like to get as soon as possible," he said.

Flint took the sheets and bent his gaze upon them. But all the time Loring had the feeling that he was studying *them*

and not the words and figures on the paper. His eyes had become accustomed to the semi-gloom of the room and the face and figure of the man across the table had become discernible.

There was certainly little about Gus Flint to suggest the burly, virile aggressiveness usually associated with the professional politician. Here was a thin, sallow little man with iron-gray hair and a wiry mustache. He had apparently just gotten out of bed, for he was garbed in a long cotton night-shirt and his feet were thrust into carpet slippers. He might have well been one of the clerks behind his counters were it not for those extraordinary eyes that made him different. Loring had an uncanny feeling that he required darkness to make his effect, that darkness was his proper medium. There was something spider-like about the man, in the quiet of his hands, the immobility of his face, something of a spider seated in the middle of a web of darkness, motionless, waiting. Loring dimly sensed that the chair Gus Flint occupied was a seat of power and of dominion over a large portion of the state.

Flint raised his eyes to Utley's face. "I can take care of all this for you, easily, and quickly," he said. "Glad to have your business, Mr. Utley. So you aim to settle in this section?"

"That's right," replied old Abe, "down in the valley to the south of here."

Flint nodded. "This section has always been open range," he remarked casually.

Utley was about to reply when Loring spoke for him. "The Boss has always been in favor of open range," he said. "He's an oldtimer, you know."

Old Abe looked slightly bewildered, but Flint nodded as if in approval. It seemed to Loring that there was a faint glow of satisfaction on his sallow face.

As soon as Loring and Utley left the store, Gus Flint busied himself with pencil and paper. He folded the sheet and called a clerk.

"Go to the telegraph office and send this message, at once," he said. "Yes, yes, to the state capital. The address is written plainly. At once, I said."

After the clerk departed, Flint leaned back in his chair, smiling faintly, the complacent expression on his face intensified and spilling over into his unusual eyes.

CHAPTER FIVE

BUT MR. FLINT'S expression was by no means either smug or complacent as he read the reply he received the following morning. There was an ominous glow in his eyes when he summoned a clerk.

"Go find that man Carter who visited me the other day," he ordered. "Bring him here. I imagine you can locate him at the Ace-Full saloon, playing poker."

In less than ten minutes the clerk returned, with him another man, a tall man who was clean-shaven save for a thin line of black mustache. His closely shaven cheeks seemed a shade paler than the other portions of his face. His hair was black. His eyes were so darkly blue as to also seem black at times. They were steady eyes but with an expression at the corners that was a trifle sinister. He glanced questioningly at Flint and occupied the chair the storekeeper indicated.

"I believe I have a chore for you, er—Carter," Flint said, his voice faintly sarcastic. "You know that tract of land to which I intended to acquire title. The valley and the hills to the south of here. Well, somebody has already acquired title to it."

Carter's eyes widened. "How—how in hell—" he sputtered.

Flint displayed one of the elements of greatness upon which his power was built—the ability to instantly acknowledge his own mistakes without any attempt to hide them.

"Through my own bad judgment," he interrupted. "I thought I had plenty of time and at the moment I was occupied with—other matters. Besides, I didn't want to go into the thing without knowing whether it was really worth while. First, as you know, I wanted the opinion of a man competent in such affairs, a man I could work with. That's why I sent for you. And of course you had to take your time about getting here."

"I had a few little matters to attend to first," Carter growled.

"So I can well imagine," Flint agreed sarcastically. He

paused, glancing expectantly at the other. Carter remained silent.

"Well, if you don't want to talk about it, you don't," Flint said, "and after all, what you did when you were on your own is none of my business. But I didn't expect you to waste a couple of months and more getting here."

Carter flushed angrily, but still remained silent.

"By the way," Flint observed with apparent irrelevance, "I wonder if they ever got a line on who tried that paycar robbery a couple of weeks back, the one some cowboys busted up?"

Carter started in his chair. He swallowed convulsively. Flint leaned forward.

"Carter," he said, his voice silkily soft, his eyes suddenly glowing, "don't doublecross me again."

Carter whitened visibly.

"The boys have to be kept busy," he muttered. "If they haven't got money to spend, there's no holding them."

Gus Flint glowered, fingering his mustache. The fire had died down in his eyes and they were like clouded pools. He appeared to be fighting something over in his mind, trying to force himself to a decision that was not at all pleasing. Carter watched him, an amused glint in his own darkly blue eyes. He seemed to derive a subtle and malicious pleasure from the political Boss' mental contortions. His glance flickered over the miserly appointed room, Flint's threadbare garments that seemed to bear witness that their owner was one who pushed frugality to the borders of a vice. The expression on Carter's face was one of carefully concealed derision and contempt.

Flint spoke, the words coming out hard.

"If you need money, within reason, come to me," he said. "Don't do anything else that might attract attention to you. Don't be a piker all your life and miss dollars by reaching for pennies. I won't warn you again."

"Flint," Carter remarked, diffidently, "there's a safe way the boys can get some money without coming to you for it. They don't mind working a little for it," he added meaningly.

Gus Flint hesitated, shaking his straggly mustache. Carter watched again, in silence. He knew that a battle between

caution and cupidity was being waged in the other's mind. Cupidity won.

"All right," Flint agreed, reluctantly, "but they must bring what they get to me for disposal. That's as far as I care to take a chance."

Carter's lips twitched slightly. "It's a deal," he said.

Flint nodded. "And now let's get back to business. Nobody here wanted that land. I expected farmers, or small ranchers. That sort usually doesn't take the trouble to get title to anything. How was I to think that somebody would arrange all the necessary details before coming here and only need to supply the immediate data? That is just what happened. And the really astonishing part is that the final negotiation was accomplished by telegraph."

Carter glared at his table companion. "Well, of all the dumb-headed—" he began.

There was a peculiar violet flash in Flint's eyes as he again interrupted—

"That—will—do!"

Carter flushed. His own eyes slid aside, uneasily. "I didn't mean anything," he mumbled, "but it looks like you've let a lot of money slip through your fingers."

Again the flare of light in the eyes across the table.

"It hasn't slipped too far—yet," Flint said softly.

Carter looked grim. He seemed to understand. "And you want me to handle it, eh?" he said. "Who was it got title?"

"A man named Utley," Flint replied. "He's down there with a big herd—I had it scouted yesterday. He's building a ranch-house. He was here yesterday to arrange for supplies."

"What sort is he?" Carter asked.

"Old-time cowman type," Flint answered. "Shouldn't be overly hard to deal with. But there was another with him, Utley's range boss—a tall young fellow with black hair, a lean face and cold eyes."

Carter leaned forward, his own eyes narrowing. "How's that again?" he asked.

Flint repeated his description. Carter swallowed hard but offered no further comment.

"How'd you find out Utley got title?" he asked. "Did he tell you?"

"No," Flint replied. "Young Loring, that's the range boss'

name, prevented that, although at the time I didn't realize it."

"Loring!" Carter interrupted. "You say his name's Loring?"

"Yes, that was it, I believe, Neale Loring," Flint replied. "Why? Do you know him?"

"The name sort of rings familiar," Carter evaded, "but then I've met a lot of people in my time. Can't expect to remember them all."

"I imagine you have," Flint remarked dryly, "and some, doubtless, you would prefer not to remember you."

"I reckon there's some you'd rather not meet up with again, either," Carter snapped angrily.

Flint's eyes narrowed, but he evidently decided the altercation had gone too far.

"Enough of that," he said. "No sense in us jabbing at one another this way. As I said, young Loring prevented Utley from telling me he'd gotten title. Just why, I don't know. Anyhow, I decided to take no further chances and wired Baker over to the capital to get busy. Baker wired back that Utley had already gotten title and that Preston Randolph had drawn up the papers. And when Randolph draws up a paper, not even Baker could find a way to evade it. There's nothing to be done at the Land Office. The situation will have to be handled at this end."

"We'll handle it," Carter declared grimly. "Just give me the line-up and turn me loose."

Flint sat silent for some moments. "This thing has got to be handled carefully," he said at length. "We don't want the Rangers coming down here and snooping around. We don't want anything to look suspicious, nothing that can be tied up to us in any way. I'm depending on you to handle your end right. If you don't—well—"

Again the violet eyes flared. Carter moved uneasily in his chair.

"Utley and Loring are coming here tomorrow to pick up their purchases," Flint concluded. "Hang around and give them a once-over. Then come in and see me."

"I'll do that," Carter promised.

Work on the new ranchhouse and other buildings continued apace. Neale Loring showed a surprising knowledge of such matters. He elaborated and improved on Utley's plans.

He evolved ingenious mechanical contrivances that lessened labor and speeded construction. There was plenty of timber ready to hand and Flint's general store supplied all other needed materials.

The ranchhouse was a two-story log structure, comfortable and roomy, that elicited old Abe's admiration.

"We'll be snug as ticks on a sheep's back," he declared. "Later, perhaps, when things get going good, we'll build a real humdinger, but this shack will do fine till we get around to it.

"Buildin' a place and fixing it up is play now-days when you can buy everything you need. Look at Tom up there spiking those rafters to the kingpost. When I was a boy you tied 'em together with green rawhide, and when the rawhide dried and shrunk they were as tight together as any big nails would hold 'em, and lasted just as long. And those oil lamps in brackets. Huh! *we* dipped a string in warm tallow and kept on dipping it till we had a candle. And there wasn't any nice smooth tables like that one in the kitchen. We shaved the boards with a draw-knife. And you made a stool or a bench out of lumber from a split tree and faced with a broad-axe. You didn't do any squirming around on those stools, not unless you hankered to pick splinters for a week. And that range in the kitchen Stiffy was cussing about because it only has six lids. Our cook on the home place made out with an iron pot, a Dutch oven, a three-legged skillet and a tin kettle to make coffee. Wasn't any stove. You hung 'em from pothooks in the fireplace. Things are plumb easy now-days."

Uteley's holdings extended the entire length of the walled valley, nearly thirty miles, to the southern terminus of the hills it included. South of the hills was open rangeland that extended east and west for many miles. Although not so sheltered as the valley and not so well watered, it was nevertheless excellent pasture. So neither Uteley nor Loring was particularly surprised when one evening several weeks after their arrival in the valley, Pete Edwards rode up from the south pastures with news.

"We got neighbors," Pete announced. "Over to the east below the hills. Purty good sized herd, I gather. Star C brand. Cows all show other brands, blotted out right and proper.

Nothin' off-color about 'em—correct counter-brandin'. I had a few words with the owner, a fellow named Carter. Come down from Deaf Smith county, up around the New Mexico line. Said he come into a little money and decided to go in business on his own. Bought him some cows from various outfits. Asked him why he came way down here and he said they been havin' bad weather up there for the past couple of years. Said lots of folks have been pullin' out of late. Said he heard about the railroad comin' through here close to good grass country and thought it would be a good notion to give it a whirl."

"A man with sense," commented Utley. "Those fellows building down there, Pete?"

"Uh-huh," replied Edwards. "Nothin' like what we got, but they're throwin' a shack together."

"We'll have to send Neale down to show 'em how to do it," declared Utley, glancing about his comfortable living quarters with satisfaction.

Utley proved no false prophet when he predicted they would soon have more neighbors, but had he divined the nature of the next bunch of neighbors to bed down in the section, with all the oldtime cowman's prejudices he would have pronounced decided displeasure.

It happened about ten days later. Utley had gone to town on an errand. Neale Loring, Pete Edwards and a couple more hands were busy with chores around the ranchhouse and the other buildings. The rest of the hands were scattered over the range performing various duties.

It was Pete Edwards who first sighted the long train of covered wagons rolling down the valley toward the ranchhouse.

"Great gosh all hemlock! nesters!" whooped Pete. "Where's my Winchester?"

"Steady," Loring told him. "They're pulling up. I'll talk with them."

He walked out to intercept the train. To his astonishment he saw that the driver of the first wagon was a girl, a rather small girl with big blue eyes, curly brown hair and a red mouth. She was young and decidedly pretty.

"Howdy, Ma'am?" he greeted courteously. "Where you headed?"

"South," the girl replied shortly. "Suppose you don't object to our passing over your land?"

"Not at all," Loring assured her. "Fact is, I'll ride with you."

"You needn't bother," she returned. "Don't worry, we don't intend to stop on your land. We learned the extent of your holdings when we were in town."

"Maybe not," Loring agreed quietly, "but you might be *stopped*. Our hands are working the range down below."

"I'd like to see them try it," the girl flared.

"No sense in looking for trouble, Ma'am," Loring told her. "You can find plenty without hunting for it, unless you're luckier than most folks."

"I'll agree with you there," was her rather surprising answer.

"Hadn't you better stop and water your stock?" Loring suggested. "We'll try and throw a meal together for your folks, if you care to wait."

"We'll take the water, and thank you for it, but we can feed ourselves," the girl replied.

"Uppity little snip," muttered Pete Edwards over Loring's shoulder.

Several men had joined the parley. They were lean, bearded individuals for the most part. They returned Loring's greeting with nods, all except one tall, broad-shouldered man who had a brown face that did not move a muscle but brown eyes that twinkled.

"Looks like a nice section down here," he remarked affably.

"It is," Loring agreed. "I've a notion you'll like it here. Just where do you aim to settle?"

"South of your valley and over to the west," the other returned. "We aim to take up our land. A fellow up in Sanders named Flint, who runs a store, made the arrangements for us. Says he's glad to see folks comin' in—means more business for him."

"Reckon he's right about that," Loring agreed, his glance wandering to the girl on the wagon seat, who still looked distinctly hostile. "I'm glad to see you come in, too. That's what the country needs most—more folks of the right sort in it. It's got everything else."

The brown-eyed man looked a trifle surprised. "Cowmen

don't usually consider us farmer folks the right sort," he commented.

"That's chiefly due to ignorance and misunderstanding," Loring replied. "No reason why farmers and cowmen shouldn't get along together. They need each other, if they'll only admit it. And admit it or not, they are going to have to learn to get along together in the future, or both sides will fold up."

"They don't feel that way up where we came from," interpolated the girl on the wagon seat. "That's one of the reasons we came down here—because of steady trouble with the cowmen."

"Where's that, Ma'am?" Loring asked by way of making conversation.

"Deaf Smith county, up around New Mexico," the brown-eyed farmer replied for her. "We did have some trouble with the ranchers up there, but that's not the only reason we pulled out. Plumb awful climate. No rain all last summer. Blizzards all winter. We come there from Kentucky. Fellow who'd been out here said it was fine country. We believed him."

"Texas is spotty," Loring replied. "A hundred miles difference in location often makes a difference out of proportion in weather and other things. I've heard about the section you're speaking of. Around the southern fringe of the Tucumcari Desert. Get some bad weather up there. I've a notion you'll do well down here. Soil is rich and although it's a dry country, there's usually a fair amount of rain. Don't see any reason why you shouldn't grow fine crops. And with the railroad here now you shouldn't want for markets."

"Glad to hear it," said the farmer. "Us fellers have had a tough couple of years and we'll appreciate a break."

"See you've got a pretty nice bunch of cows along with you," Loring observed.

"Oh, they ain't ours," the farmer replied. "They're hers." He gestured to the girl who was superintending the watering of the lead wagon's horses.

"Hers!"

"Uh-huh, Miss Norma's. She ain't a farmer. She raises cattle. She's just drivin' the wagon for old Jed Lewis. He's sick and layin' down in the wagon. Fine girl. She didn't like the way

the big ranchers up north were actin', so she pulled out and come along with us. Her dad died last year. Got shot by some—cattle thieves."

Loring eyed the girl with quickened interest. "Well, she ought to make out all right down here," he commented. "Those two old fellows with the stock her hands?"

"That's right," replied the farmer. "Them and the old cook drivin' the chuck wagon is all she's got."

"Sort of short-handed," Loring remarked, his eyes contemplative.

"Uh-huh," said the farmer. "She won't have it easy. By the way, my name is Sutton, Jacob Sutton, mostly known as Uncle Jake." He extended a sinewy hand.

Loring supplied his own name and they shook. "Glad to know you, Loring," said Sutton. "You seem to be considerable of a fellow. Sort of different from some other cowmen I've met. You talk like an educated fellow. You own this place?"

"No, I just work here," Loring replied briefly.

At that moment a wrangler appeared with Loring's horse. The wagon train was ready to move and soon got under way. Loring elected to ride beside Sutton's wagon, which was about midway back in the train.

"Notice those cows are packing a JR burn," Loring remarked.

"That was John Ray's brand," Sutton replied. "The little gal's name is Norma Ray."

"Pretty name," Loring observed.

"Uh-huh, and she's a mighty purty girl and a smart and nice one," Sutton said. "Right now she's sort of got a chip on her shoulder. She had considerable trouble with a big outfit up where we come from, the Circle Cross. Got a tough bunch workin' for 'em," he said. "They ain't got no use for the little feller."

Before they reached the valley mouth, after dark, Loring's decision to ride with the wagon train was justified. Several times in the course of the afternoon, bunches of XT riders came swooping across the prairie to intercept the wagons and question the intentions of their owners. Loring knew that a row could have very easily developed between the hot-headed young cowboys and the determined farmers.

However, when the XT hands realized that their range boss was convoying the train, they drew off without protest.

The train made camp on a stream bank just south of the valley mouth. Loring shared potluck with Jake Sutton and his wife, a motherly and hospitable little woman who appeared to be as universally liked and respected as Uncle Jake himself. After eating he walked over to where Norma Ray and her two old cowboys were bedding down their herd for the night.

"Mind if I lend you a hand, Ma'am?" he asked.

"Thank you, but we can make out by ourselves," was the cool reply.

Loring gazed at her a moment, the suspicion of a twitch at the corners of his mouth. He nodded and went back to Sutton's wagon. A bunk in the wagon was offered him but he declined, requesting only a blanket.

"I'm used to bunking out," he told his hosts. "Sort of like to sleep under the stars."

Uncle Jake nodded, and Mrs. Sutton favored Loring with a motherly smile.

"He reminds me of our Walter, Jacob," she remarked to her husband. "Walter is our son. He's over east, studying to be a lawyer," she informed Loring. "Yes, Jacob, he's tall and dark-haired like Walter and has gray eyes, too, with that same steady look in them. But I reckon he's older."

"I'm twenty-five, Ma'am," Loring replied.

"Walter is just turned nineteen," said Mrs. Sutton, "but he's already almost as big as you. Takes after his dad that way."

"I'm sure he'll grow up to be a fine man, like his dad," he assured her.

With a smile he walked off to spread his blanket.

"He's lonely," Mrs. Sutton said to her stalwart husband. "What he needs is a woman to look after him."

Uncle Jake chuckled. "That's the same thing you said about Miss Norma, Mother," he replied. "Only you said she needs a man to look after her. By gosh, wonder if that ain't a notion?"

"Jacob," said Mrs. Sutton, "for a man you do very well."

Tired though he was after a long and busy day, Neale Loring did not immediately go to sleep that night. His mind was filled with disturbing thoughts. Some dealt with the past. Some with the immediate present and some with the unpre-

dictable future. He thought of his long vengeance quest and Clate Dixon. He still hated Dixon, but somehow the fires of his hate did not burn so fiercely as before. He wondered could the land in which he found himself be subtly working a change in him. There was something about this land of vast distances and sky-kissed mountains that seemed to set at naught the futile strivings and shallow passions of mankind.

Turning restlessly in his blankets, he forced his mind to dwell on less somber things.

"She's got exactly three freckles on the bridge of her nose," he mused. "Never realized before that I sort of like freckles. Norma Ray! Uh-huh, that sure is a pretty name."

CHAPTER SIX

WITH THE OLDTIME cowman's dislike for grangers, Abe Utley was decidedly displeased, to say the least, when he learned of the arrival of the wagon train.

"Might have known something would happen to spoil the country," he complained to Loring. "It'll mean trouble for us, mark my word. Nesters always make trouble."

"They're not exactly nesters," Loring differed. "They're getting title to their land."

"That's what *they* say," scoffed Utley. "Nesters never get title to anything. They just squat. Damn 'em, anyhow! Why couldn't they stay where they were?"

"You weren't satisfied to stay where you were," Loring said.

"That was different," said old Abe. "I needed more land and a better climate for my stock."

"Seems they needed better land and a better climate, also, to grow their crops," Loring observed mildly.

"Then why couldn't they find it somewhere other than on rangeland," Utley demanded. "They ruin rangeland. Cut it up with fences. Close off water. Before you know it they'll be bringin' in sheep, like as not, and you know what that means. They've got no business here."

"Noticed quite a few kids with that train," Loring re-

marked with apparent irrelevance. "You haven't any kids, have you, Boss?"

Old Abe's eyes suddenly became uncertain. "No," he admitted. "I haven't. But I had one once, years back, a cute little shaver. I've a notion he'd have growed to be a fine, tall up-standin' young fellow like you, Neale. But—he died."

"And if he'd lived I wonder if you wouldn't have wanted him to have everything a kid needs to give him a proper start in life?" Loring said gazing out the window.

Old Abe shot him a swift glance. "Reckon that's so," he admitted.

"And wonder if other folks with kids don't feel the same way about theirs?" Loring said, still gazing out the window.

Old Abe rumbled in his throat, tugged his mustache, and changed the subject.

"Met some of those Star C hands from down to the south the other day," he said. "They were up in the lower end of the valley. Their cows have already started straying into the valley. Natural, though. Grass and water better. Doesn't matter. We have plenty of room, but it'll mean some cutting out when we round-up. They were salty lookin' fellows and appeared capable. Didn't have much to say. I haven't met Carter yet."

Loring smiled slightly, and nodded.

"While I was up in town," Utley continued, "I contracted with Flint for a buckboard. I'm having a little bed built in behind the seat. It'll be prime for carting in odds and ends we need and that don't make a full load for one of the wagons. You can sort of take it easy in a buckboard seat with good springs. Flint said he'd have it ready tomorrow. I told him I'd come for it. Like to ride up with me tomorrow? We can ride those two little roans we got in the corral. I figure we can soon get 'em in shape to handle the chore."

Loring offered no objections and early the following morning they set out for town, riding the two wiry little roans that looked enough alike to be twins. They were too light for range work but, as Utley said, would make good pulling animals.

The buckboard was ready when they arrived in town. It was a lightly built, four-wheeled vehicle having a single seat for two carried by an elastic platform that made for comfort-

able riding. Behind the seat was Utley's innovation, a small bed that would accommodate a considerable load.

Loring managed to get the mettlesome roans hitched to the buckboard. The roans didn't particularly like the idea, and showed their displeasure by considerable rearing and plunging, but Loring quickly got them under control and sent them out of town at a fast clip.

South of Sanders, the trail wound upward through a straggle of low but craggy hills. After obtaining the crest of the sag, the trail plunged steeply downward with many sharp turns. To the right was a wall of broken cliffs. To the left a sheer drop of more than two hundred feet to a canyon floor.

This portion of the trail was narrow, being barely wide enough for two vehicles to pass. Loring let the horses take it easy to the crest of the rise, but once over the hump, he sent them on at a good pace.

"They're a mite obstreperous as yet, but I figure they'll break in good," he told Utley. "Just a matter of getting them accustomed to harness."

"Keep a tight rein on 'em," grunted Abe. "We don't want any running away down this snake track. Long way to the rocks over there. Man would get clean tired of falling before he hit the ground."

"He'd rest for quite a spell afterward, though," Loring chuckled.

Snorting and tossing their heads, the roans sped on. Utley sat silent, enjoying the easy sway of the cushioned seat. Loring whistled tunefully and talked to the horses.

Without the least warning it happened. A wild lurching, a yelp from Utley, then a thud as the outer rear wheel spun free and let the end of the axle fall to the ground.

Loring grabbed Utley by the shoulder barely in time to keep him from pitching sideways from the careening vehicle. To do so he had to drop the reins. Instantly the horses, terrified by the crashing and banging behind them, seized the bits in their teeth and bolted. By the time Loring got hold of the reins again, they were going like the wind, the crippled buckboard leaping and bounding and momentarily threatening to capsize.

"Hold on!" Loring roared to his companion. "Hang onto

that rail till I get 'em under control. Of all the goddam things to happen!"

Panting and swearing, old Abe clutched the seat railing and hung on for dear life. Loring had his hands full keeping the frantic team to the road. The buckboard swayed and lurched, the wheelless axle hammering the stones. It jerked from side to side, now grazing the cliff, now careening to the very edge of the long drop to the canyon floor. They took a turn on two wheels, barely missed red ruin against the cliff face and roared on. Loring gripped the reins with iron hands and put forth his strength against the charging horses. He did not dare try to pull them to a halt lest one stumble and the whole shebang go over the precipice.

Another turn, a little sharper this time. Loring set his teeth, fought the team away from the cliff edge as far as he dared. They made it, with the off wheels grinding their hubs against the cliff, and were off again down a steeper stretch at even greater speed. The lopsided vehicle staggered like a cowboy on the outside of a quart of red-eye, and showed a terrifying tendency to slew sideways.

Uteley suddenly let out a yell of despair. "That hairpin turn ahead," he squalled. "We'll never make it. Here we go to glory! We'd better jump."

"We'll bust our necks or go over the lip if we do," Loring shouted back. "Hang on. I'm going to try and throw them on that wider stretch just this side the turn. Hang on, here we go!"

The turn, where the trail seemed to leap off into space, rushed toward them at frightful speed. Loring gripped the reins and wound them around his wrists. Bracing his feet against the dash he put forth every ounce of his strength in one terrific pull.

"If only the reins don't bust!" he gasped.

The horses' heads came up. Their front feet lifted from the ground despite their frantic efforts to keep them down. Loring instantly swayed to the right and put all his force against the off-horse's bit. Over it went, thrown off balance, to hit the ground with a crash. Its fellow floundered against it and also fell in a kicking, squealing tangle. The buckboard banged against the cliff face, rebounded, slewed around and came to a halt with one rear corner hanging over the precipice.

Loring leaped to the ground, Utley scrambling after him. He ran to the horses, soothing them with voice and hand. A moment more and he had them on their feet, bruised and bleeding, to stand with blowing nostrils and rolling eyes, all the fight knocked out of them.

Utley mopped the cold sweat from his face with a flaming red handkerchief.

"I'd figured to live to be eighty," he moaned, "but now I'll never make it. That ride took ten years off my life, easy!"

Loring chuckled, and began rolling a cigarette. "She was a whizzer," he agreed, "but everything ended up okay."

Old Abe raised both fists to the heavens. "That goddam wheelwright who put them wheels on!" he swore. "He must have forgotten to tighten that hub nut on the axle! I'd like to get my hands on him right now. I'd skin him up till his relatives would think he was a fresh hide! Of all the goddam things to do!"

Loring's eyes were suddenly thoughtful. "Funny," he said, "I could have sworn that nut was tight. I looked all of 'em over, and the brakes, too, before we left town. Always do with a new wagon. Don't see how I could have missed noticing it if one was loose."

"Well, you see what happened," Utley growled. "A tight nut doesn't come off like that."

Loring looked even more thoughtful. He pinched out his cigarette, tossed the butt over the lip of the cliff. He walked around to the wheelless axle and bent over it. Suddenly he gave a low whistle. His eyes blazed.

"Come here," he said in a strained voice. "Look—see those threads? Wait, we'll make sure. Hand me that wrench from under the seat."

He took the wrench, walked around the buckboard and loosened the nut from the other end of the axle. He returned to where Utley stood waiting.

"Look," he said as he bent over the axle. "Look, the nut screws on *backward!*"

"Darned if it don't," agreed Utley. "What in—"

"And," interrupted Loring, "the turning wheel, instead of pressing the nut tight all the time would gradually loosen it until it fell off."

Old Abe stared at him in astonishment. "You trying to say

you don't think it was just an accident, a mistake on the part of the wheelwright?" he demanded.

"How in hell," Loring wanted to know, "could an experienced wheelwright or blacksmith make such a mistake unless he was blind drunk or plumb loco? Even allowing that he did run the threads backward on the axle, he'd instantly find it out when he tried to screw the nut on. No, it was no accident. Somebody deliberately arranged things so we'd have a wreck and figured it out perfect. Of all the devilish contraptions!"

"But who would do such a thing?" asked the bewildered rancher. "I haven't any enemies I know of who'd want to kill me."

"That's a question I'd sure like to have answered," responded Loring.

"By gosh!" Utley suddenly exclaimed. "That fellow Clate Dixon you're hunting! He was headed this way. Could he be out to do you in like this?"

Loring laughed and shook his head. "I'd consider that a little far fetched," he replied. "Dixon isn't the sort to go in for this kind of thing. His methods are direct. A slug from a thicket or a dark alley would be his way. And, besides, I've asked all around and nobody in the section has been able to tell me of seeing anybody resembling Dixon. Bill Brown came and told me last week that a red-haired, red-whiskered fellow was drinking in the Ace-Full saloon, but when I got there he turned out to be a fat Irishman who cooks in an eating house. I haven't been able to get a line on Dixon, and if he was around here I'm sure somebody would have noticed him. His hair and whiskers are sort of outstanding."

"Then who in blazes could have done it?" Utley demanded helplessly.

Loring did not reply. He rolled another cigarette and smoked thoughtfully. Abruptly he picked up a hefty boulder from the trail and began deliberately burring the threads on the axle, paying particular attention to those on the under side.

"What in hell are you doing now?" demanded Utley.

"I'm trying to make these threads look as if they got all smashed and pounded by the rocks as the axle bumped over them," Loring explained. "I don't want anybody else to notice what we discovered, and I don't want anybody to know we did discover it."

"Why?"

"So there'll be a chance the bastard responsible will tip his hand somehow," Loring returned grimly. "If he finds out we know a deliberate attempt was made to kill us both, he'll be mighty likely to lay low for a spell. But if he thinks we never caught on, he'll try again, maybe soon. We'll be on the lookout, and maybe that gent with homicidal notions will get a little surprise."

"That makes sense," Uteley admitted, "but the rest of it sure doesn't. Well, now what we going to do?"

"Try and get back to town and get this contraption patched up," Loring said. "The blacksmith can run new threads on the axle and fit it with another nut. I think the wheel's lying in the trail above. Seems I remember seeing it run up against the cliff and stop. Wait till I put this nut back on the other axle and we'll go. You'll notice they picked the outer rear wheel to work on, the one that would be most liable to send us into the canyon."

Loring got the equipage turned around and they jolted back up the trail. They picked up the lost wheel, loaded it into the bed back of the seat and bumped and lurched on to town.

Playing the role in which Loring coached him, Uteley told Gus Flint off in no uncertain terms for selling him a defective vehicle. The storekeeper was profusely apologetic and promised immediate repairs. He had one of his clerks take the buckboard to the blacksmith shop without delay.

As he talked, Loring studied the storekeeper. He wondered if Flint could have had a hand in the plot against their lives, but dismissed the notion as absurd. What earthly reason could Flint have for wanting to do in a good customer? It didn't make sense. But then nothing about the whole affair made sense.

That night Flint and the black-haired ranchowner, Carter, were closeted together in the dim back room of the store.

"Well, it didn't work," the political Boss said to his henchman. "I thought we were getting a break when Loring showed up today with Uteley. By all rights they should both be smashed to a pulp at the bottom of the canyon right now. But somehow Loring managed to hold that half-wild team to the trail and get them stopped." He paused, then added cold-

ly, "I sure wish he was down there on the rocks right now, with the coyotes snooping around him."

"I don't cotton much to your way of doing things, Gus," Carter grumbled. "Suppose you let me handle the next try."

"All right," Flint agreed. "But watch your step. Loring is a cold proposition, as you are liable to find out. How are you doing down in the valley?"

"Fine," returned Carter with an evil grin. "I'm bleeding 'em white, and they haven't caught on a bit. Of that I'm sure. And when they do, they'll blame those nesters you brought in. See if they don't."

The violet flash was in Flint's eyes as he replied.

"Why else do you suppose I brought the nesters in?"

"Got title to the land for 'em yet?" Carter asked.

"No hurry," Flint said. "Take care of that when I get around to it. Meanwhile I'll string them along. I've been thinking that angle over. May find use for it, if things don't work out right before long. It's worth thinking on, anyhow. Have you made friends with them yet?"

"I been riding over now and then, visitin'," Carter said. "I can usually get along with folks when I take a notion. Say, that girl who came down with the farmers and is trying to do a chore of ranchin' over to the west isn't bad to look at."

"You leave her alone, at least till what we've got on hand is finished," Flint snapped. "Women and cards have always been your trouble. If it wasn't for them you might be—different—from what you are today."

"Maybe," Carter admitted, "but that's water under the bridge. Gus, was there ever anything you went for?"

"You wouldn't understand if I told you," Flint replied.

"Anyhow, you've always managed to keep your nose clean, at least up to now," Carter observed. "But there's a limit, fellow, there's a limit. A man who has no little weaknesses usually ends up busting loose with a big one that does for him."

Despite old Abe's avowed enmity for all nesters and all their works, Loring frequently visited the farmers south of the valley. He found that Norma Ray had established herself somewhat west of the farm lands. The farmers banded together and built her a small but comfortable ranchhouse.

Loring offered what assistance he could in getting the place in working order, but was curtly refused.

"She's sort of set against all big outfits," Jake Sutton said when Loring discussed the matter with the leader of the farmers. "She holds the Circle Cross, up in the Panhandle, responsible for the death of her father."

"She shouldn't hang onto a grudge like that," Loring said. "After all, it's not right to—"

He stopped abruptly. He was hardly in a position to moralize on this particular subject.

"She's mighty shorthanded with just those two old hands riding for her," he observed.

"That's right, but reckon she can't afford to hire any more," Sutton said. "I'm afraid she's mighty up against it. But she's almighty proud and won't accept any help. Us fellers tried it. Of course we built her a ranchhouse and bunkhouse and so on, but that's customary in this country, for folks to band together to handle such chores, and she couldn't very well object. But she won't take anything more."

Loring glowered, but didn't see what he could do about it.

A couple of weeks after his talk with Sutton, Loring had occasion to spend the night in town. After completing his chores, he repaired to Gus Flint's Ace-Full saloon for something to eat and possibly a hand or two of poker.

The Ace-Full was the biggest and busiest place in town, and the most turbulent, especially on railroad pay nights. Here gathered the railroad builders, miners from the hills to the north, wandering cowboys from the Big Bend ranches, Mexican *vaqueros* from south of the Rio Grande, and gentlemen who dressed and looked like cowhands but were not, to discuss in frank and manly fashion the topics of the day, sometimes to the cheerful accompaniment of gunsmoke and flashing steel. Sanders had a mayor and a town marshal and the sheriff had his office there. But minor disturbances in the Ace-Full were passed over in deference to the master-mind who sat in the gloomy room back of the general store.

Loring walked into the Ace-Full, glanced idly about the crowded room and abruptly went rigid.

On the cleared dance floor a girl was doing a solo dance, a girl with big blue eyes and tossing brown curls. She was small and slender. Her legs, showing beneath her billowing short

skirt glittering with spangles, were slim and shapely. Her feet were amazingly tiny and clad in satin slippers. Her low-cut bodice revealed the proud up-thrust of her young breasts and the snow of her rounded shoulders. Her lips were vividly red and sweetly curved. On the bridge of her little straight nose were three freckles.

Loring stared, his eyes narrowing, his mouth suddenly dry. No, it couldn't be. But it was. It was Norma Ray.

The room was silent as she went through the intricate movements of the dance to the music of a really good Mexican orchestra on a raised platform nearby. Every eye in the place was avidly fixed on her trim form.

Loring went red, went white. His teeth ground together. Norma finished her number. A roar of applause followed, and shouts for another. She smiled brightly, nodded her shapely little head in acknowledgment and strolled off the floor as the orchestra struck up a lively air and couples left the tables. She passed over to one side and stood idly watching the dancers, one sun-golden little hand on her hip.

Neale Loring strode across the room and faced her. She looked him up and down with cool blue eyes.

"What in hell are you doing here?" he demanded, his voice hoarse.

"What business is it of yours?" was the calm answer.

"None, I reckon," Loring growled, "but just the same *you've* no business here. It's no place for a nice woman to be dancing."

"Oh, I'm not so nice," she replied airily.

A dangerous flare showed in Loring's pale eyes.

"That's a damned lie, and you know it," he blazed at her. "Answer my question, will you?"

The girl flushed. Her silken black lashes fluttered down for an instant. Then her eyes, hot with anger, met his squarely.

"I'm working here, so that my hands and I can eat," she said. "Mr. Flint gave me the job and everybody is nice to me. Now please go away and attend to your own affairs."

While they were speaking, a tall man with gray streaking his black hair approached them. Now he spoke, in quiet tones—

"I reckon you'd better do what the lady says, cowboy."

Loring turned his pale glance on the newcomer. He rec-

ognized Blaine Masters, the manager of the Ace-Full. He did not appear to be a bad sort. His face was deeply lined, his eyes kindly.

"I reckon I had," Loring unexpectedly replied. He turned his back on them and strode to the bar. Fortunately for his peace of mind, he did not hear the blue-eyed girl's whisper to the manager—

"Oh, isn't he mad! You know, Mr. Masters, I could almost like him when he looks that way."

"Be careful, Ma'am," cautioned the elderly Masters. "You can't fool with that sort. He'll be pizen if something sets him off."

Loring shouldered his way to the bar in a black and bitter mood. He downed two drinks of fiery liquor as if it were water. The bartender gazed at him admiringly.

"Have one on the house," invited that worthy, tipping a bottle over the empty glass. "Anybody who can guzzle two slugs of that snake poison without blinkin' has sure earned one free!"

Loring toyed with the third drink, sipping it slowly. He knew that the sensible thing was to leave the saloon at once, but he could not bring himself to depart. His eyes constantly strayed to where Norma Ray had joined the dancers on the floor and was, as was the custom of the place, distributing her favors impartially. A girl working in the Ace-Full was expected to dance with anybody who asked her. But there were limits.

Finally Loring left the bar, walked to a table near the dance floor and sat down. He ordered still another drink but sat with it untasted before him. The place was filling up and becoming more boisterous by the minute. Loring recalled that this was the first of the month and a semi-monthly payday for the railroad builders.

"And everybody's here for a time," he growled to himself. "They come clean from New Mexico for a night like this. Why in hell didn't I ride right back to the ranch after I finished my business in this goddamned town?"

There was a pause in the music while the musicians had a drink. Then the orchestra burst forth in a rousing polka. Dancers began to crowd the floor.

Norma Ray stood a little to one side for the moment,

close to where Loring sat glowering at his untasted whiskey glass. A big fellow in cowboy costume came slouching over to her. He was undoubtedly much the worse for drink.

"Come on, baby," he whooped, pawing at the girl, "let's you and me hoof it."

Norma glanced at him and drew away. "Not now please," she said.

But the man who looked like a cowboy, and doubtless wasn't, was persistent. His face turned ugly.

"Come on, I say," he growled. "I ain't used to havin' dance-hall wenches say no to me."

He gripped her arm with a force that caused her to cry out in pain.

Neale Loring came to his feet with lithe grace. His hand shot out, his slender fingers coiled about the big fellow's corded wrist. The man yelped with pain as the terrific grip ground the bones of his wrist together. He let go the girl's arm as his fingers spasmodically opened. Loring flung his hand aside.

"Don't you know where you're not wanted?" he said.

The big man glared, his face fiery red. He bellowed an oath and swung a huge fist at Loring.

Loring stepped aside, and hit him. Hit him with all the pent-up anger of the evening's experiences. The big fellow shot through the air, landed on a table and took it to the floor with him in splintered ruin. He floundered, bellowing, surged to his feet, spitting blood, teeth and curses, and went for his gun.

Neale Loring's left hand flashed down and up. There was the crash of a shot, a howl of pain from the big puncher. He reeled back, clutching at his blood spurting hand. His gun, one butt plate shattered, lay half way across the room.

Loring went back against the wall in three lightning steps. He had a gun in each hand, now, and back of them his eyes were like two pale flames in his dark face. And it seemed to every man in the crowded room that those unwavering black muzzles were singling him out for special and individual attention. Loring spoke, his voice low but carrying to all parts of the room.

"Anybody else?" he asked softly. "I aim to please."

Nobody seemed to think the question directed at him

personally. Loring glanced about. The wounded man was hanging onto a table, retching and sobbing. He was in no condition to do anything more. A forty-five slug through the hand is no light matter. Loring holstered his guns and without a glance to left or right walked from the saloon.

After his broad back passed through the swinging doors, a babble of talk burst forth like water from an opened sluice gate.

"Who in hell is *he*?" demanded an elderly cowboy at the bar. "Did you see that draw? Chain lightnin'! And those eyes! Gentlemen, hush!"

"I don't know who he is," replied a companion, "but I recollect gettin' a quick look at a fellow once, through gun-smoke, who sure looked a lot like him. Tall, same sort of a dark face, same sort of eyes, same sort of chain lightnin' draw."

"Who's that?" asked the first speaker.

"Fellow named Brocius—Curly Bill Brocius!"

A dead silence fell over the group at mention of the notorious killer's name.

"But—but," a young cowboy said, "that feller's hair wasn't curly, not much, anyhow."

"Neither was Bill's, much," replied the other. "He wore it sort of long in those days and it curled up at the ends."

"But damn it, Curly Bill is dead," protested the old puncher. "Wyatt Earp killed him over west of Tombstone, Arizona."

The other shrugged. "That's what Wyatt claims, but lots of folks will tell you Wyatt never touched Bill with that shotgun. They'll tell you Bill pulled out of the section like he said he was goin' to do, because it was gettin' too hot. They say he was on his way out when he had a run-in with the Earps and Doc Holliday over by Iron Springs. He was supposed to be headin' for Mexico, but he *could* have drifted over into Texas."

"That feller who did the shootin' is the range boss for the new spread down to the south of here," said the bartender.

"Uh-huh, and Curly Bill used to be a range boss," remarked the purveyor of bad news. "That is when he wasn't busy killin' somebody he took a notion he didn't like."

His companions glowered at him.

"One thing is sure for certain," remarked the young puncher. "He's sweet on the little dance floor gal. I've had an eye on her myself. She's cute as a spotted pony. But if that big devil is interested in her, I'm not any more. I prefer to stay healthy."

There were general nods of agreement, and a change of subject.

In the back room of the saloon, Norma Ray, white and shaken and through dancing for the night, was trying to regain her composure. Masters, the manager, entered and favored her with a kindly glance.

"Understand what I mean, now?" he remarked.

CHAPTER SEVEN

ALTHOUGH it was quite late, Loring secured his horse and headed back for the XT in an unenviable frame of mind.

"Well, I made a show of myself for fair," he told Rojo disgustedly. "Just like a blasted play-actor. Stalwart hero rescues poor but honest dance-hall gal from villain's clutches! And comes within an inch of leaning against the hot end of a passing bullet as a result. That big bastard was fast, almighty fat. Too fast to take a chance on getting him in the hand like I did. If I'd missed, I wouldn't have known what hit me. Why will any man with the brains of a crazy sheep-herder have anything to do with women!"

But, most inconsistently, he added a moment later—

"She sure was cute in that dancing outfit."

However, the following day Loring had other things to think about than the vagaries, unpredictableness and undeniable charm of women. Pete Edwards met him with a very serious face.

"Neale, we're losin' cows," Edwards declared without preamble.

"What makes you think so?" Loring asked.

"I don't think, I know," Edwards replied. "You know it's my chore to try and keep a tally on the stock. And I got a sort of knack for rememberin' markin's on cows. Well, every

now and then some critter I've spotted all of a sudden just isn't around. I didn't think so much of it at first, but it's got to be happenin' altogether too often. Somebody's tiein' onto our stuff enough to hurt. And I bet I can tell who it is, too."

"Who?" Loring asked, although he knew very well what the answer would be.

"Those blasted nesters, that's who," Edwards declared vindictively. "It started not long after they showed up here. Nesters ain't never up to no good."

"Got any proof the farmers are responsible?" Loring asked.

"You know darn well I haven't," Edwards growled. "If I had, I'd be down there collectin' with the business end of a Winchester. No, I ain't got no proof. But nobody can tell me it ain't them."

Loring knew better than to directly contradict Pete. It would only antagonize the old cowboy and not change his opinion in the least. He tried logic instead.

"But where do they put 'em?" he asked. "Do they plough 'em under?"

Edwards snorted. "They run 'em to Mexico, of course," he said. "Plenty of good markets down there for stolen cows, especially if you have connections, and that sort always has."

"But they'd have to have a holding spot till they get a herd together," Loring persisted.

"Ought to be plenty of places over in those darn hills," Edwards replied, with a vague wave of his hand to the west.

Loring tried another tack. "I reckon you've been getting information concerning this country, same as I have," he remarked. "How would they run the cows to Mexico?"

"There's just one way, from all I've been able to find out," Edwards instantly answered. "That's by way of the Comanche Trail over to the west a few miles. No other way to get a herd down there and across, so folks I've talked to say."

"Then," said Loring, "if we keep watch on the Comanche we should be able to spot them."

"That's right," agreed Edwards. "Should be easy as fallin' off a slick log."

Loring nodded. "I'll take that up with the boss right away," he promised. "Meanwhile keep your eyes open. I'll post several of the boys down around the mouth of the valley to

help keep a watch on things, and I'll be around there considerably myself."

When Loring relayed Edwards' discovery to Utley, the XT owner instantly agreed with the old hand's contention that the farmers were to blame. He swore angrily and expressed his opinion of all nesters, and this bunch in particular, in no uncertain terms. Loring refrained from arguing with him for the moment.

"No matter who's doing it or who isn't, our chore right now is to catch them at it and stop it," he said. "As I told Pete, I figure our best bet is the Comanche Trail. It's just about certain they must have a holding spot somewhere. They wouldn't run the cows to Mexico by twos and threes. I'll try to find that holding spot—must be somewhere in the hills nearby—and I'll post a watch on the Comanche. I'll ride down there tomorrow and pick out a good place to hole up. If there's any other way out, nobody hereabouts seems to know anything about it."

It was inevitable that Loring would consider the new spread to the east, the Star C, in connection with the rustling. But he quickly discarded the notion. Carter's cattle undoubtedly ran into the thousands and it was highly unlikely that any big owner would take such a risk. Running cows across the Border was a highly precarious business. It was a known fact that many owners had at times run cows north from Mexico, but stealing them and running them south to sell at a reduced price was something else again. Loring dismissed the Star C from his calculations.

"A bunch from over in the Bend country, I'd say," he decided. "Plenty of that sort there, and it's only natural that they should work over this way with the advent of new outfits in the section. Wonder if the Star C has been losing stock, too? I'll have to ask about that, and put a bug in Carter's ear. He may be catching it also, and just hasn't caught on yet."

Loring set out before daylight to scout the Comanche. He reached the old Indian track about mid morning and rode it for miles, becoming more and more convinced that it represented the only possible route by which a stolen herd could hope to reach the Border. Finally he turned and back-tracked, searching for a favorable spot to post watchers. He decided

on one only a few miles south of the valley mouth. Four hands could take up their station there, build a rough shelter and watch the trail night and day with little chance of being detected. In a satisfied frame of mind he rode on. He turned east and before sunset covered the distance between the trail and the holdings of the farmers and Norma Ray. As he approached her JR ranchhouse, diagonalling up from the south he saw the girl on her horse in company with a tall man mounted on a splendid sorrel. As he drew near, the man tipped his hat to the girl and with a shake of his bridle rode east. He passed within a hundred yards of where Loring was coming up from the south, waved his hand and rode on.

"Damn it, that feller looked familiar?" Loring told himself. "Can't say as I ever saw him before, but he sure reminds me of somebody."

The sight of the blue-eyed girl on her horse and apparently awaiting his approach drove the familiar looking stranger from his mind. He wondered what kind of a reception he would get, and drew near with a certain amount of trepidation. What he did get was a most welcome surprise in the shape of a very friendly smile.

"How are you, Mr. Loring?" she said as he pulled rein beside her. "I'm glad to see you. I want to tell you that I'm sorry for the other night. I acted like a little beast and succeeded in causing you to have serious trouble."

"You didn't do anything wrong, Ma'am," Loring assured her, all warm at her friendliness.

"Yes, I did," she differed. "You were shocked to see me working there. I was hurt and angry and refused to admit to myself that you were really paying me a compliment by what you said."

"Well, Ma'am," Loring reiterated his statement of the night in the Ace-Full, "it isn't just exactly the place for a nice girl to be working. Gets sort of rough in there at times."

"So I noticed," the girl agreed dryly. "But it won't happen again. I quit that night."

Loring's face showed concern. "But, Ma'am," he said, "you told me you needed the job."

"I do," Norma replied, "but not that bad. I'll make out somehow."

Loring glanced around. "Ma'am," he said, "why don't you

let me and some of the boys ride down and put this place in shape for you. We could do it in a jiffy and then you could get along easier."

The girl stiffened. Her round little chin went up proudly.

"It's only plain neighborliness," Loring persisted before she could speak. "The sort of thing folks do for one another in this country. You'd do the same thing for anybody, and you know it."

"But your owner," she demurred. "I don't think he'd like it. He's an oldtimer and doesn't have much use for—nesters, as he calls us, of that I'm sure."

"Oh, I can handle Uncle Abe," Loring said cheerfully. "Besides, he's sort of getting along in years and sticks around the ranchhouse more and more all the time. He doesn't need to know everything. We'll do it first and tell him about it later. He may cuss a little, but he barks a sight harder than he bites. Leave Uncle Abe to me. I'll be down with some of my bunch in the next day or two."

Norma's red mouth suddenly trembled a little. Her eyes were misty.

"Everybody does seem to want to be kind," she said in a low voice. "Mr. Carter—he's the one who rode away as you came up—has also been very nice to me. He's helped to keep me from feeling lonely here in a new section. He drops around every now and then. He's interesting and has traveled a great deal. It's fascinating to hear him talk of far-away places. He was the one who persuaded Mr. Flint to give me the job of dancing in his place. He and Mr. Flint appear to be very good friends."

Loring experienced a twinge of resentment at this evidence of familiarity and mutual interest, but he forced himself to suppress the feeling. After all, it was not unreasonable for her to be interested in the prosperous ranch owner. The comparison between himself, a range boss, and Carter was suddenly not overly comforting to Loring.

"You'll usually find folks willing to help, if you'll only let them, Ma'am," he said. He gathered up the reins. "Well, reckon I'll mosey over to Jake Sutton's place for the night," he said. "I'll be seeing you soon."

The girl seemed to hesitate. Then she spoke impulsively.

"Why not spend the night at our place?" she said. "We have plenty of room and I have a good cook."

She laughed gaily and added, "The meal barrel hasn't been scraped clear to the bottom yet. I can promise you a supper. We'll eat together."

Scarcely able to credit his sudden good fortune, Neale Loring hesitated not an instant to accept the invitation.

The JR ranchhouse was small, but the capable farmers had done a good job of building and it was comfortably arranged. Norma left Loring in the tastefully furnished living room and departed to confer with the cook. When she reappeared, some time later, she had changed to something the details of which were incomprehensible to the masculine eye, but which was soft and clinging and set off well her trim little form. Loring thought she became more attractive by the minute.

Loring enjoyed a good supper and then spent several hours in Norma's company. In the course of the evening the talk got around to Dave Carter, the Star C owner.

"I understand he came here from Deaf Smith county," Norma observed. "But I don't think he can have been up there long. Doesn't seem to know much about the section. When I happened to mention the Circle Cross ranch he asked me where their holdings were. I should think anybody who had ever been in that section would know about the Circle Cross."

Loring glanced up in surprise. "I'd think so, too," he agreed. "It's one of the biggest outfits up there. They own more than a million acres in west Texas and New Mexico. Of course, though," he added, "somebody from the eastern part of the state might not know anything about them. Can't say as I did myself till my dad got the notion of moving to the Panhandle and made a lot of inquiries about the section."

Later, in the bunkhouse, Loring joined the two old cowboys and the Mexican cook in a pleasurable session of penny ante. He went to bed that night in a more peaceful frame of mind than he had known since leaving the Brazos.

Two days later, Loring and most of the XT hands rode to the JB. Before the day was done they had things in first class shape. After which Loring took a ride to Sanders and contacted the division superintendent in charge of the rail-

road construction work. The railroad people had not forgotten his part in foiling the paycar robbery and the result of the conference was apparent a week later when Norma Ray received an order for beef cattle from the railroad, an order that she gladly filled and which greatly advantaged her financial condition.

It was characteristic of Loring that he made no mention to the girl of the part he played in the transaction. But he did not hesitate to inform old Abe of his recent doings.

"Takes a woman to pull the wool over a man's eyes," Uteley snorted disgustedly. "Hanging around with nesters! Son, I'm ashamed of you."

But there was a twinkle in Uteley's faded blue eyes as he spoke that belied the belligerency of his voice. Abe Uteley had himself been young once.

"Got that guard all set for business down on the Comanche?" he asked.

"That's right," Loring replied. "Brown and Carney and Blake and Whetsall. They're all set for business. I'm riding down there myself tonight. We moved down the stuff they'll need, in the nighttime, and I don't think anybody saw us. If things work out right, somebody is liable to be in for a surprise they won't like very well."

But after two weeks of tedious vigilance with barren results, Loring began to have qualms as to the straightness of his hunch. His state of mind was not improved when he contacted Pete Edwards after returning from one of his rides south. The old cowboy pulled a long face.

"We're still losin' 'em, and plenty," he declared. "And yesterday three of those Star C fellers rode up this way cussin' to beat hell. Seems they'd just tumbled to the fact that they been catchin' it too. Said they were short more than two hundred head of prime stock and that Carter was fit to be roped and tied. They asked a lot of questions about our place and I got the notion they might be a mite suspicious of us, though one of 'em did mention that this sort of thing always happens when nesters bed down in a section."

Neale Loring was decidedly perturbed by this bit of news.

He had seen this sort of thing before and knew that it could be productive of more serious trouble than the loss of

cattle. A row between the cowhands and the farmers was the last thing he wanted to happen, for general as well as personal reasons. He felt he could answer for his own hands and hold them in check, but from all accounts, the Star C riders were tough hombres and might get out of control. Doubtless Carter's opinion of the farmers was no higher than that of his men and likely as not, he could not be counted on to go much out of his way to prevent trouble. And other outfits were coming in to the east and the west that would side with the Star C if trouble started.

"What I've got to find," he told Edwards bitterly, "is their holding spot."

In the days that followed, Loring took to riding the hills east and west of the valley. Leaving the ranchhouse in the dark hours, he spent long days prowling the canyons and gorges. He had little hope of stumbling on the holding spot except by sheer accident, but he knew that cattle cannot be moved without leaving signs of their passing and he hoped to strike a trail that would lead him to the secret hide-away of the thieves.

But as the days passed they continued to be barren of results. He began to wonder if there could be some route to the south that was not generally known. However, in the course of various talks with oldtimers in town, he was unable to unearth any evidence to confirm his suspicions. And Edwards insisted they were still losing stock.

One night, after returning from a long day of hard and tiresome riding, Loring found old Abe in a very bad temper.

"I can't understand that fellow Carter," Utley declared. "That is unless it's a case of him being mighty hard up for ready cash. There was a buyer in town today. I knew he was coming and rode up to have a talk with him. I quoted my price, a price in line with the standard market quotations right now, and he laughed at me. Said he'd just made a much better deal with Carter for more than a thousand head. I got Carter's figures out of him and they were almighty low. Too low. I know the cow business, and if Carter is selling beefs at that figure, he's selling at a loss, that's all there is to it."

"Lots of cowmen are land and cattle poor," Loring pointed out. "You don't miss much being in that class yourself, after

paying out what you did to secure your land here, from what you've told me."

"That's right," Utley admitted, "but I'm darned if I'm going to sell my cows at a loss if I can possibly keep from it. It's not only bad business but it isn't fair. That sort of thing ends up in trouble for everybody. Buyers are human just like the rest of us, though lots of cowmen won't believe they are, and they're on the lookout for bargains. Let a few outfits start that sort of thing and down goes the price for everybody. There are enough headaches in this business without looking for more. I came mighty nigh jumping Carter about it when I saw him in the general store, hobnobbing with Gus Flint, but decided not to. Maybe he's up against it and couldn't help it. He doesn't seem to be a bad sort, but I sure hope he won't keep up that sort of thing."

"He can't keep it up for long, not at a thousand head a throw," Loring smiled. "I haven't looked his stock over very closely, but from what Edwards tells me, I figure his holdings don't run to more than three or four thousand."

Loring went back to the hills, and found nothing. Once, toward evening, he was sure he saw a thread of smoke rising against the sky several miles to the southwest. But a tangle of canyons and ridges intervened, and by the time he reached the general location, in accordance with his estimate of distance and direction, night was falling and the smoke, if he had really seen smoke, was invisible.

However, the incident, indefinite though it was, strengthened his resolution to keep up the search. He tried the hills to the east, although it was unlikely that they would be chosen for a holding spot because of the greater distance to the Comanche Trail and the necessity of passing across the Star C holdings to reach the old track.

Again the search was fruitless, but Loring remained firm in his purpose. Playing a hunch, he rode over to have a talk with Jacob Sutton. He had already taken the farmer into his confidence. Sutton, not unnaturally, was as anxious as Loring to have the matter cleared up.

But here results were as barren as in the hills. "Nope, I've never noticed any cattle being driven around here," the farmer said. "But," he added a moment later, "the other evening, just as it was getting dark, I was over to the west a few

miles and saw a couple of fellers driving some loaded mules into the narrow canyon where the little crick comes down. I don't think they saw me. Mules appeared to be packin' provisions and tools."

"Prospectors," grunted Loring, with scant interest. "Those fellows are always prowling the hills and the desert."

"Uh-huh, always hoping to make a big strike, and never doin' it," agreed Sutton. "They're dreamers, those desert rats, but I reckon it's somethin' to have dreamed."

"Well," chuckled Loring, "if they make a big strike in these hills, I'm afraid it'll be a dream that won't come true. These hills are part of the XT holdings. Not that Uncle Abe would mind them washing out some dust or nuggets. They'd be welcome to 'em, so far as he's concerned. Live and let live is his motto."

"Even nesters?" asked Sutton, with a twinkle.

"Yes," Loring smiled, "even nesters, for all his big talk. If one of you fellows was in trouble, Utley would be the first to lend a hand. He might growl and grumble and go to great lengths to explain it was a special case, to justify himself to himself, but he'd do it. Well, I think I'll amble over and see how the JR is making out, and play a little penny ante with the hands, Purdy and Mason."

"A good notion," nodded Sutton. "Miss Norma is sure a nice girl. She play penny ante, too?"

Norma welcomed him warmly when he rode up to the little ranchhouse.

"I just learned who was responsible for that nice sale I made to the railroad," she said.

"How'd you find that out?" Loring demanded.

"Val Purdy was in the general store at Sanders and heard Mr. Flint telling Dave Carter about it," she explained.

"Flint always seems to have a hand in everybody's business," Loring growled irritably.

"Oh, he didn't mean any harm," the girl replied. "I don't suppose he knew you intended to keep it a secret from me, and I don't see why you should want to."

"It's wasn't anything worth talking about," Loring said.

"But it meant a great deal to me," Norma replied quietly. "Now you sit down while I go and see Manuel about supper."

We're having lots of company today. Mr. Carter was here at noon."

"That fellow seems to hang around here all the time," Loring growled morosely.

"He's very nice," Norma said demurely.

"So I gather," Loring grunted, his eyes hot.

Norma walked over and stood in front of him. "Neale," she said, "I really believe you're jealous."

She was very close to him, her lithe young body warm and alluring, her lips vividly red, her blue eyes dancing with suppressed mirth. Loring glared down at her. The faint perfume from her hair intoxicated him. Suddenly he reached out his long arms, seized her and crushed her to him. His mouth came down on hers, hard. For a moment their lips clung together. Then he loosed her and stepped back.

"Well, that's one he won't get, anyhow," he growled. He turned on his heel and walked out the door. The girl stood with one little hand pressed to her bruised lips.

Loring crossed the veranda, his boot heels pounding the boards. But before he reached the steps, a voice called to him from the house—

"Come back here, stupid, and you can have another one nobody else will ever get!"

It was the old cook, shuffling in to inquire about supper, who finally brought them back to the world of reality. After supper their talk turned to serious matters.

"The Lord knows I want you bad enough, honey," Loring said at length. "But I don't see how in blazes I can ask you to marry me on the pay of a range boss."

"We'd have the ranch, dear, and you could make it pay," she reminded him gently.

Loring's lean jaw set hard. "I don't propose to have my wife support me," he growled.

Norma wisely did not press the point at the moment, but there was a look in her blue eyes that boded ill for *Senor* Loring's future peace of mind.

Loring rode back to the XT the following morning, his mind in a considerable turmoil. Life that had been so simple and direct had suddenly become vastly complicated.

A disturbing thought suddenly intruded. His pursuit of

Clate Dixon, the man who murdered his father. How could he ask Norma Ray to marry a man dedicated to such a quest? The Love Trail and the Vengeance Trail did not run the same course. Sooner or later there would be a fork. Loring had a disturbing feeling that even now he was at the forks. During the months that passed, he had never ceased seeking clues to the whereabouts of the red-bearded killer. The time would come, he felt sure, when he would catch up with Dixon and there would be a showdown. And Dixon was deadly, resourceful. There was no guarantee that he, Loring, would end up on top when the showdown came. What sort of life would it be for a woman with such an eventuality constantly hanging over her? Would any woman consent to such a life? And if she did, could either of them hope to find happiness. Neale Loring fought a bitter battle with himself as he rode north through the golden sunshine, a battle between desire and what he had come to look upon as duty. It was a war to the knife, and when he reached the ranchhouse, the problem was not yet solved.

It was fortunate that he had other things to occupy his mind. The mystery of the vanished cattle was still a mystery and also urgently demanded to be solved.

Meanwhile, Norma Ray rode over to confide in her friends, the Suttons.

"And I'm not going to let him get away with his foolish notions about not taking charge of the ranch, and waiting until he's made a fortune or something before he marries me," she concluded, setting her little chin firmly.

"Reckon he has a pretty good job with Utley," Uncle Jake said seriously, but with a twinkle in his brown eyes. "He should be in shape to get married within four or five years."

"Five years!" Norma exclaimed.

"Hmmp!" sniffed Mrs. Sutton. "Five years is none too long to test a man. Jacob served seven years to get Rachel."

"Yes," countered Norma, who also read her Bible. "And what happened after the seven years? He married another girl!"

Uncle Jake shook with laughter. "That isn't exactly the whole story," he protested this rather novel rendering of the Twenty-ninth chapter of Genesis, "but, Mother, it's something to think about."

There was a stormy session in Gus Flint's back-room office, between Flint and Dave Carter.

"Goddamn it! I tell you something's got to be done, and done fast," Flint declared. "If Loring keeps snooping around in the hills he's going to stumble onto something, sure as hell he is."

"I know it," said Carter, "but what the hell am I going to do? I might have a couple of the boys trail Loring and throw a slug through him, but there'd still be Utley to deal with, and he's a hard one to get at. He hardly ever leaves the ranch-house any more, and when he does he has four or five of his hands with him. We can't tackle a bunch like that and hope to get away with it."

"Killing Loring and leaving Utley alive wouldn't do any good—it would just do harm," said Flint. "It would rouse Utley up for fair and likely as not bring Rangers here. Utley has influence at the capital, with Randolph his friend and representative there, and I wouldn't put it past him to do it."

"I've given Rangers the slip before now," growled Carter.

"Yes, when you were on the run," said Flint. "But we can't run, not unless we decide to throw up the whole business. And I don't intend to throw it up. Not with a fortune within reach of my hand. I placed the business of taking care of Utley and Loring in your hands. Now think of something."

The pair sat in silence for some minutes. Finally Carter spoke, slowly choosing his words.

"I was just thinking," he said, "that we might grab Loring and use him for bait to get hold of Utley. I've got a notion how it could be done."

"If you could manage that, it would be perfect," Flint instantly agreed. "Get rid of Utley and Loring both and we'd be sitting pretty. I've investigated Utley, and so far as I can learn, he has no heirs. With him and Loring both out of the way, the land would revert to the state. Then I could easily get title. We'd pay off Utley's cowhands and they'd drift away. Then, after waiting a reasonable time, we could begin operations. There might be some questions asked, at first, but interest would soon die down. In this section of the country, men have been known to disappear without leaving any trace."

"I suppose you have one of those orders for supplies sent

up from the XT and signed by Loring for Utley?" Carter asked.

Flint nodded. He rummaged in a cabinet, drew forth a written sheet.

Carter studied the signature carefully, folded the sheet and thrust it into his pocket.

"This will do," he said. "You know I'm rather handy with a pen," he added significantly.

"What's on your mind?" Flint asked.

"Well," Carter said slowly, "suppose a harmless looking gent riding Loring's horse came to Utley with a note signed by Loring, asking Utley to hurry and meet up with him to help investigate something important he'd just uncovered? I have just the man to handle the job. A young fellow who looks as innocent as Billy the Kid looked, and is just as ornery. I'm pretty sure he can put it over so Utley will fall for it."

"He might," Flint admitted. "But suppose he takes a bunch along when he rides back with your man?"

"I'll take care of that," Carter replied. "As I said, Utley hardly ever leaves the ranchhouse now-days, but his hands are out on the range most all of the time, looking for rustlers. I'll make sure Utley is at the ranchhouse alone except for his cook and a wrangler or two, neither of which he would take with him. Unless he was suspicious about something, and I don't see any reason why he should be. It won't even occur to him to take anybody along. And we have a place to hold Loring. Some of the boys have been using it for a hangout."

"It might work," Flint repeated. "Anyhow, I consider it's worth trying. We've got to make sure Utley and Loring are put away at the same time. First, though, you've got to get hold of Loring."

"I'll get hold of him," Carter promised grimly. "I know his habits, and the boys will be on the job. I'll handle it. Be a pleasure. I have a sort of personal reason for wanting Loring out of the way."

Flint shot him a suspicious glance. "That girl who owns the JR, eh?" he snorted. "Women will be your downfall again, Carter, if you don't watch your step. When you commence getting mixed up with one, I almost wish I'd never sent for you. I suppose Loring is beating your time with her and that's what makes you so anxious to get rid of him."

"Well, I've a notion I'll sleep better when Neale Loring is six feet under," Carter replied cryptically as he rose to go.

CHAPTER EIGHT

NEALE LORING took to the hills again. "I've got a blanket roll, and something to eat in my saddle pouches, and may sleep out, so don't bother about me if I don't show up to-night," he told Utley before he rode off early one morning. "And by the way, some of the Star C hands had a talk with Pete Edwards yesterday. They're taking over the chore of guarding the lower end of the valley. Carter thinks we'll have a better chance of spotting the rustlers here in the valley than out on his more open range."

"Makes sense," agreed Utley. "I've a notion he may be right about that."

"Could be," Loring conceded. "Anyhow, it'll give us a better chance to cover the valley, with our boys concentrating on the upper half. If this was a walled valley and the bastards had to pass out at the mouths, it would be an easier job to keep watch. But cows can be shoved up those gentle slopes most any place, and some of the canyons run all the way through the hills. The advantage is all on their side. But with the Star C lending a hand, we may succeed in getting a line on them. Well, so long, I'll be seeing you tomorrow or the next day. That is unless I hit on something, then I'll see you sooner."

"Okay," said Utley. "Take care of yourself, son. I'll be here when you get back. Been having a touch of lumbago of late and don't feel like riding around much when it isn't necessary."

All the long Autumn day, Loring rode through the western hills, the logical location for the mysterious holding spot, if there really was such a thing. He scoured canyons and draws, followed game trails, swept with his eyes the wide vistas from ridges and crests, and found nothing. That night he camped under an overhang of cliff. He started again with the first light, working gradually to the south. Early afternoon

found him on the level ground west of the farmlands. He stopped at the JR ranchhouse for something to eat and an hour with Norma Ray, then headed north through the valley, expecting to reach the XT ranchhouse before dark. He was weary and depressed. Nothing could have been more meticulous than his search that had proven so barren of results. But he was forced to admit that in the wide area covered by the hills and the broken ground, it would be easy to miss his elusive quarry. His respect for the cow thieves was increasing. It was no ordinary fumbling outfit, but a bunch that knew their business.

Suddenly he was struck by an idea. The two prospectors Jake Sutton saw riding into the hills. Perhaps he might obtain some clue from the gold seekers, if he could locate them.

He had little doubt of being able to. Sutton knew where they entered the hills, and men and mules would leave traces of their passing easy for a plainsman's trained eyes to spot. That would be his next try after resting up a day or so at the ranchhouse, he decided.

Loring followed his usual route, riding a trail that veered in an easterly direction toward the center of the valley and then followed the banks of the stream. Several miles from the valley mouth, the trail ran through a considerable grove of large trees, winding between the massive trunks and under low, wide-spreading branches. Often he was forced to bend his head to avoid some drooping limb.

He was passing under one such when he heard a sudden rustling above. He flung up his head an instant too late. A rope snaked down from among the leaves, a loop dropped over his shoulders and was instantly jerked tight. He grabbed for his guns, but the onward plunge of his horse swept him from the saddle. He hit the ground with stunning force. Before he could make a move, men dashed out of the growth on either side. Even as he strained to free his arms from the noose, a gun barrel crashed down on his head and the world dissolved in exploding, pain-streaked flame and clammy darkness.

A man came swarming down the tree trunk from the overhanging branch to join the other two.

"Catch that red horse, Ed, and bring him here," one ordered. "Okay, now hold the horse while Watson and me

hoist this gent into the saddle. Tie his ankles to the stirrup straps. Ease him forward onto the horse's neck. Never mind his hands. I got his guns. He'll be comin' out of it before long. I didn't tap him very hard. Right. Let's go. Straight across the valley to the hills. We won't meet anybody except some of our boys maybe. The Boss took care of that. All the XT bunch are up to the north. Let's go!"

The trio mounted and set off across the valley at a fast pace, their unconscious captive lurching and swaying in the saddle.

When Neale Loring recovered consciousness, he was slumped forward on the neck of his jolting horse. His head seemed one vast ache and there was a gnawing pain in his ankles. He tried to ease their cramped position and realized that they were bound fast to the stirrup straps. For a moment he lay as he was, pain flowing through limbs that seemed other than his own and stabbing at his temples. Gradually his head cleared a little, the vague wonder as to where he was and what had happened crystallized around memory. With a mighty effort of the will, he struggled erect. At first his head whirled dizzily and his eyes were dazzled as by intense light. This quickly passed, however, and he was able to take stock of his surroundings.

His horse was pounding along a faint track that wound through craggy hills. On either side of him a man rode. The one on the right held Rojo's split reins in his hand. Slightly in front was a third man who turned his head to look at him. He was young, almost boyish in appearance. The other two were older, in the middle thirties, Loring judged, and hard-looking characters. The one on the right, a squat, brawny individual was bearded. The other, lanky, cadaverous, had clean shaven chops. All three wore rangeland garb and sat their saddles like cowhands.

"Comin' out of it, eh?" remarked the squat man in a guttural voice. "All right, just take it easy and don't try anything, if you want to stay healthy."

"What in hell—" Loring began.

"Never mind the questions," the other interrupted. "You'll find out soon enough. Just keep riding and keep your trap shut. We ain't got much farther to go."

Loring set his lips. He decided there was no use talking

and it just might get him another whack on the head. Nor did there seem much sense in wondering what it was all about. As the squat man said, he'd doubtless find out soon enough and it would be something unpleasant. The ache in his head was dulling somewhat but served only to call attention to the pain gnawing at his ankles where the rawhide thongs with which they were bound cut into the flesh.

The pain, however, served to quicken his perceptions and dissipate the fog that shrouded his brain. He studied his captors and could make little of them. He did not recall ever seeing them before. He caught a glimpse of the sun through a rift in the growth overhead and knew he could not have been unconscious for very long. The sun's position told him they were riding in an easterly direction. He decided they must have crossed the valley while he was bereft of his senses and were in the hills to the east. He wondered where his captors were taking him and for what purpose.

Half an hour later the destination was reached. The trail flowed into a shallow clearing almost circular in shape. On the far side of the clearing the trail appeared to continue through thinner growth. Over to one side, almost hidden by a straggle of thicket, was an old cabin strongly built of logs and roofed with split poles. It had a stick-and-mud chimney and a door and two windows that faced toward the riders. Against one side wall was a pole-roofed lean-to or shed, doubtless to shelter horses.

Loring's captors rode straight to the cabin door. All three dismounted and the lanky man stepped over to one side and drew his gun.

"I'll hold on to him while you cut him loose, Barnes," he said to the squat man. "Ain't takin' no chances with him; he's a tough customer."

"Reckon he's tame enough right now," grunted the other as he untied the thongs that bound Loring's ankles. He stepped back.

"Light off," he told the captive.

Loring dismounted with difficulty. His legs were numb and wooden. He clutched at the saddle horn for support.

Very quickly, however, the "pins and needles" of returning circulation set up an agony in his lower limbs. Gritting his teeth, he stamped his feet, enduring the torture that sub-

sided after a few moments. The squat man grinned, showing crooked, tobacco-stained teeth.

"I been there," he said. "Know how you feel. All right, head for the door and push it open. Don't turn around. Watson has a itchy trigger finger. Ed," he told the youngster, "put up the horses and then come on in. You got a ride ahead of you, but we'll eat first."

Loring obeyed orders. He pushed open the door and stepped into the cabin. His eyes quickly accustomed themselves to the semi-gloom of the interior and he noted a table, chairs, bunks mortressed into the walls, a rusty stove and shelves upon which reposed a store of staple provisions. It appeared the cabin knew regular occupancy.

He was not permitted to see more. Watson stepped in behind him, jabbing a gun muzzle against his back.

"Right across and through that door," Watson said, emphasizing the order with a jab of his gun barrel. "You'll have company soon, so you won't get lonesome for so long as you're here."

Loring crossed the room and passed through an inner door to find himself in a second and smaller room. The door banged shut behind him. He heard the snick of a shot bolt.

Standing in the middle of the room, Loring took stock of his prison by the fading light. The results were not encouraging. The room was bare of furnishings save for a bunk built against the far wall, upon which were tumbled blankets. The room boasted a single small and glassless window strongly barred with iron.

The walls were of logs notched closely together, the floor of planks roughly hewn with an ax. The door was uncompromisingly sturdy and held in place by heavy strap hinges screwed to the log jamb. There was a crack nearly an inch wide between the door and the jamb, through which light filtered from the other room.

Loring walked to the door and peered through the crack. He could see Watson kindling a fire in the stove. Barnes was removing provisions from the shelves.

"Slice off some bacon while I peel potatoes and get the coffee going," Barnes told Watson. "Make a johnny-cake while you're at it. We're in no hurry and I'm hungry."

"What about that feller in there?" asked Watson, jerking his thumb toward the back room.

"Oh, fix him a plate, too," said Barnes. "No sense in starvin' him. They always give fellers a good meal before hangin' 'em. He might as well enjoy himself while he can. His snoopin' days are about over."

Watson seemed to appreciate the grisly joke. He laughed brutally, and continued to chuckle as he sliced the bacon and placed the slices in an iron skillet.

The outer door opened and the youthful Ed entered the cabin, glancing around with innocent-appearing blue eyes.

"You can ride soon as you eat," Barnes told him. "Get the Boss and bring him here. He'll be waiting for you. You had ought to make it before morning. He'll want to ride at night."

"I'd like to ride that red horse," remarked Ed in a musical voice. "He's a beaut."

"You leave that red horse alone," growled Barnes. "Want to get spotted. A horse like that attracts attention. Besides, we got use for him. You'll get to ride him soon enough."

"And leave those guns alone, too," Barnes added as Pete picked up Loring's Colts from where they rested on a corner of the table. "More than one damn fool has gotten in trouble from packin' a dead man's guns. Them's mighty fine irons and like as not more than one gent has looked 'em over. If you don't learn to use your head, you won't last in this business as long as I have."

Ed grinned evilly, and replaced the hardware, reluctantly. He busied himself helping Watson with the cooking.

Loring left the door and sat down on the bunk. His captors had taken his knife and everything else that might serve as a weapon, but they had left his tobacco and matches. He rolled a cigarette and smoked thoughtfully.

There was a sizeable lump on the side of his head, but otherwise he was unhurt and his strength was quickly returning. Pondering the situation, he decided he had been taken captive by members of the bunch that had been robbing the XT and the Star C. As to what fate was in store for him he had little doubt. Barnes' hints were broad. Loring did not expect to live long after the mysterious Boss returned with Ed. He was puzzled over Barnes' remark about him having company soon. It appeared another captive was to be brought in. Lor-

ing decided that perhaps it was Pete Edwards, who had first stumbled onto the systematic stealing. What puzzled him more was why his captors had not finished him off at once. That appeared to be their ultimate intention. Why go to the trouble to bring him to what was evidently their hidden hangout? There must be a reason, but what it was, Loring could not imagine. He pinched out his cigarette butt and utilized the last fading light to make another survey of the room, with barren results so far as hope of escape was concerned. The cabin had doubtless been built by some wandering prospector or trapper, many years before, and had been built to endure and to provide a place of refuge against the marauding Indians and Mexican raiders who formerly frequented the section. It was discouragingly sturdy.

While Loring was smoking a second cigarette, in darkness, now, Barnes' voice raised in the outer room.

"Stand back away from the door, you," he called.

"I'm on the bunk," Loring answered.

"All right," said Barnes, "stay there if you know what's good for you."

Loring heard the bolt snick back. The door was opened a crack and a plate of food, a heavy iron spoon and a cup filled with steaming coffee were shoved through. The door slammed shut and the bolt was again shot.

Loring groped across the dark room and located the food. He was hungry and might as well eat. He went back to the bunk and proceeded to do so. Feeling considerably better, he placed the empty plate and cup on the floor and rolled another cigarette. A few minutes later he strolled to the door again and peered through the crack. The three men were eating in silence. His guns lay on a corner of the table. Loring eyed them longingly; his hands itched to grip the checkered wooden stocks, if only for a moment. But they might as well have been on the other side of the valley for all the good they were likely to do him. He returned to the bunk and sat down.

But he didn't stay there. A nervous restlessness drove him back to the crack in the door. He saw Ed stand up from the table, wipe his mouth and put on his hat.

"Think I'll be ridin'," Ed told Barnes.

"Reckon you'd better," Barnes agreed. "Watson and me'll

clean up and then turn in till you get back. Didn't get much sleep last night. Okay, the Boss will be glad to hear the news. He's been jumpy about that bastard ever since he showed up here."

Ed left the cabin. A few minutes later Loring heard hoofs thud away on the trail.

Barnes and Watson proceeded to wash the dishes. Then they smoked a cigarette each, grunting occasional monosyllables to one another. Loring watched them through the crack, having nothing else to occupy his mind. He tried to formulate a plan at escaping, but could think of no possible way to get out of the bolted room. He finally resolved a desperate dash for freedom when next the door was opened. It was tantamount to committing suicide, he admitted, but he was convinced he had but a short time to live in any event.

Leaning against the door, he absently traced the shape of the heavy strap hinge with his finger tips. He thrust a tentative nail into the slot in the head of one of the big screws, rasped it back and forth, absently. Suddenly he started, his heart beats accelerating. He scratched cautiously on the surface of the axe-squared log that formed the door jamb, into which the hinge screws were driven. With a surge of hope, he realized that the wood was crumbly and worm eaten. If he could only remove the screws from the rotted wood! Then it would be simple to fling the door open. Then a grab for his guns and a fighting chance.

But what to use for a screwdriver? His heart sank. His knife and anything else that might have served had been taken. He slipped back to the bunk. Perhaps the planks forming its bed were held together by iron straps that he might be able to loosen and use for the purpose.

A swift examination of the bunk killed that hope. The planks were bound to the frame with rawhide thongs. Loring straightened up with a mutter of disgust. His foot struck against the empty plate and the spoon and rattled them.

Again that surge of heart-lifting hope! The spoon! It was of stout iron! He groped about till he found the utensil. He ran his fingers over it, then slipped back to the door. He fitted the blunt point into the slot in the screw head. It fitted snugly. Cautiously he put forth his strength. The screw moved a trifle. His heart beat wildly.

Loring desisted for the time being and went back to the bunk and sat down, rolling a cigarette with trembling fingers. He would have to wait till the two men were asleep. Even then there was a chance that they might hear him at work. Such men usually sleep with one eye open, like dogs. But he would have to risk it. He could hear them moving about, washing the dishes and cleaning up after the meal. He eased back on the bunk and schooled himself to patience.

Chairs creaked as the two men sat down again. They conversed in low tones. Loring could not make out what they were saying. Matches scratched as they lighted cigarettes.

Gradually the talk slackened to occasional grunts. The chairs creaked again. Steps sounded. Then Loring heard the thud of a removed boot striking the floor, and another. There was the sound of a man lying down on one of the bunks. Loring glided across to the crack and peered through. The bracket lamp had been turned low, but he could make out the lanky form of Watson on the far bunk. He was fully clothed save for his boots and had not removed his gun belt. Barnes evidently occupied the opposite bunk for he was not within Loring's range of vision.

Loring went back to his own bunk and stretched out on it, trying to relax, husbanding his strength. He was tingling with impatience. Removing the screws might take a long time and there was no telling when Ed and the Boss would arrive. Before morning, Barnes had said. Before morning might mean any time, and Loring knew it was already past midnight. But he had to wait till the two men were fast asleep before he began working. Not until he could hear deep and rhythmic breathing in the outer room did he leave the bunk.

Removing the screws did take a long time. Before he finished with the upper hinge his fingers were sore and bleeding, and he was trembling with fatigue. His muscles seemed turned to water.

As he anticipated, the screws had become somewhat loosened with the passage of time. But they were still firmly enough fixed in the wood to make their removal with his makeshift tool a tedious and difficult procedure. Loring was wet with sweat and his breath came in gasps. From time to time, he was forced to pause and rest. The tip of the spoon became bent and was hard to straighten. Finally the tip

broke off. But this was an advantage. The thicker metal better resisted the strain.

Finally the upper hinge swung free. Loring sat down on the bunk and rested before tackling the lower one. He had lost all track of time, which had become a slow eternity of frightful effort and nerve wracking anticipation.

The lower hinge afforded an even more difficult task. He had to squat on his heels and work from an awkward angle. There were four screws to be removed and each one seemed more firmly fixed than the preceding one. Once he thought he heard horses outside the cabin and paused rigid, his heart pounding, until he was sure he was mistaken.

After an eternity of back-breaking effort the last screw came out of the wood and the hinge swung free. The door sagged slightly, creaking against the bolt. Loring thrust his fingers between door and jamb and held it in place. For long minutes he stood breathing deeply, until his strength returned and his nerves were steady once more. He listened, peered through the crack, his gaze fixed on the two guns lying on the table.

Loring knew that the success or failure of his desperate attempt hinged on one small item. Were the guns on the table still loaded, he had a chance. If the cartridges had been removed from the cylinders he was good as dead. Jaw grimly set, he tensed for the final effort.

Working slowly and carefully, he eased the door toward him, until he felt the bolt come free from the hasp. Then with all his strength he hurled the door back into the room and leaped through the opening. He was reaching for the guns before it hit the floor with a thunderous crash.

As he seized the guns, Loring knew they were loaded. He whirled to face Barnes, who was coming out of his bunk, gun in hand. Loring snapped a shot at him and Barnes fell forward with a choking cry.

Across the room a gun blazed. The bullet ripped Loring's sleeve. He slewed sideways, firing at Watson with both hands. A second slug tore through the top of his boot, nearly hurling him off balance. A third grazed his temple. Red flashes stormed before his eyes, blinding him. He fired again and again till the hammers clicked on empty shells.

Sagging against the table, Loring suddenly realized that

the cabin was strangely still, still save for a soft and ghastly sound. The slow plash of great drops of blood falling one by one. Loring's eyes cleared and he peered through the powder fog.

Barnes lay on the floor, his throat torn open by Loring's first bullets. Watson was half in and half out of his bunk, his body riddled.

Mechanically, Loring ejected the spent shells from his guns and replaced them with fresh cartridges. He holstered the Colts with twitching hands and again sagged against the table. His heart was racing, he was breathing as one who has run fast and far, there was a deadly feel of sickness in the pit of his stomach. He sank into a chair and remained there for several minutes, until his pulses had ceased their pounding and he was breathing normally.

There was a half pot of still warm coffee on the stove. He poured a cup and swallowed it at a gulp, drinking a second more slowly. He seized a hunk of johnny-cake from a shelf and ate it like a starving man, striving to relieve the awful feel of emptiness that possessed him.

The food quickly had the desired results. His mind stopped whirling in circles, his nerves steadied. The dirty window panes of the cabin were graying and he realized dawn was not far off. Ed and the Boss might appear at any instant. Loring left the cabin and hurried to the lean-to. Rojo, tethered there, greeted him with a plaintive nicker. His saddle hung on a nearby peg.

With fumbling fingers he got the rig on the red horse and cinched it in place. He led Rojo from under the shed and mounted.

As he hesitated which direction to take, there was a clicking of hoofs and four men rode into view from the west. Loring whirled Rojo and sent him charging across the clearing.

There was a startled oath, a shout of alarm. A gun cracked. The bullet whined past Loring's head. He bent low in the saddle and urged Rojo to greater speed. They flashed into the growth, bullets whistling around them, Rojo's irons drumming the surface of the faint trail. Loring did not shoot back. He concentrated on getting the utmost from his racing horse, confident that Rojo would quickly distance the pursuit. Behind sounded shouts and the pound of hoofs.

They whisked around a curve and on for a hundred yards or more at top speed.

Rojo came to a slithering halt, hoofs splayed, with a suddenness that all but hurled his rider from the saddle. Under his very nose was a wide ravine that cut the trail. In its depths, a good fifty feet below, was a gleam of water.

On either side was thick brush and broken ground. Behind sounded the triumphant yells of the pursuers. There was only one thing to do.

"Take it, Rojo!" Loring roared, driving his spurs home.

Rojo didn't want to take it, but he did, with a scream of fright and anger. He launched his great body over the lip. Down they rushed, the displaced air screaming past them, the water leaping upward to meet them like a living thing. They struck with a tremendous splash and went down and down until Loring thought they would never rise again.

Rojo's irons clashed on the stones at the bottom. Loring slipped from the saddle and clutched the horn as the current gripped them and hurled them downstream, rising slowly through the icy water.

Loring's lungs were bursting when they broke surface. He gulped in great draughts of life-giving air and clung to the saddle horn. From behind came, faintly, the angry shouts of the baffled pursuers. A few bullets struck the surface of the water nearby, but in another instant they had swept around a bend and were out of range.

But the stream ran like a millrace and the water was icy cold. Loring's body was growing numb, his strength going. It was all he could do to retain his grip on the wet and slippery horn. And the side walls of the gorge flickered by without a break.

Soon, however, the walls began to fall back. A strip of sandy beach appeared to the left. Horse and man struggled toward it. And abruptly the situation developed a fresh horror. Loring became conscious of a deep roaring that quickly increased in volume. They were rushing toward a waterfall. Craning his neck he could see where the stream plunged over a cliff less than two hundred yards distant. His eyes absently noted how smooth and rounded was the curve of the lip before the water hurtled downward. Rojo saw it also and redoubled his efforts to reach the shore. His hoofs grated on

the sand. The water swiftly shallowed and horse and man floundered onto the beach. Loring released his hold on the horn, staggered on to where grass grew at the base of the gorge wall. Even as he reached it, he fell, to lie prone and retching. Almost instantly he sank into the sodden sleep of utter exhaustion.

CHAPTER NINE

THE SUN was directly overhead and pouring its warm rays into the gorge when Loring awoke with a start of fright. He sat up and glanced around, apprehensively. There was no living thing in sight, save only Rojo, who was placidly cropping grass nearby, apparently none the worse for his recent harrowing experience.

Loring struggled to his feet. He was stiff and sore, but his fatigue was relieved, and with the toughness of youth he would quickly throw off the other effects. His clothes were almost dry and the warmth of the sun was restoring.

He carefully fumbled his damp tobacco and papers from his pocket and spread them on a convenient rock to dry. He had matches in a tightly stoppered bottle that resisted the water and he soon had a smoke going.

"Well, we made it," he told the horse through the blue trickle of his cigarette. "But it was sure touch-and-go for a while. If my hair isn't gray now, it never will be."

Pinching out the cigarette butt, he arose and removed Rojo's rig. Then he gave the red horse a good rubdown, after which he replaced saddle and bridle and mounted.

"Might as well follow the creek, fellow," he decided. "It must reach the grasslands sooner or later. I've a notion it's the same one that runs across the Star C west range and is only a few miles east of the valley. Once we get out of this crack we'll head for home. You managed to fill up on grass, but it's no good for me. Let's go."

Loring's surmise proved correct. The widening gorge finally opened out onto the rangeland at no great distance from the valley mouth. Two hours later he was riding north.

Mindful of his recent unpleasant experience, Loring was alert and watchful during the homeward ride; but he reached the XT ranchhouse without incident, some time after dark.

Abe Utley listened in wrathful bewilderment to Loring's story.

"Must have been Clate Dixon and his bunch, out to get you, son," was his verdict when Loring finished the account. But Loring shook his head.

"I can't see it, Boss," he said. "If it was Dixon wanting to get me out of the way, that fellow would have just tapped me a little harder with his gun barrel and finished me off. Why should they go to all the trouble and risk of taking me to their hide-out? It just doesn't make sense."

"Maybe they figured to hold you for ransom?" Utley hazarded.

"Not likely, I'd say," Loring replied with a smile. "A range boss isn't very promising ransom material. Besides, from the hints Barnes threw out, it was pretty evident that I was to be finished off soon after Ed got back with the Boss, whoever he might be. Seems they were just waiting to capture somebody else and then do for us both. I wish I'd gotten a look at those three fellows who rode back with Ed, but the light wasn't very good and besides I had other things to think about just then."

"What about that cabin they had you locked up in?" suggested Utley. "You figured it to be their hangout, didn't you? How about keeping watch on the cabin for some of them to show up?"

"They'll never use it again," Loring said. "They'd know there's a chance somebody might take a look at it. No, that's out."

"The whole thing's beyond me," said Utley. "Maybe that Dixon bastard figured to do a little chore of torturing on you before killing you."

Loring shook his head. "I can't see that, either," he disagreed. "From all I heard of Dixon, he's not that kind. He's bad and a killer, but there's no evidence that he ever went in for anything of that sort. In fact, I'd say that Dixon has no particular personal anger against me. I'm just a threat to his security that must be removed, if possible. That is if I happen to cross his path. I don't think he'd take the trouble to try

and run me down unless I was really interfering with some plan of his."

"You might have the answer right there," said Utley. "Dixon may have something in mind, something he can't pull off so long as you're around and kicking."

"But in the name of Petel! What?" Loring demanded. "The only thing of any value with which I'm connected is the XT, and I don't own that. And will you please explain to me what would an outlaw and killer with a price on his head do with a cattle ranch if he managed to get hold of it? He couldn't operate it. He couldn't sell it. Why, he couldn't even sell the stock in the open market."

"Just before those bastards dropped their loop on me I had an idea about the rustling," he added.

"What's that?" asked Utley.

"Those two prospectors Jake Sutton saw going into the hills," Loring explained. "I'm going to try and locate those fellows."

"Prospectors don't run off cows," snorted Utley.

"No," Loring agreed, "but they browse around a lot and cover a lot of ground. It's just possible they might have noticed something. I figure it's worth a try, anyhow. I'm sure not getting anywhere as it is. I'm going to ride over to that canyon tomorrow and see if I can pick up their trail. Chances are they're pecking and tapping somewhere up around the head of that gulch. Sutton said they were driving a couple of loaded mules, so they must have figured on spending some time in the hills."

"I wish you'd stay out of those damned hills," Utley said in worried tones. "With the valley guarded as it is now, and with the Star C bunch lending a hand, we're bound to catch the devils sooner or later, if they keep on operating. Why not let it go at that, Neale? Stop prowling around in the hills and taking chances. You're playing into their hands."

Loring's lean jaw set stubbornly. "When I start something, I aim to finish it," he said. "They must have a holding spot somewhere, and I calc'late to find it."

Utley gave over the argument, but he went to bed in no pleasant frame of mind and had trouble getting to sleep. The affection he had developed for the young range boss was comparable to the feeling of a father for a son.

"I'd rather lose every damn cow I own than to have anything happen to him," he told his pillow as he tried to thump it into a more comfortable shape.

Leaving the ranchhouse before dawn, Loring rode to the canyon in question the following morning. With the plainsman's keen and experienced eye, he had little difficulty in picking up the trail left by the two mules and the horses ridden by the men Sutton noticed. But as he progressed up the narrow gorge he became sorely puzzled by what he saw.

"Looks like this crack has been a regular run-way of late," he told Rojo. "There are the mule tracks, all right, and they're about a week old, I'd say, tying up proper with the time Uncle Jake said he saw those two fellows. But there are older tracks, too, and some a lot fresher—prints left by horses, not mules. If there were any signs of cows having passed this way, I'd think I'd hit it at last. But I'm willing to bet this month's pay that there never has been a cow in here. What in hell is this all about, anyhow?"

For several miles Loring followed the trail, which flowed on up the gorge. The canyon was narrow with lofty walls which were slashed every now and then by side gulches and washes. However, the trail did not turn but continued north. And then, some five miles from the canyon mouth, it turned. Turned into an even narrower and more gloomy gorge that split the west wall at an angle. The canyon was stony and brush grown and here the trail was almost indiscernible. But Loring had no fear of losing it. The sheer rock walls towered upward for hundreds of feet without a break in their beetling surface. There was evidence that once upon a time considerable water had flowed down the gorge, but now it was dry save for trickles from occasional shallow springs.

Loring covered perhaps three miles more, with the canyon narrowing and growing more and more gloomy. Finally the sun rose high enough to shine directly down into the gorge and very quickly the heat became intense. Another mile and Rojo pricked his ears and stared ahead with questioning eyes. Loring heard it also, a queer murmuring that he thought at first might be caused by running water. But as he forged on, the sound loudened to a rumbling and grating. It was continuous but highlighted by occasional louder rumbles that

were almost bumps. Loring quickly associated the sound with the grating of rock on rock but was completely at a loss as to its cause. A moment later he distinctly smelled wood smoke intermingled with the aroma of cooking meat and boiling coffee.

"Somebody up here, all right," he muttered.

Instinctively he grew cautious. He had learned to mistrust anything he did not understand, and the activity ahead was decidedly mysterious. He pulled Rojo to a halt.

"I've a notion I'd better leave you here, fellow, and scout around a bit instead of barging on and letting everybody know I'm coming," he told the bay.

Dismounting, he led the horse in back of a thicket and tethered him lightly to a trunk. Then he proceeded on foot, pausing from time to time to peer and listen. Now he could hear other sounds as of the tapping of a pick and the scrape of a shovel. He moved forward a little more and found himself descending a narrow track between the growth toward what appeared to be a shallow hollow flanked by the canyon's west wall. The heat in this close place was terrific. He paused to wipe the sweat from his eyes and proceeded more slowly. Another moment and he topped a little swell and stood staring through a final fringe of growth. The cliff wall was less than a score of yards distant and built near it were brush-roofed structures evidently erected for shade. Over to one side was a spring beside which glowed a fire in a rough stone fireplace. On the coals were covered skillets and a large coffeepot.

But it was the nearer and larger structure that interested Loring. It was octagonal in shape, built of mesquite posts and brush. From under it came the rumble of moving rocks and the clatter of pick and shovel. He moved forward a few more paces and gazed at the novel scene.

The brush-roofed structure was a shelter for what he recognized as an *arrastra*, the primitive stamp mill utilized by the early Spaniards, and later by Mexicans and wandering prospectors to crush gold or silver bearing ore.

In the center of the shelter a round pit had been dug in the ground and lined and floored with flat stones. An upright beam was set in the middle of this, its upper end fastened to the roof. Crossbeams were attached to the upright, and from these crossbeams dragged heavy rocks held by chains. A long and stout pole, like the tongue of a wagon,

extended far out from the upright at a height of about four feet from the ground. The upright was set in sockets above and below so as to turn easily. As it turned it revolved the crossbeams and dragged the heavy stones around and around the pit, crushing the ore shovelled under them. Mercury would be used to absorb the freed gold from the surface and crevices between the flooring stones. The contrivance was crude and wasteful but efficient enough in its way.

The motive power to revolve the upright was in this instance provided by two men who appeared to be Mexicans. Bent almost double, they shoved on the outer end of the pole in a ceaseless and fatiguing trudge around the circumference of the pit, the sun blazing down on them through the opening in the brush roof.

Two more men were busy with pick and shovel, one digging down the metal bearing ore from a ledge of crumbling rock that ran along the cliff face, the other shovelling it into the pit.

"Shucks," Loring muttered disappointedly, "just some prospectors crushing out gold or silver."

He was about to announce his presence when the *arrastra* slowed as one of the pushers stumbled and faltered with weariness.

Instantly the man with the shovel dropped his tool, seized a heavy quirt that lay nearby and with a bellowed curse, lashed the two pushers across their bare backs. Loring saw blood spurt under the cruel rawhide. The two toilers did not cry out but only shuffled on at an accelerated pace. The man with the quirt glared at them, fingering the lash and growling something Loring could not make out above the bumping and grinding of the stones.

"There's something funny about this," the range boss told himself. He hesitated an instant, then strode down the slope.

He was close to the structure before its occupants noticed his approach. The man with the quirt suddenly peered with outthrust neck. Then he uttered a startled yelp and dropped the lash. His hand flashed down. Loring caught a gleam of shifted metal. He hurled himself sideways even as the gun roared. He gasped as the slug ripped a stinging furrow along his ribs. As he staggered, off balance, the pick man fired. The slug fanned Loring's face. He slewed sideways again. His

hands streaked to his guns. The cliff face echoed and vibrated to the roar as both guns let go in booming thunder.

Back and forth the spurts of flame knifed through the swirling smoke. A bullet nicked Loring's shoulder. Another rasped his cheek. Then he lowered his smoking Colts and stared through the fog at the two forms sprawled motionless under the shelter.

Loring strode forward, guns cocked and ready for instant action. The two Mexicans were straining away from him, cowering against one of the corner posts. Loring fixed his icy eyes on them.

"Come out of that," he ordered harshly.

"*Señor*," one quavered, "we cannot."

Then Loring saw that the two men were chained and padlocked to the *arrastra* pole.

"For the love of Petel what is going on here?" he exclaimed. "Where's the key to those locks?"

"In the pocket of the shorter one," the older Mexican replied in very good English.

Loring holstered his guns and approached the smaller of the two dead men. He was surprised to note that the man wore high-heeled riding boots instead of the usual clumsy shoes of the prospector. The other's feet were similarly shod. He found the key and unlocked the padlocks, freeing the captives. They leaned against the post and chafed bruised and swollen wrists.

"And now," Loring said, "what's this all about?"

"*Señor*, we know not," the Mexican replied. "We were driving our salt cart south along the Comanche Trail, Pedro and I, when men rode up to us. They shot our mule and made us prisoners. They brought us here and made us work the *arrastra*. When we faltered from weariness, they beat us."

"How long you been here?" Loring asked.

"The month, perhaps more," the Mexican replied. "When one lives as we have lived, time has no meaning."

Loring nodded. "Just those two bastards picked you up?" he asked.

"No, *Señor*. There were others. Six altogether."

"Which means that somebody might come snooping up here at any time, Loring observed.

"*Si, señor*," the Mexican said. "Every two days the others

come to talk and to relieve those working here. Two always remain when the others depart. They should come tonight. They come always at night."

"Then we don't need to hustle too much," Loring decided. He noted that the men were staring longingly at the cooking fire.

"Hungry?" he asked.

"Señor, we are starving," the other said. "They fed us only enough to keep body and soul together."

"Then go ahead and eat," Loring told them. "Looks like there's plenty of good food over there. I'll have some coffee with you."

The Mexicans needed no second invitation. They hurried to the fire and ate like starving men.

"Take it easy," Loring cautioned. "Stop while you're still hungry. Too much on a starved stomach isn't good. Here, have some more coffee. That will fill you up and not do any harm."

While the *peons* were finishing their meal, Loring investigated the surroundings. In one corner of the shelter he discovered flasks of quicksilver and an iron retort that was evidently used to vaporize the quicksilver and free its gold content, for inside the retort was a dull yellow lump about half the size of a man's head. It was astonishingly heavy. Nearby were two plump buckskin sacks filled with fragments of metal doubtless chipped from a similar lump.

"Gold content mighty high," he decided.

Acting on impulse, he picked up the pokes and the lump and thrust them at the two Mexicans.

"Take it," he told them. "The Lord knows you've earned it."

"Señor," gasped the man who spoke English, "you are most generous."

"Not particularly so," Loring replied with a laugh, "it isn't hard to give away something that doesn't belong to you. But I know my Boss, who owns this land, won't object."

"And now," he continued, "I've a notion we'd better be trailing away from here. By the way, do you think you would recognize the others of the bunch if you saw them again?"

"Señor, I think we would," the Mexican replied.

"Then, if you don't mind, I'll just take you fellows to our ranchhouse and keep you with us a spell," Loring said. "You might be able to help us clean up this nest of snakes."

The Mexican's dark face contorted with hatred. "Señor," he said, "that would indeed be the great pleasure."

"Okay," Loring nodded. "I see there's a couple of rigs lying over there in the corner. Reckon those dead men have horses somewhere around?"

"Sí, señor, beyond the thicket to the left. There is an open space, grass grown, and another spring."

"All right," Loring said. "Get 'em and get the rigs on 'em. Then come back here. I want to look around a bit more."

He explored the gold bearing ledge a ways. It stretched along the cliff face for an unknown distance.

"Don't know much about such things, but it sure looks like a rich strike to me," he told the Mexicans. "Uncle Abe will be sort of interested. And," he added grimly, "I'm beginning to understand some things that have been puzzling me."

"Señor," said the older Mexican, "it is a rich strike. I, Ralpho, know something of such matters, and tell you so. This is no shallow pocket. The ledge burrows deep into the earth, and it extends for a long distance. With proper tools and working, it will yield great returns. There is gold here to make many men wealthy. The method that has been used here is slow and wasteful. The ledge should be mined with machinery, the ore crushed in stamp mills driven by steam. I knew the men who enslaved us had no right to the gold. They did not even post location notices. Which means they did not file a claim with the proper authorities. They are thieves who dare not report their find."

Loring nodded. "I've a notion you're right," he agreed. "Uncle Abe, my Boss, will be sort of interested, and he'll see to it you boys don't lose anything by sticking with us."

"And," he added grimly, "I'm beginning to understand some things that have been puzzling me. No wonder somebody wants to get rid of me, and Utley also. It was Utley those bastards who had me locked in that cabin hoped to take. Then they would have done away with both of us and somehow managed to get hold of this strike. How, I'll be damned if I know, no more than I know who is back of all this, but I aim to find out."

He stopped talking, realizing that he had been speaking his thoughts aloud to the puzzled Mexican.

"I'll tell you all about it later. Ralpho," he chuckled. "When

we get to the ranchhouse. Maybe you'll be able to give us a bigger hand than you expect. Wait a minute. We've got to dispose of those bodies."

He searched around a bit, found a crevice suitable for the purpose he had in mind.

"Pack the bodies over here," he called to his companions. "We'll dump 'em in this crack and roll rocks on top of them. When the relief shows up and don't find their pardners, and find the gold gone, it should puzzle 'em. Chances are they'll decide this pair made off with it. Anyhow, they'll have a time figuring out what really did happen."

The chore was soon finished. The horses, good animals, were saddled and bridled for the Mexicans. Loring had hoped that the brands might tell him something, but they turned out to be meaningless "skillet-of-snakes" burns apparently run on south of the Rio Grande. He retrieved Rojo and they rode down the canyon at a good pace, reaching its mouth just as dusk was falling, which was what Loring planned.

Old Abe swore in astonishment and wrath when Loring regaled him with an account of the happenings in the canyon. He swore some more as Loring continued to talk.

"Now I reckon you understand why somebody tried to kill us both there on the hill trail," the range boss went on. "Somebody caught onto that gold ledge in the canyon and figures to get possession of it. First they'd have to get you out of the way, for it is on your land and, according to mining law, all metal on it belongs to you. As I say, I don't know much about mining, but it sure looks rich, and Ralpho who claims to know something about such matters, insists it is. Somebody else must think so, seeing as they're willing to commit murder to get it."

"But what in hell are we going to do about it?" Utley demanded helplessly.

"Nothing, right now," Loring replied. "There's nothing much we can do. Of course you can take over the ledge any time you are of a mind to, but I'd sure like to first get a line on the bastards pulling the wires."

"You don't figure it was the two you caught at the *arrastra*, then?" Utley asked.

"Hell, no," Loring said. "I looked 'em over careful, and I'd never credit that sort of scum with brains enough to

handle such a scheme. No, they were just a couple of hired hands, perhaps, just doing a little on-the-side stealing of their own. Chances are the real Boss doesn't even know about the *arrastra* up there. They were cowhand types, not real prospectors."

"How about layin' a trap for the rest of them when they show up?" Utley suggested.

"I thought of that," Loring replied. "They're due there tonight, according to the Mexican boys, but I didn't feel up to tackling the whole bunch in the dark by myself, and the Mexicans were too worn out and scared to be much help. I figured if what happened there today doesn't scare them off, and I don't think it will, for they won't be able to figure what really did happen, they'll keep on working the ledge and we can drop in on them any time we take a notion. But very likely even if we caught them, they wouldn't know who is really back of things. That sort usually keeps pretty well under cover. And the big Boss is the one we want."

"I've still got a notion Clate Dixon is back of everything," Utley said.

"And it still doesn't make sense," Loring retorted. "Dixon could no more operate a quartz mine than he could a cow ranch. To do so he'd have to come out in the open, and he can't. And what I mentioned before, the impossibility of him getting control of the land, still holds. Admitting the remote chance of Dixon being mixed up in it, he's got to have somebody with him, somebody with a respectable front. But if so, where is Dixon? I've questioned any number of people, including the sheriff and his deputies, and nobody has seen anybody resembling Dixon. Doesn't seem reasonable that he could be operating in the section all this time without somebody seeing him. I'm about ready to believe he headed west into the Big Bend, or perhaps to Mexico."

"I hope so," grunted Utley.

Neale Loring would not admit it even to himself, but he knew in his heart that he hoped so, too.

"Well," he said, "this matter can wait, for the time being. I've got other things to do right now. I still don't know who's rustling our cows, or how."

CHAPTER TEN

A FEW DAYS later, most unexpectedly, for such things usually happen that way, Loring got the break for which he so long and vainly hoped. He was riding in the shadow of the west wall of the valley and some five miles from its mouth when he noticed a thread of smoke rising from beyond a thicket a little farther on. He quickened his horse's pace and soon reached a point from where he could ascertain its source, a small fire about a quarter mile distant. Near the fire stood two horses holding tight ropes that stretched an animal helpless on the ground. Two men were busy over the hogtied calf. To Loring's ears came a strangled bleat of pain and protest.

A couple of the boys branding a calf, he decided and thought no more of the matter at the moment. He pulled up in the cool shade and proceeded to roll and light a cigarette. Before he had finished smoking, the two men rose from beside the fire. The ropes were cast loose and the freed calf struggled to its feet, licked its side a couple of times and began grazing. The men mounted their horses and rode down the valley at a fast pace.

Loring finished his cigarette, pinched out the butt and rode across the valley floor to see if his hands had done a good job of burning. As he drew nearer he was surprised to note that the calf was considerably more than a calf, very nearly a yearling, in fact.

"Now how did we come to miss that critter for so long?" he wondered.

But as he got close enough to read the brand, he understood. The burn was a Star C.

"One of Carter's mavericks strayed up here," he told Rojo. "Plenty of his stock in the valley."

The cow looked up, eyed Loring suspiciously a moment and then went back to cropping grass. Loring idly speculated the burn on its haunch. He noted absently that above the

Star C was a cross-out brand such as marked most of Carter's stock.

Suddenly he leaned forward in his saddle, staring at the blotted brand above the Star C.

"Darned if that doesn't look like a fresh burn, too," he muttered. "How come?"

Interested he drew still nearer. The cow moved away a few paces. Loring walked his horse slowly toward it, his eyes fixed on the two burns. Suddenly his eyes narrowed. He halted Rojo and gazed fixedly at the Star C brand. He loosened his rope, built up a loop and made a quick under-hand toss. The loop settled over the yearling's head. Rojo instantly took up the slack. The cow plunged a couple of times, uttered a strangled bawl and stood still. Loring dismounted and approached it warily. Rojo kept the rope taut and the cow had to either stand still or have its wind shut off. It decided to stand still. Loring came within arm's reach of it. He stared at the brand, reached out a finger and traced it with the tip. Then he stepped back and gave a low whistle.

"Well, if this doesn't take the shingles off the barn!" he exclaimed aloud. "Of all the smooth work I ever saw! No wonder we couldn't find out what was becoming of our stock."

The mystery of the purloined cattle was no longer a mystery. And the simple ingenuity of the scheme was stupefying. No wonder the Star C bunch had offered to take over the chore of guarding the lower half of the valley. It gave them a clear field for their foul work. Loring realized he had unwittingly played into their hands by agreeing to the plan. Even with the XT hands riding the range, there was little chance of detection, and with them concentrated in the upper half of the valley, the brand changers were free to work at their leisure.

It was easy to understand now how Dave Carter could sell below the current market price. He was selling XT beefs.

But knowing and proving were two different matters. Loring cursed his delay in riding over to the branding fire. Had he gotten a look at the two men, he would be in a position to make a case against them. And perhaps, to save their own necks they could have been induced to testify against Carter.

Not that he was at all certain that such evidence would stand up in court.

As it was, he had not a shred of evidence of any kind against anybody. He had the cow, plain proof that the brand was altered, but nobody against whom he could place a charge. The matter would take considerable thinking out. First, Uteley must be advised of what had been going on. Loring was getting an idea as to procedure against the thieves, but it would take time, and careful working out. He thought of posting Edwards and others to keep watch, on the chance of catching the brand changers red-handed; but even then, Carter might be able to slide from under. Carter could plead ignorance of what was going on, and it would be hard to get a jury to disbelieve him. Were it not for the herd Carter sold at reduced prices, Loring would have been inclined to think that Carter possibly did not know what was going on. Selling that herd was the slip that was liable to prove Carter's undoing. He decided to return to the ranchhouse and a consultation with Uteley without delay.

He nodded to the disgusted looking yearling. "Cow," he said, "you're coming home with me." He mounted Rojo and turned his head north. The cow, having no choice in the matter, followed.

When Loring reached the ranchhouse, shortly after dark, he stabled his horse and secured the cow in an adjoining stall. He placed a lighted lantern beside the stall and went to find Uteley.

When old Abe reached the stable in Loring's company, he stared in astonishment at the stalled yearling.

"What's the big notion, son?" he asked. "Going in for a little cow stealing in your old age. You can't ever get by with it this way. They'll catch you sure. Why'd you bring me out here to see this critter?"

"I brought you out here," Loring explained, "to see the smoothest bit of brand changing you or anybody else ever saw or heard tell of. Can't you see it? That's one of our cows."

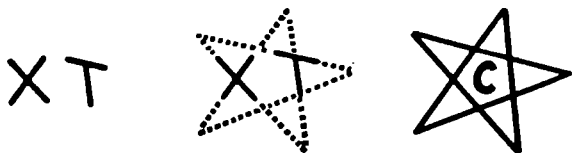
"One of our cows!" snorted Uteley. "Are you plumb loco? Anybody with half an eye can see that's one of Carter's Star C critters."

"Well, use all of both eyes, and maybe you'll change your mind," Loring said. "Look, I'll show you."

He drew a pencil and a notebook from his pocket.

"Now, watch," he said. "Here's our X T burn. The way

our irons are made, the stem of the T slants a little, which makes the chore all the easier for the bastards. Now we'll begin over again. We'll extend the cross bars of the X and the stem and the bar of the T. Then we draw a line across under the X and the T. Here we go. First the XT— Now we've got a star, see?



“We put a C in the middle of the star, and there it is. Talk about smooth work! I never would have caught on except for two things. First, they burned a blotted brand above the Star C so the cow would look like the rest of Carter’s stock. Second, the jigger let his iron slip just a little when he burned over the stem of the T and left the outer edge of the old brand showing the merest trifle. This time tomorrow, when the scab had begun to form, nobody would have ever noticed it, but I got to the critter just a few minutes after the iron had been touched to its hide. Now do you see it all? It doesn’t look possible, but a real capable slick-iron artist can do as good a chore with a cinch ring or a bit of telegraph wire as an expert forger can with a pen.”

Old Abe raised his fists and swore till the rafters smoked. “The goddamn brush poppers!” he concluded. “We’ll tell the sheriff.”

But Loring shook his head. “No, we won’t,” he said decidedly. “At least not yet. In the first place, he’d give the whole thing away *pronto*. I’ve met the sheriff. He’s a nice old fellow, but he sure was behind the door when they handed out brains. In the second place, we have no case against anybody, yet. This bit of work is so slick that you’d never get a jury to bring in a conviction. Not even if you killed the cow and showed the burn from the other side. And besides, we have nobody to bring a charge against.

“I didn’t get close enough to that pair to recognize them. I thought at first it was our hands at work. You couldn’t bring a charge against Carter, though I’m sure he’s in on the deal.

No wonder he sells cows under the market price! Why not? They don't cost him anything. But you couldn't bring a charge against him. What would he say? Just a couple of hands doing a little slick ironing on the side, so they could steal from the Boss without him missing any stock. That is if you even had the hands to bring charges against, which you haven't."

"But what are we going to do?" Uteley demanded helplessly. "We can't let this go on."

"When I lived over on the Brazos," Loring remarked thoughtfully, "I was pretty good friends with a mighty smart Texas Ranger. I remember something he said once. He said the outlaw band always make slips that sooner or later catch them up. I'm going to play a hunch that somebody has made a slip. I want you to get in touch with Randolph, your lawyer over to the capital. You said he packs considerable influence around the State House and the Land Office. He should be able to find out for you if anybody over here has ever tried to get title to your holdings, before you arrived here or right after. If he can, the knowledge may help us a lot in cleaning up this mess. Don't send the message from the telegraph office at Sanders, though. It might leak out, even though company rules swear the operator to secrecy. Ride over to Marathon and send it from there. Okay?"

"Okay," growled Uteley. "I'll start first thing in the morning. It's a long ride, but I'll do anything to drop a loop on those murdering thieves."

Three days later, Uteley returned to the XT ranchhouse in a state of great excitement.

"I got hold of Randolph," he announced. "We burned the wires up with messages back and forth till I thought the telegraph operator would go loco. You played a straight hunch, son. Somebody did try to get title to my holdings. Tried the day after we rode up to town and wired Randolph. There's a lawyer over at the capital named Baker, a smooth cuss who's been mixed up in more than one shady deal nobody was able to pin onto him. He tried to get title the day after I did, for Gus Flint!"

"I'm not a bit surprised," Loring said. "I didn't like the looks of that snake-eyed rat the first time I saw him. Well, anyhow,

now we know who to suspect, and that's more than we did before."

"What's the next move?" asked Utley.

"I think," Loring replied slowly, "that we'll pay a little visit to that *arrastra* up in the canyon. If there's still a couple of those fellows working it and we manage to grab them, we might sort of persuade them to talk a little. They may not know enough to do us any good, but then again they might. I figure it's worth trying, anyhow."

"I think so, too," agreed Utley. "Tomorrow night okay?"

In the dark hours after midnight, Loring, Utley and a picked group of the XT hands rode cautiously up the narrow canyon. With the plainsman's uncanny instinct for distance and direction, Loring called a halt not far from the site of the *arrastra* but some ways from the west wall. They left the horses and stole forward on foot till they reached the beginning of the little dip that sagged down to the cliffs. Here they holed up and waited.

"Don't smell any smoke," Utley breathed to the range boss. "Reckon they've let the fire die down and go out."

The minutes passed with tedious slowness. The false dawn fled across the sky like a lonely ghost. An hour of intense blackness followed. Then gradually the east began to gray. The stars dwindled, winked out one by one. A wan radiance seeped into the canyon and glinted on leaves and twigs. The watchers in the growth that fringed the dip could make out the shapeless bulk of the brush and pole structure that housed the *arrastra*. They tensed for action.

The light quickly strengthened. Now they made out objects under the shelter. Over to one side they could see the gray ashes of what had been a fire. Cooking utensils were scattered about.

But nobody was in sight. The *arrastra* pole swung idle. Picks and shovels were lying around.

Neale Loring rose to his feet. "Come on," he told his companions. "There's nobody around, and I don't think any work has been done since I was here. There's the same heap of ore over by the cliff. It hasn't been touched."

They strode down to the *arrastra* and browsed about. The place had a deserted air, the sort that descends upon any

habitation, no matter how temporary, when its occupants have departed not to return.

Loring suddenly had an idea. He hurried to the cleft where he concealed the two bodies, and swore aloud. A heap of boulders lay beside the crevice. The crack between the rocks was empty.

"They were smarter than I gave them credit for," he told the others who came crowding after him. "And now I realize where I slipped up. When we packed the bodies over here, I forgot to wash the blood off the stones. They spotted it, nosed around until they picked up my trail and found where I hid the bodies. They hauled 'em out and took them away. And I've a prime notion they're not coming back. Chances are they figured the Mexicans got loose somehow and killed their jailers, took the gold and left. The bunch is scared to come back for fear the Mexicans might return with some of their *amigos* and be waiting for them. Reckon me might as well head back to the ranch. We've been riding a cold trail."

Before leaving, Utley examined the gold bearing ledge. He took a few samples of ore for an assay. There was a contemplative gleam in his eyes as they rested on Neale Loring, but he refrained from voicing whatever was in his mind.

"Looks like we're right back where we started," he observed as they rode down the canyon. "Now what, Neale?"

"I've got a little scheme working in my head," Loring said. "I'll tell you about it when we get to the ranchhouse. Maybe we'll have better luck next time."

Soon after they arrived at the ranchhouse, Loring summoned Ralpho, the older of the two Mexicans, from the bunkhouse. When the *peon* entered the living room, he looked him over with care.

"Hair okay, eyes okay," he observed. "You're plenty dark and your cheek bones are high. Ralpho, I've a notion you could pass for an Indian without much trouble."

"Doubtless, *Señor*," the Mexican replied with a smile.

Loring drew a comb from his pocket. He carefully combed Ralpho's lank black hair down over his forehead.

"Get me a pair of scissors," he requested Utley. He took the scissors and, chuckling, cut Ralpho's hair into a square bang across his forehead.

"Now a strip of colored cloth," he told Utley. "The tail of an old checkered or striped shirt will do."

When the puzzled ranch owner returned with the cloth, Loring took it and bound it about Ralpho's head. He chuckled again, stepped back and surveyed his handiwork.

"Ralpho," he declared, "you look more like a Yaqui than a real one."

"My mother was a full-blooded Yaqui Indian," Ralpho replied. "The daughter of a chief."

"Well," chuckled Loring, "for a while you are going to be a Yaqui. Think you can manage to talk like one that doesn't know much English?"

"Can do," Ralpho grunted. "Heap much talk good."

"You'll pass," Loring declared. "Now sit down and I'll give you a line-up on just what I want you to do."

As Ralpho listened to the range boss unfold his scheme, his black eyes glowed and his dark face contorted with savage delight.

"I will not fail, *Señor*," he said when Loring had finished. "You can rely on me. It will be the great pleasure."

"With your help, I've a notion we'll be able to clean out that nest of snakes," Loring said.

"It sounds like it might work," Utley agreed. "If they'll just swallow the bait."

"They will swallow it, *Señors*," Ralpho said confidently. "I, Ralpho, will see to that."

"I'm depending on you," Loring told him. "You'd better head for town tonight."

The following morning, a lean, sinewy "Yaqui" entered Flint's general store and walked to the counter.

"Want um buy grub," he told a clerk. "Beans, flour, coffee. Not got money but can pay."

He hauled a buckskin sack from his soiled overalls, loosened the pucker string and spilled several rough lumps of dull-colored metal onto the counter. The clerk picked one up, whistled through his teeth and hurried to the back room. A moment later, Gus Flint came into view, Dave Carter lounging along beside him. He picked up the lumps of metal, hefted them, and fixed his strangely colored eyes on the Yaqui.

"Where'd you get this, *muchacho*?" he asked.

The Yaqui gestured vaguely to the southwest. "Go up

canyon," he gutteralled. "One—two—" he counted on his fingers, "four *amigos*. Me make five. We find ledge along cliff. Heap gold. We grind out gold. Heap more. Next week we come to town and file claim. Get rich."

Dave Carter muttered a startled and wrathful oath, under his breath. Flint's face remained impassive save for the sudden violet flare of his eyes.

"Well, that's fine," he congratulated the "Indian". "Give this boy everything he wants," he told the clerk. He got out his fine scales and put the lumps of metal in the pan.

"I'll buy all you've got, and I'll buy all you bring in," he told the Yaqui. "I pay the regular price."

The Indian nodded, and emptied the contents of the poke on the counter. Flint weighed the metal, the Yaqui's black eyes watching him closely, and passed over the equivalent in gold pieces. He was too shrewd to underpay the Indian. Yaquis know the value of metal and are not easy to fool.

"Yes, I'll be glad to handle all you bring in," he repeated. "Come and see me after you file your claim. You'll need tools and things and it's my business to sell them. Do you want to leave these provisions here while you look over the town?"

The Yaqui shook his head. "Go back now, take um with me," he said. "*Amigos* hungry."

Flint told the clerk to bundle the articles securely, help the customer out with them and help load them on his horse. Then he and Carter returned to the back room and closed the door.

Carter's face was livid with fury.

"I knew something like this would happen," he declared, his voice thick with passion.

Flint regarded him calmly, apparently unmoved by the other's anger.

"It's one of two things," he remarked. "*I'd* say those two Mexicans who escaped and killed Crane and Hastings came back from Mexico with a bunch of Yaqui and half-breed friends to get a little revenge for what your men did to them. When they found the place deserted and nobody showed up after they waited a while, doubtless they decided to work the claim and file on it, not knowing the land is privately owned.

"The worthless sons-of-bitches you got together are to

blame for this," he continued, his eyes suddenly flaring. "Too lazy to grind the ore themselves, they had to kidnap those Mexicans to do the hard work for them!"

"I gave them hell when I found out about it," Carter said.

"I'm to blame, too," Flint admitted. "I should never have consented to their working the ledge in the first place.

"Of course," he added thoughtfully, "it might have been a freak happening. The Yaquis might have just stumbled onto the ledge. That prospector I grubstaked stumbled onto it largely by accident. There were no prominent outcroppings to show its presence."

"And he had a bad *accident* himself right after he brought the news, before he had time to file the claim," Carter remarked in vicious tones.

"People who don't get along with me do sometimes have accidents," Flint replied significantly, his eyes hard on Carter's face.

"Well, what are you going to do about this?" Carter asked in a different voice.

"We'll take care of it," Flint replied. "Slip outside now, and make sure that Indian leaves town. We want them all together down in the canyon when we land on them. Come back in when you see him going up the trail."

Carter sauntered out. He returned shortly. "He's gone," he said. "Headed south on the trail. Never looked back. Damn it, this would have to happen, and right now when I've just about got things fixed up to do for Utley and Loring."

"Like you had them fixed up last week, eh?" Flint remarked with a sneer. "Didn't seem to work out just as you planned. Those fellows you counted on to take care of Loring must have been a prize pair of idiots. The tool I have to work with! You're certain Loring didn't get a look at you that morning? If he did, you'll be seeing him again, in a way you won't like."

"That bastard!" raged Carter. "He has the devil's own luck, and brains to go with it. Of course he didn't get a look at me. It was nearly dark and he was a hundred yards off. Also I was riding in back of Ed and the others."

"Naturally," Flint commented, with an acid smile.

Carter glared at him but chose to ignore the slur.

"Just the same I won't feel safe so long as Loring is alive,"

he said. "His sort would get on anybody's nerves. But I'll take care of him.

"What if that Yaqui has talked to somebody," he added in worried tones.

"Don't worry," Flint replied composedly. "Yaquis are close-mouthed. That fellow didn't spill any information, you'll notice. Just waved his hand in the general direction of the Big Bend. He didn't say a word about the *arrastra*. And try to trail him! Those black devils have eyes in the back of the head. Now this thing has got to be handled right with no slip-ups. I'm going with you this time. We'll leave here right after dark. We'll change horses at your place, pick up the boys and head for the canyon. That way we'll hit them just before dawn, when people sleep the soundest. It's got to be a clean sweep. Not one left alive to talk."

"Wonder if we could be all wrong about this thing?" Carter hazarded hopefully. "They might have got this stuff from someplace else, a pocket they panned or dug out."

"Carter," said Flint, "you're talking like a fool. You're a mining engineer and you know as well as I do that this stuff isn't nuggets. It's fragments that have been chiselled from a larger lump of gold, a lump refined in a retort. It would be altogether too much of a coincidence for two such workings to be in operation in the section. Stop that sort of nonsense and get busy."

The "Yaqui" rode at a steady pace until he was well out of sight of town, a big bundle strapped behind his saddle, another balanced in front of him. But once he was sure he was beyond the range of possible watching eyes, he cast the two bundles into a thicket and sent his horse south at racing speed. The horse was an excellent one despite its deliberately roughed-up coat and tangled mane and he reached the XT ranchhouse in a surprisingly short time.

"They swallowed the bait, *Señor*," he exultantly told Neale Loring. "I watched their eyes, although they did not realize I was doing so. They never doubted I was other than I pretended to be. I thought the tall dark man was going to have the, what you call it, stroke."

"So Carter was there, too," Loring said. "Well, that was even better than I hoped for."

"We'll ride just as soon as it's dark," he told Utley, "and we'll ride fast. I'm sure Flint and Carter won't leave town before dark. They won't want to be seen leaving together. Flint is that sort. But we'll take no chances. We'll get to the canyon first, in plenty of time."

"Think we'd better get the sheriff?" asked Utley.

"It isn't necessary, under the circumstances," said Loring. "You'll be within the law. You have a right to defend your property. We'll fix things up to look like somebody's working the *arrastra*, then we'll hole up in the bushes and wait."

In the dark hours after midnight, the site of the *arrastra* was silent but showed signs of life. A good fire flickered and smouldered in the stone fireplace. Around it were blanket rolls carefully arranged to simulate sleepers. In a nearby thicket Loring, Utley and the grim-faced XT hands lay waiting and watching.

"Sure hope you're playin' a straight hunch, son," old Abe whispered to Loring. "If they caught on, *we* may be the ones in for a surprise."

"I'm sure they didn't catch on," Loring breathed back. "Ralpho is a smart number and played his hand right. The thing is so simple and logical it should work fine. It's right in line with what must have been bothering Flint all the time—the danger of somebody stumbling onto the strike. He'd be thinking along those lines and just about have his mind made up for him even before Ralpho exploded in his face. They'll be here, all right, and in just the way we expect 'em to show."

The hours passed slowly. Nerves were taut to the breaking point. Ears were strained to catch the least sound that would herald the approach of the killers.

But so utterly noiseless was that approach when it finally did take place, that the first indication of the presence of the raiders was a roar of gunfire that startled the watchers almost out of their skins. The gulps and jumps that followed would have most certainly been heard by the would-be killers had not their ears been deafened by the crash of their own guns.

The blanket rolls by the fire twitched and jerked as slugs hammered them. A second volley followed close on the first. Gus Flint was not the sort to take chances. Then shadowy figures stole into the circle of flickering firelight. More wood

and brush heaped ready to hand were thrown on the fire. The flames leaped up fiercely. The raiders crowded around the rolled blankets.

Suddenly a man let out a startled yelp. "Hey," he bawled, "there's nobody in these blankets!"

Hard on the echoes of his voice came old Abe Utley's stentorian bellow—

"Hands up! You're covered!" He strode from concealment as he spoke, gun out and ready. Beside him was Neale Loring, thumbs hooked over his double cartridge belt. The XT hands fanned out on either side, black muzzles menacing the astounded raiders.

For a moment there was a numb silence. Then, with a scream of fear and fury, Dave Carter went for his gun. Flint, his face an awful mask of rage, his eyes the eyes of a devil, followed suit. The cliff face shivered and rocked to the thundering explosions.

Weaving, ducking, shooting with both hands, Neale Loring saw Flint pitch sideways across the fire. He saw Carter go down like a sack of old clothes to lie sprawled on his back, dead arms wide-flung. He saw others fall, heard the screams of pain as bullets found their marks. Behind him sounded grunts and cries from wounded members of his own band. Then suddenly there was silence broken only by the howls for mercy of five men who stood with upraised hands, cowering back away from the grim faces and smoking guns of the XT riders.

"Hold it!" Loring shouted. "We can use that bunch alive. Grab 'em and tie 'em up."

The cowboys, alert and watchful, itching for a chance to use their guns, moved forward to obey.

Loring's first thought was for their own wounded. He found several punctured hides but nothing that could be considered too serious. The outlaws had been too taken by surprise, too thrown off balance to do any effective shooting. He himself was bleeding from a flesh wound in his upper arm, but aside from binding his neckerchief around the wound he paid it no mind.

Somebody had dragged Flint's smoking body from the fire. Others were making sure none of the forms on the ground were playing 'possum.

Loring stared down into Dave Carter's face outlined by the leaping flames of the fire. In his heart was a feeling of compassion for the dead man. After all, he had been kind to Norma Ray.

Suddenly Loring leaned close, struck by the vague familiarity of the dead face. Again came that conviction that he had seen the man somewhere before. He dropped on his knees beside Carter, his eyes widening.

Carter had not shaved for at least twenty-four hours. On his face was a stubble of beard. But the hair was totally different in color from his dark, close-clipped mustache. It was a fiery red.

Muttering under his breath, Loring loosened the chin strap of Carter's hat and flipped it off. He bent close, parted the dead man's black hair. He uttered a hoarse exclamation.

The roots showed red!

Loring stood up, a dazed look on his face. Utley hurried over to him.

"What's the matter?" he asked anxiously. "You get hurt more than you thought?"

Loring shook his head. He passed a trembling hand across his forehead.

"Abe," he said thickly, "Abe, that dead man there is Clate Dixon, the man I've been trailing all these months. Clate Dixon with his whiskers shaved and his red hair dyed black. No wonder I thought he looked familiar that day I rode up from the Comanche Trail and saw him talking to Norma Ray. He rode off before I got close to him. Come to think of it, I never did get a close look at Carter. Guess he took good care that I wouldn't. If this doesn't beat anything I ever heard tell of!"

Utley was of a practical turn of mind. "Fine!" he applauded. "The ornery skunk got what was coming to him. Looks like your trail has run out to a good finish. And the best part about it is you'll never know if it was your slug that did for him, or one of mine, or one of the boys'. That's plumb fine."

Loring still appeared numb at the unexpected development, but Utley was suddenly struck by inspiration. He dropped on his knees beside Dixon's body.

"Want to look this gent over," he rumbled. He turned out the dead man's pockets, revealing various odds and ends and

considerable money in gold and silver. He was about to desist when his hand encountered a bulge under Dixon's shirt. He unbuttoned the shirt, muttering excitedly to himself, thrust in a hand and fumbled about. A moment later, with an exultant exclamation, he drew out a money belt with one very plump pocket. He fished into the pocket and pulled forth a wad of bills. He held them to the firelight, peered closely at them and riffled them between his fingers. Then he stood up. His voice was casual when he spoke but his eyes were glowing.

"There's your money, son," he said. "The money that snake took off your dad. Thousand-dollar bills, twenty of 'em. He never got a chance to spend 'em. Looks like you're all set to get married to the little Ray gal whenever you're a mind to." He thrust the packet into Loring's hand.

Loring took the money mechanically. He seemed drained of emotion.

"Abe," he managed to get out at last, "doesn't it beat hell?"

Utley bellowed with laughter. "Sure it beats hell," he chuckled. "Anything right and good beats hell, son, that's why hell always ends up whupped in the end. Well, it looks like we made a clean sweep. We'll take them hogtied gents to town and turn 'em over to the sheriff. I've a notion he'll want to ask 'em a few questions."

"That's a notion," Loring remarked. "I want to ask a couple of questions myself."

He strode over to the prisoners, singled out a scrawny little rat of a man whose nerves were completely shattered and who was in a state of abject terror.

The man whimpered reply to Loring's questions, in a thin, reedy voice. Loring returned to Utley.

"Just as I thought," he said. "Flint and Dixon had worked together before. Remember I told you Dixon was a mining engineer before he went bad. Seems an old prospector Flint grubstaked discovered the gold ledge here and brought word to Flint. Flint investigated a little and decided the strike was a real one. But the prospector had been grubstaked from time to time by other folks. Flint was afraid he might have to share the claim with them, although the chances are he wouldn't have had to. It's accepted mining procedure that a man is obligated to the grubstaker for only the trip he makes on the supplies in hand."

Utlely nodded agreement as Loring paused to roll a cigarette.

"So," Loring continued, "before the prospector had a chance to do any talking, he was found with a knife in his back."

"Flint killed him?" asked Utlely.

"So that fellow over there said," nodded Loring. "The killing kicked up considerable of a row, for the prospector was well known and liked. Flint decided it was best to lie low for a while. That's why he made no immediate move to stake the claim or get title to the land. He had decided that getting title and then 'discovering' the gold on his own land was the safest.

"He was a calculating devil who always wanted to be sure of his moves, and he hated to spend money. So before investing in the land, he sent for Dixon to evaluate the strike and to lend a hand in subsequent proceedings. Chances are he would have figured a way to murder Dixon when he had no further use for him. He didn't intend to share with anyone."

"Absolutely cold-blooded," grunted Utlely.

"When you showed up," resumed Loring, "Flint decided he shouldn't wait any longer and moved to get title to the land, and learned you'd beaten him to it. So he and Dixon set out to do for you, and me, too, incidentally."

"The snake-blooded devil," growled Utlely. "Carter, or Dixon, was bad enough, but Flint was worse. He was cold and pizen as a Gila Monster. The country is well rid of him. Funny, isn't it, that a fellow who was doing all right by himself in what's considered a legitimate field of endeavor should get mixed up in something like this?"

"The human mind works strangely at times, especially if it has an off-color quirk," Loring said. "Remember, Dixon had a ten-thousand-a-year job, and a future, with the mining company that employed him. But he threw it all over to ride a crooked trail.

"Flint was a miser, and his own piggishness was his undoing. Acting under Flint's orders, the prospector did not post the claim. Flint, of course, figured on beating the poor devil out of his share of anything he might find. Otherwise, the location on state land would have taken priority over your purchase and he would have had the mine."

"We'll try and find out if that poor prospector left any

dependants," Utley said. "If he did, we'll locate 'em and see that they get a fair share. I'll just take a look at that ledge before we pull out for home. I know a little about quartz deposits."

"It sure looks like the real thing," he concluded after his examination of the ledge. "I've a notion, pardner, it's going to have you and me both setting nice before we get through with it. All right, let's go. We've got a long ride ahead of us."

With their sullen prisoners, they rode down the gloomy canyon and onto the rangeland all glorious with morning. But before they reached the farm lands, Neale Loring pulled up before a trim little ranchhouse set in a grove.

"Where you going, son?" Utley asked.

Loring grinned at him, his eyes dancing. "I'm riding up to the JR ranchhouse," he announced, "to arrange for a lifetime job with—a *nester!*"