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Great Western Novelettes from *Argosy Magazine*

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by

LUKE SHORT

TOM W. BLACKBURN

FRANK BONHAM

ALLAN R. BOSWORTH

STEVE FRAZEE

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Trumpets West!*

by LUKE SHORT

FORT AKIN'S one-room hospital stood at a corner of the parade grounds. Out of respect for the newly sown grass, those who wanted to reach headquarters building in the center of the opposite side of the ground had been ordered to use the gravel walk.

On this late afternoon of an Arizona July, however, Lieutenant Burke Hanna stepped out of the hospital door and cut string-straight across the parade ground. He was a tall, unshaven and dirty man in a moderate hurry, and his field uniform was grimed a color closer to gray than blue.

Crossing the gravel drive, he went up the short walk of headquarters building. A hulking, barrel-chested sergeant major with a black, short-clipped beard that reached almost to his eyes, was coming down the veranda steps. He saluted and said, "Glad you're back, sir."

"Thanks, O'Mara," Burke said. His foot was on the bottom step when he halted, turned and called, "O'Mara!"

The sergeant came back to him, and Burke said, "Did you see those ration requests I sent in by Hardy?"

"Yes, sir," O'Mara said in the bland voice of an old soldier who knows his rights. "Captain Ervien wouldn't sign them, sir."

Burke said, "Right. Thanks," and went up the steps. Standing in the big doorway of the adobe building was Lieutenant Abe Byas, a big man with a morose and homely face and so wide of shoulder that he nearly blocked the doorway—which seemed to be his intention now.

Burke hauled up, and Byas said with gentle mockery in his deep voice, "Counted ten, Burke?"

"I've counted ten thousand," Burke said grimly. "Let me past, Abe."

"Sure," Byas said, not moving. The two men regarded each

other a long moment, then Burke Hanna drew a deep breath.

"All right," he said patiently. He lifted off his dusty campaign hat and beat at his trousers with it. His black hair, ragged at the edges, was darker than the thick beard stubble sworled on his lean and weather-blackened face. When he looked up, his wide mouth was humorless. He said bitterly, "What's gone on here, Abe?"

Byas only shook his head in kindly refusal to answer. "Did Doc Ford see your cripples?"

Burke nodded, and said in the same bitter voice, "Two men half dead with dysentery. Raines' feet are cut to ribbons; so are Kahn's. A half dozen others crippled up, and another dozen starved and played out or sick from a diet of horsemeat." He paused. "Now can I get past?"

Byas stood aside, and as Burke passed him he laid a hand on his arm. "Look, don't go in there that way. Get a cinch on your temper, will you?"

"Sure, sure," Burke said wryly and went across the bare room and said to the sergeant behind the desk, "Lieutenant Hanna to see Captain Ervien."

"He's got the agent with him, Lieutenant, but he's expecting you," said the sergeant.

"Yes," Burke said dryly. He paced once across the room and caught sight of Byas, huge in the doorway, watching him gloomily. Byas said, "Calla says come over for dinner tonight."

Burke said, "All right, thanks," in as polite a voice as he could muster, then turned and looked speculatively at one of the chairs as Byas went out. If he sat down he would never want to get up, he knew.

The door in the wall ahead of him opened, and a big, soft, pale man in an oversize black suit stepped through, closing the door behind him. He and Burke saw each other at the same time. For an instant it seemed as if there would be no recognition, then Burke said idly, "Hello, Corinne."

The Apache agent smiled and said with false heartiness, "How are you, Hanna?" He nodded courteously to the sergeant and went out.

Burke crushed his dusty campaign hat under his left arm, knocked firmly on the door Corinne had just closed, opened it, and went inside.

Captain Ervien was at his desk, which was set across the corner of the room between two windows. The American flag and the squadron standard were stacked behind him. He did not look up until Burke was almost in front of him.

Burke came to attention, saluted and said, "Lieutenant Hanna reporting, sir."

Ervien returned the salute, then leaned back in his chair, regarding Burke's appearance with a dark and cynical amusement that Burke, from three years of service with him as a junior officer, knew was sincere. Whatever ease there had been between the two men had vanished long before Ervien, upon Major Drummond's death, had been appointed commanding officer. Ervien, handsome, thirty-five, with his well tailored uniforms and his thorough and calculating knowledge of Army ways, had elected the course of the garrison soldier. Burke saw his nostrils twitch faintly, and he thought, *He's smelling horse for a change.*

Ervien said, "Burke, I saw you bring in K Troop. The lot of you looked more like a bunch of Mexican army deserters than soldiers."

"Maybe that's because we've been treated like Mexican deserters, Phil," Burke answered.

Ervien blandly ignored that. "You were afoot. The only officer—walking, just like a damned infantryman. Why?"

"We lost fifteen horses. Ate some, too."

"But not your own. Your sergeant was riding him."

Burke nodded shortly. "Raines had walked half the distance from Ojo Negra. His feet are badly cut. The whole troop walked half way, turn about." He added with an edge to his voice, "That's the only way we could get back here."

"You had rations and forage for five weeks," Ervien said flatly. "Enough to find that renegade Ponce and his band, fight them if you had to, send them back to the reservation and extend your patrol. Those were your orders, weren't they?"

"My dispatch to you explained that," Burke said with a mounting aggressiveness. "We shared all our supplies with Ponce and his Apaches. That's the only way we could get them back alive."

"He got to his hideout without Army rations!" Ervien flared. "Let him get back without them! Who are you to be giving away Army supplies? Let the black devils starve!"

A blazing anger left Burke inarticulate for a moment. Ervien leaned his elbows on the desk. "Once you'd sent Ponce back, I suppose you sat there eating up your remaining rations and waiting for more instead of extending your patrol, as you were ordered?"

"We sat six days. And why not?" Burke's voice thickened with anger. "Good God, Phil, why didn't you send the forage and rations and take it out of my pay if necessary? Instead, you sent a flat refusal and ordered out the patrol!"

"You made the patrol, didn't you?"

"With half my troop afoot and sick from horsemeat!"

"You have been gone four weeks and three days." Ervien tapped the desk with his soft forefinger for emphasis. "You were issued rations for five weeks. I know that, because I just checked the supply records with Sergeant O'Mara. If you and your men suffered, you've nobody to blame but yourself."

There was, Burke knew savagely, no rebuttal open to him. Technically, Ervien was right, and yet Ponce, the Apache sub-chief he had been ordered to send back to the reservation, could not have brought his half-starved band through that poor, barren country without Army supplies.

Ervien leaned back, laced his fingers atop his curly chestnut hair and surveyed Burke. He said dryly, "You feel abused, Burke?"

"I feel my men have been treated like dogs."

"Like troopers," Ervien said sharply. "And damned poorly officered troopers." He sat erect and said matter-of-factly, "We've got word that Federico, Ponce's nephew, is skulking around the Mogollon Rim north, waiting for Ponce to get fed and supplied by the agency here. When he's rested, Ponce intends to break and join him, and raid the Navajo country with him." He paused, isolating this. "Tomorrow, suppose you draw rations and forage for two weeks, take K Troop up there, confirm Federico's presence or absence and return in two weeks. See if you can turn in a satisfactory job this time."

A stunned anger rose in Burke. He thought of his troop, a dozen hospitalized, the rest sick and exhausted, and he knew Ervien knew this. He said slowly, "You mean that, Phil?"

Burke had a grip on his temper, yet it was failing fast. He put both hands on Ervien's desk and leaned on them. "Phil," he began in a shaky voice, "this will make the fourth consecutive patrol for K Troop. In the past six months we've been out all but nine days. I suggest you send another troop."

"Those are your orders," Ervien repeated.

Then the rage came, and with violence. Burke slowly straightened up to attention, and said with a savage formality, "I refuse to obey them, sir."

There was a long moment of silence, during which Ervien eyed him shrewdly. Burke knew Ervien was casting up the probable results of a court martial, and when Ervien spoke now, it was still with confidence. "Want another chance, Burke?"

"No, sir," Burke said. "My only way of protesting that treatment of sick men is by refusing to obey your order. I do refuse."

Ervien said coldly, "Very well, you will consider yourself under arrest and confine your movements to the limits of the post, pending further action, Mister Hanna."

"Very good, sir." Again Burke saluted, again had it returned, about-faced and was halfway to the door when Captain Ervien said, "By the way, Mister Hanna," in a soft, commanding voice.

Burke paused and looked at him. Ervien picked up a sheaf of papers from the corner of his desk and tapped them. "I've read your report on the alleged offenses against the Apaches committed by Mr. Alec Corinne, their agent. I've just discussed the matter with him, and have only one comment."

Burke waited silently.

"You seem to have a difficult time learning the soldiering profession. I suggest you study it and listen less to gossip. Let the Indian Bureau discipline its agents. That is *not* the Army's business." He tossed the paper into the wastebasket and Burke went out.

The late afternoon sunlight lay still and blazing on the parade ground, and the young trees lining the gravel walk rustled in the hot breeze. Burke tramped down the steps and turned right up the walk. The rage was still in him, a live thing that almost sickened him. He had, he knew, been systematically harried and ridden until he had rebelled—and now Ervien had him. Nor did he have to look for the reason; you didn't write blistering reports about a crooked Indian agent and submit them to a superior officer who was engaged to marry the agent's daughter, as Phil Ervien was going to marry Vinnie Corinne.

He turned up the short walk leading to the low outsize adobe building that was the unmarried officer's quarters and went in. The lounge was empty, and he went on down the corridor to his bare corner room at the rear of the building. He sank onto the plain iron bed and sat motionless, stupid with weariness.

This, then, was his homecoming—on which he had planned to be married. The prospect of seeing Calla now brought a strange reluctance to him. In a matter of minutes, Lucy, Abe's wife, would have learned of his arrest and would have told her sister Calla. News traveled like that in a remote post. And Calla, with everything set except the marriage day—which Burke was supposed to have settled with Ervien a moment ago—what would Calla do?

Tiredly, despondently, Burke pulled off his boots. She couldn't marry an officer under arrest, a man who could not wear a sword at his own wedding because he was forbidden now to carry arms, or leave the designated limits of the post. Or command troops.

Burke swore darkly, thinking, *Thirty is too damned old to*

let myself be baited into a fight with a CO, but he knew that wasn't right either. Rising, he stripped off his torn and filthy uniform, put on slippers and robe and went down the corridor to the big bathroom. There, he shaved and bathed with the slow thoroughness of a man who has done neither for many weeks, then started back to his room.

Before he reached the door, he halted and sniffed. Only one man he knew smoked the black and vile Apache trade tobacco he was smelling now. He went on, and in the doorway, before he looked, he said gloomily, "Hello, Rush, you damn carrion crow."

Rush Doll was seated back-tilted on the chair at the foot of Burke's bed, his feet on Burke's blankets. He grinned sparsely around the long cigarette pasted in the corner of his mouth. He was a man of fifty, graying and dried by decades of Arizona summers. He wore a cast-off army shirt, denim pants and Apache moccasins, and was, unqualfiedly, the best packmaster in the West, and Burke's friend.

He jibed now by way of greeting, "Footed it back, I hear."

"On horsemeat," Burke said wryly. He opened a drawer of the chest in the corner and took out some clothes.

Rush said presently, "What's a general court martial?"

Burke turned to look at him. "So it's out, is it?"

"You wouldn't go on patrol tomorrow, they say."

Burke nodded and savagely slammed the drawer shut. He said morosely, "The need for Lieutenant Hanna, and only Lieutenant Hanna, on patrol is what gravels me." He glanced obliquely at Rush. "Remember that report on Corinne you helped me with?"

Rush shook his head. "No. That's not the reason."

Something in Rush's tone held Burke motionless.

Things have been happening since you left," Rush murmured. "He wants you out of the way."

"Things like what?"

"Your report accused Corinne of long-countin' the 'Paches so he could put their rations in his pocket, didn't it? Well, he's quit that. For the past month he's been busy tradin' the fat government-issue beef for all the scrub-cull beef anyone brings him. He trades at the rate of two fat beef for three culls."

Burke sat down slowly on his bed. "To issue to the Indians? That won't do him any good. The beef is issued to the Apaches by weight, not by count."

"What if he's rigged the agency scales to weigh out every beef at six hundred pounds or over, even if it really weighs three hundred?"

Burke only stared at him and Rush went on, "Say he gets

three hundred fat beef for issue. He trades two hundred of 'em off for three hundred culls. He issues the three hundred culls weighed on his rigged scale, then sells the hundred fat ones left and pockets the money."

Burke stared down at his bare and bruised feet. Ervien's order made sense now. There was only one man in either post or agency who cared enough about the Indians' welfare to keep their agent honest, and that man was himself. And his reason was simple enough; he was tired of seeing Apaches starved into breaking out, and then having to fight or capture them. Now Ervien, protecting his prospective father-in-law, wanted him out of the way, and he had him out of the way.

As Burke reached for his socks, a thought came to him. He asked Rush, "What about Ponce's bunch I sent back? Have they been fed well and issued rations?"

"They ain't had a square meal since they hit the reservation," Rush said.

Broodingly, Burke dressed, silent now. He had almost forgotten Rush when Rush said searchingly, "You goin' to put that in your new report?"

Burke said unsmilingly, "You think Ponce would talk with me tonight?"

"How?" Rush asked. "You can't leave the post, and he ain't allowed to come on it after dark."

Burke thought a moment and said, "You bring him over to the blacksmith shop after dark. That's post limits. We can talk there and neither of us will be disobeying orders." He looked levelly at Rush. "I promised Ponce we'd treat him right if he came back. If we don't, he'll bust out and gut this country. And," he added slowly, "I wouldn't blame him."

Rush agreed and left. Burke hurriedly dressed. As he was struggling into his blouse, Lieutenants Umberhine and Cavanaugh poked their heads in to say hello. They made no reference to his arrest. Finished dressing, Burke picked up his garrison cap and pistol belt; then, remembering, he hung the pistol on the wall. He was under arrest, so he could not carry arms.

He stepped outside and cut across the parade ground, heading for the third square brick house in the row of married officers' homes opposite. As he approached Abe Byas' house, he wondered whether he should tell Abe of Rush's revelation. He decided against it; Abe was Ervien's adjutant, honor bound to be loyal to him, and there was no use troubling Abe until he had proof.

Byas, bareheaded, was waiting on his walk when Burke crossed the drive.

"Look," Abe said mildly in greeting. "I'm adjutant of this post. You want to appear before me tomorrow morning for disciplinary action?"

Burke hauled up. "What for?"

Abe pointed to the parade ground. "It's seeded," he said carefully, distinctly. "Stay off it, will you?"

Burke grinned. "I forgot."

As they went up the walk, Abe looked reprovingly at him. "Well, you did it up brown, didn't you?"

"Didn't I?" Burke murmured.

"You'll learn," Abe said. "Just keep chewing his ears until you're in real trouble."

Burke didn't reply, and Abe mounted the steps. His house was a square brick affair with a small porch and an iron-railed widow's walk surmounting its sloping roof. Abe went in first and waved his hand toward the parlor. "Sit down. I'll get Calla."

He went on through the hall toward the back rooms.

Burke looked around the pleasant parlor, whose contents had been freighted half a thousand miles. Through the open window he caught the brassy, saucy sound of mess call being sounded, and he wondered gloomily what he was going to say to Calla.

Sighing, he turned from the window just in time to see Calla, apron over her dress, come into the room. She didn't pause, didn't speak, only came into his arms and kissed him. After she had kissed him twice more, she hugged him and said into his ear in a low, shaky voice, "I've got to get used to missing you, Burke."

Burke smiled faintly and held her from him, looking hungrily at her. The grave and mischievous amber eyes told him nothing except that she was glad to see him. Her wide mouth, soft and smiling, was happy enough. She had been fussing with her thick golden hair: it was done differently atop her head, and he thought it beautiful, just as, without knowing why, he thought her gray dress, through the sleeves of which he could feel the rounded softness of her arms, delightful. He said, "If that's what they call a soldier's welcome I'm for it."

He held her to him a moment, then asked, "Did Abe tell you, Calla?"

She drew back and looked gravely at him. "About your arrest? Yes, I'd have hated you forever if you'd taken your troop out as Ervien ordered." She frowned quizzically. "Did you really think I'd mind?"

"Well," Burke said slowly, "I wouldn't blame a girl for being a little mad over a postponed wedding."

Calla said, alarm in her eyes, "Who said it was postponed?"

"Look, honey," Burke murmured. "You can't marry an officer when he's under arrest. I couldn't even wear a sword at the ceremony."

"Do you think I care about a silly sword?" Calla flared.

"I do," Burke said grimly. "I want to know whether you'd be marrying a soldier or a civilian. So do you."

Calla sighed in mock exasperation, took his hand and led him over to the sofa and pulled him down beside her. "Burke, let's be practical. If you hadn't sassed Captain Ervien, you'd be on patrol tomorrow, wouldn't you?"

"I suppose," Burke admitted.

"Then, for heaven's sake, you're here now. You will be until the trial. It's the only chance he'll give us to be together. To hell with your arrest!"

Burke looked faintly shocked, and Calla said swiftly, vehemently, "I mean it, Burke. I'm tired of being Mrs. Hanna-to-be! The chapel is on post limits. We can get married tomorrow. In private or public, I don't care. It's nobody's business but ours."

She smiled now at her own vehemence. "Speak up, soldier."

Burke grinned. "I kind of like the idea," he murmured. "Of course—" He paused. He had just caught sight of Abe standing in the doorway. Burke said, "You've got a wife. Let me get one, will you?"

"Later," Abe said calmly. "There's a trooper at the back door. He wants to speak to you."

Burke swore under his breath and started for the door. He came back, leaned over and kissed Calla, and then went into the hall toward the kitchen. *That's how much you know about the girl you'll marry,* he thought wonderingly.

Lucy Byas, an older, smaller and more placid version of Calla, was in the kitchen. She looked over her shoulder at Burke's entrance and said, "Hello, you wild-eyed Mick." Although she had a dish in each hand, Burke hugged her in passing, and then went on to the back door.

"Hello, Carney," he said to the beardless trooper on the steps, and then he saw the restrained excitement in the soldier's face. "What's the trouble?"

"I thought the lieutenant ought to know, sir. Raines and O'Mara are buildin' up a fight over issue of mounts down at the corral."

Burke scowled. "I left Raines in the hospital."

"He's on crutches, sir. Dr. Ford let him out."

Burke swore and went down the steps. "You go along to supper, Carney. And thanks." He strode down the alley, cut left down the short street lined with the homes of the married

enlisted men, and at a trot, passed A stable. Raines, K Troop's first sergeant, was a tough, tobacco-chewing bantam of a man with an aggressive loyalty to his officers, his men and his horses. And when Burke thought of him fighting with O'Mara, the squadron bully, the sly toadying Irishman whom anyone but Ervien would have broken and kept broken, he was worried. And Raines was on crutches.

Passing B stable at a run, he saw the place was deserted; all the troopers were at supper call. He cut in through the forage shed that lay between B stable and the corrals and saw a big supply wagon blocking the far door.

Ducking round it, he hauled up. There, in front of the corral gate in the slanting sunlight were O'Mara and Raines. Raines, on his bandaged feet, had backed against the corral poles besides a stack of forks and shovels, and was swinging his remaining crutch in a half circle, trying to fend off the squat, long-armed O'Mara. Even as Burke saw this, O'Mara moved inside the arc of the crutch, and smashed savagely at Raines' seamed face with the swift pawing motion of a bear striking. Moving in, and pulling Raines to him, he stamped on Raines' bandaged feet; then, half turning, he picked up the smaller man, whose fists were flailing at his bearded face, and slammed him to the ground and fell on top of him.

Burke vaulted the wagon's tongue; his foot caught in one of the loops of a long stay chain festooned on the tongue, and he fell heavily and came up again, running. He saw O'Mara's fist driving into Raines' face. Burke pulled up.

"O'Mara!" he said in an iron voice. "Get up!"

The voice of authority startled O'Mara, and he was already rising when he saw that it was Burke beside him. He paused, his knees half flexed, and then slowly sank back on Raines.

"Lieutenant, you're under arrest, with no authority for anything," he said gently.

"Get to your quarters!" Burke said.

O'Mara stared quietly at him with his small red-rimmed eyes, which were calculating and sly and arrogant and then he said in his strangely gentle voice, "Off with you, Lieutenant. I've this to finish." And he slashed savagely at Raines' face.

Burke hit him, then, in the face, a driving blow that knocked him off Raines and into the dust on his back. O'Mara sat up, raised a thick and meaty hand to his jaw and said mildly, wickedly, "You struck an enlisted man, Lieutenant."

"Get to your quarters, O'Mara," Burke repeated.

O'Mara came to his feet with a slow, sure indolence, and Burke saw that his massive shoulders had burst the seam of

his blue shirt. No fear and no respect, only a kind of animal cunning was in his eyes now; he rubbed his beard gently with the back of his hand and said, "It'd be a fine thing to smash you, Lieutenant—you under arrest, and not allowed to order me. It'd be your word against mine."

"I wouldn't try it," Burke advised.

O'Mara looked around the lot in one swift glance to make sure there were no witnesses, and in that moment Burke knew that O'Mara's hatred of authority and the whole officer system, plus his sharing Ervien's dislike of K Troop, would drive him to attacking. And he would not be penalized for it.

O'Mara glanced at Raines, then moved over and kicked him in the temple. "No help there, Lieutenant," he said. Then, in a crouch, thick arms outthrust, he came slowly at Burke. He came out of his crouch like a spring uncoiling, and Burke hit him once in the throat before O'Mara's massive arms wrapped around him, squeezing him with a breath-stopping strength.

Burke felt his chest constricting, and felt O'Mara's wiry beard pricking through his blouse against his shoulder. Now O'Mara heaved to lift him off the ground, and Burke brought his knee up into O'Mara's groin with a murderous violence. O'Mara whined, his grip loosened, and Burke turned sideways, jamming the point of his shoulder into O'Mara's face. O'Mara's hold broke and, off balance, he backstepped until he crashed into the corral fence and fell heavily on his side among the clutter of stable tools. Burke was breathing deeply, impressed now by O'Mara's great strength, and wary of it.

O'Mara raised himself on an elbow and pawed the blood away from his nose. His movement stirred the tangle of tools. Looking wickedly at Burke, he pawed among them until he found a wide-tined pitchfork. Supporting himself with it, he came unsteadily to his feet, and Burke, knowing intent to murder when he saw it, reached for his pistol. He was not wearing it, he remembered then, and in the same moment, he began to back slowly away.

O'Mara lifted the fork like a spear and came shuffling toward him. Burke wheeled, looking for a weapon. Across the lot, he spied the stay chain on the wagon tongue that had tripped him. He turned and ran for it, and O'Mara ran too.

As Burke neared the wagon, O'Mara raised the fork over his head and hurled it like a spear. Burke fell and rolled under the wagon tongue, and the fork drove into the double tree, then boomed into the wagon box.

O'Mara was charging again now, and Burke, on his knees, unhooked the heavy stay chain. As O'Mara was on him, Burke slashed backhanded at him with a short length of the

chain. The murderous weight of it raked across O'Mara's chest, tearing the shirt away and leaving a bloody furrow in the matted hair.

The force of O'Mara's charge was halted; he staggered back one step, caught his balance and lunged too close. Burke, who had risen, backed up a step and raised the chain and savagely slashed it down across O'Mara's shoulders. O'Mara sank to his knees, but even then he groped out and his bloody fist gripped Burke's ankle. Again Burke brought the chain down, this time across O'Mara's black, round skull.

O'Mara fell on his face, not stirring. Burke stood over him a long minute, breathing deeply, and he thought he had killed the man and did not care.

Stepping around O'Mara he went over to Raines, who was lying on his back as O'Mara had left him. A livid bruise was rising on Raines' temple, and the gentle slapping Burke gave his face would not bring his eyes open.

Burke picked him up, turned and tramped through B stable. Between B and A stables, he met two troopers, and called them to him.

"Take Raines to the hospital. Then one of you go over to the officer's mess and get Dr. Ford."

Soberly, the troopers took Raines and disappeared behind A stable. Burke stood a moment brushing the dust from his uniform. He was thinking, *This is real trouble, now.*

There was nothing to do except report it, he knew. He turned wearily up toward the parade ground.

He had passed the barracks and was nearing the sutler's post which housed the officers' club when he saw Captain Ervien leave headquarters building and turn toward him. Burke met him in front of the post trader's.

Burke saluted. "Sir," he began formally, "I think I've probably killed your sergeant major."

Ervien's mouth opened slowly, but no words came.

Burke went on, "O'Mara was roughing up Sergeant Raines. When I ordered him to stop, he refused, saying I had no authority to issue orders. I hit him to keep him from hurting Raines. He thought that gave him the right to attack me, and he did, I think," he finished, "I may have killed him."

Burke saw the wicked anger mount in Ervien's dark eyes. "Mister Hanna, you seem to get in trouble even when confined to the post," he said in a dry and savagely formal voice. "Confine yourself to quarters and mess until I have the particulars."

"Yes, sir," Burke said, and Ervien brushed past him.

Back in quarters, Burke paused long enough to send the orderly over to Byas' to explain his absence, and then went

on to his room. Abe, he reflected wryly, would probably be pulled away from his supper to investigate, since he was adjutant.

He sank wearily down on his bed. He wondered idly what Raines and O'Mara had quarreled about, and then turned to his own predicament. Outside of having to face the very serious charge of striking an enlisted man, there was Calla to think about now. Even Calla, badly as she wanted them married, couldn't be married in the lounge of bachelor officers' quarters. Burke swore under his breath when he thought of it.

An orderly came from Byas' with a tray of food—the supper Burke was to have eaten with Calla and Abe and Lucy, and he ate hungrily. Afterward he loaded a pipe and lay down again and stared gloomily at the ceiling in the lowering dusk. Either he could broodingly count his sins, or what were called his sins, or he could forget them; there was no changing anything now. He swung his feet to the floor and rose and prowled restlessly to the window and came back. There, lying on the corner of his desk and covered with five weeks' dust, was his black notebook. A hundred hours of friendly argument with his fellow officers about cavalry tactics and Army practice had led him long ago to fortify and clarify his views by writing them down.

He opened the book, then closed it with disgust. What did it matter if he contended, against cavalry practice, that a mounted charge against hostile Indians was not impossible? Or that a native pony that lived off the land was often a better mount than a grain-fed Army horse?

He saw that it was getting dark, and lighted his desk lamp. He was adjusting the wick when the soft knock came on his door.

It opened immediately, and Rush Doll stepped in. Rush put his shoulder against the wall.

"You confined to quarters, like they say?"

Burke nodded. "How's O'Mara? Have you heard?"

"All right. You can't kill a brute like that. He's in the hospital. Raines is all right. He's left."

"Hear what they fought about?"

"O'Mara was tryin' to work off his crowbait mounts on K Troop replacements, and Raines wouldn't take 'em." Rush straightened up. "Well, I better go send Ponce back."

"He's there?"

Rush nodded. Burke stood hesitant a moment. He was on his honor as an officer and gentleman not to break arrest. But if he didn't see Ponce and somehow persuade him to patience until Ervien could be convinced of the necessity for

making Corinne feed his people, then he would be criminally liable.

He came to his reckless decision. "Hold him there, Rush. I'll meet you at full dark."

Burke couldn't take the chance that the sentry wouldn't know of his being confined to quarters, so he waited until the man had passed, then climbed out of his window. Quietly, he walked ahead until he was in the friendly shadow of the laundry. Once there, he turned and skirted the sutler's post, the barracks and A stable, and cut down toward the blacksmith shop, which marked post limits.

A pair of troopers were doing some work there by lantern light on a wagon wheel. The nearby stable guard, carbine slacked under his arm, was peering off in the darkness. Beyond, in the half light of the lanterns, Burke could see Rush Doll and Ponce.

Burke approached the guard and returned his salute. "Bellows, I'm under arrest, you know," he began.

"Yes, sir. I heard it, sir."

Burke pointed to Doll and Ponce in the darkness. "I have to talk with that 'Pache. He's not allowed on the post after dark and I'm not allowed off it. Suppose we meet on the line and you watch us."

Bellows grinned. "As long as nobody crosses, I'm obeying orders, sir."

Burke went on, and paused at the line of the blacksmith shop's wall. Rush and Ponce came to meet him, and in the dim light of the lantern Burke looked searchingly at Ponce. He was taller than the average Apache, perhaps thirty-eight, with squarish flat features holding a subtle blending of fierceness, pride and cunning that had made him Tana's subchief—and a rebel. He was dressed in a dirty blue calico shirt, worn tails out, breechclout and high leggings and moccasins. Gravely he extended his hand to Burke and shook hands.

This was hardly the time for ceremony, Burke knew, but he offered Ponce a cigar from his pocket, and it was accepted and lighted. Burke and Rush knelt while Ponce squatted silently in the dim light. He spoke now in Apache to Rush, who interpreted to Burke.

"He says he's sorry you got in trouble for giving him and his band food," said Rush.

"Tell him I'm his friend," Burke said. "My friends don't go hungry."

Rush interpreted and Ponce answered quickly, almost with hate. Rush said dryly to Burke, "He asks if you're still his

friend, because he's hungry and so are his people. They've been hungry since you sent them back."

"Ask if he hasn't been included on weekly ration issue, along with the others."

Rush and Ponce conversed a moment, and then Rush said, "He says Corinne is punishing him for breaking out last time. They receive short rations, not as much as the others. From lack of meat they're getting weak and sick. It's hard to hold the young bucks in, he says, and he wants to know how to get more meat. They're started killing their ponies, he says—and he's lying on that point, of course."

"Don't they get beef?"

Rush spoke again to Ponce, was again answered sharply, and Rush looked at Burke, irony in his eyes. "Sick beef, starved beef, with no meat on their bones."

Burke said, "Tell him I'll talk to Corinne."

Rush passed on this information, and again he received a quick and flat reply. "Tomorrow," Rush repeated, "is issue day for beef. He has told his young men to wait, to see what tomorrow brings. If they get the same sick scrub beef, Ponce says he isn't sure if he can hold them in." Rush paused. "He's threatening you, Burke. Those young men of his are pretty handy to put the blame on. He's mad, and he's threatened old Chief Tana that he'll break if his people aren't fed better."

Burke said slowly, "Tell him if he breaks, I'll hunt him down, and this time I'll kill him and every man that breaks with him."

Rush hesitated a moment before translating. When he had, Ponce gazed levelly at Burke. There was a challenge in the look and Burke's eyes met it steadily. Finally, Ponce spoke briefly, and Rush translated.

"He says you can't hunt him down. You're under arrest. The rest of the soldiers he's not afraid of."

Burke rose, signifying the end of the parley. He waited for the customary *"Enju"* from Ponce, which signified "All is good," but it did not come. Ponce shook hands gravely, turned and vanished noiselessly into the night.

"He's already made up his mind to break," Burke said slowly.

Rush cursed viciously. "That damn Corinne!"

Burke stared out into the warm star-studded night. He would go to Ervien now and tell him what Ponce said, pointing out that Corinne's weekly shortweight swindle tomorrow would touch off the explosion. But Ervien would either reprimand him for not minding the Army's business, or deny that Corinne was engaged in sharp practice. Only by being con-

fronted with the evidence of Corinne's crookedness could Burke drive him into correcting it in time.

Reluctantly, he knew what he must do. It would have to be done without Rush, for he could not risk dragging Rush into a scheme which, if it were discovered, might cost him his livelihood. And Rush would hate him for what he would say now.

"All I can do is warn Ervien," Burke spoke resignedly.

"That won't do it, Burke!" Rush said vehemently.

Burke shrugged.

There was bitterness in Rush's eyes as he said curtly, "I suppose you're right. The hell with it. Good night."

He turned stiffly and walked off toward the distant lights of the agency a half mile to the south across the flat. Burke strolled back to the deep shadow of A stable and then hauled up. He knew that what he was about to do would have far graver consequences than anything he had done thus far, and for a moment, watching the stable guard on his round, listening to the night noises of the post, he reckoned the risk and knew he must take it.

Presently, a couple of troopers joined the two already at the blacksmith shop. There was a parley there which Bellows, on his round, paused to join.

This was the chance Burke had been waiting for. Circling far outside the light of the shop lanterns, he noiselessly crossed the post limits and set out toward the agency lights. He was going to see for himself if the agency scales were rigged, as both Rush and Ponce said they were.

Once in the shelter of the agency's adobe stables, he halted and listened. He could hear the occasional bawling of restive cattle in the corral ahead. Probably hungry, he thought, and he wondered if Corinne had put out a night guard. He'd have to take that chance. From watching past issues, he knew where the scales were. An issue chute was set up leading across the scales from the corral and it was here that each Apache head of family or clan leader presented his ration ticket, had it stamped, watched his beef weighed, and received it.

A pack of dogs around the distant Apache *wickiups* started a fight. Under cover of their yammering, Burke made his way in the deep blackness toward the big holding corral. Once there, he moved to his right until he saw the high oblong box housing the scale machinery outlined against the sky among the chute rails.

Approaching it, he knelt and felt along its board panels for the handle of the door that gave access to the adjusting

mechanism. His hand touched a hasp and then a heavy padlock. Corinne, evidently, wasn't taking any chances.

Burke rose, cursing, and started beating about for a piece of iron with which to pry off the padlock. His boot hit something and he leaned down, and as he did so he heard the hoofbeats of horses at a run.

Rising, he looked off toward the dark stables, and at that moment he heard a sharp command given. "Spread out and cover the corral, men!" The voice was Ervien's.

Burke knelt, listening to the mounted troopers beating toward him. Then he turned and ran, hugging the corral fence, but the troopers fanned out quickly in the darkness, cutting off his escape. Halting, he saw a pair of troopers now rounding the end of the stables, and each held a lantern.

Burke debated vaulting the corral and hiding on the other side, but he knew his presence there would spook the wild range cattle inside. Either they would attack him, or give away his presence by their actions.

Kneeling there, a gray despair touched him, and he thought, *He knew where to come for me.* Ahead of him a trooper had turned his horse and was carefully scouting the base of the corral. The troopers with lanterns had split now, one going to either side of the corral. Ervien had halted midway between the corral and the stables.

Burke waited with a kind of fatalism, and when the trooper with the lantern approached, Burke stood up and said, "All right."

"Here he is, Captain!" the trooper called.

Burke waited, blinking against the lantern light, as the platoon collected. Ervien rode up slowly and reined in.

"You knew where to hunt for me, didn't you, Phil?" Burke said recklessly.

Ervien said coldly, "Mister Hanna, I went to your room and found you had broken arrest. Consider yourself a prisoner."

Burke said, forgetting caution, "Dismount three of your smallest men and weigh them together on that scale, Phil. See if they don't weigh over six hundred. Are you afraid to?"

"You have broken your word of honor as an officer, Mister Hanna." Ervien's voice was shaking with rage. "Now come along, or we'll bind you and carry you!"

"Sure." Burke knew he was beaten. He began to walk toward the stables, and the troopers, at Ervien's orders, flanked him. Ervien silently rode on the right flank.

They went on past the stables, between the agency buildings, and turned into the road that ran in front of Corinne's store to the post.

A brace of carriage lamps lighted the store's deep veranda, and Burke saw Corinne, soft, gray and formless in his baggy black suit, watching silently at the top of the steps. A scattering of Apaches and agency employees were seated on the veranda benches.

As they drew even with the steps, Burke halted and looked balefully up at Corinne. Ervien, sensing trouble, said, "Forward, Mr. Hanna!"

Burke didn't move. He raised his arm now and pointed at Corinne and said slowly, "Corinne, if you short-weight that beef you issue to Ponce tomorrow, he'll break. He told me so tonight. And every drop of blood it takes to get him back here will be on your head!"

"Forward!" Ervien roared. "Sergeant, put a carbine on that prisoner and if he refuses to move shoot him!"

Burke had never ceased looking at Corinne, who did not move. Now he looked over at Ervien. "You heard it, too. I'll go now."

Burke tramped on. The troopers flanking him were quiet, awed by the gravity of their errand. Later, at the sentry gate, the sentry silently presented arms, and afterward Burke tasted the full measure of this calculated humiliation. He was an officer being brought back afoot by the commanding officer and guard, a prisoner who had broken arrest. They filed past the sutler's post where loitering enlisted men, baffled and wondering, watched them in silence.

It was here, at the corner of the parade ground, that Ervien at last spoke and a score of men heard him. "Sergeant, put him in the guardhouse, and double your guard."

Sometime, after ten o'clock, next morning, Burke, fed and rested, was lying on his bunk trying to pick out the separate sounds of a post working through a July morning. His barred cell was a big one, occupying half the small adobe building that lay between the two barracks. A pair of troopers were sleeping a drunk off in the cell opposite.

He turned his head at a sound in the passageway and saw Abe Byas being let in by the sergeant of the guard.

Burke swung his feet to the floor and Abe, closing the cell door behind him, said, "Hello, Burke," with a morose lack of enthusiasm. He put his huge bulk gently on the foot of Burke's cot, regarded Burke a moment, then shook his head. "Since the middle of supper last night," he said, "I've been looking around for the pieces of all the regulations you've broken. Did you miss one?"

Burke's long face broke in a grin, and Abe regarded him

unsmilingly. "Ervien has me drawing up the list of additional charges this morning."

"I added some," Burke murmured.

"For God's sake, why did you have to break arrest? Why were you at the agency?"

Burke said dryly, "I'm a kind soul, Abe. I got to wondering if Corinne watered his beef."

"Damn it, can't you be serious?"

"I am serious," Burke said gravely. "Either I'm out of the Army or he's out, after the court martial. Let's let it go at that." He wasn't going to tell Abe of his certain belief that Ervien was winking at Corinne's cheating the Apaches. Abe would be torn between his loyalty to him and his duty to Ervien and, if he became involved, would have to risk his career.

"How is Calla?" Burke asked.

"She's crazy," Abe growled. "I mean she isn't even worried."

"When'll the court martial sit, Abe?" asked Burke.

"In two weeks maybe. When I've heard all the witnesses the case will be forwarded." He rose and looked down at Burke, puzzlement in his face, "I hope you know what you're doing."

"I do. Thanks."

When Abe was gone, Burke lay down again, and he found himself thinking of the coming court martial. He had only to plead justification and state his case, but that case must be proved. He saw now that he must do two things; he must prove his charge of crookedness against Corinne, and he must prove that Phil Ervien knew of Corinne's swindle and was abetting it. *If I can't I'm cashiered,* he concluded bleakly.

Some time later he was roused again by the sergeant's footsteps. He looked up. Calla, a covered tray in her hands, was standing by the cell door. He rose, and Calla came in. Before she put the tray down, she kissed him.

"Happy wedding day," Burke said gravely.

"You wait," Calla said, merriment in her eyes. "You can't dodge it by going to jail."

Burke grinned. "Why did they let you in here?"

"I asked permission of your Captain Ervien," Calla said, and added slyly, "He's a charming man, really."

She was wearing a flowered green dress, cool and fresh as new grass, and Burke didn't wonder at Ervien's gallantry. He put the tray on the floor and pulled her down beside him, and she half turned to him, regarding him levelly and soberly.

"How much of what Abe says they say you did, did you do?"

"All of it."

"Can you justify it?"

"All of it," Burke repeated. "Either I don't belong in the Army or he doesn't, Calla."

She reached for his hand and Burke knew that she believed in him completely.

"Calla, how much of the money I gave you for our house stuff have you got left?"

"Three hundred dollars or so. Why?"

"I'm going to buy us a wedding present," Burke said musingly. "A couple of ugly, brindle, half-starved cows." He smiled at her look of puzzlement, and then, speaking in a low voice, he told of what had happened last night, and why. He held back nothing, and finished by saying, "I never saw the scales, Calla. I can't prove anything on Corinne—and I've go to."

Calla nodded. "But what have two cows got to do with it?"

"You get our money and take it to Rush Doll. The beef issue is going on right now. Tell Rush to pick out a couple of Corinne's issue beeves—cows that are marked or disfigured, so if a man saw them once he'd never forget them. Tell Rush to buy or trade for them with the Apache who was issued them—and that Apache must be a member of Ponce's band. Does it all make sense?"

"Yes," Calla said quickly. "Either Corinne fixes the scales and weighs Ponce's beef right, or he short-weights him—and you have the evidence. If Ponce breaks, you can prove why. Oh, Burke, he won't break, will he?"

Burke shrugged. Calla stood up quickly. "I'll go now, Burke. I don't know if I can come again."

Early that evening, the sergeant of the guard gave him a note. It contained one word, *Enju,* and was unsigned, and Burke knew Rush had succeeded.

He got to sleep late. At 4:30 next morning, at bare dawn, the bugle woke him. It was sounding Call to Arms.

Burke lay, hearing the sound of men running and their talking. Ten minutes later, the sergeant of the guard poked his head in and said, "Thought you'd want to know, sir. Ponce's busted loose again."

Burke sank back on his cot. So it happened, just as he had warned Ervien it would. A hot anger flooded through him; men would die, ranches would be ravaged and burned, and a whole countryside thrown into terror until Ponce was brought in again. And this time, Ponce would fight. He had trusted the white man's word, and been betrayed. And the blame for all of it was on Corinne's head.

The trooper who brought Burke's breakfast told him that

Ponce had killed an agency policeman in his break. The trooper didn't know how many bucks had broken with him, but they were headed west for the Tonto Rim.

Burke was almost through his breakfast when the corridor door opened and Captain Ervien, followed by Lieutenant Byas, stood aside to let the sergeant unlock his cell.

Burke put his tray on the floor and came to attention.

Ervien looked haggard and worried. He said stiffly, "At ease, Mister Hanna."

Burke relaxed, glancing at Abe's sober face.

"Mister Hanna," Ervien began, "I have come to a decision I think is a fair one, and I have disregarded my personal feelings in the matter."

Burke said nothing, and Ervien said, "I am releasing you from arrest. You are to assume command of K Troop immediately and prepare to take the field."

"What's the reason, sir?"

"You are our most experienced commander in the field," Ervien said. "You know Ponce, you know how he fights. You've campaigned longer and more ably than any man in the squadron. You are needed." He added stiffly, "It is your privilege to refuse, of course. It will not influence your record. Neither," he said bluntly, "will your acceptance."

"I'll accept, of course," Burke said promptly.

"Very well. Assembly will be sounded in half an hour. Have your troop ready."

Ervien went out, and Burke stared unbelievingly at Byas. "What's behind it, Abe?"

"Nothing. He said it all. We need you."

It was midday of the second day out of Fort Akin when Burke, topping the Tonto Rim, led K Troop in a circle and ordered dismount. Abe Byas, who had turned over his I Troop to his second lieutenant in order to join Burke's advance party, stepped heavily out of the saddle and sought the closest shade. The troopers eased from their saddles and loosened cinches that had been tightened for the long ascent, then found shelter from the blasting midday sun under the pines that grew almost to the edge of the Rim.

Burke loosened his cinch and, seeing Abe was flat on his back in the shade, moved over to Abe's horse and loosened that cinch also. A faint excitement was running through him now. Last night, Nick Arno, the chief of scouts, had climbed close enough to the top of the rim here to see Ponce's campfires. Ponce would know that, and would make his stand sometime today. Burke thought he knew where it would be,

and he impatiently waited word from Nick, whose scouts were well to the front and flanks.

Byas said dreamily, "It's hell to carry as much weight as I do, Burke."

"It's hell on your horse, too," Burke jibed, and walked back to the edge of the Rim, passing among the resting blue-shirted troopers. At his call for volunteers from K Troop, every man passed by Surgeon Ford as able to sit in a saddle had come forward, and now he looked at them, along with his few replacements, trying to gauge their temper. They were silent, preoccupied. Having just come off the grinding patrol of sending Ponce back to the reservation, they had a personal interest in finishing the job now, Burke knew. Sergeant Raines was cruising silently by himself among the troopers, his campaign hat turned up at the back and in the front, his tight, leathery face pouched in the right cheek by his ever-present cud of tobacco. He had borrowed a pair of oversize boots to accommodate his bandaged feet, and Burke knew he felt ridiculous and therefore touchy.

At the Rim, Burke halted. A thousand feet or more below him perhaps two miles away on the backtrail, Troops I, L, and M, comprising two hundred men, toiled antlike up the first lift of the trail. Behind them a string of crawling black beads told him Rush Doll's mule-pack train was coming along. For a moment, the panorama of the Basin caught and held his attention. He had seen it many times from this point, but never twice alike. Now it was gray, stippled with green and brown, with great pools of black cloud shadow moving majestically across it like lakes of cooling lava. An almost unbearably hot draft of wind lifted ceaselessly over the Rim.

"Lieutenant, sir."

That was Raines. Burke turned and saw Nick Arno, the young half-breed Apache who was chief of scouts, trotting silently through the resting troop. From the waist up, Nick was dressed like a white man, wearing a dun calico shirt, neckerchief and black campaign hat. From the waist down, he was Apache, with breech clout, high leggings and moccasins. The cast of his broad features was Apache, but his pale coffee-colored skin bespoke white blood.

He hauled up before Burke. "He's gettin' ready to fight, Burke," he said. "He's run far enough."

"The far bank of Quartermaster Creek?" Burke asked. This was his hunch, and he saw it confirmed by Nick's nod. "How many?"

"Sixty or seventy, not counting women and kids. They're holed up in rocks on both sides of the trail."

Burke looked beyond the resting troopers and up the tim-

bered trail to the country ahead. The trail, he remembered, climbed over the near ridge he could see, sloped down and crossed an open park to climb again for a higher ridge before it dived steeply into the wide and sandy waterless wash that was Quartermaster Creek. It was on the far bank of the creek, among the vaulting boulders, that Ponce had forted up.

"Don't cross the creek, Nick," he said. "Scatter your boys to the right of the trail along the ridge and open up on them. Hold them there, and when you're set, start back and I'll meet you on the trail."

Nick nedded and swung into an easy trot up the trail. Burke went over to Raines.

"Raines, you ride," Burke said. "The rest of us will walk. No smoking, no talking. Ponce is about three miles ahead. Let's get going."

With Byas silently plodding behind him, Burke led the file through the timber to the ridge and over it. The humus of pine needles silenced the footfalls of the horses, and there was only the hushed sound of creaking leather. On the downslope as the timber thinned, Burke saw the open grassy park he had promised Ervien would make a suitable assembly point, lying still and deserted in the sun.

Once there, Burke almost absently gave the command to fall out while he studied the park. His glance passed over and then returned to the left of the trail at the far edge of the timber.

Byas, from beside him, was studying the park too. He said, "I feel awful naked here, Burke. I keep thinking I see Indians behind trees."

Burke only grinned and beckoned Raines over to him. He told him to take Callahan and see if they could make their way, mounted, down the wash. "I want to know if we can get through there, mounted, to Quartermaster Creek without being seen. If there's been anybody down it ahead of you, pull back and we'll forget it."

Raines shouted for Callahan, and the two set out.

As Burke mounted, Byas said, "Hell, Ponce's got that wash spotted, Burke."

Burke shook his head in negation. "If we were 'Paches, he might have, Abe, but we're only dumb soldiers. A goosetrap ambush on the far bank of the Quartermaster is good enough for us. It's worked on us before, and he thinks it'll work again." He lifted his reins, just as the sound of distant scattered fire came to them. He listened a moment, then turned to Abe and grinned. "See?" he said.

"Quartermaster Creek?"

"Far bank." He put his horse into motion, calling back

over his shoulder. "Post lookouts, Abe, and take over, will you?"

He rode across the park and into the timber, and the trail climbed gently again. He felt a curious impatience to examine Ponce's position, although he already pictured it. He knew, without any cynicism, that Ervien had elected him to pull his chestnuts out of the fire, and he was willing enough to do it. For this was his chance to settle his score with Ponce, as he had promised the Apache he would.

A ten-minute ride brought him just short of the timbered crest where Nick was waiting, standing beside the trail, facing the sound of firing and listening intently.

Dismounting, Burke picketed his pony off the trail and joined Nick, who wordlessly led him angling to the right of the trail into the thinning timber of the crest. Nick crawled up behind a windfall lying across the hump of the ridge; Burke came up, hatless, and bellied down beside him.

Before them, the timber ceased almost abruptly; a field of jagged and tumbled boulders sloped easily down to the steep bank of Quartermaster Creek forty yards away. To his left, and across the wide, sandy and waterless wash, Burke saw the trail rising steeply to vanish into the boulder field piled high and vaulting on the far bank. Behind the rocks a bare and level sage flat stretched for several hundred yards until the thick timber began again. It was among those boulders on the far bank that Ponce had placed his men on both sides of the trail, waiting contemptuously. Now Burke could pick out the sharp flat crack of Ponce's Winchesters, which were answered by the muffled, heavier bark of the scouts' cavalry carbines to his right on this bank.

Nick touched his arm and pointed across the wash to the right and rear of Ponce's position. Burke saw a column of dust lifting in a slow spiral above the pines, and he knew it was Ponce's pony herd. *He's keeping them moving in a circle,* Burke thought. *Bait for us.*

Nick said then, "Ponce thinks you're in jail, Burke. That trap is meant for the others."

Burke grunted assent. He'd forgotten that, and it would help. He told Nick to keep the scouts in position and firing, so as to make Ponce waste ammunition, adding, "If they move to our left across the trail, send back word."

Returning to his horse, Burke mounted. The rightness of the plan he had half-formed in his mind was confirmed by what he had seen. If only Raines' report was favorable. Impatient now, he lifted his horse into a canter down the trail to the assembly point.

As he rode into the Park, he saw that I, L, and M Troops

had arrived and dismounted, and were scattered across the park in the hot sunshine, roughly holding formation. The officers, dismounted beyond his own K Troop in the middle of the park, were gathered in a loose circle around Ervien, who was still on his horse.

Burke rode straight for his troop. Reining in, he asked, "What luck, Raines?"

Raines shifted his tobacco before he spoke. "We got down the wash without any trouble. There's been nobody over it, Lieutenant."

"Can a troop get through unobserved?"

"In a column of troopers, yes, sir."

"Did you scout the other side?"

Raines nodded. "Yes, sir. We found a wash and went up it into the boulders."

Burke felt a quiet elation. "What's it like on top?"

"Past the boulders, it's mostly level, with sage and rabbitbrush flats clean to the timber."

"Fine work, Raines. Thank you."

"Sir," Raines said ominously, "O'Mara's along!"

"Keep away from him. We've got other business, Raines." Then he understood that this might be Raines' way of warning him. He looked levelly at the sergeant, and said, "I see. Thank you, Raines."

He rode over to join the officers. As he approached he heard Ervien say fretfully, "I still think it's unwise to move until Doll's pack train is here." He caught sight of Burke and swung out of his saddle. Without his blouse and in his shirtsleeves, Ervien seemed somehow frail, soft and ill at ease. A day-old beard blurred the edges of his sharp face; his uniform was dusty and his shirt was staining with sweat at his belly and back. He contrived to hide his harried expression from only the closest observer as he said stiffly, "Well, Mister Hanna. You're advance party. What have you found?"

Burke swung down and looked at the ground about him. He found a bare patch of clay a yard or so to the right of him. Stepping over to it, he started to kneel, then looked up at Ervien. "You want your first sergeants to hear this, sir?" he asked.

"Very good idea," Ervien murmured.

Byas turned and shouted, "Pass the word. All sergeants assemble here!" Burke knelt and smoothed out the clay, then began to draw his map with his finger. The officers collected about him in a loose circle, and the sergeants, as they came up, fell in behind them.

Burke, waiting for the laggards, looked up to see Sergeant

O'Mara, his nose swollen but his face otherwise unmarked, watching him with bland and arrogant eyes.

They were all watching now, and Burke explained his simple map, giving Ponce's position, the locations of the pony herd and the disposition of the scouts.

When he had finished, he looked up at Ervien. He had, he saw immediately, done the wrong thing, for Ervien was looking at him with an air of expectancy mingled with relief, as if the burden of decision had been lifted from him. Now the harried expression returned to his face as he looked awkwardly about him, and saw that the other officers were watching him. He cleared his throat and said formally, "Any suggestions, Mister Hanna?"

"Yes, sir," Burke said bluntly. "It's the usual sucker's trap he's set. I propose we don't oblige him."

Lieutenant Umberhine laughed. Ervien looked reprovingly at the stocky officer and then at Hanna. "None of us want to, I assure you. Go ahead."

Burke looked over at Umberhine, now. "You laughed, Brad, and you're right. Ponce expects us to fight across the wash and make for the pony herd he's labeled for us, so he can butcher us in that wash where the trail crosses."

"What's your scheme?" Byas said.

Burke told them of Raines' reconnaissance, which offered a covered route around across the creek and behind Ponce's flank. One troop, Burke said, should reinforce the present line of scouts at the wash; a second troop should take Raines' route, while the other two troops should swing around to the right to make a demonstration against Ponce's other flank as if to cut between him and his pony herd.

"Is this a fake demonstration, Mister Hanna?" Ervien asked sharply. "You just told us Ponce expects us to do that."

"No, sir," Burke said. "That's where we ram home the first hard attack—a quarter mile to the right of the trail where the banks are lower."

"Approximately where Ponce expects us to," Ervien said dryly. "Be consistent, Mister Hanna."

"I am," Burke said flatly. "We don't ram it home until the troop that's crossed the wash and hidden on his other flank is all set and firing. When Ponce sees his pony herd threatened and moves to protect it, the hidden troop will take him from the rear and cut off escape into the timber." He looked at the circle of attentive faces now. "With eighty men, he can't fight two ways. The two troops on the right will cross between him and his pony herd, then wheel and cut into him."

Burke rose, and Ervien knelt and studied the map. Sergeant

O'Mara, behind him, leaned hands on knees and looked over his shoulder. The other officers crowded up.

After a long moment, Ervien rose. "We'll accept that, Mister Hanna. It's very good," he acknowledged. Now, regarding each officer in turn, he was once more the sharp garrison soldier. His work was done for him. To Lieutenant Umberhine he gave command of Troops L and M; they were to force the crossing on the right. Byas was to command Troop I, which was reserve, and the scouts at the trail crossing.

To Burke Hanna and K Troop fell the mission of crossing the Quartermaster unobserved and coming in behind Ponce. Burke felt a grim satisfaction at this. Ervien himself, as commanding officer, elected to take his position behind Lieutenant Umberhine's main attack.

As the group broke up to scatter for their horses, Ervien called, "Good luck, gentlemen. I will post a lookout to our right and rear."

Burke fell in beside the lumbering Byas as they sought their horses. Abe glanced fondly at him and said, "You earn your pay, don't you?"

Burke didn't answer; he said quietly, "Abe, your troop won't need pistols. I want to borrow them."

Byas said slowly, "All right, Burke. But why?"

"This is one time," Burke said grimly, "we'll get more than ponies and squaws. I'm after the bucks."

"At short range," Byas said.

"As short as I can make it," Burke murmured.

As K Troop was ready to move, Burke looked across the park and saw that Ervien, with O'Mara at his side, was still studying the map, pointing to it and gesturing vehemently. Ervien, he supposed, would keep O'Mara, which was satisfactory to K Troop, he knew.

Burke let Raines and Callahan precede him into the wash, then giving K Troop the order to mount, he led on. The issue of extra pistols was causing comment, he knew, and he would give his troop the reason in good time. Soon the high clay walls closed about them, and the heat was stifling, so that when they came into the blazing brightness of Quartermaster Creek's sandy bed, it was almost a relief.

Here Raines' trail, hidden from Ponce's view by a sharp bend in the stream bed, crossed and dropped downstream a hundred yards, then headed up a wide sandy draw through the boulders that climbed steeply as it narrowed to little more than the width of a horse.

As Burke pulled out of the arroyo in one last step climb, he saw, immediately to his right, Callahan holding his own

and Raines' horses. Beyond Callahan, a long low clay dune that cut back toward the creek screened his view of Ponce's position.

Raines, his dusty blue uniform almost the color of the clay, was lying on his stomach down below the crest of the ridge, which was covered with rabbit brush and sage.

Forming his troop in line below the crest, Burke gave the command to dismount and joined Raines.

The wide sage flats lay in front of him now, separating the timber to his left from the boulder-studded canyon rim to his right. He could tell that L and M Troops had joined the engagement by the increase in the volume of fire and, watching carefully, he caught an occasional glimpse of a trooper, small in the distance across the creek, edging his way forward.

Leaving Raines in observation, Burke pulled back behind the dunes and called the troop together. His old troopers were watching him expectantly; only the volunteer replacements showed any uneasiness.

Burke began easily. "This is one time a soldier gets in the first shot with an Apache. They haven't seen us. We're going to scatter down this ridge at ten-yard intervals and fire two volleys from carbines. That lets L and M know we're in position, and it tells Ponce he's outflanked. Then you'll fall back to your mounts."

There was a puzzled silence at this last piece of information. Finally, Callahan said, "Beg pardon, sir, but these extra pistols. What are they for?"

"A mounted charge," Burke said quietly.

An even longer silence followed, and Burke saw the old troopers were mulling this over. He glanced up the ridge and saw Raines looking at him. He thought Raines was grinning, but he couldn't be sure. A mounted charge against Indians, of course, had been given up by the cavalry long ago as impossible, and Burke knew the older troopers were remembering this.

He said, "When we volley at Ponce's rear, he'll have to pull out of those rocks or die there. Once he's in the open and afoot, you'll have a horse under you, twelve shots in your pistols and five in your carbines. If you're tired of fighting Indians the way an infantryman does, here's your chance. We're going to wind this one up without a foot race."

The men laughed at that, and Burke said, "All right, move forward. Open fire when I do."

The troop scattered down the ridge, and Burke pulled his carbine from his saddle scabbard, and climbed the ridge to lie down beside Raines. He surveyed the boulder field, and catching a movement there, h e shot carelessly at it. A ragged

volley followed; men were reluctant to shoot without targets, and the Apaches were well hidden.

The second volley, sweeping nearly the whole of Ponce's line beyond the trail, stilled Ponce's Winchesters. Then, as Burke had hoped, there was a stir of activity in the rocks. Several bucks changed positions; a handful stood up briefly, staring at the dunes. He heard angry and excited shouting, and one buck broke for the long run to the timber, then, thinking better of it, dropped behind a clump of sage.

The overtone of L and M's fire dropped off. Burke thought, *They're crossing,* and lifted his glance to the bare bank of the creek. What he saw puzzled him. Blue-clad troopers were pulling out of their positions along the rocks of the creek bed, and were hastily retiring up the slope and over the crest.

Raines, seeing it, spat, then looked quizzically at Burke and asked, "What's that for?"

Burke shook his head in wonderment. If they were reforming for a dismounted charge, they'd better hurry.

Then his attention was yanked to Ponce's band. They were drifting out of the rocks now to face this new threat to their rear. There was no concerted movement; here a naked buck, mud-smeared, bent over and running, would show himself a second and drop, and another would rise after him. The direction of their movement was obliquely across K Troop's field of fire, and Burke thought, *He's trying to get between us and his camp in the timber. If he reaches timber, he's gone.*

He said, "Come on, Raines," and turned and ran downhill for his horse, raising his arm in the signal to the waiting troopers to mount. Riding immediately to his position in front of center, he ordered, "By the right flank," and rapidly moved the troop, still hidden by the dune, toward the creek. When the lead trooper had almost reached the rocks, Burke pulled his pistol and signalled, "By the left flank."

The troop turned into line, labored up the short climb, reached the crest and, as if heeding a signal unspoken, boiled down the far side and out onto the flats at full gallop, yelling wildly.

A hundred and fifty yards ahead was the scattering of Ponce's bucks who had broken from the bouders. At sight of the charging line of mounted troopers, they remained motionless, momentarily stunned with surprise. This was not the way they fought; nor had they ever fought mounted soldiers before. Then the panic hit them, and they milled about in confusion, firing wildly and inaccurately.

Burke rode hard for the center of the band. Holding his fire until he was almost on them, he chose a frightened young buck as his man and rode him down. The impact hurled the

buck into a kneeling Apache ahead whose Winchester was already leveled at Burke. The gun went off and the Apache raised his gun as a pike and thrust savagely at Burke. With his pistol arm, Burke fended off the blow, and then he was past, and turning in his saddle, he leveled and shot almost over his horse's croup into the Apache's side.

His horse swerved, almost unseating him, as Trooper Breen, still mounted, cut across his path. Burke saw the reins of Breen's horse flying; the man had both arms folded across his belly, and was swaying drunkenly in the saddle. At the impact of Burke's horse, Breen pitched sideways and fell, and Burke's horse caromed off to the right.

Wheeling, Burke roweled his horse to complete the circle and found himself almost alone in swirling dust. The momentum of the first charge had taken the troopers past him, and now he saw the half dozen desperate Apaches who had withstood the charge firing at the galloping troopers, some of whom had fallen. A score of downed Apaches lay scattered in the choking dust raised by the charge. Burke had already chosen the nearest Apache when he heard the terrified protesting moan of a man to his left. Burke swiveled his glance and saw two Apaches, one stripped, the other in a dirty calico shirt, savagely clubbing a downed trooper with their gun butts. Burke saw that the buck in the calico shirt was Ponce.

Burke fired, and Ponce's companion ran. Then two troopers, both mouthing the Rebel yell, cut in front of Burke, heading for the remaining Apaches, and Burke had to pull up to avoid collision. As the two riders cleared him, he saw Ponce, dropped on one knee, some thirty yards away, his Winchester slacked hesitantly in his arms. As soon as he identified Burke, he raised his gun. Instinctively, Burke flattened out on the neck of his horse. The shot came immediately, and Burke felt his horse shudder at the impact. As if propelled from a sling, Burke was catapulted over the animal's head. He landed heavily on his chest in the dust, the breath driven from him.

Gagging, he rolled on his left side so that his pistol arm was free. Ponce shot again. The noise was deafening, and Burke felt the sting of the powder. He bent back his head and saw, not ten feet away, Ponce's squat figure half hidden in dust, levering a shell. Burke was lying on his side; with no time to roll on his belly, he streaked up his pistol and shot immediately at the dust-blurred outline of Ponce, which was canted awkwardly in his vision.

He thought he had missed; he rolled over, panicked, expecting Ponce's shot, but the barrel of Ponce's gun slowly tilted down, halted, was inched up again as if he were lifting

a ponderous weight. The calico shirt began to stain redly at the belly. Burke shot at the stain and Ponce went over backward, fell heavily and lay still.

Burke rose now and was immediately aware that something had happened. The close-hand fighting was over; the troopers scattered over the flats who were herding their prisoners back were now under fire themselves from the rocks and from the dunes, behind which the Apaches had filtered. Raines and a half dozen dismounted troopers were fighting their horses quiet, and kneeling to minimize the target they presented. Even from the timber came shots from the bucks who had taken refuge there.

Burke looked bleakly off across the creek, a hot sense of betrayal within him. Where were L and M Troops? K had been left to make the fight alone, and unless they got out of here, the tables would be completely turned on them. They were exposed now.

Burke saw one of the volunteer replacements sitting up in the dust a few yards from him, flexing a bloody arm with a look of bafflement on his young face.

Burke ran to him, helped him to his feet, and half dragged, half carried him toward Raines and the men guarding the prisoners. Lagging troopers were racing toward the same point.

Burke called sharply, "Callahan, take your squad and mount the wounded men. Raines, take the second squad and bind those prisoners. The rest of you scatter and make a run for the rocks. When you get there dismount and get into action at once."

As the troopers dispersed and rode for the boulders, enough fire was drawn off the wounded to allow Burke and Callahan to mount them. Raines left, directed by Burke to hole up close to the trail, and presently, still under inaccurate fire, Burke mounted the dead Trooper Breen's horse and headed for the rocks, bringing up the rear.

Fifty feet into the tangle of high boulders, Callahan and two troopers had already found some shade and were making the wounded men comfortable. Burke, stepping out of the saddle close by, heard his dismounted troopers firing, and he felt a savage and wicked anger at this bungling. L and M had never tried to cross.

The rocks held the blasting heat of the overhead sun. Burke took off his hat and wiped his brow with his sleeve.

Looking back over the flats, he caught occasional glimpses of running Apaches. Keeping to cover, they were rallying to attack again, knowing they could win now. These rocks, Burke knew, had won K Troop only temporary respite; this

sort of cover suited the Apaches best, and they were shrewd enough to know if they could corner this scattering of deserted troopers here, the soldiers would die. *We've got to get some help,* Burke thought. *Damned if we'll run. I Troop must come to us.* There was the trail down to the Quartermaster and across it, along which the ambush was originally laid. Was it still held by the Apaches?

After a moment he called, "Callahan!"

"Yes, sir." Callahan made the last of the wounded comfortable, then came up beside Burke.

"Callahan, we've got to get word to I Troop to cross the creek and reinforce us. The trail over there is the only way to them, and God knows what's down there."

He paused, his face set, sobered by the thought of what he had been going to ask of this man.

"You want me to try it, sir?"

"I guess not," Burke said slowly.

"I'll make it, sir. Let me try."

Somebody must go, Burke knew, and he steeled himself and said, "All right. Tell Lieutenant Byas we're clearing out both sides of the trail, and it'll be safe for him to bring I Troop across. Tell him to hurry it. Good luck."

Callahan mounted, rode out of the rocks and turned left, and was lost to sight around the boulders.

Burke now posted the two troopers among the rocks with orders to fire at will and mounted out and turned through the rocks toward the trail. He had traveled only a hundred feet or so when he found Raines and two more troopers hidden back among the rocks. Raines had their prisoners lying flat on the ground, face down, and was directing the fire of the other two troopers.

Dismounting, Burke briefly told Raines his plan, and Raines ordered the waiting troopers to go out and pull in both flanks to the edge of the trail.

When they were gone, Burke stood looking at the half dozen naked and sweating Apaches stretched belly down on the ground. They were watching him carefully, a hot hatred in their eyes, and he knew that however this fight turned out, it would settle nothing with these people; they had a deep and abiding grudge, nourished by the actions of men like Corinne.

The sound of an approaching horse roused him, and he looked over his shoulder. There, among the boulders, stood Callahan's horse, riderless, its rump bleeding from a long gash.

Raines and Burke glanced dismallly at each other, and

Raines said around his tobacco, "You hold these monkeys, Lieutenant. I'll go."

Burke was touched with a gray despair. He shook his head. "No. You know what's got to be done, Raines. Hold that trail open for us. Either kill those devils guarding it or keep them down until we're through."

He got into the saddle, just as the slug from a searching shot ricocheted off a nearby boulder. Time was precious now, he knew.

As he rode on toward the trail, Burke put as many rocks as he could find between him and the Apaches on the flats, but the shooting was uncomfortably close.

When at last he picked up the trail, and turned into it, he saw troopers already forted up behind rocks on either side and shooting.

And then he gave his attention to what lay ahead. The trail, he remembered, twisted and turned between towering rocks, dropping steeply for fifty yards to the bed of the creek, and every rock was big enough to hide a dozen Apaches. Pulling his pistol, he urged his horse into a trot and then roweled him into a run. Then, leaning flat on his neck, he gave him his head. He was going to run through, somehow.

Rounding the first twist in the trail, Burke's knee was raked savagely against a jutting boulder, but he did not rein in. His horse stumbled once, recovered in time to hurtle around another boulder and take the steep drop in a lunge that almost unseated Burke. And then, coming around another sharp curve, he saw what he had been expecting.

Callahan lay in the trail between precipitous walls. The two Apaches cutting his already mutilated body had had no warning of Burke's presence until they looked up to find horse and rider hurtling down on them. One buck clawed at the rock in his haste to get out of the way, then turned and ran down the trail.

Burke roweled his horse savagely at the other Apache, who was flattened against the wall, drawing his knife. Burke shot him in the face, then raised his pistol again and shot at the buck running ahead, but his hammer fell on an empty chamber.

Freeing his foot from the stirrup, Burke raced his pony up close to the Apache, then kicked out solidly, catching the buck between the shoulders. The buck went down between the pony's legs and his scream was cut off sharply. Burke yanked his reins up as the buck, tangled among his pony's legs, tripped him. For a moment, Burke thought the pony would go down, but suddenly he was free, and running again.

Two more lowering curves in the trail, and Burke saw the

gleaming sand of the river bed ahead. From somewhere up the rocks on the right a futile shot searched for him, and then he was in the deep sand of the wash. Under Burke's urging, his pony labored through it, as an erring marksman among the rocks kept firing swiftly and inaccurately at them.

At the far bank, Burke reined down to a walk for the climb. Pulling onto the bank, he saw Abe Byas and two troopers waiting for him behind a large portecting rock.

Burke swung out of the saddle and said shortly, "Bring your men over, Abe. And make it fast."

Byas hesitated and Burke's ragged temper flared. "Damn it, man, you're reserve and I'm calling on you!"

"Take it easy, Burke," Abe said. "I was wondering about the trail."

"It's cleared," Burke said. "Make it fast, Abe, or I'm all that's left of K."

Abe gave orders to his sergeant, then turned to regard Burke.

"What happened to L and M Troops?" Burke demanded angrily. "Did they ever cross?"

Byas shook his head. By now, the first of Nick's scouts were coming at a jog down the trail, and Burke halted them long enough to tell them what he wanted. The trail was being cleared by K Troop. He would lead the scouts and I Troop, dismounted, up the trail, where they would split, travel the edge of the boulder field in both directions for five hundred yards, then, flanking the Apaches, dig them out of the rocks.

Walking across the bed of Quartermaster Creek was a slogging, exhausting job, and Burke's legs were trembling with weariness when he reached the other side. Without a pause, he started up the trail, Nick ahead of him, Byas behind. Only a scattering of shots had harassed them as they crossed. There was steady fire now above them in the boulders on both sides of the trail but none of it was directed at them, and Burke knew Raines was obeying instructions to keep the Apaches down.

Reaching the top, Burke and Byas divided the squads, two to each side of the trail, and the hunt was on. But it lasted only a matter of minutes. The reinforcing I Troopers, hunting in pairs, and pushing the Apaches from the flanks toward the center where K Troop was waiting, were too much. The Apaches were killed, or gave up, seeing the hopelessness of their position.

When the first scattering of sullen prisoners began to trickle in, Burke sought out Byas, and found him looking over the wounded men. Burke, bone-weary and exhausted and wet

with sweat, was leaning up against a rock in a piece of shade when Abe approached.

"You feel like turning over the cleanup job to a junior officer, Abe?"

"All right. Why?"

"Then come with me," Burke said grimly. "Somebody's going to answer my questions."

Byas knew he was referring to L and M's disappearance.

They borrowed two horses and rode down the trail and across the river. When they reached the timbered crest on the far bank, the trail widened, and Burke reined in to let Abe come abreast of him.

"What happened, now, Abe?"

"I never made it out," Abe said wearily. "L and M started to cross after your volleys, then they were pulled back. I sent a runner to Ervien asking what was wrong. He came back with the answer that dust had been sighted to his right and rear, that he was pulling back to protect our flank, and for me to have the reserves ready to move."

Burke's baleful glance settled on him. "Did you hear any shooting back there, Abe?"

"Not a shot."

Burke was silent a moment and then murmured, "It better be so."

When the timber thinned out and they could see the park where the assembly point was, Burke saw that L and M Troops had come in only minutes before. Some of the troops were still loosening cinches. Beyond them, Rush Doll's packers were just beginning to unload the mules in the shade.

And then Burke saw Ervien. He and the officers of L and M Troops were kneeling in the sun just where he had left them over his map of the battle plan in the center of the park. Rush Doll, hands on hips, was looking over Ervien's shoulder.

Burke and Abe rode directly up to them and dismounted, and Burke saw instantly by the faces of the officers gathered around Ervien that a bitter argument had been interrupted.

Ervien seemed shocked by Burke's dust-grimed appearance. He rose now as Burke dismounted, and said crisply, "Well, Mister Hanna, what have you to report?"

Burke said with an ominous quiet, "Ponce is dead, twenty-three of his men are dead, and the rest have surrendered. Three dead and three wounded from K Troop." He paused. "How many dead and wounded in L and M, sir?"

"Look, Burke," Lieutenant Umberhine said hotly. "I was—"

"Let your commanding officer answer, Brad," Burke murmured, watching Ervien.

Ervien's sunburned face flushed a deeper red. "I countermanded Brad's order to advance across the creek." His voice was quiet, almost arrogant, and he stood stiffly erect.

"Why, sir?"

"Abe has probably told you. The lookout I posted saw dust clouds to the rear and right of our position. I couldn't risk leaving our flank open, so I ordered L and M back to protect our position."

"And were they hostiles, sir?" Burke asked evenly.

"As it turned out, they weren't," Ervien said.

"It was me," Rush Doll drawled. "My pack mules stirred the dust."

Burke frowned. "What were you doing to the right and rear of L and M Troops, Rush?" he asked. "This was the assembly point."

"I got the order from the captain through O'Mara," Rush said slowly, looking toward Ervien.

Ervien nodded. "That's right. L and M were the bulk of the troops to be supplied. Doll could have followed our advance across the creek much easier than waiting here to move across."

"You didn't tell me that, sir," Umberhine said angrily.

Ervien looked calmly at him. "An oversight. I apologize, Brad."

Burke said slowly, "If you knew Doll was coming that route, the dust shouldn't have surprised you."

"I didn't see the dust or its position," Ervien said impatiently. "It was reported to me by the lookout."

"Let's talk to that lookout," Burke said. "Who was he?"

Ervien hesitated a split second, and then said, "Sergeant O'Mara."

Umberhine shouted for O'Mara. Burke glanced fleetingly at Byas, who was studying Ervien with a sober puzzlement in his face.

O'Mara broke away from a cluster of troopers, approached and saluted. Ervien began, "Sergeant, tell—"

One moment, sir," Burke said flatly. "I'm going to ask him." He looked levelly at O'Mara and the sergeant blandly returned his stare. Burke said, "You knew Doll was coming up on L and M's flank, O'Mara. Who did you think raised that dust?"

"I only reported it, sir," O'Mara said in his gentle, sly voice. "I was not asked my opinion."

"If you had been asked your opinion, what would you have said?" Burke asked dryly.

"I'd have said we should protect ourselves till we were sure."

Burke shifted his glance to Byas and said slowly, "There you are, Abe."

Ervien said sharply, "There who is, Mister Hanna? Since when are a commanding officer's orders subject to discussion?"

Burke's hot glance settled on Ervien now. "Since today, Phil. You pulled out of the fight and left K Troop to be massacred. If we didn't have the luck of the damned, the lot of us would be dead now. We aren't—thanks to I Troop." He looked at the group of officers. "Now hear me, Abe, you're adjutant and next in command. I demand you place Captain Ervien and Sergeant O'Mara under arrest for dereliction of duty."

"I demand it, too!" Umberhine said flatly. "Damned if I'll let any man make me a coward!"

Abe Byas said slowly, "I'd like it a lot better if I knew the reason for this, Burke."

"I'll give you that, too," Burke said. "Corinne has cheated the Indians blind, and Ervien has protected him. When I recommended Ervien report Corinne's dishonesty, I got sent on six months of patrol. And when Ponce broke out, Ervien knew he was in trouble, because I warned him Ponce would break." He looked around at his fellow officers. "You all saw that plan of battle I submitted. You saw where K Troop, myself commanding, was placed. If anything slipped, we were in a fair position to be wiped out. It slipped, all right—and I say Ervien, in collusion with O'Mara, planned to kill me and my troop."

"But proof, man, proof," Abe said gently.

"Of Corinne's crookedness? I've got it at the post. The rest will come out in the court martial—his or mine."

There was a long moment of silence, which was broken at last by Ervien. "Mister Hanna, you are now under arrest—again."

Abe Byas said gently, "No, Captain Ervien. It's my duty as senior officer to place you under arrest, and assume command."

Ervien looked arrogantly about him. "Very well. All of you will undergo a court martial for mutiny."

The victors of the battle of Quartermaster Creek reached Fort Akin a little after nine o'clock the second night after the battle. The post was ablaze with lights, and the veranda of the sutler's post crowded with the garrison soldiers and the womenfolk of absent men.

As the troopers were wearily scattering to their barracks five horsemen entered through the north sentry gate and rode

along the parade ground to dismount at headquarters building, where lamps were lighted.

Lieutenant Byas led the way into the building, spoke to the sergeant, and went immediately into Captain Ervien's office. He spoke courteously to Mr. Corinne, who had been sitting beside Ervien's desk, then stepped aside to let Captain Ervien, Lieutenant Umberhine, Rush Doll and Burke Hanna enter.

As Burke closed the door, Corinne said irritably, "Phil, I ought to be over checking in that pack of Ponce's scoundrels. Can't this wait?"

"No," Byas said bluntly. He walked over to the desk, sat on its edge and glanced at Burke. "Go ahead, Burke."

Corinne's glance flicked to Burke, who was already looking at him.

"Corinne," Burke said, "Rush Doll has two cows in his corral. They were issued by you to Klin-se at Saturday's issue. Klin-se has kept his ration slip—with your figures."

He paused. Corinne looked straight ahead and said nothing. Burke went on, "We're going over and weigh them on the agency scales."

Corinne looked at Ervien, and only now did he begin to suspect something was amiss. Abe's message summoning Corinne tonight was delivered by a trusted trooper who had been told to explain nothing of what had passed at the assembly point. Corinne said dryly, "Are you the commanding officer now, Mister Hanna?"

"Lieutenant Byas is."

Corinne looked again at Ervien, and Ervien nodded. Corinne's already flabby face seemed to sag. He looked despairingly at Burke and said, "Our scales were broken, Mister Hanna."

"Give it up, Alec." Ervien's voice was quiet, sardonic. "You're kicking him out?" he asked Byas.

"As fast as he can pack up," Abe said grimly.

"What'll satisfy you completely? If I get out, too?"

Byas glanced questioningly at Burke.

"Yes," Burke said implacably. "Get out. Resign or face a court martial—if Lieutenant Byas will let you. He doesn't have to."

Abe rose from the desk and indicated the chair. "Write it out."

Ervien sat down wearily and Byas strode past Burke and went out into the anteroom, leaving the door open behind him. Burke heard him say, "Sergeant, before you close up, fill out papers reducing Sergeant O'Mara to private on stable police."

When he came back, Ervien looked up from his writing. "Would you like me to give a reason?" he asked Byas.

"You've been given it," Byas said quietly. "You're no good. Officially you can say 'for the honor of the service.' "

Ervien's face flushed, and his glance dropped to the paper. He signed his name, rose and extended the paper to Byas, who put it on the desk without looking at it.

"Get out of that uniform. Your transportation will be ready in an hour," Byas said. "We'll send your stuff to Corinne. You," he added to Corinne, "hand over your books to Lieutenant Hanna tomorrow morning at eight o'clock. Don't try to go to your office. It's under guard."

Some minutes later, Burke and Byas said goodnight to Rush and Umberhine and wearily headed for the lights of Byas' house. Halfway across the parade ground, Burke said, "Abe."

"What?"

"I'm on your grass seed. So are you."

Abe laughed. "The hell with it. As the commanding officer, I can walk where I want."

At the house, Abe opened the door and stood aside to let Calla come into Burke's arms. Then he went past them and inside to greet his wife. Minutes later, when Burke, with Calla, came into the living room, Abe and Lucy were standing in the middle of the room arm in arm.

Abe said, "Calla, do you want the chaplain tonight, or would you rather be married tomorrow in your own house?"

Calla grinned. "I can wait. But where's my own house?"

"You're standing in it. I'm taking over Ervien's house tomorrow. He's resigned."

Calla looked up at Burke, then glanced at Abe. "Make it early, will you, please?"

Renegade*

by TOM W. BLACKBURN

THE NIGHT WAS WARM. There was no physical need for the greasewood and dung fire. Still, the compulsion which made men gather at a common table for food made them require a fire for council. It was a totem to forgotten gods.

The smoke drifted against Jim Henry's towering, buckskin-clad frame. He was oblivious to its acrid bite and its strong, sour-sweet odor. If there were smells in this camp of wagon men which meant anything to him, they were of fresh bread —which he hadn't tasted in fourteen months—of bottled and labeled river whiskey, of fresh, starched cloth and sweet toilet waters, and the elusive scent of indefinables which white women seemed to take with them wherever they went.

But mostly his attention was on Aaron Baring, the train captain, across the fire. There were more of the wagon men beyond the flames—one as prepossessing in his way as Baring himself. And there were others of a different kind at Jim Henry's back. The subject of this council was of common interest to them all—survival. But, for the moment, only Baring and himself were important.

"Intimidation!" Baring snapped, showing the flinty core of purposefulness the frontier seemed to congeal in some men. "As stockholders in this colonization company, we've sunk everything we have in it. We have the full authority and approval of Washington behind our claim to the Poudre Valley. That's not slops, to be thrown out because you claim the bucket!"

"Not me," Jim corrected patiently. "I claim nothing. I'm trying to make that plain, like I did to your surveyors when they were here early in this spring. This is Antelope beside me. You talk about Washington. You got your approval and authority from the wrong place. You people will make a deal with Antelope that'll let him protect his tribe or you'll never turn a yard of sod in their valley!"

There was a stir among the men behind Baring. The tall, gray, old man Jim Henry had noticed earlier moved forward, about midway between Baring and the others, but if Baring saw the older man, he ignored him. The broad, slightly fleshy handsomeness of the train captain's features harshened, accentuating the deep lines of middle life.

Baring moved forward, around the fire. He made a slow circuit of Jim and the four Arapahoe who had ridden into the encampment with him. His arrogance became more pronounced. Jim waited with impatience.

To those who knew the real size of men's shadows in this country, to those who knew the legends of the horse tribes, these were great figures. Old Antelope, slight, graying, a little stooped. Redrock, powerful of body, silent now, but dynamic among his own people. Little Three Horse, so detached in manner and so merciless in battle. And Arrow, who believed in so much good and was so hopeless of its attainment. Among the wisest and most dangerous men Jim Henry had ever known.

The train captain completed his circuit of Jim and his companions and returned to his own side of the fire. He thrust his hands deep into his pants pockets and rocked confidently back and forth on his heels.

"Tell them what I say," he ordered with an abrupt tilt of his head toward the Arapahoe.

Jim smiled. The Indians were shrewd enough to know their foe and to understand him. They would concede him no advantage of language. The Arapahoe needed no interpreter. The four at his back could speak English in any company. He nodded assent at Baring.

"Our company's strong enough to defend itself," the man went on. "We don't have to treat with four mud-plastered bucks and a smelly renegade white."

"The color of a man's hide and the smell of his body don't add up to much against what's inside of him, out in this country," Jim said quietly. "The Aarapahoe aren't trying to keep you out of the Poudre Valley. They want only an agreement to leave them part of it. They're entitled to that."

Baring pulled his hands from his pockets and balled them into fists. His body tilted aggressively forward.

"The scraps—all right—as long as they stay away from the table. If there's any lodges in the surveyed area, where their village is now, when we get there late tomorrow or early the next day, we'll burn them. And any Indian—including you, Henry—caught within ten miles of the farms we lay out will be shot on sight. If they keep out of our way and leave our stock alone, they'll get along—for this year."

"You understand the paint they're wearing tonight?"

"I had sixty months in the Army during the Missouri campaigns—long enough to learn almost as much about these back-stabbers as a renegade who's gone far enough toward hell to live with them. The paint means they're prepared to call it war if this talk doesn't go right. So are we, Henry! Tell them to count my men and guns and then get the hell out of my camp!"

For the first time since they had dismounted beyond the fire, one of the Arapahoe spoke in his own tongue.

"Because they are many, the stupid porcupine thinks his quills are longer than the hunter's arrows," old Antelope murmured. "We've talked to a fool. Words are useless."

"A lance at the throat is better!" Redrock growled. "Death talks better than a wise man in council."

"That's the last argument!" Jim cut in sharply. "You promised me a chance to make these settlers come to fair terms. I'm not through with them yet. Dead wagon men mean dead Indians. Don't forget it!"

"Perhaps it is the year for Indians to die," Antelope said with a shrug. "The air is cleaner about our own fires. We can talk further there."

The old man turned and started back toward the horses.

Jim would have followed him, but Baring called out sharply, "Just a minute, Henry! You're staying here. There's nothing quite so dangerous in a village of dissatisfied Indians as a renegade white. That's something the Army taught me to handle. We're going to pull your teeth right now!"

Guns had appeared beyond Baring, obviously by prearranged order. Astonishment and bright anger showed on the face of the tall old man between Baring and the rest of the wagon company. Jim glanced at the four Arapahoe. They had halted, furious at this breach of the parley customs of the plains. The honor so dear to horse tribesmen was cheap among wagon men. Jim spoke confidently to them.

"Go on. I need to talk further here. When I want you, there'll be a fire in my camp on the Elbow."

The Indians moved on, reaching their horses and swinging soundlessly up.

Jim looked around the wagon camp beyond the immediate area about the fire. He saw the faces of more of Baring's company in the shadows. Among them were women.

One of these stood apart from the rest as though shunned by them. She was young, full-bodied, defiant. She had startling beauty for a man who had wildness of his own to tame and so could relish it in a woman. To see a woman and to feel like this in the first moment was wry proof of a thing

Jim had known for months—he had been too long apart from his kind.

Aaron Baring issued orders he didn't hear. Half a dozen men stepped past the old man and past Baring to converge on him warily. He let them lift his knife and gun without protest.

With the fire built higher and the Indians gone, more of the wagon party drew close. Seeing the guarded, hostile curiosity in them, he felt sorry. They were strong, basically, from a strong strain. But this was all strangeness and it was the nature of these people to distrust and hate the unfamiliar with a peculiar and unreasoning hatred.

Those who had disarmed Jim Henry brought him carefully around the fire and stood him up against the tall rear wheel of the nearest wagon, where Aaron Baring waited. The erect old man who had moved toward Baring when the Indians were still beside the fire now crossed to him.

"It seems to me this is properly a matter for the company council, Captain," he said.

Baring turned on him. "How long does it take to get something through a Missourian's head?" he said. "I'll make this plain again, Mr. Wheeler—the last action the council can take until we're on the land staked for us in the Poudre Valley was electing me at St. Joseph, the day we started. Bossing a train and a bunch of greenhorns is no easy chore and one I'll do in my way. I'll have no interference."

The old man stiffened angrily. "I might point out I'm the largest single stockholder in this venture, and a man of some reputation. I'm at least entitled to courtesy and consideration of my judgment!"

"You're entitled to nothing not written down in the train articles," Baring corrected. "The sooner you and the rest learn that, the better!"

Baring signaled the men flanking Jim. They moved in, seizing his arms. He didn't wholly understand, even then, but he had an aversion to the hands of smaller men on him and his belly was full of Baring's arrogance. He shook off the two men on his right, and then hit in the face the man clinging to his left arm, spilling the fellow backward against Baring with a red-streaming nose. The two he had shaken loose piled in on him. He caught one in the belly with the point of his shoulder, and flung him pin-wheeling to the ground. The other man stopped, and stood out of reach. Baring angrily shoved himself free of the stumbling, dazed man with the broken nose.

"Thanks for the good word, sir," Jim said to the man Bar-

ing had called Mr. Wheeler. And to the captain he said, "Supposing you try handling your own chores yourself!"

The woman, who had been standing apart from the others, back in the crowd, moved up to Baring's elbow. It was plain she was on speaking terms with the captain if with no one else in the camp. She looked full at Jim, lips parted—in approval, he thought, Baring caught the expression on her face and it seemed to anger him further.

"You damned fools, hang onto the sneaking renegade! Next time you see him he may be reaching for your hair! Bust his head!"

Mr. Wheeler put out a veined hand to touch Baring's arm, but he was knocked aside. Others moved forward from the rim of the crowd under Baring's urging. Appraisal of Jim Henry as a white Indian stirred in them a brutal righteousness.

They swarmed into him in a body, carrying him from his feet. He protected his groins with a knowing desperation, and a brass-capped boot-toe struck his temple, sickening him with hurt. Other boots worked until volition had been kicked from him. Swift, efficient, dispassionate work. Jim felt his big frame lifted. He was tilted with his shoulders flat against the tall wheel beside which Baring stood, and his wrists were lashed to the rim. Through a fog of sound, Baring's voice emerged.

"Turn everybody out—kids, too. I've been preaching this is a hard country. You better all learn how hard now than later. Pour some whiskey into this son! Stiffen him up. I want him to remember this, every minute of it!"

The old man who had protested before faced Baring again. "Aaron, I tell you you're exceeding your authority! You proceed in whatever you plan to do to this man without getting a ruling from the council and I'll use all my influence to have you discharged the moment we're onto our land!"

"In St. Joe, Morgan Wheeler's name and influence might have meant something, but not out here. You do what you think you can when we're on the Poudre, Wheeler, but you keep out of my way now or I'll put you under captain's arrest."

Baring shouldered the white-faced Wheeler aside and grinned at Jim.

"This Indian-loving son's going to learn we can be rougher than his friends, if we have to. He won't talk war with his redskins half so glib when we're through with him!"

There was a tin cup and the smell of whiskey, the sting of it against his battered lips, the stricture of it in his throat and belly. With it came a wave of reviving pride. Jim stif-

fened, no longer hanging limply by his lashed wrists, but standing upright against the wagon wheel.

Jim's vision, the focus of which had been deep enough only to outline Baring and Morgan Wheeler, cleared to embrace the whole crowd. Grim-faced and righteous men, a backdrop against the darkness. Among them he saw a few more paling women and the great, rounded, frightened eyes of two or three children.

Baring moved up closer, the bullwhip held loosely in his hands. The woman who had been beside him was still at his elbow. She was still looking at Jim Henry.

Baring flicked the whip along the ground to uncoil it.

The woman spoke softly. "Not that, Aaron!" she protested. "You'll tear him to pieces!"

Baring snapped an undulation through the grounded length of the whip. "Damned dog!" he growled.

The woman tore her eyes from Jim and seized Baring's arm. "Turn him around, at least!" she begged. "Work on his back, not his face. We don't all have to be savages!"

"You want captain's arrest, too, Lucky?" he growled. He shook off her grip with angry impatience, but he was careful not to let the rest of his reply to her carry to the rest of the company, behind them.

"You've only half kept your deal with me. If you want to save his hide, you can trade me for it."

"No," she said.

Baring shoved her clear. The lash leaped from the ground, snaked in the air, and hissed toward Jim like a lance of flame. . . .

Life returned painfully to Jim Henry. Aaron Baring's lash had burned twice across his face, closing one eye and impairing the vision of the other. Lying flat on his back on wiry grass under a tarpaulin tossed carelessly over an outspanned wagon tongue, Jim waited. He knew there would presently be a flood of bitter anger, but for the moment he was only sick. He thought he had stood against the wagon wheel, steadily cursing Baring through torn lips until the man had lowered his heavy whip in exhaustion.

There were remembered fragments of awed faces among the wagon people and the mutter of their awe in his ears. There was Morgan Wheeler, outraged and making no attempt to mask before others his anger at Baring. There were the tense, white features of the woman Baring had called Lucky Duneen, flinching as Jim himself flinched under the bite of the plaited leather. Not awe or outrage so much as an agonized wonder in her eyes.

Retching weakly where he lay, Jim wondered if any man was ever brave by deliberation. He thought not. Heroes were a fabrication of circumstance.

His sickness, passed and anger warmed him, easing first the knot in the pit of his belly and spreading slowly through his body with a flow of rousing energy. He rolled over onto his hands and knees. The movement hurt, but the hurt served to feed his anger. He looked out under the tarp at the night-silenced wagon camp.

The earlier council fire was in gray ash and embers. A man dozed beside it on nominal guard. A dozen or more horses were loosely corraled between a pair of wagons near the center of the camp. Another man was with these. All others among the wagons appeared to be between blankets.

Baring's wagon was larger than the others and set apart, upwind of the corraled horses. Jim crawled through the grass on his hands and knees. The faint glow of candlelight showed at close range through the heavy tilt of Baring's wagon and Jim heard the murmur of carefully muted voices within it. He halted beneath the wagon box to listen, unwilling, now, to meet others than Baring, knowing he would need as much caution as luck to kill the man above him and escape this camp. However, the second voice was not of another man, but of the woman who had smiled at Jim Henry and whose body had flinched when rawhide bit into his. She was plainly angry and desperately defensive.

"Do you think you're God? You insulted the richest and most respected man in the company tonight. You cut another man to pieces to please your own vanity. You fat-headed pig, I only came in here to get some peroxide to take care of that scout you whipped!"

"Scout!" Baring laughed unpleasantly. "Renegade, rather! You don't owe him anything, but you do me. It's time you started paying, girl!"

"Paying! I paid you all the money I had—for the right to get away from the river—a new beginning!"

"For company shares," Baring corrected. "They were unsold and we needed every cent of capital we could get before we left the river. Yes! But a new start—nobody ever begins again. You can't. The other women didn't want your kind in the company—the men, either, if for a different reason. I overruled them. Your wagon's had the best spot, right behind mine, on the whole crossing. Be reasonable and you'll have your choice of the Poudre land. And if the others haven't been friendly, they've at least been civil. You owe me for all that!"

"Your price is too high, Aaron."

"You'll pay it, just the same," Baring insisted. His voice had become hoarse with stress and frustration.

There was the sound of sudden movement, of struggle. Jim crawled to the tailgate, hauled himself erect.

The ties were not laced at the back of the tilt. Only the bottom strings were knotted. Jim slipped these and silently parted the canvas. The woman Baring had called Lucky Duneen was forced against a table hinged against one sidewall of the uncluttered wagon interior. She was bent far back in avoidance of the man crowded with angry hunger against her. This woman's face had been the last thing he had seen beside the council fire, and it was the first thing he saw now, peering at him with widened eyes over Baring's shoulder.

She had been pallid before with a kind of horror—perhaps shock. She was even paler now, but with a fury more consuming than anger. As he scrambled over the tailgate Jim saw that one of her hands, raking across Baring's back, had been savagely reaching for the knife he wore sheathed over one buttock.

She showed neither alarm nor relief at Jim's swift appearance. The single bracketed candle cast an immense shadow of Jim's body on the white wall beyond the woman. Baring had no more warning than this. Jim's right fist, hard heel downward, struck hammerlike at the base of his neck, stunning him and silencing outcry.

Shaken, dazed, Baring tried to straighten and turn. Jim's fingers locked about his neck from behind, closing with a savage force which made hidden veins leap out beneath Baring's ears. Baring was big and powerful and he threshed in terror. But Jim was no longer a sickened, injured man. He was an angry animal with an animal's strength.

He lifted Baring's twisting body by his neck-hold alone and swung it so the ticking of the bunk along the opposite wall absorbed the frenzied kicking and silenced it. Spilling forward, Jim added the weight of his body to the pressure of his hands, ignoring the woman for an instant. She was onto him before he heard someone running toward the wagon—a guard or wagon man who had heard the struggle under the tilt and was coming to investigate before sounding general alarm.

Her fingers bit into Jim's arm, pulling him strongly from Baring. If she meant to voice warning, she had no time. The man outside reached the tilt flap, parted it, and thrust his torso partially inside. His eyes rounded at sight of Jim, but before he could cry out, Jim tore away from the girl, launching himself in a full dive at the man's face. He went cleanly through the tilt flap, carrying the man outside down with him.

They hit the ground hard, with the man's face under Jim's shoulder. Jim bounded to his feet, snaking the fellow's gun from his belt as he rose. The man did not move.

The girl had come to the flap opening. She looked down at Jim with an unreadable expression. He thought he understood. Baring had done his work well beside the wagon wheel. For weeks to come, his face would not make a pleasant sight.

Beyond the girl, Jim could hear Baring's tortured, stertorous breathing. He moved forward, intending to climb back into the wagon and finish his work there, then thought better of it. Escape was better. He rocked the gun in his hands upward so that the girl above looked down its barrel. He could not trust her. He could not leave her behind to set pursuit on his heels.

The message of the gun was plain. The girl's mouth set and she pulled the tilt flap open a little wider.

"You think I'll go with you?" she asked.

"Or stay here, dead!" Jim whispered harshly. "Make up your mind!"

Lucky Duneen hesitated only an instant, then swung down, exposing a fine length of leg with neither apology nor vanity.

"I saw two guards posted," Jim murmured. "Careful. Head toward the horses."

The girl nodded. Kiting her skirts under the belt of her jacket for freer movement, she slid past Jim into the darkness, a graceful shadow, long-legged and sure of movement.

Overtaking the girl, Jim veered toward the man on guard over the special saddle stock in the center of the camp. He was grateful for the heavy shadows in this shag end of the night. These, hiding the identity of Jim and the girl, as well as the steady, unhurried tempo of their approach, kept the guard's alarm at a low level, even when he saw them. Perhaps, as Jim hoped, Lucky Duneen's presence further eased the man's distrust. He turned, rising with some wariness from the upended keg on which he had been sitting. But his challenge was subdued to avoid awakening sleepers.

"Who is it?"

"Me, Jack," Jim answered easily. "Got some tobacco?"

The name he had chosen at random didn't fit. The guard peered anxiously. The distance between them cut to ten paces —to six.

"Who is it?" the man repeated with rising sharpness.

"What the hell's the matter with you?" Jim asked him good-naturedly—and leaped forward. The gun in Jim's hand lifted swiftly and chopped downward. A hasty bellow of alarm died in the guard's throat. His hat rolled in the dust.

Jim caught his sagging body and spilled it back onto the keg. The horses beyond him, more sensitive than any sentry, stirred restlessly.

"If one of those horses is yours," he told the girl, "hit it bareback. If not, take one you think you can sit without a saddle. No time to get leather up. Head for that star against the hills yonder, and keep going as hard as you can till I come up with you."

The girl snaked up a bridle and vanished among the animals. They shied from her, increasing their stir. Jim picked up some folded, sweat-smelling blankets, bent a stray piece of line about them, and cinched them into a tight roll. He saw that a number of the biggest horses in the makeshift corral were tied to the braces of a wagon box by hackamores, so he would himself need no bridle. He crouched tensely, waiting for the girl to break clear, thinking of the other guard he had seen dozing by the fading fire and cursing himself for not taking the extra seconds to make sure Baring would not breathe again.

The thing for which he had been waiting happened before the girl appeared, mounted, among the milling horses. The second guard, roused either by the struggle in Baring's wagon or the restlessness of the horses, was more wary than his comrade had been. Coming around the end of one of the wagons, he saw the limpness of the horse guard on the keg and Jim's additional silhouette. It was enough for him. He flung up his gun.

Jim had been ready, but the man was very fast. The two weapons fired almost together. Lead buffeted one end of the roll of blankets under Jim's arm, twisting it a little. The guard, however, rolled loosely in the dust.

The girl had set up a banshee shouting. All but one of the tethered mounts had been freed. Astride a small, handsome animal. Lucky Duneen was hazing the whole bunch of horses ahead of her across a wagon-tongue barricade and into the night.

Emptying the gun still in his hand into the air, Jim swung onto his horse and jumped the animal over the wagon tongues to hammer after the girl. She rode like a burr and she understood horses, since only one who knew them well could drive nervous saddle stock in the dead of night at the pace to which she held them. It took him nearly ten minutes to come abreast of her. She abandoned the running animals ahead and pulled up.

"It looks like there's some things I won't have to teach you," Jim told her. "An Arapahoe couldn't have done that more neatly."

Lucky Duneen's lips parted in a strained smile. "A compliment!" she murmured. "Anyway, we've left the wagon camp with nothing to ride that can overtake us. And when those thick-skulled farmers do get saddles up, they'll be too anxious to get Aaron's saddle stock back to bother about us."

Jim had been looking back at the lights now bobbing about in the camp. He swiveled sharply.

"Those were Baring's own horses?"

"You think horses belonging to the rest of the company would get a special corral and guard?"

"I don't want to pile any hell on those folks back there that can't be blamed on Baring," Jim said. "I've been worrying about them losing that stock. Since it's Baring's, that's different. I'm a renegade. Might as well be a thief. We'll drive those horses on with us. The Arapahoe will pay plenty for them and a white Indian's got to live—'specially when he's got a woman on his hands."

"I think you hate Aaron as wickedly as I do!" she breathed. "Do you work as hard at it when you like somebody?"

"I rode into your camp tonight because the Arapahoe are my friends."

"Sure. Indians. Bucks, squaws. Dogs and fleas! You must have had better friends than Indians, somewhere."

Jim shook his head. "Friends don't come any better."

"Mister," she said with mock gravity, "if I thought that was personal!"

For an instant Jim Henry saw the shape of what this girl had been trying to escape when she bought shares in the Cache la Poudre Colonization Company. She had been much with men on their own ground, without the company of others of her sex to erect barriers about her. It was as if she had built her own fires and killed her own game from childhood. And because she knew the motives of most men too well, she couldn't understand Jim Henry. He stared at her. She had been perhaps an entertainer—a singer or a dancer, at best. Any man who knew the river towns knew what she could have been at worst.

"We better get on after that stock," she said.

"Sure, Lucky," Jim agreed.

They rode forward. A few minutes later, at a steep cutbank, she pulled up again and twisted to face him.

"Forget that name you used," she said. "I left it with the tables I used to run. Call me Sue—Susan. Folks used to, a long time ago."

She sent her mount down the cutbank. Jim followed, warmed by a curious relief. Lucky. Tables she had run—a girl gambler, then—like the fancier clubs in St. Louis and St.

Joe sometimes used to stimulate play and trade. She could have been so much worse. Still—and the thought puzzled Jim—he wondered if it would have made any real difference now.

They made Jim's camp on the Elbow Creek tributary of the Poudre by noon. The horses, driven out, grazed quietly on the creek with the wide expanse of the Poudre Valley about it. Few of the tired animals raised their heads when Jim shot a spring jack as it scuttled from cover to cover. He skinned the animal and cleaned it at the creek, then built a fire near the dugout and skewered the rabbit on a willow wand to broil. The girl sprawled, belly down, full length on the grass, her upraised chin propped on her hands, and watched him. Her nose wrinkled boyishly as the aroma of roasting meat filled the air.

"You came into our camp last night to see your Indian friends got a fair shake in their pow-wow with Aaron," she said slowly. "You got the whip for that. Early this morning you were worrying about the company losing its horses till you found out they belonged to Baring, personally. You had no chips in either game, really. You can't ride two saddles at once. What do you care what happens to a bunch of Indians or a few wagonloads of rockheaded sodbusters? This country was made for a man like you. Let the others kill themselves off. Leave them alone and they'll do it. Good riddance!"

Jim turned the rabbit without answering.

The girl nodded at the fire. "That's what I mean," she went on. "We're hungry, so you find us a meal. When we're sleepy, you'll unroll the blankets you brought for our bed."

"Your bed," Jim corrected quietly. "My blankets are stowed over there in the dugout."

Sue Duneen's knuckles whitened with sudden angry pressure.

"Listen, buckskin man," she said with harsh, flat disbelief, "I know how to count the chips on a table! You dragged me out of Baring's wagon for fear I'd set the dogs on you too quickly if you left me behind. But that was only part of it. You figured on using Baring's woman for yourself!"

Jim eyed the animal-like comfort in her sprawl, the uncompromising challenge in her eyes. She knew a man's appetite, but not what he really hungered for.

A settler craved new land of his own, a lonely man a woman. But a settler wanted freedom with his land and a mountain man wanted more than just a woman. This Sue Duneen didn't understand, and knowing that she didn't was the difference between Jim Henry's desire in Baring's wagon and his desire here in the noonday sun.

"That was last night," he told her.

"I don't look as good to you as I did cornered in Aaron's wagon?" she flared. "Does a woman always look best to a man with another man's hands on her? I came with you because you wanted me. You're going to help me squeeze out Aaron Baring's rotten soul the way he tried to squeeze out mine—slowly."

Her anger softened as quickly as it had congealed. She stirred with conscious laziness, the movement a slow undulation through her whole body. Her look was now an invitation.

"Will that be so hard to endure?" she asked softly. "Just how much of a man are you, Jim Henry?"

He bent over her, twisting her body until her face was upturned. He pressed his mouth—torn, bloody, dust-caked—against hers. His restraint was savage. She lay limp for a moment in surprise, perhaps in elation. Then she began to struggle. Jim Henry was a big and powerful man and he was wickedly angry. A man's grip on decency was tenuous at best and she had made this as difficult as she could. He held her immobile until she was limp. Then he released her.

"If that's what you want," he told her with unsteady harshness, "You've got it. Take it back to Baring. That's cheating him enough for whatever he's done to you!"

She sat up slowly, pulling absently at the shoulders of her dress to tighten its bodice across her breasts. A speculation he had not before seen was in her eyes and a dark flush on her cheeks and throat.

"I—I thought that kind of thing was dead. I thought this was—fair. Jim, I think I'm just learning what it is to be sorry. I guess it's the river mud on me."

"You could try scrubbing in the creek," Jim suggested dryly.

"Maybe I will, after I've taken care of your face. It's gone too long already. Lie down, so I can work on it."

The torn flesh had been growing increasingly painful all morning. Jim eased gratefully over onto his back as she ordered. Sue Duneen moved down to the creek and returned, carrying dripping squares of cloth torn from some part of her clothing and soaked in the stream. Sitting tailor-fashion, she lifted his head into her lap. Presently she was finished cleaning his wounds and he sat up in a better mood.

She looked at him steadily. "What are you going to do about Baring?"

"I should have killed him," Jim said. "I thought I was shorter on time than I really was, back at the camp. Now I don't know. Maybe I'll wait—give the country a chance at him. It'll break his kind. You wait, too."

"Not too long," she said flatly.

She rose and walked toward the creek. She didn't come back, and in a few minutes Jim halved the rabbit over the fire, eating his share and leaving hers spitted to keep it warm. He was into a smoke, relishing it, when there was an outcry and much splashing in the creek. An instant later Sue broke from the willows, carrying the bulk of her clothes and with but the scantiest cover over her wet body. Behind her, frankly curious and admiring, came Antelope and Redrock.

Remembering the girl's wantonness with him a few minutes before, Jim was amused until he saw the tears of fright and anger in her eyes. He got up to meet the Arapahoe, giving her a chance to dress behind him. Both of the Indians studied the fresh scars on Jim's face without comment, knowing well enough how he had come by them. Antelope glanced past him at Sue and seemed to understand her fright. Although he had a strong dislike for the language, the old man spoke in English—for Sue's reassurance, Jim was certain.

"We saw your fire as you intended," he said. "It's good you're back. You had luck—horses and a woman! We've looked at the horses and counted them. We may need them. They're for sale?"

"For whatever they're worth in furs, left for me at the post at La Porte," Jim agreed.

Barefoot, but otherwise hastily redressed, Sue came angrily back to Jim.

"You're really crazy!" she said. "Name your price—a high one! Don't leave it up to these prowling devils! I was taking a bath when they sneaked out on the creek bank. That wasn't enough. They waded right on across like—well, like they wanted a better look! Don't trust them!"

Antelope was obviously amused at the girl's anger. "I'm an old man," he said. "The time is past for a woman to distrust me, but I can thank you for the pleasure to my eyes. Your meal is back there over the fire. Eat it before it burns." Grimness crowded out his humor. His voice dropped somberly. "There is talk to be made of the wagons, and it's not for women."

If Antelope's dry compliment was not wholly understandable to Sue, his courtesy and authority were unmistakable. She glanced at Jim. He nodded and she returned to the fire, attacking the spitted rabbit with the remnants of her anger and with her head tilted to catch whatever else might pass between Jim and the Indians.

Antelope hunkered down on the grass. Redrock and Jim remained standing in deference to him. His fingers twined stems of grass together for a long time. Finally he looked up.

"You've long given us your best counsel. You should know of our decision. Even now the wagons are rolling into the best part of our valley. We might bear this, but the wagon men are unreasonable. They've whipped you, our friend, like a dog, and only because you are our friend. They will take the rest of the valley, even the parts they can't use, only because they belong to us. We can talk reason and justice among ourselves and with friends, but to the wagon men we will always be savages. Perhaps we are. The wagons are to be destroyed!"

Jim Henry stood motionless. Antelope and Redrock waited patiently for the protest they knew he would make. Behind him the sound of Sue's movements at the fire ceased.

He couldn't tell the two Indians before him any more than he could tell Sue Duneen that on lonely nights when many men thought of women, he had thought of this country. He had come alone, empty-handed across the grass, and he had found it. In many ways it was his love. He believed that in the end there was to be justice in everything for every man here—the farmer, the trading trapper, the Indian. He believed, as some men believed in their gods, that this was the one country big enough for such final justice, if only there was patience. But he couldn't tell them these things.

He had tried this kind of talk before and it had failed. Few shared his beliefs and he was forced to use words others understood. He kept Antelope and Redrock waiting long for his reply.

"There will be other parties—twice as many wagons—finally, soldiers."

"They will also be driven back—until we are destroyed."

"Since when is death the answer to anything?" Jim protested.

The old chief rose swiftly to his feet.

"I am an old man. To me, death is the answer to everything. Perhaps it is also the answer for my people. Nothing is accomplished, hiding from the wind. You've been our friend and this is known among your kind. We tell you our decision now so that in three days, when we attack the wagons, you can be far from here and free of blame. It isn't good to be known for friendship with enemies of your people. I know. I've tried too long to find a way to peace with the wagon men. Now I must make war or the Arapahoe will have a new chief. Tomorrow you will be my enemy. Be gone with your woman before the sun comes!"

The Arapahoe turned abruptly and strode away. Jim knew the futility of calling after them. They would not return. There would be no more parleys. Despite the attempt to deliver it as the judgment of a tribal council, Jim knew Ante-

lope had made his decision to attack the wagons, here, while he talked. And he knew the reason for it. The scars on his own face. Aaron Baring had whipped a peaceful emissary to his camp—a man of his own race. He was therefore treacherous. The logic of the Indian mind was direct. No honorable peace could be made with such a man. Further effort was useless. Attack, before the wagon men were settled and entrenched, was the only answer.

Jim returned slowly to the girl waiting beside the fire. Triumph was in her eyes, but she said nothing. He dropped down heavily beside her.

"You heard," he said wearily. "We'll be watched now. Nothing we can do till dark. Maybe you can divert Antelope's watchers long enough for me to slip away. You'll be in no danger—"

"Slip out—to the wagons?" the girl cut in. "You'd risk your life sliding through Indian guards for that?"

"I have to."

"No!" she said with conviction. "Why pretend to be something you're not? You know what I am—ought to by now, anyhow. Are you any better?

"You won't build anything out here or leave kids who'll know their father. In the end you'll be a few rags of buckskin and a forgotten heap of bleaching bones somewhere. Baring was about right when he called you an Indian-loving renegade, just as maybe he was close to right in what he expected of me. We hate Baring—both of us. The Indians will take care of him. Nothing else counts. We're the wrong kind to get saintly and reckless over what happens to his train!"

"There's women—kids—"

"I was a kid once. Kicked from door to door, rags and table scraps and cuffed ears. Pawed and chased and threatened when I began to grow. Trash because I was alone. Every decent door shut in my face. Those people in the wagons claimed I wasn't their kind, even when I'd bought my way with the best of them. And they bullwhipped you. If they're decent, let decent folks take care of them. Not us!"

"Listen," Jim Henry said quietly. "The big worry of every man who knows the grass is a union of the tribes to wipe out every settlement, post, and wagon train on the plains. A lot of the nations have been quietly talking it for months. An uprising so terrible no wagon train will dare to cross the Missouri."

"It won't work," the girl said bluntly. "The Indians don't know how many wagons there are, how landgreedy the wagon kind are."

"No, it won't work. But it would be terrible if it was tried.

And that's what Antelope's decision means. He's decided to toss in with them. He wouldn't move against Baring's train alone. Believe me, I know. Now, how about taking a nap while the sun's warm? There'll be no sleeping for either of us tonight."

He stretched out on the grass, his face away from the sun, and tilted his hat over scars which had now become unimportant. He heard the girl rise quickly to her feet. She came back in a moment with a blanket, Jim thought. He grinned to himself when he heard her muttering. An Indian liked placid women, dutiful and silent. He hoped he could deliver his warning and return here with time of his own. Jim Henry was not an Indian.

He was still grinning when the clumsily swung rifle butt slammed against the exposed crown of his head.

Partially stunned, Jim was an instant realizing the source of the blow. Then he rolled swiftly over, batting the hat from his face. Sue Duneen, white of face, was already swinging the heavy rifle again. One of Jim's hands shot out, fastened about a bare ankle. He jerked and the girl spilled on top of him. She fought as a cat fights, with economy of motion, surprising strength in her long-lined body.

It took Jim several threshing, breathless moments to pry the rifle from her. In the end he held her helpless, her shoulders pinned flat to the grass. As the tempest in her eyes quieted and her breathing slowed, he allowed her to sit up. He fingered his scalp beneath the thick crown of long, uncut hair which had saved him greater injury. A knot lay against his skull and his fingers came away reddened with blood from a cut there.

He glared at Sue. "Talk!" he said.

Searching carefully for words, Sue did as she was bidden. "I had to leave the wagons with you last night, whether I wanted to or not, Jim. Anything was better than staying in Aaron's reach. If this was back on the river, I could be on my own. But not here. I've got to have you—you're my only chance to even my score with Aaron and get back where I belong. I couldn't let you risk getting killed just to warn him about the Indians. He's earned what he's got coming. So have the others—Morgan Wheeler and the rest—for not throwing him out when they discovered what a grab-handed beast he is! I thought that if I kept you here—"

"I tell you it isn't just Baring's train that's involved!" Jim said. "This affects every one of our kind on the plains!"

The girl shook her head. "If you're worrying about that general uprising among the tribes, you can quit it. There won't be any!"

"You know Indians that well?"

"No—just Baring. You talked to his surveyors when they were out here earlier in the year. Ever wonder how he got the government to approve his claim to so much land?"

Jim scowled. The size of the Poudre Company claims were what had convinced him that if there was general tribal revolt it would start here. It was for this reason he had remained in camp on the Elbow, waiting for the first of the wagons and a chance to talk reason to the company itself.

"Keep talking," he said.

"Aaron wouldn't risk investment in something that might be wiped out by the Indians. He'd make sure of his ground —on the quiet, the way most decent folks seem to do their business. Nothing in writing. Just a gentleman's agreement between Baring, somebody in the Washington land office, and some Army friends of Barings."

She paused, scrubbing one hand wearily across her eyes. She looked very young beside the fire.

"The Poudre Company is a decoy, among other things, strong enough until help comes up, if attacked, and under definite orders to crowd the Arapahoe as much as possible. See now why Aaron used that bullwhip on you last night? Begin to see how rotten the whole thing is?"

"There's a big Army force lagging along in the sandhills a day or two behind Baring's wagons, then—out of reach of Antelope's scouts—waiting!"

Sue nodded. "Its officers don't know they're a part of the plan, but their orders are to wipe out any hostiles making an overt move. Aaron will see your Arapahoe friends do just that. Hasn't he, already, after what Antelope told you here? Turning the tables on the Indians, Aaron calls it. The big massacre the tribes have been talking about, all right—but a massacre of Indians instead of whites. It will quiet all of the tribes—permanently. It'll be that thorough!"

"Land concessions and Army protection is what Baring gets out of it," Jim said slowly, piecing in the last of the picture.

"That's what Aaron thinks," Sue corrected. "But it won't work, Jim. Your friend, old Antelope, will see to that. Aaron thinks he could hold off any attack until the Army came up. Antelope told you he was going to wipe out the train. He's too careful to attack a force he couldn't handle."

Sue paused, a troubled frown between her brows.

"Maybe most of Aaron's plan will work. Maybe it's the only practical way to end the Indian wars. I don't know. But Aaron isn't going to live to see it. His hair's going to hang from an Arapahoe belt before the soldiers come up, because

he's not going to have any warning that Antelope will strike."

"You won't trust my judgment?"

"I won't trust anything about another man the rest of my life."

Jim shrugged. "Get your shoes on then. I'll catch up the horses. You've been trouble enough. It's time you were useful. We've got a ride to make."

"To the wagons?"

"Maybe. Get your shoes on!"

The girl obeyed sullenly. When Jim led up the horses she mounted without protest. He turned down the Elbow. She rode in silence beside him, her only plea the one in her eyes, asking him where they were going. And Jim ignored this. There were some things a man did because there was nothing else left to do. Things so distasteful that he avoided explanation. What he now had in mind was one of these.

The Arapahoe village was pitched on an age-old site, a meadow bench beside the noisy Poudre, grass-mounded with the midden heaps of countless seasons. Below the meadow was a narrow pass cut by the Poudre between a pair of the low tablelands.

Jim Henry and the girl approached by this route, riding into the pass with caution-enforced slowness, avoiding shadows and holding to the open and the strong late afternoon sunlight, hands and reins high. It was a familiar path, one Jim had followed often. He knew they had been watched from the moment they left their own camp, and he was expecting the Arapahoe sentries when they suddenly appeared among the rocks at the throat of the passage.

Sue, however, had no such foreknowledge and Jim had not warned her. She cried out and pulled violently aside. One of the sentries leaped forward, seizing the bridle of her horse. Another dragged her from the animal's back, his bear grip pinning her arms and making her helpless. Jim had of his own accord swung down to face a belly-centered rifle in the hands of a third Indian. Frightened, likely shaken with revulsion at the contact of the sentry's naked body against her own, Sue's voice went up in a rising wail of alarm and she struggled violently. Knowing such outcry was like swatting at a swarm of hornets, Jim snapped a harsh order at her.

"Shut up, you little fool!"

She subsided with startled meekness and looked at him for further guidance.

Jim spoke rapidly in Arapahoe to the Indians, "Take us to Antelope!"

"To the lodges, yes. To the chief, no," the sentry captain answered. "The wise ones are in council."

The sentry's hostility was marked, although he must have recognized Jim as a long-time friend of the most important men in his nation. Hatred of whites was already at a sullen level in the Arapahoe village and a share of it must fall to Jim Henry because of his blood.

Jim dropped his hand to the butt of the gun at his belt, ignoring the sentry captain's rifle.

"My business is with the chiefs and it won't wait!" he said arrogantly. "Do you take me to them or do I walk into the council lodge with your blood on my feet?"

Understanding no word of what was said, Sue Duneen caught her breath at this open hostility. The sentry captain stared sullenly at Jim, then turned slowly toward the girl.

"Not the woman," he growled.

Jim made the concession as an Indian would have made it, carelessly. He knew that by custom no woman could approach a chief's lodge while a council was in session, and he had brought Sue Duneen here with him for a special purpose, rather than leaving her in his own camp.

"Not the woman," he agreed.

The sentry gestured toward the village. Jim started up the trail.

"Jim—Jim, wait for me!" Sue cried out sharply.

Again as an Indian would have done, keenly aware of the sentry captain's edged approval, Jim ignored the frantic plea. He heard the sound of struggle as Sue again tried to fight clear of the men holding her. Then he heard her voice, bitter and heavy with a terrible contempt.

"All right, you damned renegade—just wait!"

At a turn in the trail a few yards farther on, the sentry captain swung up abreast of Jim, tilting his head in the direction of the rocks beside which Sue Duneen stood captive.

"Fire in her," the Arapahoe observed. "She'd keep a bed warm."

Only the four who had ridden out with Jim to meet the Poudre company were in the firelit council lodge—Redrock, Three Horse, Arrow, and old Antelope. Jim was forced to wait outside the flap while Antelope prevailed upon the others to hear him. While he waited, he heard Sue Duneen's entry into the camp.

The size of her escort swelled as she was brought in among the lodges. She seemed to have forgotten her fear. She was in a raging, hysterical anger and the tone of the rich river polyglot with which she described Jim Henry and all other men

was understandable to the Indians, even if her words were not. Idling men gathered about her in increasing numbers, many of them broadly smiling.

Because of her smoky protests, Jim knew, Sue would be badgered and thoroughly humiliated. She would have to take it.

The girl was led deep into the camp as a sentry at the flap of Antelope's lodge motioned Jim Henry to enter. He faced the four Indians but was not permitted a seat and so was obliged to retain what dignity he could while bending his long body to conform to the sloping walls of the conical shelter. There was no courtesy use of English here now.

"Coming here instead of leaving the valley as you were told doesn't change the promise I made in your camp, leather man," Antelope said acidly. "You are our enemy. And we will hear no more pleas for the wagons. There will be injustice. War kills the hunter who feeds a family as well as the hunter who feeds only himself. But war is necessary. Talk has failed us."

"Are you talking with your own tongue or the tongues of the others, Antelope?" Jim asked gently. "Listen to what I have heard . . ."

Bluntly, Jim told the Indians the details of Aaron Baring's plan to end at once all resistance to settlement along the Poudre and any chance of a general tribal uprising on the plains. When he had finished he sat down, unasked, as though his warning had earned him the seat he had earlier been denied. None of the four challenged the action. Antelope spoke first.

"I've long held that friendship with some whites was good. Here is proof!"

"Of what?" Redrock countered. "You make the same mistake, old one. The leather man has proved nothing except that he thinks we are fools!"

"He claims to have ridden with the gods and seen what will happen tomorrow," Three Horse added dryly. "Is it not that he has a new woman in his camp, so new he won't even leave her behind when he comes here? Even among us it happens that when a man has a new woman in his lodge he imagines for a few days that he rides with the gods. I think this warning has been woven between blankets and is only a trick to save the wagons."

Here were now three votes cast, one with Jim and two against him. The balance lay with Arrow, the one Indian Jim Henry had ever known who had a real, personal aversion to the adventure of war. The only pacifist among the Arapahoe.

Arrow spoke slowly. "In sickness a man must drink bitter purges and herbs. We are sick for lack of peace. We must swallow the bitter purge of war to be well again. The leather man lies!"

Jim rose to his feet again. "You speak of the woman in my camp. Know now why I brought her here with me. I leave her in your keeping as my pledge I speak the truth. By sunset tomorrow I will have brought the wagon captain here for your punishment and his successor here to make a new treaty with you. And I will turn the soldiers away from your valley. If I fail in these things by sunset tomorrow, my woman is forfeit to you."

"A prisoner, offering a trade to his captors!" Redrock scoffed.

"I want a promise the Arapahoe will not move against the wagons before sunset tomorrow."

"You know what will happen to the woman if you don't return?" Three Horse asked wickedly.

Jim's face set grimly. No cruelty equalled that of the squaws in a village preparing for war. He knew the answer to this question. He had known when he left his own camp to ride here with Sue Duneen.

At last Antelope spoke with finality. "I am chief. The council can depose me, but until it does, my order is law. The leather man has offered a pledge. I accept it. But he asks for too much time—time enough for the soldiers to surround us, if they are near. Time enough for the wagon men to make themselves strong. If he has returned to us with the wagon captain and a way to lasting peace by sunrise, we will not attack the wagons. There will be no war. If he fails, his woman will die and after her, every white on the grass. I have spoken."

Jim watched the others, recognizing Antelope's shrewdness even as he cursed the necessity for it. The old man had known his council would not accept Jim's whole plea and so had cut the time element down as an offering to the others. For a long moment there was again silence in the lodge.

Then, "The chief has spoken," said Redrock.

Jim hesitated an instant. He wanted a word with Sue, a brief glimpse of her again and a chance to tell her what was afoot and why it was necessary. A chance to tell her what to expect in his absence and how to cope with it. Without this he knew she would be terribly frightened and wholly without understanding. But he knew he could not now afford the time and that the Indians would not grant it to him, fearing trickery. He ducked and left the lodge. His horse was led up and

he mounted, reining about and riding away without a backward glance.

Like most plainsmen, Jim Henry disliked demanding too much of any horse he rode. However, there was now so much that must be done and so little time in which to do it that he was merciless with the animal he rode.

With the wind in his face, thinking was easier. The Arapahoe would keep their promise. But if he failed, they would try with skilled desperation to destroy every Poudre wagon and, if the soldiery became involved, every trooper. And while gunpowder burned on the grass, Sue Duneen would die slowly in the camp behind him.

A hardly better situation faced him at the wagon camp toward which he now rode. Baring's animus toward him was personal now, based on Sue Duneen and a bunch of horses. Few of the others among the wagons would believe Jim's defense, discounting him as a renegade. His one hope lay in those who might be opposed to Baring's heavy-handed policies. He thought of Morgan Wheeler, the dignified old man who had interfered when Baring lashed him to a wagon wheel. If Wheeler would still stand against Baring and there were enough others like him, there might be a chance.

He had risked Sue Duneen's life without her knowledge or consent. Now he was to risk his own. In the end, there could be no profit for either of them, but there were times when even a renegade had no choice.

The Baring train had moved fifteen miles or so, well into the Poudre Basin. Jim had no difficulty locating it by estimation. He was concerned over the location of the Army detachment Sue had claimed was in the area, but it was, for the moment, of secondary importance. Whatever move the detachment made would be only under provocation and then only in good faith. Baring would see the provocation wasn't offered until the time was exactly right for his own purposes.

Jim approached the camp warily, knowing that the men in the wagon train had to be avoided until he convinced Morgan Wheeler that Baring was using them to commit murder.

He left his horse well short of the circle of wagons, and advanced cautiously through the grass. Worming his way forward on his belly, he reached the cover of a wagon. He rested for a few seconds, then, pulling his hat low on his forehead, he stood up quickly and started following the circle of wagons. He kept well away from the glow of the supper fires, walking neither slow nor fast, as if he were one of the teamsters bound on a casual errand. When he found a solitary man

adding wood to a fire, Jim stopped to question him, knowing the man's vision would be weak from the glare of the flames.

"Where's Wheeler's wagon tonight?"

The camper looked up. "Fourth one down," he said. "I don't think—"

Jim waved his hand. "Thanks. I'll take a look." He retreated into the darkness, conscious that the man was squinting after him.

At Wheeler's wagon, Jim knocked softly. There was no answer. He thought briefly of seeking out Baring, but then he remembered that the captain was only half the problem. Wheeler should come first. Crouching impatiently, he tried to think of a way to reach Wheeler. By one means or another he had to get Baring and Wheeler out of this camp and . . .

"Reach." The harsh voice sounded just behind him. The muzzle of a gun pushed against his ribs, and his pistol was lifted from his belt.

"Get up and walk." The gun prodded him toward the nearest campfire. Jim did as he was told, knowing from the sound of movements that there were at least two men behind him. He walked slowly toward the fire, feeling only a cold anger that he had let himself be taken so easily.

His captors prodded him on into the center of the camp. Jim saw Morgan Wheeler and two or three others eyeing him with a puzzled speculation. But the rest showed no uncertainty.

A dozen men clamped in about him. Cordage was jerked tight about his wrists. He was tripped to the ground, straddled, and his ankles bound.

"Where's Morgan Wheeler?" he asked. "I want to talk to him."

One of the men holding him laughed savagely. "No, it's Aaron Baring you want. He'll set you straight."

"Listen to me," Jim said. "Listen! Baring is using you to bait a trap. He's lying to you. You all want to build out here. Why don't you listen to reason?"

"You'll listen to it when Aaron gets back," a wagon man shouted from beyond Jim's guards. "There's going to be a hanging then."

"Back? Where's he gone? I've got to see him, fast!"

"So you can steal his eye teeth, this time?" a man growled. "He'll be back directly. And he'll take care of you. Gone now to get back the woman and horses you stole for the Indians. You stand still till he gets back, Henry! We'd as soon turn a dead renegade over to Aaron as a live one!"

Tension stiffened Jim. Baring gone—certainly to only one place if he was to get back the girl and the horses Jim had

taken from his wagons—to the Army! Jim hadn't anticipated this. Not so soon. Baring was using the missing girl and the stolen horses for the provocation he needed to enlist Army help. The odds grew steeper and the time shorter.

Wheeler moved forward. "Listen to him, at least, Perkins!" he protested.

Who's giving orders?" Perkins snapped. "Aaron told you last night, Wheeler—your money buys land out here, but he's still the boss! He left me in charge—"

"My money does more than buy land, since I'm the only one in the company with any left," Wheeler answered quietly. "It gives every man in this company whose judgment I respect a place to turn to if the first season's a hard one out here, in the way of crops. You want to give up your chance at a loan from me later?"

Perkins paled. "All right, Wheeler. Have your say, Henry."

With a glance at old Morgan Wheeler, Jim swiftly repeated the details of the plan about which Baring had boasted to Sue Duneen. Faces lost color as he talked. Morgan Wheeler spoke quietly to a man beside him and Jim thought the message worked back through the crowd to others. But Perkins and most of the rest showed defiant disbelief. Perkins cut Jim short.

"That's enough! A lot of us knowed Aaron was asking for trouble when he let that gambling floozy come along just because she had enough cash to buy her way. Here's proof. Now she's tried to sink her teeth in Aaron. Let me tell you something, Henry. We'd no more believe her kind than we would yours. Decent and God-fearing folks have got no cause to truck with either of you. We've heard enough of your lies! Dump him in the grain wagon, boys, and see he stays there. If there's an attack in the morning, the first powder I'll burn is to put a bullet through his head."

Lying helplessly bound on grain sacks in a smelly supply wagon, the night hours passed slowly for Jim. Irretrievable and precious hours. This was no longer a question of right and wrong—of sincerity or selfish malice on Baring's part. No individual was important now. Sue Duneen—Baring—Antelope—Jim Henry. The paramount thing was that men of two races were to die needlessly while a leather man—a renegade who for the moment had the respect and trust of neither camp and could yet save both—was a prisoner and helpless.

Jim listened to the sounds about him, sounds of an earnest people preparing against an enemy they believed unjustly facing them. And he thought of Sue Duneen. He had wanted little enough of life since he could remember. He could see her figure in the shadow of the dirty tilt over his head. He

could feel her touch and he knew he wanted her as he had wanted nothing before. But even the desire was helpless.

Past midnight Jim thought he heard a faint scuffling but the sound was brief and did not recur. Perhaps an hour later, without warning, the flap in the tilt parted and a man wormed into the wagon. Jim saw moonlight on bare steel and briefly feared some fanatic among the farmers had come to cheat Baring of the hanging he would be eager to stage on his return. But the steel swiftly sawed his bonds free.

"Quiet! We've got the sentries on this side. Here's a gun. If there's an alarm, use it. I believe you. We've got to get clear —fast!"

The man crawled outside. Jim followed, straightening to face Morgan Wheeler as the old man sheathed his knife. They slid off through the wagons. Twice they passed silent men guarding gagged and bound sentries. Past the last wagon Wheeler grunted relief.

"A man's a saint or a sinner in this. No middle ground. Hope to hell I'm right in backing you!"

"Get me to Baring and I'll pound proof enough out of him for you!" Jim growled.

"I'll do what I can. He headed for the soldiers hours ago. It's a big start. And he was going to take them right down on the Indians. If something misses, can you keep those red devils off our wagons?"

"By hauling Baring into their village by sunup."

"Sunup! Man, we'll need wings. The Army camp's over ten miles away."

"That close?" Jim said. "Then we'd be too late, there! They'd be under way already if Baring sold them his bill of goods, and I don't see how he could have missed. We've got to head for the mountains now!"

Even Jim Henry had never been party to a ride like this. At worst, before, only his own hide had been in danger. Now the stakes were the lives of many men. Old Wheeler dropped steadily behind, and the flat-sodded, barranca-cut miles reeled darkly away. Behind him Jim became aware of approaching dawn. He thought of the people in the village ahead and those in the wagons behind; of an officer and men of a government service who were riding in the darkness ahead of him. He thought of himself and the strange girl he wanted, waiting in an Arapahoe lodge for dawn or death.

The Army detachment was traveling with open-country caution along the floor of a coulee when he first spotted it in the slowly growing light. Its officer was competent. He had split his force into two flanking parties, slowly diverging to

catch the Arapahoe village on two sides as they approached the ragged foothills. In the center, somewhat ahead of the flanks, was moving a widely scattered line of scouts. And directly behind these, within reach of either flank in case trouble began, rode a small knot of men which Jim knew included the detachment commander and Aaron Baring.

With a shout to Wheeler, some distance behind him, Jim rose in his stirrups, buck-jumping his horse with reckless skill down the steep coulee wall, firing the pistol Wheeler had given him, to attract attention below.

The two quick shots he fired had a result he did not anticipate. They were echoed almost immediately by men at the forward edge of the screen of cavalry scouts. And intermingled with the sound of service weapons came the heavier, less regular slam of the overcharged trade weapons that the plains tribes were beginning to use.

The Arapahoe were standing by their agreement to withhold attack until dawn, but they were taking no chances that Jim would trick them. They had flung out scouts of their own to protect the village from sudden attack. The two scouting forces had been practically in contact when Jim fired his signal, and his shots had made a nervous finger twitch. Now they had begun to fight, and word was on its way back to the village that Arrow and Three Horse and Redrock had been right. The leather man had lied.

Swerving raggedly, Jim careened toward the knot of men in the center of the troops. As he approached, he saw Aaron Baring turn in his saddle to point accusingly. "There's our man, Captain! Arrest the damned renegade!"

Jim ignored him, his attention on the young officer, an outflung arm taking in the scouts who were trading fire with the Arapahoe security line.

"Call those men in! Pull them back!"

"You giving me orders?" the officer said angrily.

"I'm trying to save you from the worst mistake you'll ever make," Jim replied. "You're being tricked!"

Morgan Wheeler rode up, "Listen to this man, Captain. I'm Morgan Wheeler, of Missouri . . ."

Baring was sitting hunched in his saddle. "Damn you, Wheeler, you should be with the wagons!"

"Morgan Wheeler?" the young officer said with a touch of deference. "I've heard of you, sir. I'll listen, if you vouch for him—"

"For God's sake, man, of course I do," Wheeler said impatiently.

The captain called a courier.

"Tell Sergeant Cooper to halt his advance and fire only to

hold his ground until further orders. Henry, I'm listening. Make it fast, man!"

"There's no time for talk. Let that order you just gave stand for fifteen minutes. If you do, I think I can stop this mess."

"Stop an engagement already practically begun? Henry, you're crazy!"

"I'll go out with Baring, there, for a parley with the Indians. If I'm willing to risk it, surely he will. No sane man wants Indian trouble."

The officer swung toward Baring. Beyond the scouts, firing was increasing in tempo. Jim understood. The Arapahoe were beginning to reinforce their outposts. When their full strength was up to the line, they'd charge. A handful of minutes remained now.

"Ride out there?" Baring cried. "The devil I will! It's suicide!"

He shifted and his gun appeared as Jim reined toward him.

"You started this, Baring," Jim said quietly. "You're going to finish it—"

The wagon man eared back the hammer of his gun. Jim kept his horse moving steadily toward Baring. The officer swore angrily. Jim's eyes were on Baring's face. A telltale change in expression came swiftly, and was gone. And with it Jim flung himself from his saddle on the far side of his horse. Baring's gun fired and lead tore over the pommel above Jim.

Darting under the belly of his horse, Jim reached Baring's near side before Baring located him and started to depress his weapon. He was too late. Seizing his leg, Jim hauled strongly.

Baring hit the ground with a thud that sent his riderless horse rearing and bolting from them. He rolled over, hate distorting his face, and swung the gun around again. But Jim's foot swung fast and hard at Baring's wrist, knocking the gun away.

The fight was not over. Baring scrambled to his feet, and lunged at Jim again, and there was murder in every muscle of his body. Jim's instincts worked for him then. Instead of falling back, he moved in suddenly, caught Baring in mid-stride, and hit the man cleanly, so hard that his own arm hurt clear across to the middle of his back. Baring left his feet, twisted in the air, and landed on his shoulder. He lay where he fell, without moving. Morgan Wheeler, the young captain, and the one courier remaining with the headquarters party had swung down and were running forward. Before they reached him, Jim had bent and slung Baring's body across his shoulders.

"Hold your men down for ten minutes—just ten minutes,

Captain," he panted. "If the Indians are still firing then, fight like hell."

Jim turned toward the line of skirmish with his burden, a dead weight across his shoulders. Behind him he heard the cavalry captain cursing and Morgan Wheeler saying, "Let him go. I've come this far with him. I've got to see the end of it!"

Jim stumbled across the uneven ground, thrown off balance by the weight of the body he carried, but staying on his feet. Around him the light was growing brighter, and he knew that the sun was rising above the horizon. Now, there was nothing he could gain personally from this. Perhaps he could still halt the coming battle, but with this rising sun, Sue Duneen would be dead. And he, Jim Henry, who had wanted her more than he had wanted anything else in his life, had killed her. She would have died hating him.

He staggered past a wide-eyed cavalry scout, down in a boghole shelter with four companions. They turned from their guns to stare at him in disbelief as he lumbered past them and over the lip of their shelter, an upright target for the Arapahoe advance line with which they had been engaged. Dust sprang up at his feet.

He knew that the puzzled Indians in the advance line were firing at him and that sooner or later they couldn't fail to hit the target he afforded, but he made no attempt to seek cover, trotting on steadily toward them. He even forgot his hatred for the man he carried. He could think only of Sue . . .

The terrible exertion of his burdened run, after two sleepless nights and much mistreatment, sapped Jim Henry's strength until the blood hammering in his ears was like thunder, and a red mist seemed to color all things about him. Hands were laid on him, checking his advance. He was relieved of his burden. Words were spoken. But he became aware of these things slowly. He blinked his eyes. The sound of gunfire had died on the grass. He stood in the lee of a rock outcropping, looking at three familiar faces—Arrow, Redrock, and Three Horse. Antelope was stooped over Aaron Baring's figure where it lay spilled down on the grass. He straightened slowly.

"The leather man has kept his word, my brothers," he said slowly. "This is the wagon captain. And the gods have punished him. There is no mark or wound, yet his neck is broken. We are left without an enemy, for the soldiers are already withdrawing."

Jim understood. In his anxiety to stun Baring with one blow, he had struck him as hard as he could. The blow and

the twisted fall had snapped a vertebra. He had carried a dead man across the grass.

"Peace, then. I was in time enough for that!" he said softly,

"In war, leather man, Arapahoe take no chances," Antelope said quietly. "You were watched from the moment you left our village. Our scouts followed you wherever you rode. Their reports are good. Taken prisoner, you were released by friends. Released, you rode to carry out your bargain. You have brought us the wagon chief who made us trouble, dead. You have kept your bargain. It is now for us to keep ours. When we have signed our peace with the wagon men we will send messages to the other nations. There will be no big war on the grass."

Jim's attention slid from his old friend's words. Perhaps this was a renegade's pay—to win for others, but not for himself. He closed his eyes, holding his head in his hands.

"Here, Jim. I'm here . . ."

He jerked his head up, unbelieving, to see the figure rushing toward him. In a moment she was against him, warm and real past all doubting.

"Antelope kept me from the others because the reports of their scouts were good, Jim. And then, this morning, you came. Oh, Jim, hold me tight!"

Jim's arms closed. Sue's lips touched his ear.

"I thought I hated Aaron Baring, but what did I know of hate or love until last night when I thought you had left me to save your own skin and was at the same time afraid you wouldn't come back! Oh, Jim—"

Sue smelled of sweet grass and warmth and Jim buried his scarred, stubbled face in the softness of her shoulder.

"Jim Henry . . . a renegade . . . it's true," she murmured. "We're both of us renegades, Jim."

Jim did not raise his head.

"I have shares for a thousand acres in the Poudre Company, Jim. The Indians and the company people will both need you as long as they share this valley together. They'll need you almost as much as I do. Can't you stay here?"

Jim glanced up to see that they were entirely alone. Old though he was, Antelope remembered a man wanted privacy with his woman. Jim thought the old chief had circled his party to meet Wheeler and the cavalry officer for a parley some distance from this sheltered patch of grass.

Strange things could change a man beyond Missouri. He rode west to find a bigger world than he could own on the river. He moved between horizons a month's hard riding apart. But in the end, his boundaries embraced only a thousand acres of land. Yet it was enough and more.

Jim breathed deeply and bent Sue Duneen backward until her shoulders were against the dew-wet grass. He kissed her then as he had an unnamed formless woman in the long-ago hungry dreaming of the past.

Today's sun was a bright one.

Trouble at Temescal*

by FRANK BONHAM

BEYOND THE MEADOW he could see a vineyard, and beyond the vineyard the huge adobe building with sheds and outhouses huddled to it like hawk-frightened chicks around a hen. The lacy, round heads of pepper trees made shade everywhere.

"What they call a *hacienda,* I reckon," Hank Ashwood said. He whittled shavings for a fire, his big, horseman's hands easy and familiar with the Green River knife stroking off the long, even curls of wood.

From the gully beside their horse camp, Red Wolfe came swinging into view with the dripping water bags bearing him down. He poured some water into the Dutch oven and began crumbling jerky into it. "We sure come to the right place, Hank. There's money in this outfit. I hear these California *hacendados* are crazy for a blonde, whether it's a horse or a woman. I'm telling you what's the truth; we'll sell these yella horses at a hundred a head!"

"I'd feel surer of it if they were blonde women," Hank Ashwood said.

Chain-hobbled, the horse herd grazed tranquilly. Aside from the need for currying, they looked good—ex-Army mounts, most of them, bought cheaply in New Mexico and trailed to the pueblo of Los Angeles for resale.

Red threw a handful of dried vegetables into the kettle. He was a stretchy, middle-sized man of twenty-five who could never sit easy; he had to be busy all the time. Around a horse camp it came in handy.

He took a deep breath. "Smoke yonder must be the town. Real hellroarer, what I heard." The thin dusting of freckles spread across his face with a quick smile. "You know what I'm going to do with my cut of these here plugs?"

"Blow it on craps, women, and whiskey—in two days. After five months on the trail."

Hank spoke gruffly and gave the stew a stir. But he smiled a little in his whisker stubble. Red would do all right. A mite wild, maybe, but his red head was screwed on tight enough when it counted. They had met in Santa Fe, when Hank was just out of the Army and Red was on the loose from some money-making project or another that hadn't paid off—Hank had never learned just what. Some horse talk over a bottle of whiskey had made them friends; Red knew his way around, and Hank had some back pay and poker winnings burning in his pocket. So they became partners. They finished the bottle and shook hands and went out to look over the Army mounts. Five months had brought them this far along the trail, and about as close as two men can get.

From his possible-sack Red had produced a steel mirror and was looking himself over. He bared his teeth and fingered a knife scar on his cheekbone. "Buddy, I'll strike a hard bargain with the *señoritas* hereabouts. They'll know how Red Wolfe likes his bacon before I leave. How 'bout you? What you figuring to do with your cut?"

"I'll find something," Hank said.

When the fire was going good, the smoke seemed to release something in both of them. They stood watching the sunset fume along the horizon, until Red noticed a covey of blackbirds strutting on the cropped grass a hundred feet away. Abruptly, he drew his Colt and fired into their midst. One of them exploded into feathers as the rest scurried off.

"What the hell was that for?" Hank said.

Red grinned devilishly at the smoking pistol, as he said: "Ain't you ever felt that way? So full of vinegar you could bust? Man, what are you—a gelding or something?"

Hank smiled, but he pointed out across the gullied pasture. "If the people in that castle ain't used to gringos, they'll be putting furniture in front of the doors tonight."

"They ought to be used to 'em. If they ain't, they'll know about Yankees before we leave."

A few minutes later they heard the horseman coming across the field from the buildings. It was now late dusk, and the windows of the ranch house were orange with lamplight. There were the sounds of cows lowing to be milked, of sheep, and the family sounds of chickens going to roost. The fragrance of woodsmoke and food drifted past Hank Ashwood's nose. He would always think of charcoal fumes and frying chilis when he thought of Mexicans.

Red was shaving cake coffee into their cups, listening to the oncoming hoofbeats. His face gleamed with wicked expectancy.

Hank poured hot water. "Listen, kid," he said mildly.

"Don't forget we're in somebody else's town, now. Have your fun, but remember you're a guest."

Red snorted. "The hell you say! This is California, ain't it? And California's a state of the Union now, ain't it? We licked them Mexes for fair. They get off the sidewalks for us."

"If it comes to that. But it don't have to come to it. These people were here a couple of hundred years before us. They never made trouble. Now, there's plenty of the kind of woman you're looking for, and plenty of places to raise hell, without riling up the decent folks—"

"What the hell's gone and got into you?" Red stared at him. "Why didn't you tell me you were a preacher? Why, hellfire, man, we could have had chapel every night!"

"For a fella your size that's a lot of mouth you're flapping—"

Red came up quickly, swirling the coffee in his cup, staring with open hostility. Across the fire from him Hank got to his feet, not quite casually.

"It's this way," he told the red-head. "We want some money out of these horses. We won't get it by going on the butt with our customers." His square, dark face said he was offering an explanation, nothing else.

After a moment, Red grunted. "Now, that makes sense."

They were sitting on the ground with their pie pans in their laps, eating halfcooked stew, when the horseman arrived.

He came like a flourish of trumpets. Loping his horse directly into the camp, he put it to a plowing halt on its hind legs and then, with a lift of his reins, hauled it over to the fire. Hank stared, not alarmed, just amazed. The man handled the magnificent horse like a god. He was a young Mexican with coppery skin.

He was furious. Hank was glad the Green River knife rested on his plate.

The Mexican said, "*'Uenas noches, caballeros.'*"

"Hi, Mex," Red said. He speared a bit of meat and took it in his teeth.

The face of the Mexican worked. He was blue-eyed, though Hank guessed him to be of Spanish blood. Whatever his blood, it was boiling.

Hank said gravely: "*A sus órdenes, amigo.*"

The courtesy tamed the man a little. He addressed his next remark to Hank. "*Han tirado un fúsil?*"

"Yeah, we shot a gun," Red said.

"*Porqué?*"

"*Porqué* you no speak English, if you understand it?" Red demanded.

Still speaking Spanish the man said, "I understand English, but I speak my own tongue. That is all right?"

"Sure. You talk Spik; we talk English."

Hank set his plate down and stood up, wiping his knife with two fingers. *"Señor,"* he said, "we're mustangers. We come a long way today and we're plumb glad to get here. My partner took a shot at a bird, just because he felt good. I felt the same way, but I just grinned. The shot didn't mean any more than my grin. Only you heard it."

"Yes," the Mexican said. "We did."

Red walked around, looking at the horse. "You the bossman? You look too green to boss much of anything."

He was grinning a little, but Hank knew that American humor was not Mexican humor. The Californian's anger was rising like the neck feathers of a fighting cock as he stiffly watched Red circle the horse.

"I am Ramon Calder. This is Rancho Temescal, the de la Torre ranch. I am a neighbor of the owner."

"Who's the owner, Ray?"

"Doña Julia de la Torre."

Red gave him that brash grin. "Prob'ly call her Julie, where we come from. How old is she?"

"Old enough to hate gringos," snapped the Mexican.

Red frowned. "Maybe we ought to drop around and show this lady how lovable we are."

Hank said quickly, "Cut it out, Red. Calder, all we want is pasturage for some horses until we sell them. We figured to pay our respects to the *patrón* and find out if we could leave them here."

"You *figured,"* the Californian said, "to squat here until you could claim the land. Like the others in Pike's company."

"Pike? Who's Pike?"

Calder repeated softly, "Who is Pike!" He laughed without humor.

Red's back stiffened.

Having stood between them long enough, Hank Ashwood was now tired of it. He liked fun; he didn't mind fighting. But he didn't like sarcasm.

"Calder," he declared, "we don't know Pike, and Pike don't know us. I said we were mustangers, and that's the story on us. They call me Hank Ashwood; this is my partner, Red Wolfe. We'll be over to say howdy after we've eaten. Tell the lady we're sorry about the shot. We don't know this fella, Pike, and we don't aim to squat. Will you tell her that?"

"No," Ramon Calder said. "I will tell her that Pike has sent two more squatters in. But that I ran them off."

"Well, listen to the boy!" Red took a twist of tobacco from

his hip pocket and broke off a chew with his teeth. He began to work it up. "Calder," he said. "Ramon Calder. Got a gringo daddy, eh? Reckon that would make you kind of a half-breed, eh?"

There was a pistol at Calder's hip which Hank had not noticed. He saw it now, gleaming in the firelight, rising from the far side of the horse as the Mexican threw down on Red.

Red's gun was holstered at his feet, lying beside his saddle. He dropped to his knees and clawed at the gun.

Hank's hand and wrist rolled in a blur of fluid movement. The knife turned lazily in the air and hit Calder's wrist with such force that the pistol was jarred from his grasp. It fell into the grass.

Calder stared at his arm. The point of the knife had gone in crookedly, tearing the shirt, ripping his flesh. As the blade fell to the ground, blood flooded his sleeve.

Red had kept moving. He was across the fire, leaping at Calder, pulling him to the ground. He had pumped four blows into Calder's face before Hank dragged him off, dominating him by sheer fury.

"You hard-mouthed little pint o' willow juice! Why didn't I let you have it? We could have made a friend out of this boy, maybe, but now you—" He shook his partner savagely.

Red twisted away. "He threw down on me, didn't he?"

"After you called him a breed." Hank turned to stare down at the Mexican. The boy was stunned, and was bleeding steadily.

With a clean bandana, Hank bound the injured wrist. "I'm sorry about this," he said.

But the Mexican's eyes remained stony. He did not say another word. When he finally left, he did not return to the rancho headquarters but quartered off northeast, toward his own ranch.

Red found a bottle of wine that he had acquired at a mission the day before. He lay back on his blankets and tilted the bottle to his lips.

"I'll buy him a drink in town," he offered, grinning. "Hell, we'll make a Christian out of that kid yet."

"The less we have to do with that fireeater," said Hank, "the better off everybody's going to be. If they're all as touchy as this one, we're going to have to go in with our hats in our hands before we get rid of these horses."

In the morning, a man from the ranch house rode to the horse camp. "Juan Soto, *mayordomo* of this ranch," he introduced himself. "At your orders, *señors*." He was slender

and dark, with leathery skin and a gray mustache, an old man but a vigorous one.

"Glad to know you," Hank said. "Young Calder tell you what we wanted?"

"You desire pasturage, as I understand. *La Patroncita* will have to decide. Will you come to the *casa?"*

They rode through the vineyards. *La Patroncita*—the little boss. It was intriguing, and Hank wondered how she would look. Probably seventy-five, and have wooden pegs for teeth.

Soto led them into the courtyard. Two women stood in the doorway of the kitchen, watching them.

Directly in front of them, as they rode through the gate, was the two-story wall of the main building. A gallery ran along the full length of the upper floor. Vines trailed along the spidery woodwork, and behind it, standing in the sunlight, a girl was stroking her hair with a silver brush. Seeing them, she stood poised with the brush to her hair.

He would always remember her that way, Hank knew. When he thought of the Pueblo of Los Angeles, he would think of a girl on a balcony, brushing her black hair with a silver brush. In her vivid features was the same pride Ramon had thrust at them.

Even after she had called down, *"Momentito!"* Hank sat staring.

Red caught his glance. "By Godlins! Now there's a Mex filly I wouldn't mind putting my brand on!"

Soto growled something to the boys who came to take their horses. They walked toward the big, nail-studded front door. Walking slowly, a lanky-boned man with unkept dark hair, his sleeves too short and his face unshaven, Hank felt like a peddler about to invade a forbidden parlor.

Soto took them to the parlor. The furniture was heavy, homemade stuff, but handsome. The floor was red tile, patterned with hides.

The girl came down the stairs into the hall and entered the room. The tapping of her heels was light and feminine and throat-tightening. Both men bounced up.

"Los Americanos, señorita," Soto announced. "They would like to arrange for pasturage."

She met them without a smile. *"Bienvenidos, caballeros."* She was tiny, olive-skinned and slender, with eyes like black velvet. Her lips were very bright. She wore a high-necked gown of pale green merino, whose lowest hoop just brushed the floor.

And watching her move toward a chair, Hank decided his first impression in the courtyard had been right. She was the loveliest woman he had ever seen.

He started to sit down again, but she raised a slim hand toward him in a motion of annoyance and alarm.

"Oh, no, you mustn't! Please!" She hurried across the floor to remove an antimacassar-like cloth of petit-point from the back of Hank's chair. "It is very precious to me, you understand. My mother made it. And you Americans—the grease you put in your hair!"

Deliberately she laid it on the arm of a chair and sat in the center of the sofa, adjusting her skirt about her. Then she raised that lovely young face imperiously and allowed her eyes to say that she was ready for them to talk to her.

Hank ran his hand over his hair. There was dust in it, perhaps, that a creek bath hadn't removed completely, but there was no grease. He told her as much with his glance, but said nothing. This tramps-begging-at-the-back-door role which she had assigned to them got under his hide. He decided that she would speak first.

Finally she said, "I notice that you were in the army," glancing at his faded shirt.

"For a while."

"During the war?" And when he nodded: "Then you must have killed a great number of Mexicans?"

"Only the ones that were trying to kill me—"

"And won much medals. And honor." Her voice was scornful.

He said, "Can't we agree the war is finished? I don't know who started it, but I'm ready to forget it. Our business here is with horses."

"Chapita," Red chimed in boldly, "how'd you like a yella horse to set off that black hair of yours?"

"I fear the price would be too high."

Red laughed. "Wouldn't be a question of money at all, *Chapita."*

The girl flushed, from shame or anger, Hank could not tell.

"You Yankees! You think that is all there is to it—you come in here and think that you can treat us all like swine! And if we object, there are always your guns." She looked directly at Hank. "Or your knives."

"Now hold on," he said. "We got some horses to sell. We came a thousand miles to sell them, and the first night we get here a sprout tells us to break camp and move along, and pulls a gun on us."

"After he had been insulted!"

"That kid gave me a pretty good roasting first, *Chapita,"* Red grinned at her.

"In California," said Julia de la Torre, "gentlemen call a

lady by her proper name at the first meeting. After a while, names like Shorty might be permitted."

Red bit off the end of a cigar. "Us gringos work kinda fast. You'd be surprised to know how we treat ladies we take a shine to, on the *second* meeting."

Her lips went thin as she fought to contain her anger. "You have come to ask me for pasturage. What is it worth if I say yes? Will you and Pike leave me alone? Will—"

"Pike, Pike! That's all I hear," Hank said. "Who is Pike? Your pal Ramon Calder pulled the same thing on us. This Pike must be quite an hombre."

She sighed. "All right. I'll pretend that you are as innocent as you want me to think. Pike is an *empresario* who is camped with his squatters on my land. According to law, I can make him get off. According to practice, he can stay until the courts decide he ought to have the land, if he wants it so badly. Then he pays me a little money, and I have been satisfied."

"That really how it works?"

"When one's name is de la Torre. If it were—Smith, for instance, or Jones—it would go differently. My title would have been acknowledged four years ago and I could run off Pike before he ruins me."

Hank said easily, "Then why not throw him off—tie a can to his tail?"

He had forgotten the *mayordomo,* Soto, who spoke now from the doorway.

"Vincente Arvizu was fined five hundred dollars for throwing some squatters off his place. And then they brought their relatives. He lost everything."

In the silent parlor, guilt buzzed around the Americans. Even Red shifted on his chair.

Abruptly Hank rose. Carefully, he replaced the antimacassar. "I hope we didn't bring in any vermin, *señorita.* You go right on fighting the good fight. Enough females like you could send any army in the world home dragging its muskets."

Their eyes clashed.

"We—we have not arranged about your horses," the girl said quickly. "I shall buy all of them. I'll send the horse foreman back with you."

He smiled. "You really don't trust us, do you? You still figure maybe we got a connection with Pike. But give us a good hatful of money for our horses and we might listen to reason and ride off. Ain't that it?"

"Do not all Americans have a price?" she asked contemptuously.

"Not this one," Hank said.

That morning they drove the horses five miles north into some brown hills. Here, on scorched grass in a dusty live-oak grove, they settled the herd once more.

Then they ate hardtack and venison and sat among the low-branching trees sipping their coffee. Hank could discern the pattern of the vineyards and horse pastures, fruit orchards and truck gardens, of Julia de la Torre's Rancho Temescal.

Evidently Red had been studying it, too. "That there's a tolerable big outfit. Musta been fifty flunkeys around the *hacienda* this morning."

"No wonder pigs like this Pike try to grab the old ranchos off, eh?"

Hank knocked out his pipe and covered the sparks with loose dirt. "Well, we better curry the horses. I figure tomorrow we ought to move them into the plaza and advertise 'em. They must have a paper, town of this size."

Stretching, Red smiled like a lazy tomcat. "That ain't all they got, I reckon. You take care of the advertising, I'll track us down some sweet-smellin' . . . Hey!"

He grinned, ducking the rock Hank chucked in his direction. They got up and went to work.

With curry combs and dandy brushes, they burnished the golden horses. Hank wished the Torre girl could see them. She would gasp, and he would say "Take your pick. Nothing stingy about a Yankee, *Chapita.*"

Of course, if she had formed her impression of them from an occupation army and one-mule 'croppers like Pike, you couldn't blame her. Yet every time he remembered the way she had treated him about dirtying the chair, he got warm in the neck. He found himself thinking, too, about this fellow Pike, and the kind of reputation a man like that brought to other Americans.

When they had finished with the horses, it was almost dark.

"I got Pike and his bunch spotted over in that wash where all the smoke is," Hank said. "Probably cooking a beef they stole."

"You figuring on riding over that way?" Red asked.

Hank nodded. "This may be just a cockeyed idea of mine. You don't have to get mixed up in it."

"We're partners, ain't we?" Red said.

They pulled out two mounts, tightened their saddle girths and rode out.

They encountered the fragrance of Pike's camp before they found the camp itself. Rotting carcasses of sheep, rudely butchered for a few tender cuts, lay in the brush beside the

trail. Soon they came in view of a campfire and saw deerhide tents among scattered oak trees. Riding in, they saw that a beef was being barbecued in a pit; a man was slopping sauce onto it with a mop-like affair. The scent of it was overpowering. They sat inhaling it and inspecting the sprawl of a half-dozen tents among gear of all sorts—plows, saddles, bucksaws, boxes.

A man spoke from the shade of a tree. "Howdy, boys. You the mustangers?"

Hank noticed the rifle in the crook of his arm. "Yep. Smelled your food."

"Plenty for everybody," said the man. He came forward to look at them. He was tall and well-made, youngish, not bad-looking, a supple man wearing a saucer-brimmed straw sombrero.

"Owen Pike," he said.

"Hank Ashwood," Hank said. "This is Red Wolfe, my pardner. Might take some of that boot-leather you're cookin'."

At the barbecue pit, they shook hands with the bald-headed little man with the mop. His name was Brown. There was another man named Flint who had unhappy gray eyes which watched with suspicion from beneath thick brows. Flint was very tall, with wide sagging shoulders. He had badly made false teeth which he rattled like a horse chewing a bit.

"Rest of the boys are in town," Owen Pike said, "gittin' fixed up." He chuckled.

All of these men, Hank perceived, had one thing in common they were unconscionably lazy. They would do three days' work to get out of one.

"Aim to settle," Pike queried, "or move along?"

"Quien sabe?" Red shrugged. His teeth tore at a dripping slab of meat.

"Fix you up with a nice piece of land," said Pike.

"Horse traders," Hank sighed, "can't afford land like this."

"Bring me a couple of them titles," Pike told Flint.

Flint brought some impressive-looking documents. Pike frowned over one. "This is five hundred acres. Fifty acres of muscat grapes grow on it and a hundred orange trees. The rest will cultivate or raise stock."

"Nearby?" asked Hank, with interest.

"You're settin' next door to 'em. Both on Rancho Temescal."

"You own the land?"

"Fixin' to." Pike winked. "I'll sell either or both at a dollar an acre. Or trade for horses."

"What if this de la Torre woman makes trouble?"

"You got it wrong, friend. They don't make *us* trouble—we make *them* trouble. You could move in tomorrow."

"But how do I know these titles will stand up?"

Pike drew the cork from a jug of whiskey, laid the jug across his elbow while he drank, then stoppered it again. "I get it that every Mexican title in Los Angeles county is going to be throwed out. That makes the next titles in line good. And you know what they say about possession."

Hank drank deeply of the whiskey. After belching, he said mildly to Red, "Cover Brow and Flint."

Red pulled his gun and the squatters blinked at it. Pike stared, then roused up from his heels to reach for his rifle, cocked against an ox-cart. "Well, by God," he snarled. His face writhed, coming out evil as that of a cur.

But he froze when he saw the knife shining in Hank's hand. Hank reached forward to catch Pike's gun belt and cut it loose. The revolver fell to the ground.

"Get up," Hank told him.

Pike came up tall, like an Indian. He threw aside his hat and waited. His face was murderous; his eyes bored at Hank's.

"Up to you," he said. "But remember—in this town you can have a man killed for two bits, and git change."

Hank sheathed the knife and handed his Colt to Red. "You ain't worth two bits." His left hand flicked into Pike's face. His right crashed in when the squatter ducked. Pike covered his face and stumbled away. He went to one knee but lunged up again. As Hank came slashing in, he wiped the blood from his face and slanted into him, both arms swinging.

Hank ducked under the squatter's swings and butted him in the belly. He got his arms around him and ran backward.

The squatter, Flint, bawled, *"The pit, Owen!"*

Hank unlocked his arms and stopped short. Owen Pike stared at him, afraid to look back. At once he leaned, flailing, into Hank, swearing, calling up all the vicious profanity of two languages. Hank dodged and ducked and then feinted at Pike's crotch with his knee, and when Pike grunted and covered up he slammed him in the face with an overhand right. Pike's head jerked. He twisted backward and sprawled across the greasy, sweating carcass of the spitted veal. Screaming, he went ankledeep in the coals before he could haul himself out. Red was roaring with laughter. Hank just stood there with a grin, waiting to see whether the squatter had all the fight squeezed out of him.

Groaning, Pike held his feet for one moment, as he huddled on the ground. But an instant later he clawed his hands full of dirt and hurled it into Hank's face. Hank's eyes were

full of the grit. He heard Red's angry bawl, "Duck, Hank—I'll give it to 'm!"

But the squatter was upon him, hammering one into his jaw, and as Hank went back, he felt Pike's hand clutching at his hip. Hank felt the knife slip out of the sheath. What had been only a rough fight was now deadly serious.

Pike was moving in like a cat. Hank considered ducking away to give Red a shot at him. Yet he wanted to handle this himself, and he did not want anyone killed. He wanted Julia to know that he had been enough, barehanded, for a whole campful of squatters.

The knife cut the air before his belly, withdrew, slipped in toward his breast, retreated again. Hank backed slowly. Then Pike dived in with a straightforward lunge for the buckle of his belt. Hank jumped sidewise and brought a smashing fist down upon Owen Pike's forearm. The knife fell. Hank scooped it up and as the squatter went for his throat he brought it across the side of his head.

The tip of the squatter's ear fell to the dirt. Blood fountained over the side of his head and down his neck and shoulders. When Pike saw the bit of flesh in the dirt, he covered his ear with his hand and staggered away. He sat on a log with his palm against his ear, twisting his head back and forth in agony.

Hank saw to the disarming of the other squatters. He carried all their pistols in his hat. Mounted, he stopped beside Pike.

"You got all day tomorrow to pack and get. Be gone the next morning. Or all the two-bitses in Los Angeles won't keep you from losing the rest of that ear."

The pueblo called the Queen of the Angels was different from anything Hank had ever seen. It was a long haul from an eastern town, or even Santa Fe. Nothing seemed to matter to the natives. Even the air was soft and slow.

They had moved into town the day after the fight, and pitched camp in a vacant lot off the plaza, under a huge pepper tree dripping red. They corralled the horses in a rope enclosure and Hank put an ad in the *Star,* and the horses began to sell. They did not make a hundred a head, but they did well.

Red and Hank took their meals in a Mexican café on the plaza. In the evenings they would sit in the deep bay of the windows, smoking and watching the traffic come and go; and after a while, when it was dark, Red would say, "Got to find a gal, Hank. I'm great for dancing." With a laugh he would go out into the night.

After a couple of these nights he asked Hank, "What's eating you, *compadre?* All the *señoritas* you were going to swing, and you ain't done anything but eat and work since we hit town."

"Anything wrong with eating and working?"

"Nothing wrong with the fillies here, either. Tell you one thing—they ain't the angels they named the town after."

And Hank sighed and wished he could get the picture of a black-haired girl out of his mind.

At eight o'clock one night, as he was finishing his cigar before the café, Hank saw a turnout flash up to their camp and stop. He sauntered over, hopeful of a customer. A young fellow was walking nervously about the camp, looking at the horses, and as Hank came up he ducked to glance into the low deerhide tent.

"Aquí estóy," Hank called.

The man turned quickly. It was Ramon Calder. He came toward Hank with the stiff-legged strut of a small dog guarding a large yard. Hank smiled to himself but his hand was on the butt of his gun.

A girl spoke, close to him. "Ramon, you promised!"

A tingle chased itself along Hank's spine. Her voice—it was like a bell heard softly on a warm evening. He had heard it for days, saying things that tantalized and infuriated him. Now he did not turn to look at her, sitting in the rig, but watched the Californio come on. Ramon stopped three feet away with his hands on his hips. Just a kid, Hank thought. A spoiled and hot-blooded kid, but a scrapper. He found himself liking him.

Before Ramon could say anything, Hank remarked, "Sorry about the arm, Ramoncito. That pardner of mine—I blame him as much as you."

"What's the plan now? To lay claim to the plaza?"

"Sell and git," Hank smiled. "Tell you what I'll do. Give you your pick of the horses for half price."

"Would that apply to me, too?" asked Julia de la Torre.

Hank took his eyes off Ramon and let himself relax. The night and her voice combined to disarm him. He heard his voice say quite distinctly, "No, ma'am. I'll just give you one. To set off that black hair of yours."

"Señor Ashwood," Julia said quietly. "Señor Ashwood, I am sorry about the other day. But when you are about to lose everything . . . I am going to accept the horse, with thanks. Ramon, will you pick out one for me?"

"Be assured the horse won't be free," Ramon said darkly.

But the girl smiled and made a face at his concern, allying

herself by the small action with Hank. She got down from the turnout, holding out her arm for him to take.

They stood close together. In the dying light he could see that her lips were smooth as lacquer, that there was the slightest blemish near the corner of her mouth. And that her eyes were very dark brown, with incredibly long lashes. Her nose was delicate, perfectly fashioned. He was glad for that tiny mole; without that to break the perfection, he had a feeling that he would have choked on this lump in his throat. She was sure something for a man to run smack into after five months among the squirrels.

"I want to thank you for trying to frighten off my squatters," she said. "It was very brave of you."

He felt the movement of her hand in his and remembered only then to release her. "It was very practical business, too," he told her. "Best way to show people here that I'm not like Pike, and that I want no part of Pike or his kind. My horse sales have been going well."

"Of course, *señor*. Good business, as you say. Pike and his men are still here, though. You must watch out for them."

"I'll take care of myself. Is that what you wanted to talk about, *señorita?*"

"To thank you, yes. And . . ." Her luminous eyes met his briefly, and he saw a doubt, a question in their depths. "Yes, there is something else. But I do not know if I can make you see."

She took a deep breath, swelling the merino gown. "This—this place is not what I remember from my childhood. What we had here before the war—it used to be so wonderful! The ranchos, the people—all of us living as we were meant to live. My grandfather would have fiestas you wouldn't believe! Those were the happy times, *señor!*" and she seemed to dream over it.

"And now we have the great ranchos being broken up, the land stolen from its owners. Did you know this town before, Señor Ashwood? The fine residential district of the North Side—it is now the infamous *Calle Desperar!*"

Hank had seen it—the lowest part of the worst section in town. The Alley of Despair. It was the bottom of the keg, where the lees went fetid. Drunkards and murderers roamed its sordid length.

"We did not have it before the Yankees came," she said. "I have heard they kill at least one man there every night. The big *hacendados* have the drunks rounded up by deputies and shanghaied to their ranches, work them until they drop and send them back with a dollar."

"All towns get worse as they get bigger," said Hank. "The

town will get sick to its stomach one of these days. It'll purge itself with a vigilante committee."

"We are losing what we had. The Rancho Temescal will be taken from me. Owen Pike and his squatters will claim still more of my land, or the survey commission will write a letter to Washington saying that my title was one of the fraudulent ones given when we were losing the war."

"It can't be that bad," he protested.

"It is," she said. "But there is a way for me still to protect what I have. If I marry an American."

For an instant he was shocked to silence. Then. "What kind of fool idea—"

"But of course! With a bona-fide American name—the wife of an American—my title would be accepted tomorrow. That is the established policy. But I could not marry a man I couldn't trust. He must live up to his part of the bargain, or I would be even worse off."

"Bargain?"

"I could not pretend there was love, where there is not," she told him. "I would want him to marry me and—and then leave. Go from California for at least a year, so that I could divorce him for desertion. By next week, when the survey commission leaves, my title would have been accepted."

His face grew bleak as he stared down at her. "You don't think much of us, do you?"

"But you see," Julia said quickly, "I would pay for his name. Two thousand dollars! For his name and his promise."

"Would a Mexican do that for an American woman?"

Her eyes, shifting quickly, gave him the answer to that.

"Of course not!" His voice lashed her. "He'd be too proud. But a Yankee!"

Before she could move, he pulled her roughly to him. His lips caught hers as she tried to shape a word of protest; she struggled, and then she relaxed against him. What had been meant to be a gesture of scorn did not remain one, and Hank released her, angry at himself.

He left her standing there, one hand held out as if to draw him back.

"Ramon!" he called. "You better come get the *señorita*. She's ready to go home."

He told Red about it that night. Red was feeling pretty good.

"You mean that nice piece of Mex fluff wanted you to marry her and you turned her down? I'm telling you what's the truth, Hank, you ain't got the brains God put into a billygoat. Saying no to something ripe as all that!"

Hank snorted. "It's not a real marriage. Some idea about a bargain—"

"Bargain's the word, sure." The redheaded mustanger smacked his lips theatrically. "It'd be legal—and *so-o-o-o* nice. So very, very nice. *Youe-e-e-e-ah!*"

"Damn it," Hank said, "a man that would do a thing like that would be so morally irresponsible he'd be a menace to society." His partner's refusal to be serious about it annoyed him. "He wouldn't only be making a pimp out of himself. He'd be making every other American in California look like one. Every Mexican widow, or single girl like this one, would be buying a Yankee husband and hustling him out of the state. Pretty soon we'd be stepping off the sidewalk for *them!*"

"Man, you're talking like a preacher again. Must be something this California air brings out in you." In the darkness of the tent Red's cigar glowed briefly. "All depends now, on who hustles who. There's nothing says a man's *got* to get out of the state once he's tied the knot legal to a Mex gal. A man could do himself right proud with one of these here ranchos. Maybe even turn it into cash. . . . Build himself a palace in San Francisco. . . ."

Red's voice trailed off. He began to snore. Hank got up, took Red's cigar out of his limp fingers and tossed it outside. He left the tent flap open to air out the heavy odor of the cheap whiskey that rose from his partner's body.

Sleep, for Hank, was a long time coming. He chased it down a lonely road, where the smells that came off the trees were the tantalizing odor of Julia's raven hair, where the hoofbeats beneath him were his own pounding heart.

In the morning, Red groaned and held his head as he struggled with his coffee. Some men from a livery stable came by to look at horses, and Hank was busy.

Sometime after noon, Red said morosely, "My stomach ain't speaking to my throat. Hank. I don't know what I was drinking last night but it sure peeled the lining. Nothing will fix a belly like mine but good whiskey. Hold 'er down while I'm gone, eh?"

Very late, Hank did not know when, Red was back. He was cold sober. He went right to sleep.

But the next morning Hank knew something was wrong. Red fooled with his breakfast until the mustachioed proprietor, cracking his knuckles, asked, *"Demasiado pimienta, quizas?"*

"Nothing wrong with the chuck, Dad," Red said. "Something wrong with me."

"What's the matter?" Hank asked.

"Had a bellyful of town, that's all. I'm broke, Hank. Now I'm itching to travel."

"Where?"

The redhead hesitated. "Why—uh—up to the north. North California—the mines!"

"And you're leaving today. Is that it?"

"That's it. Sell you my interest in these plugs for a hundred dollars."

"Deal," Hank said. "Some advice, kid. Slow down. We worked like hell for that money. Save a little of the next you get and stick it in the bank. Or you'll wind up in *Calle Desperar.*"

Out of the octagonal gold pieces Hank put down, Red tossed one back. "Make you a bet, *amigo.* Five years from now I'll be wearing better clothes than you are. And eating better."

Hank smiled. They drank a half bottle of wine on it, and shook hands.

And now it was a waiting game that began to drive Hank crazy, too. He all but gave away the last of the horses, retaining only the one he had earmarked for Julia. He stabled it and counted his money. He had thirty-two hundred dollars, gold. He clinked it in the chamois bag. Maybe money would grease a balky land title.

The office of the survey commission was in the Union Hotel. In a large room facing on the hotel corral, four men worked with maps and scrolls and drafting instruments. They looked harried, and at once Hank had sympathy for the big, gray-haired man who was in charge. Colonel Proctor must have had every landowner in California crying on his shoulder by now, honest or dishonest. There was a fat little man doing it when Hank arrived.

The Mexican had a cowhide volume under his arm. His eyes were black and miserable and desperate. *"Seguro Coronel,"* he whined. "The name is different, but you see, my grandfather, he was unpopular after the revolution, and he change' his name. Then my father—he was *muy fiero!*—he change' it back! But when he married. . . ."

"It'll be looked into," Proctor said. "We're here to protect landowners, not rob them."

He began escorting the man to the door. "But I have friends who have lost everything!" the Mexican protested.

Proctor shrugged. "We make mistakes."

After the old man had gone, the colonel looked at Hank. "What do you want?"

Hank knew at once that this man could not be bought.

"What's the story on throwing squatters off your land?" he asked.

"That's up to the courts."

"But it's no different with a Mexican than an American, is it?"

"Well, what do you think? The case comes up before an American judge, and the squatter turns out to be a Yankee who fought for his country and brought his family out here to settle. But there's no place to settle. It's all big ranches forty miles square. Who's going to blame him if he squats?"

"That's right," Hank said. "What if he's single, though, just a drifter?"

"Every case is different," Proctor said. He opened a sheaf of papers, frowned at it, then growled, "What ranch is it you're interested in?"

"Rancho Temescal. Julia de la Torre."

"That's different. She's all right."

Hank blinked. "But she told me—"

"That was before she was married. Her husband was in to record the land in his name."

"Oh?" Hank said. "What's her name now?"

"Wolfe," the colonel said. "Mrs. George 'Red' Wolfe."

Hank went out and had a drink on it. Clinking the gold piece down on the bar reminded him of what he had intended doing with his poke. Get her title papers cleared for her—hand her Rancho Temescal all wrapped up in legal ribbons and say, "Here it is, a present. From a Yankee." A real gentlemanly thing to do, worthy of a grandee of Old Spain.

Hank stopped counting the drinks, and sometime later found himself in *Calle Desperar*, fighting with two drunken sailors who had tried to lift his wad. He beat them both into the ground, while other drunks howled wild encouragement. Hank was filled with pain and glory. It was like the Hell pictures in a Doré Bible. Much later he was sitting on a doorsill in front of a shop. It was dark. The street was quiet. His stomach, after a sleep, was tender as a boil. What had he been drinking—lye? He was sick, and came out of it shaken but sober.

Crawling through the low door of his tent, he halted, rigid. It stank of sweat—the sweetish, nervous odor you smelled on soldiers after a battle. Someone had been here, or was here, someone who was nervous from waiting.

Pike and his squatters, he thought.

He held himself unmoving, waiting for the first small sound that would tell him from which direction the attack would come. He had no way of knowing how many of them there

were, and his ears strained for some indication. In his throat was the brassy taste of fear.

Breath hissed between set teeth. It was all the warning Hank had, but it was enough. He went sprawling forward to the small noise, one arm sweeping for his gun, the other held out before him, clutching. He touched something; knocked the man sprawling and they both went down in a tangle. There was no clear chance to use his gun; he hit the man in the crotch with his elbow and felt him convulse. They swore savagely, the words twisting into snarls of effort. Hank caught a blow against his shoulder and his hand was fast enough to grab the other's gun hand and turn it away from himself.

A sob of pain reached out to him, even as he realized the wrist he clutched was swathed in bandage.

"Goddammit!" Hank said. "Calder!"

"Señor!"

He felt the fight go out of Ramon instantly and held his own gun to one side, out of the way.

"What the hell you trying to do?" Hank released his grip. "You danged fool!"

"I am sorry, *señor,"* the young Mexican said. "I did not know it was you."

"Thought you was Pike and his bunch."

"And I thought that you were your partner, Wolfe."

Hank shook his head. "You came to the wrong corral." He turned and led the way outside.

In the thin light Ramon's face was set in harsh, hard lines. "Did you know your partner has married Julia?"

"I found out today. Only you got it wrong, *amigo*. He ain't my partner now."

"I did not know that. I thought I might find him here."

Hank picked a spot beside the pepper tree. He sat down, got his pipe going. "You ain't looking for him to offer your congratulations, I reckon."

"No, *señor*. Julia should not marry an American," Calder said. "But she went through with it, and gave him the money she had promised. But he did not leave. He intends to keep the ranch for himself!"

"So?" Remembering what Red had said the other night, Hank was not too surprised. Legally, Julia could do nothing to stop him. In a way, the situation was funny.

"It is not for smiles, *señor,"* Calder said hotly, watching Hank carefully. "Julia pleaded with him to keep his bargain —and he laughed at her. She offered him more money; he scorned it. Rancho Temescal is his now, he told her, and she could stay or leave, as she chose."

"He's pretty stubborn, when he sets his mind to it."

"I have offered Julia the sanctuary of my *hacienda.*" The young Mexican spoke with careful severity. "Señor Wolfe shall not claim her, too. Soto says that Wolfe rode out this morning to look over his property, now that he is the *hacendado.* I searched but was unable to find him. I thought perhaps he came here."

"Ain't seen hide nor hair of 'im," Hank growled. "Like I told you, Red and I are quits."

"Good," said Calder. "Then it will not matter to you when I kill him."

Hank awakened to the sound of bells, the voice of every Mexican town he had ever been through. Near and far, they chimed and bonged and tinkled for an hour.

I wonder what I'd have done if I'd been her, he asked himself. If I knew I was heading for the street corner with nothing left but my clothes. Would I have been damn fool enough to have trusted any man on a deal like that? Couldn't she have seen that Red Wolfe was a hare-brained, devil-may-care gringo looking for all he could get?

It did no good to think about it. The thing for him to do was pack and git.

Accordingly, he busied himself throughout the morning, striking the deerhide tent, fashioning a bedroll that would sit easy behind his saddle. There were some things of Red's around and Hank made a separate bundle of them to take over to the Alta Vista Hotel.

"Hold these for Señor Wolfe," he told the proprietor. "If he should come in."

The man looked sourly at the blanket-wrapped bundle, muttering behind his mustache. Hank caught the words Temescal, and something about the damned gringo who probably would not need these things now that he was a big *hacendado.*

He supposed Red would be just one more reason, shortly, that these Mexicans could say so bitterly, "We had no *Calle Desperar* before the Americans came."

Yet weren't people like Julia de la Torre to blame, as well? With her "bargain" that was equally demeaning, and which offered such temptation?

But the argument made him feel no better, and by the time that he had downed two glasses of tequila in a *Calle Alameda* saloon, the strange compulsion that burned him made up his mind.

He went to the livery stable and got the horse which he had held out for her. Rope-trailing it behind his own mount, he

took the road toward Rancho Temescal and Ramon Calder's *hacienda.*

He rode in late daylight through fields of dried mustard weed. He had expected to find the carts laboring in from the vineyards and truck gardens; there was no activity of any sort.

In the yard the silence was even more noticeable. The smell of charcoal smoke hung faintly in the air, yet there was not the frying food smell of supper. The quiet bothered him as he sat there, trying to get some taste out of a cigarette.

What the hell? he thought, and called out. "Hello!" waiting for a stableboy to come out to take his horse. But no one came. After another few minutes, Hank hitched the horses and went on inside through the stone arch that was the entrance.

Above the ringing of his boot heels on the tile floor he heard the murmur of voices in a high-vaulted room off to the left of the main hall. In there, he found the crowd of Mexicans, the men and women and children of the rancho, bunched like frightened cattle. Some of the women were sobbing openly, wringing their hands in their voluminous skirts; the men stood, slack-faced and bleak-eyed, their hats in their hands.

He caught the shoulder of the nearest man. "Señorita de la Torre—*adonde?*"

The man pulled away from him. "Gringo pig!" he spat.

Like a spark, the action seemed to ignite the crowd. A growing surge of anger ran through the room. Hank eased his hand to his holster instinctively.

"Hold!" someone commanded, pushing through the crowd. It was Soto, Julia's *mayordomo.*

"What do you want here?" he demanded.

"Where's Julie?"

"She does not want to see you, I am sure," the old man said. "Go from here now, *señor,* before there is more trouble."

"What's wrong?"

"There has been a shooting." The Mexican's eyes burned Hank's face. "Between your redheaded partner, and Ramon Calder. The doctor is inside with him now. I do not think he expects Señor Calder to live."

Even as he spoke a door opened at the far end of the room and Hank saw Julia de la Torre emerge. She wore a simple gown of gray, unrelieved by any ornamentation, and her face, as much as he could see of it, was white and drawn. Tears had stained her cheeks which she dabbed with a square of lace.

He could not hear what she said to those standing nearest

her, but it did not take a wise man to guess. The women's sobs went just the least bit higher, rising on their indrawn breath, in the way it does when tragedy embraces them. The men passed the dread word, *"Muerta,"* softly.

Hank pushed his way through the press of bodies. He saw Julia look up at his approach, saw her eyes go larger with the briefest mark of hope, before the grief and disillusionment crumbled her face again. And then, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, she was in his arms, sobbing bitterly, her small body shaking beneath his hands.

"Chapita," he said softly into her hair, holding back nothing of the way he felt now, refusing to admit, in this moment that brought them closer than a mere embrace, that it was too late. . . .

She put her lips up to his and he kissed her, a little stiffly at first, but suddenly bringing her hard against himself. His fingers moved along her back, up into her soft, dark hair; he felt an ache go all through him. He was kissing her and whispering her name.

After a while she moved away from him. But for themselves and a few ranch hands straggling through the door, they were alone in the big room.

Julia held his arms, looking up into his eyes, and he knew beyond a doubt this was the face he loved, this was the woman he wanted.

"Pobrecito!" she whispered. "There was my pride. You do not hate the Yankees all your life and then admit, even to yourself, that you are in love with one.

"Perhaps if there had been more time, I could have come to you as a woman, not as a frightened ranch owner who feared the Yankee law. But I did not know what to do. The day after I saw you, I had a visitor—Señor Wolfe. He said that you had told him you would not marry me. Your business here was finished. You and he were going away. He said he felt a great pity for me and so, before he left with you, he would do me the favor of this marriage which his partner would not."

He felt the moment of their nearness slipping from their grasp. "And you believed him."

"He was your friend, and he seemed so angry with you, for having refused. Yes, I believed him." The tears welled in her eyes. "Tell me how great a fool I was."

"You couldn't know."

"It is all my fault. But more than stupid. I am also guilty. Of Ramon's death." She started to sob again.

"I'm sorry for that." He put out his hands to comfort her,

then drew them back, opening and closing his fingers. "How did it happen?"

"This morning. I tried to stop him, but Ramon rode over to Rancho Temescal. He and Red argued. Señor Wolfe refused to go away. Ramon drew his gun. If it were not for my foolishness this awful thing would not have happened!"

"You're not all to blame," Hank said, so sharply that she was startled. "It's my fault, too."

He was not attempting gallantry, but examining the facts as he saw them now. "I brought Red Wolfe here as my partner. I told him about your offer of marriage, though I didn't think at the time he was figuring to do anything about it. And I'm the one who crippled Ramon's shooting hand. Whatever blame there is, I get some of it."

He reached for the hat he'd dropped when she had come into his arms. "I brought the horse. Perhaps you can ride it back to Rancho Temescal, when us gringos are gone."

"There will be little left to go back to when Wolfe leaves," she said sadly.

"Maybe not. I'll ride over there and see if I can talk Red into leaving with me tonight."

She studied the hard lines of his jaw. "You do not have to do this thing—"

"For you?" He shook his head. "No, *Chapita,* it is for me as well. And for the other Yankees who would be your friends. I don't think Red understands that in his own way he ain't any better than Owen Pike and his gang."

She twisted the small lace handkerchief in her hands. "But there will be more trouble, more shooting."

"Only if Red wants it that way," Hank said.

Julia wanted Soto to accompany him back to the Rancho Temescal, but Hank preferred to go alone. He did not like to think of what might happen if Red were drinking and in one of his ugly moods.

He rode with the soft night air pushing back his hat brim, washing his face with the clean sharp smells of the fields. They'd had some times, him and Red; some good, some not so good. Just last spring, when the bosque was sharp with the fragrance of new leaves and blossoms, and they were camped on the sand in the tunnel of cottonwoods along a river. They had hunted some horses which had strayed during a storm. There was venison and quail and wild turkey, and trout for the taking.

"A man'd have to be pretty used up, not to go for this," Red had said, and he spoke as if he wanted nothing else out of life. Then, a week later, a sandstorm caught them on the

Jornada. They worked in a blinding, choking fury, struggling to keep the herd all in one piece, while their clothes tore to pieces on their bodies. "Anybody who tries to make a living this way should have his head patched for cracks, by Godlins!" Red moaned, forgetting the things he'd said a week before.

That was his way. Blowing hot one minute, cold the next. So maybe, Hank thought, he'll have changed his mind about making a big thing out of the Rancho Temescal, maybe something else will have struck his fancy by now.

The main house blazed with light, but like the Calder ranch it was quiet. Hank reined before the courtyard gate, which was closed. He had one leg out of the saddle when he heard the whine of a slug and felt his hat spin off into the darkness.

His mount shied, but Hank wasn't thrown; it was his own idea to leap from the stirrup and roll into the protection afforded by the thick wall, away from the doorway. Gun out, he waited, but there was no second shot.

"Red!" he called, changing position, just in case.

"Is that you, Hank? Well, hell, man!" Red Wolfe sang out.

Hank heard his footsteps in the courtyard, then the gate swung wide and Red stood framed in the light from inside.

"Hank! Sorry, *amigo*. I didn't know it was you."

"Man comes to pay a sociable call and get shot at. You that touchy?"

The redhead grinned apologetically, putting up his gun. "Thought you might be Pike, or some of his boys. Ran into them this morning, up in the North Quarter, and they seemed downright unfriendly, way they were showing their hardware. I slipped them and got back here. . . . Well, come on in, come on in."

They went inside. "You all alone?" Hank asked.

Red studied him for a moment, as if trying to read the full intent behind the question.

"Yeah, Hank. Damn Mexes have been pulling out steady on me since I took over. I got some boys coming out from town. Shoulda been here today, matter of fact." He gave an imitation of the old, brash grin. "By the way, you ain't offered me congratulations on my wedding."

"That's right," Hank said. "I haven't."

Red turned and led the way into the parlor where they had first spoken to Julia de la Torre. Now, another girl—a young, pretty Mexican—got up from the sofa and stood there.

"Go get us some food, sweetheart," Red told her. "Two platters of enchiladas, and plenty of eggs."

He flopped on the sofa, while Hank took the seat he had

used the last time. The antimacassar was gone, he noted. "You ain't been making friends right and left, have you?"

"Ain't it a fact, though. Tell you what's the truth, I can't understand how come a nice, lovable fella like me has got so many people looking down their noses at him." When Hank merely stared at him, he went on. "You can't blame a man for feathering his own nest, now, can you? Hell, if I hadn't grabbed off this place, the vultures like Pike would'a'."

"You were pulling out for the mines."

Red laughed. "This here can be a gold mine, Hank." He indicated a bottle of brandy on the low table between them. "Pour yourself a nugget."

They had a drink. Hank watched the redhead take two more in quick succession before he allowed his own glass to be refilled. Wolfe was struggling mightly to keep the light smile on his mouth, but Hank knew what the effort was costing him. This thing had not gone as easily or as well as Red thought it would.

Hank shifted in his chair. His holster hung free. "Ramon Calder died a little while ago."

Red frowned, started to say something and thought better of it. "Damn, I'm sorry." He rubbed his chin a while. "Hank, the straight of it—I didn't want to shoot him. God's honor. But the little hothead wouldn't give me a chance to talk. Went pawing for his iron. Hell-fire, what could I do?"

"You could have left, before any trouble started." He got to his feet, careful not to make a sudden movement of it. "I think it'll be better all ways round, if you and me just sorta mosey out of here."

Red's glance sidled up, and veiled itself. He smiled. "So that's what's on your mind. The way I been figuring, Hank, was you might be looking to go partners again. Now the girl —this Julie—she don't mean nothing to me. You know the way I am about women—one's about as good as the other. Just 'cause she happens to be my wife. . . ."

"Cut it," Hank said.

"Man, you got that preacher look again. Whenever you gonna relax and start enjoying life. This here spread is big enough for the both of us. We could live like kings."

"How long do you think you're gonna last around here?" Hank demanded angrily. "How long do you think it'll be before these people get sick and tired of the gringos pushing them around, robbing them blind, deaf and dumb? Red, get some sense."

Red laughed. "I don't want to live to be an old, old man. I just want to live *like* a man. Not like somebody sucking fa-

vors from a Mex gal, getting her ranch back for her from the big bad gringo and—"

"You're crazy!"

"No. Hank. You're the one's been nibbling that loco weed, if you think you can talk me into giving up all this. I ain't leaving. Now, if you propose to try and make me. . . ."

Red started to his feet. Hank's leg lashed out against the low table, skidding it across the tiles. It crashed into Red's knees and he swore, falling backward, his hand clasping his gun. Hank followed the table in a low dive. He and Red piled into the sofa and it went over backward, spilling them upon the floor. Hank's greater weight worked for him. He landed hard on Red and held him squirming, unable to reach his gun around.

"Drop it," Hank muttered.

Red struggled to get free. Hank ground an elbow and forearm against Red's throat, cutting off the flow of curses, choking him.

Red dropped his gun and Hank picked it up.

"Let's go."

The redhead rubbed his throat. "I keep forgetting you're a knife man," he said wryly. "You knife men are just too damn sneaky to suit me."

"C'mon."

"You really mean it?" Red was amazed. "Hank, how the hell you fixing to keep me. Chain-hobble me or something? I'm telling you, first chance I get I'm heading right back here to my good old rancho."

"Shut up," Hank said. "You get any ideas and I'll make Julie the happiest widow in California!"

They got as far as the door to the hall when the night erupted into violence. A fusillade of shots tore through the house; horse hooves pounded in the courtyard.

They heard the big, East-Texas voice of Owen Pike bawling to his riders, "Burn the bastard out! Burn it all! Wolfe, just show your mangy head!"

They did not know how many squatters Owen Pike had brought with him on this raid-and-ride, but it sounded like a regiment. The riders whooped their horses in different directions and slung firebrands that painted weird shadows in the hall beyond where Hank and Red lay low. One torch crashed through a window in their room; it caught in the curtains. The dry cloth went up with a sudden, sizzling roar.

"He really means to burn the whole place out," Hank said.

Red grinned. "You know, I do think friend Pike is peeved 'cause I made Julie's title too legal to bust up."

"Helping me take part of his ear didn't make him love you none, either." Hank had Red's Colt out. "Partner, let's get back in business." He handed over the gun and clapped Red on the shoulder.

"Let's see if we can get the rest of that ear!" Red raced over and pulled down the flaming curtain, stamped it dark with his boots. He snapped a couple of shots out the window at the horsemen who were swinging back into the courtyard.

"You man enough to come and get me, Pike?" he hollered.

While Red backed down the wall from the doorway, Hank dropped to one knee behind a heavy table.

Outside, Pike's voice raised in a shout: "The bastard's in there, all right!"

A volley of shots drummed through the door. Pike came into the shadowy hall but did not enter the room at once. There was some conversation, and then two other men appeared, neither of whom Hank knew. Brown, who Hank had met previously, came in. Finally, bulwarked behind the other three, Owen Pike entered.

Pike had his gun out. So did Brown. The others merely had their hands on their holstered revolvers.

"Raise 'em, boys," Hank said.

He guessed what Pike might do, and he was a move ahead of him. He had his gun barrel trained on the doorway, and when Pike fired wildly at the table top and lunged backward for the safety of the hall, Hank's shot caught him, splitting him in the middle. Pike, still moving, crashed against the wall opposite the door and slewed away.

The room was dense with smoke, but Hank saw Brown throwing down on him, and he ducked and slid away. The bullet ripped a gash in the table as it tore through. There was the thunder of this shot and the tumultuous, echoing roar of Red's Colt. Hank did not need to look to know that Brown was out of it.

"Look out!" Red called. "Behind you!"

Hank spun, the gun held sideways in his hand, throwing lead as if he were scything grass. Something burned him in his shoulder but he saw one of the squatters disappear before his fire, kneeling almost as if in prayer. The other squatter was fanning the hammer of his gun with the hard heel of his hand, and Red was answering, crouched low, weaving with each shot. They were within whispering distance of each other. Their bodies jerked as the bullets sped between them.

"Red!" Hank cried, "Red!" using his own gun on the squatter. He drove the man down, but he knew that it was too late. Red fell heavily before he could reach him, his face drained of color. The freckles stood out sharply, like rust

spots touched to wax; and the boyish mouth, relieved of all strain, was younger than Hank had ever seen it.

Afterward, he worked with Soto and the other Mexican hands who had ridden over from the Calder ranch, attracted by the flames. They killed the fires in the main house, but two of the outbuildings were leveled to the ground.

Hank did not remember that he had been shot until he fell down in the courtyard. He crawled over and sat against the wall, and it was there that Julie found him when she rode up in the turnout.

"Pobrecito! Pobrecito!"

She lay her face against his cheek and he thought that she was crying, but he could not tell for sure. The night and all the people in it swirled in his vision. When he awakened she had removed his shirt and had bound his shoulder with clean cloth.

He pulled her to him and they sat together by the wall. High over the vineyards a half moon shone. There was a faint mist from the irrigated fields, a fragrance of wetness and vines that overrode the smell of charred wood.

The burial party filed past them. With his good arm Hank held Julie lightly, and silently they watched until Red's body was taken out through the entrance of Rancho Temescal.

Powder, Shot and Texas Cattle*

by ALLAN R. BOSWORTH

IT WAS SUNDOWN when Charley Greer came back from the holding grounds. He rode like a cowboy going to a dance, sitting the sorrel with a loose, easy recklessness; he crossed the Dodge City toll bridge, and the sound of his horse's hoofs reached the men in front of the Long Branch Saloon.

They let down tilted chairs to watch Charley come into Front Street, two blocks away. Everybody could guess what was going to happen. The thing had been building up like those thunderheads towering massive and dark into the brassy sky, and the same sort of ominous quiet had held the town all day—the quiet which precedes the lightning. Everybody knew Charley Greer.

He was a young man, tall and rangy, with that lean Texas flatness to give him a ribs-and-rawhide look, and he was dressed more like a trail driver than a livestock commission man. They could see his eyes, now, black and unwinking under the brim of his sweat-stained hat. He looked straight ahead.

"This time," somebody said softly, "Charley's got hell all the way up his neck! Maybe we ought to send for Wyatt Earp."

"Marshal Earp's in Wichita," another man answered. "Besides, it's about time somebody called Corbin's hand. Hey, Charley! Your figurin' on runnin' for mayor?"

Charley Greer only grinned and waved his hand as he went by. There was no thought of civic improvement in his mind; it mattered not a damn to him what happened to Dodge City. He was tired of the town, tired of the whole unsatisfying business of selling other men's cattle. Above all, he was tired of bucking Ace Corbin's sharp, unscrupulous practices.

Charley was going to leave Dodge City, anyway. But he'd leave things easier for Ben Collins, who had been his partner for two difficult years in the livestock commission busi-

ness. And deep within him he felt a warm, anticipatory pleasure. Dodge City had been much too quiet of late.

He turned toward the railroad tracks and the honkytonks that flourished beyond, in Hell's Half Acre. This took him across the town's "deadline", and the men who watched straggled that way too, leaving Front Street's thin respectability behind. Across the deadline, nobody cared whether a man packed a gun.

Charley Greer was packing a gun today. He stopped the sorrel at the hitching rail of the Lady Gay.

He got down from his saddle with an unhurried ease. Times like this, all a man's senses were alive with a sharpened awareness; he saw and heard everything. A three-wagon freight outfit came down the street, rattling emptily, hoofs and wheels waking the sleeping dust. Longhorn cattle bawled yonder in the loading pens, and down the block of false-fronted dives a piano made dubious melody. The wagons passed, bringing the warm smell of the dust and a sharp, familiar odor of sweating horses. The dust swirled over Ace Corbin's shiny new buggy, standing at the corner with its team still hitched.

Charley dropped his split reins and turned across the wooden sidewalk. Just as he did so, a girl came from the other direction and stopped at the doors of the Lady Gay, pulling one of them toward her so she could see inside. She hesitated, studying the four men who leaned against the bar.

She wore Eastern riding boots and a divided skirt, and her wide, soft hat didn't at all conceal a luxuriance of chestnut brown hair. By her costume, Charley judged her to be one of those Easterners who were invading the cattle business.

Any respectable woman should have known better than to come south of the deadline, and in Charley's present mood he found it difficult to be polite. She was barring the way. He tipped his hat and said, "Excuse me, ma'am, but I think you're in the wrong place. The hotels are up yonder across the tracks."

She turned with a long, level glance. Her eyes were blue, and impersonally cool.

"Thank you," she said. "But I'm not looking for a hotel. I'm looking for a foreman and some hands. From what I've seen of cowboys"—and her mouth turned bitter—"I wouldn't expect to find any in a respectable neighborhood!"

Charley grinned, and his amusement grew to an outright laugh. He knew how long the Trail was, and how dry; if a man wanted to cut the dust out of his neck at Dodge, that was his right.

The girl surveyed him, from head to foot, unsmilingly.

"I'm Betty Larrabee," she said. "Mr. Corbin said he'd find some competent men for the L Bar, but nobody has turned up. If you're interested—and competent—I'll pay you sixty a month.

There was Corbin again. Corbin was everywhere. Probably he had made some sort of deal with the L Bar outfit, whatever it was.

"I don't reckon I'm interested," Charley drawled coolly, studying this Betty Larrabee as deliberately as she had appraised him. "Besides, I hang out in places like this. I drink when I'm dry. Every now and then I just up and cut loose my wolf, and raise hell in general." He smiled down at her with a boldness in his black eyes that sent the color sweeping into her face. "No, Miss Larrabee, we wouldn't get along." He took her gently by the arms and moved her out of the doorway. "Right now," he said, "you'd better run along. I've got business with your Mr. Corbin. There may be some shooting."

"You're like all the rest, aren't you?" she said scornfully, facing him from the sidewalk. "Big and brave and bad—as long as you're carrying a gun! I take back the offer. I want a foreman who's man enough *not* to carry a gun!"

She turned, and Charley laughed again, and put her out of his mind. He stepped inside the Lady Gay, looking down the long bar and dismissing the men who stood there. The man he wanted would be yonder at the back of the room, where a rusty pot-bellied stove half concealed the poker table.

Kitty Sims, powdered and painted and dressed with revealing tightness, stood watching the game, resting her bare arm on the shoulder of a big man. This was Corbin, wearing, as always, the look of a man conscious of his own importance. The yellow-haired Kitty had been Charley's girl. But now he saw her smiling down at Corbin, and he knew, all at once, that she would always be watching the winning hand, no matter who held it.

At Corbin's right was Yoder, a government cattle buyer who acted as purchasing agent for several of the Army posts —a sallow, black-mustached man, scowling at his cards and drinking whiskey and black coffee. Across from Corbin was Lonnie Sears, professional gambler and one of Corbin's inside men, thin and pale and jumpy. The fourth player's back was toward Charley, but cowboys guarding the Running K cattle out on the holding grounds had told him that Young Dan Parker had gone to town in Corbin's buggy, and they added that by this time he was probably drunker than a hoot-owl.

They were right. Young Dan's head wobbled. His money was most likely gone; he'd have written IOU's, or sight drafts on his father, who owned the Running K. Tomorrow, Ace

Corbin would tear these up—if Young Dan allowed him to handle the Running K herd on commission. Tomorrow the story would be all over town: *Corbin got another trail boss drunk, grabbed off another herd Collins & Greer had lined up.*

Kitty Sims stepped back from Corbin's chair. "Well, hello, Charley, honey!" she called loudly.

The bartender froze in the act of breathing on a glass to give it a better polish. The men at the bar moved hastily to the opposite wall. Quiet fell.

Lonnie Sears peered weasel-eyed around the stove. "We ain't looking for trouble, Charley!" he called.

"Shut up, Lonnie!" Corbin ordered, and Yoder looked up as if annoyed. He poured a drink unsteadily.

Charley Greer pushed back his hat and walked slowly down the room. His eyes were on Corbin; the tinkle of his spurs was the only sound in the place.

The bartender beckoned to one of the customers, sidling out. "Get Ben Collins," he whispered. "Hurry!"

Yoder drank, and scowled as he put down his glass. "Save your private quarrels, Lonnie!" he said. "Give me two, Corbin."

Corbin dealt the cards. Charley passed the stove, feeling Kitty Sims' eyes upon him. He kicked a chair out of his way, and Lonnie Sears jumped.

"You hear me, Charley?" Lonnie asked, licking his lips. "Ain't none of us packing a gun. We don't want no trouble in here."

Kitty laughed. "Charley came to see me," she said. "Didn't you, Charley?"

She came toward him, walking provocatively, her smile painted on. He remembered, now, that he had told her about the Running K's coming up from the Nueces, and how Collins & Greer planned to meet a Wyoming contract with them. *And that, he* thought angrily, *is what comes of trusting a woman!*

She had passed that information, and probably many other such reports, along to Ace Corbin. He pushed her aside without taking his eyes off Corbin's face, and stopped behind the chair where Young Dan Parker sat.

"Get up, Dan! he ordered. "You're going to the hotel."

Young Dan turned with difficulty, showing a boyish, sunbrowned face. His eyes blurred over Charley.

"I'll be damned!" he whooped. "Ol' Charley Greer! How about a li'l drink, Charley? Wanna sit in on li'l frien'ly game?"

"Friendly, hell!" Charley grunted. "These hombres would

cut a slit in your throat and run your leg through it—that's how friendly they are! Corbin, how about giving Dan back his IOU's?"

Corbin's eyes went cold. He said, "You keep the hell out of this, Greer, unless you want to buy in the game! And stay away from me when you're packing that gun. I'm not armed, and I've got too big a stake in this town to get mixed up in a cheap saloon shooting. Dan's here of his own free will."

"And drunk," said Charley. "You got him drunk, Corbin, you'd better get yourself a gun. This town's too little for the two of us."

"Drunk?" yelled Young Dan Parker. "Hell, I ain't drunk, Charley—I'm orey-eyed! I'm a ringtailed lobo from the Nueces brush, and this is my night to howl! I can't even hit the ground with my hat. Look!"

He swung his hat at the floor, and failed, to his complete satisfaction. But the wide Stetson swept his cards off the table.

Yoder lost patience, then. "Cut out the monkeyshines, Parker!" he exclaimed, his sallow face working. He leaned out of his chair and reached for the fallen cards. Young Dan thrust out one spurred boot and pinned the government cattle buyer's fingers to the floor.

"You cut that out!" he said sharply. "Nobody's seeing my cards!"

Now it was coming. Yoder lurched to his feet, nursing the bruised fingers under his armpit. Charley saw the bulge of shoulder holster there; he saw, too, that Young Dan had checked his gun and cartridge belt somewhere.

The bartender ducked, Lonnie Sears dived under the table, Kitty Sims screamed. Ace Corbin merely pushed his chair back and sat with an expression of disdain on his dark, heavy face.

The gun came out in Yoder's hand, its hammer rising. Charley Greer brought his arm around in a whiplash backward sweep, knocking Young Dan sprawling from his chair. The gun was already filling the room with noise; Yoder was squeezing the trigger a second time; the first bullet had burned across Charley's wrist in the spot where Young Dan's head had been an instant before. He shouted for Corbin to grab Yoder, and remembered the cool, unchanged expression on the big man's face, as if Corbin considered himself above all this. Yoder missed with the second shot, and came around the table with murder in his bloodshot eyes, cursing and throwing Lonnie Sears' chair out of the way to get at Young Dan.

Charley didn't remember pulling the .44 from his holster. The gun jumped in his hand, and the table jarred as Yoder lurched against it. The whiskey bottle upset, gurgling its con-

tents over the scattered cards. Smoke curled up from Charley's gun, and through the smoke he saw Yoder doubling like a swimmer stricken with cramps, threshing to keep his balance. He lost it, sprawled heavily across the table. Then he rolled to the floor, and his gun blazed once more as he struck.

Silence came briefly, and Kitty Sims was moaning yonder in a chair, with Corbin bending over her. Lonnie Sears wasn't in sight. A tall man ran in from the street and began deliberately shooting out the lights.

This was Ben Collins. Everything he did was planned, deliberate, even at a time like this. He moved toward the rear, calling, "I'm siding you, Charley! Clear out!"

But Charley wasn't ready to go. He had come here for business with Corbin, and that business had been interrupted. He stepped to the side of the man he had shot, and bent over him. Yoder wasn't breathing. Charley turned away, cursing, and bumped into Young Dan. The boy was holding onto the stove, dazed and half-sobered.

"Cripes!" Young Dan mumbled. "I didn't have a gun. Corbin told me—"

"Get out!" Charley said, and shoved him into the arms of Collins. "Get him out of here, Ben. I ain't through!"

Ben said, "You'd better travel, yourself! You've done enough for one day!"

Charley turned and saw that Corbin had vanished, and Kitty Sims with him. Then Lonnie Sears crawled out from beneath the table, his face the color of grass roots. Charley grabbed him by the collar.

"Turn me loose!" Sears yelled. "You started all this! I'll get Wyatt Earp. I'll—"

"You'll get the eight o'clock train out of town!" Charley warned, shaking him. "And before you go, find Corbin. Tell him he'd better start packing that gun!"

He shoved Lonnie violently out the swinging doors. The gambler hurried across the street.

"The eight o'clock train, Lonnie!" Charley called after him. Then he swung around on the sidewalk. Ben Collins was helping Young Dan toward the Wright House. Corbin's buggy was gone.

"Somebody'd better get the coroner," Charley told the watching men. "There's a dead man inside."

He swung into his saddle and turned the sorrel up the street that paralleled the railroad tracks. Dodge City's lights were beginning to blaze. In a little while the cowboy stampede would sweep in from the holding grounds; the dry and dusty men from Texas would whoop across the tracks into Hell's Half Acre, and the roar of a gun would be common-

place. Normally, a shooting across the deadline was nothing to get excited about.

But Ben Collins, hurrying back to the two-story frame building beside the loading pens, was as excited as a steady, conservative man allows himself to get. He swore under his breath when he saw that Paisano, Charley's sorrel horse, was still outside the place. He took the stairs two at a jump, and turned in a door lettered COLLINS & GREER, *Livestock Commission Agents.*

Charley's spurs were making new scars on the pine table top. His hat was pushed back, showing dark hair coming to a satanic peak above his level brows. There was a humorous quirk to his wide mouth, and always the devil dancing in his black eyes.

He rolled a cigarette. "You act like a grass fire was on your tail, Ben," he drawled.

"It's on yours!" said Ben Collins. He hung his hat on a longhorn rack, and faced Charley. "You've got to drag your navel in the sand! Major Stoneman's in from Fort Dodge. He took charge of Yoder's body, and he says if Earp ain't here to arrest you, he'll do it himself."

"Funny thing," said Charley Greer. "I don't feel like running, yet. I plan to hit for Texas, soon as I've squared accounts with Corbin. But you can't shoot a man when he ain't packing a gun." He licked the cigarette. "I'm sorry about Yoder. I didn't have anything against him, even if he did throw all his business Corbin's way. Shooting him was self-defense."

"Who'll testify to that?" Ben demanded. "Kitty and Lonnie and the bartender will say what Corbin tells them to. That leaves Young Dan, and he's too drunk to remember what happened. I put him on my horse and started him for camp."

He went to the window and looked out for a moment, and Charley knew what he was thinking. The shooting hadn't helped matters for Collins & Greer. And things were getting increasingly tough in the commission business. There was a drought in Texas, and all along the Trail; there were die-ups of cattle down beyond the Red River, and fewer herds coming up. What cattle did come through arrived in poor shape.

But what had been done was done, and when Ben Collins turned again, neither his eyes nor his tone held reproach. He said, "I know how you feel, Charley. You never liked this business. But I've thought all along we can beat Corbin without a gunfight."

"The hell we can!" Charley exclaimed. "Ben, he's got the Running K herd away from us, this time, because he's hold-

ing a flock of Young Dan's IOU's, and Young Dan will never dare let his father see them. That makes about twenty herds Corbin has taken away from us. You were counting on the Running K's to meet the Asa Hill contract in Cheyenne. How'll you meet it now?"

"I don't know," Ben admitted. "I know old Asa would buy the first prime herd that showed up, if we failed to meet the delivery date. But we've got four months, Charley. Something will turn up."

"Sure, another good bunch like the Running K. Only Corbin or some of his men will meet it somewhere between here and the Red River, with liquor and cards. Time they're through, it'll be another Corbin deal. He's built up a monopoly, Ben. This town ain't big enough for him and you!"

"You cutting yourself out?" Ben asked.

"I'm fed up handling other people's cows. I want to raise them, drive them myself."

Ben Collins paced the floor thoughtfully. "Charley," he said, "the market's turning to quality, not quantity. We could still be partners. You could line up the business down in Texas—pick threes and fours that would stand the drive and pick up weight on the way. I'd stay here, and try that scheme of corn-feeding the beef for a couple of months before throwing it on the market. It's worth a gamble!"

Charley grinned. That plan to fatten a trail herd on corn was one of Ben's pet progressive schemes, but Charley doubted that it would pay. And Charley had no patience with anything that took so long.

"You'd have to ship most of the corn in from Illinois," he objected. "And Corbin's still spreading out. He's already forced three commission firms out of business, and he's out to get you. No, sir—things are headed for a shootout!"

"I'd like to try my way," Ben said patiently. "You clear out —leave town until things blow over, at least."

Charley looked at his watch. It was seven-thirty. He heard the confused, restless bellowing of Texas beef in the loading pens, and knew a sympathetic kinship to that penned feeling. He rose and stretched.

"I'll think it over," he said. "But I've got to see Lonnie Sears off on that train." He stopped at the door and looked back at Ben. "Some day," he drawled, "I'm going to make Ace Corbin mad enough to pull a gun on me!"

He rode Paisano into Front Street and up it, seeing the town come to life in the sultry evening. From the hill where Dodge City's residential section had spread under the impetus of the cattle boom, he could look across the river. Out

on the holding grounds, where Texas herds waited their turn at the loading pens, a scatter of campfires twinkled like fallen stars. A growl of thunder rolled across the prairie from the clouds that would not give rain, and somewhere down the line a locomotive whistled. Charley rolled a cigarette thoughtfully and turned back down the street. It was almost train time.

A man had to back his talk, and perhaps if he ran Lonnie Sears and a few other Corbin henchmen out of town, Corbin would get mad. There were a dozen men working for him, mostly card sharps; a couple of them had been shot, but Corbin himself was too smooth, too influential to let his hand show in the shadier deals. So long as the Texas trail was dusty and dry, it would be an easy matter to lure trail bosses into a "friendly" game of cards, with liquor brought along in the buggy to cut the dust from their necks.

A block from the Wright House, Charley reined the sorrel in the shadows and dismounted. Corbin and Sears might be among the men who sat on the hotel's gallery. Charley strode down the board sidewalk, feeling the excitement rising within him like an intoxicant, noting an unusual number of horses at the hotel's far corner.

The light from a barber-shop window fell upon him. The loungers went suddenly silent, and one man started down the gallery steps. *One of them's there, anyway!* Charley thought. He threw aside the cigarette, then saw that the man wore a blue uniform. It was Major Stoneman, quartermaster at the fort.

"All right, Greer!" the officer called. "Put up your hands!"

Charley laughed. Those were cavalry mounts, yonder; he could make out the muley saddles. More men were coming out of the shadows.

"Major," he answered, "this is a civil case. If you want me you've got a horse race on your hands!"

Stoneman made a sweeping motion with his hand and said, "After him, sergeant!"

Six or eight troopers started up the walk, pistols out. Charley threw a shot into the planks at their feet, and the hotel loungers took cover in a mad scramble. The soldiers hesitated, then came on at a trot.

This was what Charley wanted. The farther they came afoot, the longer it would take them to get back to their horses. He knew, now, that there'd be no time to see whether Lonnie Sears was sufficiently scared to board the eight o'clock train. He knew that whether he liked it or not, he was headed for Texas. He fired twice more into the boot-scuffed planking, then reached Paisano in a twisting jackrabbit run.

The major was yelling for his men to get their horses.

Charley made the saddle and hit spurs to the sorrel in the same jump. Then, because the recklessness was wild within him, he headed straight down Front Street, giving a cowboy yell as he flashed past the hotel gallery.

Guns winked out of that dark huddle of men and cavalry mounts, and the bullets sang near. Charley hooked his right leg around the saddle horn and rode Indian style on the far side of his horse for a block. Then he straddled the saddle again, and fired two shots in the air by way of farewell, as the sorrel swept across the toll bridge.

Beyond was the dark vast roll of prairie, and the scattered Texas herds bedded down. The long Trail began here, and stretched far and free—to the Red River, to the Nueces and the Rio Grande. . . .

Paisano's barrel was heaving when Charley reined him on a little rise and looked back. He saw the lights of the town, and thought briefly of Kitty Sims and the perfidy of women. He heard horses on the toll bridge. The sergeant was a stubborn man.

He pointed, then, for the darkness between two of the nearer campfires. The Running K's were camped far out; it was his plan to ride by and see Young Dan before he went on down the trail, to tell the boy not to pay the IOU's he'd given Corbin. Intermittent lightning played over the prairie's rim, and now shots began hammering behind him, but he was well out of range.

The moon rose over his shoulder as he rode again, and for a space of some two miles the guns were silent. Suddenly they opened up again, and he could hear the bullets sing. He lay low over the saddle horn and turned Paisano down a brush-bordered draw, hoping to shake pursuit. But after he had followed the sandy bottom for nearly a mile the soldiers were even nearer.

Then he jumped a rangy longhorn cow browsing on the green leaves of the draw, with a calf too big to be following her, and he set upon them furiously, slapping their rumps with a rope's end. They broke into a run that would last a spell, making enough noise for any horse. At the next bend in the draw, Charley turned quietly up the western bank and stopped in the brush to let Paisano blow.

There was a campfire a couple of hundred yards away, with cattle bedded down between it and the draw, and a night rider coming singing around the outskirts of the herd. The soldiers passed in a furiously galloping knot, following the crashing in the draw bed. Charley turned to ride around the sleeping cattle. And then, a little further down the draw, the

cow broke suddenly into open prairie with the yearling at her tail.

Their contagious fright brought the nearer herd cattle to their feet. The Texas rider turned that way to check the panic before it spread. But a handful of troopers boiled suddenly over the draw bank, certain they were on the heels of their man, and at that instant a sharp crack of thunder drowned out the night rider's profane warning. For a full second the prairie was bright as noonday, and before the zigzag brilliance had winked out of the sky, the stampede was on.

Charley Greer knew what to do, then, with Providence and a thousand longhorn steers come to his aid. He spurred into a dead run, heading northward and cutting across the path of the herd before it got into full stride. The lightning came again, and he saw another rider still farther in front of the running cattle, and heard the soldiers' shouts dimly before the swelling roar of hoofs drowned them. When he looked back the herd was like a dark, tempestuous stream between him and his pursuers.

By all accounts he should have been safe. He was at the outer edge of the path of the stampede when Paisano put a foreleg into a gopher hole, and somersaulted.

Charley was thrown clear, with the ground coming up to slam his head and shoulders with stunning force. Paisano rolled heavily; the cantle of the saddle cut down hard upon Charley's right ankle, pushing it against the sun-baked earth. He dimly remembered seeing the horse rise and run; he knew enough to crawl and roll farther out of the path of the steers. Everything was hazy, and the ground-shaking roar of the stampede faded to a dry whisper.

When full consciousness returned to him, the longhorn cattle and the thunderstorm seemed to have moved northward together, dissipating their fury along the dark prairie. Blood crept stickily down Charley's cheek from a sizable gash over his temple, and the concussion had left a dull ache pounding in his skull. He had lost his pistol and hat. He crawled back to the spot where Paisano had fallen, and found them.

The troopers had gone on. He arose, feeling lightheaded, and nearly collapsed with the pain that shot through his right ankle when he put weight on it.

He massaged it for a little while, then hobbled painfully westward, crossing another little draw. The campfires out yonder were still a long way off, and Paisano was still running, most likely. He could hear the troopers spreading out, searching to the north.

A horse crashed the low brush of the draw, coming Charley's way. He crouched beside a clump of willows, putting his weight on his good leg. Chances were this was one of the troopers; a little pistol persuasian might be necessary.

The horse moved down the draw bed and found the same trail Charley had followed up the western bank. Brush hid both mount and rider until they were hardly more than arm's length from him. He stepped quickly into the moonlight, wincing at the pain in his ankle. The horse reared, and Charley caught the rein.

"Just set easy!" he said. "I ain't going to hurt you!"

There he stopped, feeling foolish because of the gun in his hand. It was the girl he had met at the door of the Lady Gay —Betty Larrabee.

Her quirt was raised ready to strike him across the face. There was contempt in the way she lowered her arm, and it was plain in her voice.

"So it's you, Mr. Greer! What do you want?"

"Nothing," said Charley. "I made a mistake." The dizziness returned, and he holstered the gun and caught a willow branch for support, wondering at the measure of dislike he had formed for this girl. He asked, curiously, "Who told you my name?"

"Why, you're famous—or perhaps I should say notorious! Even the bridge keeper asked me about you, as I was leaving town. He wanted to know if you'd found Mr. Corbin." She paused, then asked, as if the question were distasteful, "What happened?"

It gave him pleasure to shock her. He said, shortly, "I killed a man."

"Killed a man?" she echoed sharply. "Corbin?"

"No. That was a mistake, too. I killed a man named Yoder."

She stared for a moment, her face white in the moonlight, her mouth bitter. "And it doesn't mean anything to you," she said slowly. "It won't keep you awake at night. I suppose you'll file a notch on your gun barrel and brag about it! Until a few months ago I thought cowboys were dashing and romantic. I had been brought up to regard a man on horseback as a cavalier. But you're all savages!"

"It was self-defense," Charley said.

"Self-defense? When you went into that place looking for trouble? Do you expect anybody to believe that?"

"No," said Charley. "That's why I'm here." He laughed, and knew that the laugh sounded strange. The dizziness set his head whirling, and either he lost his grip on the willow branch, or it broke in his hand.

All at once the dust was warm against his cheek, and the moon turned in the sky, and there was the girl's face above his own.

She cried, "Why, you're hurt!" in a changed tone.

"I'm all right," he said, sitting up weakly. "Much obliged. You'd better go now."

He sensed that her sympathy was a compromise; she would have felt sorry for anybody, for anything, wounded or hurt. She said, "They're after you, aren't they? All that shooting wasn't because of the stampede. Where's your horse?"

"He rolled with me and ran off. I reckon I can find him in the morning."

"Get up," she ordered. "I'll help you into the saddle."

"You'd better ride on," he repeated.

"I'll do nothing of the kind. Get up!"

Even with her help, it took all his strength to mount. The stirrup straps were too short. He clutched the horn and Betty climbed up behind him, bringing a sense of nearness that was disturbing. He said, "I'm mighty sorry, Miss Larrabee. I wanted to go to the Running K camp. Dan Parker outfit. Maybe you know where . . ."

His words trailed off. The girl was far away, urging him to hold on, and after that he remembered nothing until his eyes opened on the blank sun-yellowed arch of a wagon tarp. There was a wet cloth on his head, and he lay quietly for a space, exploring a thirst more extensive than any he could ever recall. *Last night,* he thought dully, *must have been a ring-tailed roarer!*

Somebody's weight tipped the wagon bed slightly. He sat up, remembering everything, wondering if he had made the Running K camp, after all. Then Betty Larrabee came from behind him, stooping under the wagon bows.

"Lie down!" she cautioned. "There are soldiers coming. Lie down and cover with the tarp."

"Look," Charley protested. "I don't want you to get into any trouble on my account. Besides, why should you?"

Betty looked at him in her aloof, impersonal way. She said, "There's no time for argument," and put a cool hand on his forehead, pushing him back down.

She pulled the bed tarp over his face. Lying in the darkness, he felt a saddle and other gear being disposed with studied carelessness across his body. Then the girl moved back toward the wagon seat.

He heard horses outside, and a muffled voice he recognized as Major Stoneman's. "We're looking for Charley Greer! He killed a man in Dodge last night, and he was headed this way. Sergeant, search that wagon!"

Saddle leather creaked as the sergeant got down. Charley reached for his gun, then thought better of it. The girl was too close for gun play.

"Just a minute, sergeant!" she called sharply. "I happen to be dressing, and I certainly wouldn't be doing that if there were a man in here. You keep out!"

Stoneman hesitated, and Charley Greer smiled at himself in the darkness.

"All right, sergeant—never mind!" Stoneman said. "I'll take your word for it, ma'am. But if you see Greer—"

"I've got troubles enough without having to look for any outlaws," she broke in. "Do you see that herd? It's in pretty bad shape. I fired the trail boss and two of the hands. They talked two others into quitting. If you see any riders looking for a job, I'd appreciate it if you'd send them out this way."

Major Stoneman politely said he would, and then the cavalrymen rode off.

After a moment Charley lifted the tarp and sat up. "Is it safe to look around?"

"Of course," Betty said. She was sitting on a bedding roll behind the seat's lazy-back, regarding him unsmilingly. "That was very close."

"You ran a good bluff." Charley smiled. "And I'm much obliged. Now, if you can loan me a horse, I'll find the Running K outfit."

The girl shook her head. "You haven't tried standing on that foot, have you?" she asked. "We thought for a while last night we were going to have to cut off your boot. I'm heating a bucket of water, now. You'll need to give your ankle a few soakings, and Bill's got a bottle of horse liniment he says will do it some good."

"Bill?"

"Bill Sanger. He's the only man I've got left. He's out holding the herd. Which reminds me—I'd better go relieve him so he can get some breakfast."

As she climbed over the wagon seat Charley thought he caught a troubled look clouding her eyes. She handed up a cup of coffee to him before she rode off.

Bill Sanger climbed into the wagon a little later, lugging the steaming bucket for soaking Charley's foot. He was a man of fifty or so, grizzled and crookboned, looking like an old and stove-up bronco buster. His eyes were red-rimmed with weariness, but he had a likable grin. He brought his own coffee and squatted campfire fashion in the wagon bed, blowing noisily across the tin cup to cool it.

"Never figured I'd see the time when I'd be holdin' nine

hundred odd steers by my lonesome!" he declared. "And I couldn't of course, if they had any run left in 'em. You never seen such buzzard bait in all your born days!"

Charley grimaced as he thrust his foot into the hot water. "What happened to this outfit?" he asked.

"Everything," Sanger said. "Hard luck from the time we threw the herd together, down on the Llano. Did Miss Betty tell you about her dad?"

Charley shook his head. "I heard her mention that she fired the trail boss and a couple of hands. That's all."

"Her dad," Sanger went on, "was Cap'n John Larrabee. He fought all through the War between the States without bein' scratched. Then it seems like he lost everything durin' Reconstruction, and come to Texas and sunk what money he could scrape up into this herd. Well, we hadn't been on the drive a week when a bunch of drunk cowboys rode into Santos Angeles and shot up the town, not meanin' any harm—and a bullet come through the door of a saloon where Cap'n Larrabee was settin', havin' a peaceful drink. It killed him."

He sipped his coffee, and Charley said, "That was mighty tough!" He thought he understood, now, why Betty Larrabee looked upon cowboys as a low breed.

"So Crowder took charge," Bill Sanger went on. "He was the trail boss. And he got mighty high-handed, even with Miss Betty."

"And she finally fired him?"

"Should have done it a long time ago," said Sanger. "But we couldn't get anybody else. Cap'n Larrabee had one fault. He trusted anybody. He hired the crew in San Antone, and it was the worst bunch of shorthorns I've ever laid eyes on. Nobody but me knew anything about drivin' cattle, and I didn't have much say. We had runs and dry drives that could have been avoided, and die-ups. We started with twelve hundred head in pretty fair shape. You ought to see them steers now—you can hang your hat on any of 'em."

"What does she plan to do now?" asked Charley.

Bill Sanger spread his gnarled hands. "What can she do? Sell out and take a lickin'. There was a commission man out day before yesterday."

"I know. Ace Corbin."

Sanger caught the bitterness with which Charley spoke the name, and shot him a quick glance. He said, "A slick hombre with a new buggy. If you ask me, it was Miss Betty he was playin' up to. He wouldn't have been interested in tryin' to market the L Bars!"

The old cowboy finished his coffee and went back to the

herd, leaving Charley to massage his ankle with the liniment, leaving him with time to think.

It was the following day, after a series of alternate scaldings and rubbings, before Charley could put his weight on the injured foot. Even then he could only hobble around the camp, and an impatience seized him. It didn't matter so much that his trip toward Texas was being delayed, but he wanted to learn what had happened to the Running K herd and what Ben Collins was doing.

That next day he insisted on saddling one of the L Bar horses and riding out to take his turn at holding the longhorns. Betty had ridden to Dodge City to make another attempt to hire some men, and Charley had given her a note to Ben Collins. Bill Sanger unrolled his bed tarp under the wagon for a much-needed nap.

The camp was on Mulberry Creek, some ten miles from Dodge City. There was water enough in the creek for the immediate needs of the cattle, but Charley saw that other herds had been held here, and the grass was short. Before he realized it, he was planning what should be done. Drive the L Bars a few miles up the creek, hold them for a month or more on good grass before even considering throwing them on the market. Even then, he realized when he saw the cattle at close range, she wasn't likely to make any money on the drive!

He slid sidewise in his saddle and studied the steers with a growing amazement. They were, he judged, three-year-olds, needing another year to mature—and they didn't look as if they would live that long. Betty's mentioning that the herd was in "pretty bad shape" was the worst kind of understatement. The L Bars had been driven improperly, without rest, without enough grass. They moved listlessly, footsore and stiff-legged. They were gaunted as jaybirds and slab-sided.

Charley rolled a cigarette and swore softly. To a man who loved cattle, a man who wanted to raise them and drive them and *work* with them, instead of merely buying and selling them on commission, the obvious mishandling of these poor dumb brutes was a crime.

He rode slowly around the shabby herd, coming to the curve of the creek where a straggling line of willows drooped in the heat. The sun was going down as he turned westward; it was in his eyes when he looked up to see two riders coming toward him. For a moment the old feeling of excitement and danger was strong upon him, and then he heard Betty Larrabee's voice. The man with her was Ben Collins.

Ben stopped his horse and regarded Charley soberly. He

said, "Howdy," and sat for a space with that worried crease deepened between his gray eyes.

"Where's the funeral?" Charley asked.

"Maybe you didn't know it," Ben said slowly, "but they had one today. On Boot Hill. For *you,* Charley."

Charley's grin vanished. "Come again?" he said.

"I'm not hoorawing you. Major Stoneman's boys found your horse. They back-tracked and found the body of a man about your size and build, with all his clothes tromped off him by that stampede. He"—Ben hesitated, glancing sidewise at Betty—"he just wasn't recognizable. They figured it was you."

"That's too bad," Charley said, remembering the rider he had seen in the lightning flash. "Some poor devil will turn up missing. Any idea who it was?"

Ben nodded. "My horse came back before daylight, Charley."

"Young Dan?" Charley exclaimed. "Good God!"

"I blame myself," Ben said bitterly. "I never ought to have started him for camp all alone, drunk as he was!"

"Forget about that!" said Charley sharply. "If anybody's to blame—" He stopped there, leaving Corbin's name unspoken.

Ben said, "I had just got back from the Running K camp when Miss Larrabee came to the office with your note. I asked them to sit tight and say nothing for a few days. Young Dan's folks'll get the news soon enough. And that gives you a chance to get on out of the country."

Betty had been watching Charley, studying his face.

"Any luck?" he inquired.

"I hired one man," she said wearily. "He'll be out tomorrow. That was all I could find. But I met Mr. Corbin, and he promised to send out three others just as soon as he can get in touch with them."

"Damn Corbin!" Charley exploded. "We'll send his three back so quick they'll think they're riding a merry-go-round!"

Betty's glance was level and cool. "We will not!" she retorted. "I've got to have help. I'll decide—"

"Listen to me!" Charley interrupted. "You offered me the job as foreman—at sixty dollars a month. All right. I'm starting tomorrow, and as foreman *I'll* do the hiring!"

"You forget one thing, Mr. Greer," she said calmly. "I told you I wouldn't hire any man who carries a gun. Remember?"

Ben said, "Don't be a fool, Charley! Now's your chance to move. You stay, and you'll be in jail for murder!"

Charley eased sidewise in his saddle and watched a bony

line-backed steer shuffle down the creek bank to drink. He said, "Ben, you pick a couple of good hands for me. Keep the Running K boys quiet as long as you can, and sound out the court on what I'd have to post in the way of bail bond. I've decided not to go to Texas—not yet. I'm going to hang and rattle with these shad-bellied steers!"

He unbuckled his gun belt and grinned as he handed it to Betty. "You can put this in the wagon. Maybe I won't need it for a while—and when I do, I can quit."

Ben Collins had supper with them, and sat beside the L Bar campfire until the moon was high. There was a powdery sprinkle of stars overhead, and now and then a snatch of soft song from Bill Sanger, riding night-herd.

Firelight brought a ruddy glow to Charley's lean face as he sat on a bedding roll and rubbed liniment into his sprained ankle. Watching him, Ben saw contentment. This, he realized, was where Charley belonged.

But it couldn't last. Charley had made his play against Ace Corbin, and Corbin wasn't a man to forget.

Betty had climbed into the wagon to go to bed, and Ben inclined his head in that direction.

"Delilah," he said with a significant grin. "I never thought I'd see the day!"

Charley grunted. "Don't get the wrong idea. You had a look at those steers. You know why I'm doing this."

"Are you sure it's on account of the steers?" Ben asked softly. "She's a mighty pretty girl."

"And about every five minutes," Charley said, "she rubs my fur the wrong way. It's a habit. Sure, she helped me when I was stove up, and hid me from the troops—but she'd have done the same thing for a dogie calf. Trouble with her is, she's got a whole lot to learn about this country, and what a man has to do if he lives in it." He shrugged, as if to dismiss the subject, and said, "What about Corbin? What did Lonnie Sears do?"

Ben grinned. "You sure had Lonnie buffaloed. He caught that train."

"Maybe I did too good a job on Lonnie. I've got him sized up as the only weak sister in Corbin's outfit. Maybe the law could have scared him, too; maybe he'd have told a few things about Corbin's crooked deals."

"Maybe," Ben said, and he frowned thoughtfully into the fire. "Charley, Corbin's got something up his sleeve. He knows Young Dan is missing, because he's been out to the Running K camp asking for him. It sure wouldn't be hard for him to put two and two together and figure out what hap-

pened. He's keeping quiet for some reason. When he gets ready, he'll sic the law on you again."

Charley pulled his boot on and rolled himself a smoke. He said, "Well, I can't hide always, this close to town. And if the Army's still interested, it'll be hard to hide at all. There are Army posts everywhere."

"I was coming to that," Ben went on. "Stoneman had a personal reason for coming after you. Yoder's wife is his sister. And he's told it around town that Yoder was packing a wad of money that night, and that his money belt was gone. In other words, he's getting ready to spring a robbery charge on you, too."

Charley's laugh was short. "He's crazy. For one thing, I hardly knew Yoder. For another, the chances are Corbin and Lonnie had already cleaned him in that poker game. Yoder was pretty drunk. Say—wait a minute. Lonnie was under the table, right by where Yoder was lying when you shot out the lights. *He* could have lifted the money belt, if there was one!"

"I'll work on that," Ben said grimly. "Now, look, Charley —you ought to move. Trail this herd to Ogalalla, or Cheyenne."

"I'm not running out on you, right now," Charley said stubbornly. "Besides, the L Bars aren't in any shape to trail-drive. I'm going to move them up the creek a ways and put them on better grass. You'll know where to find me."

So will Corbin, Ben thought. What he said, though, was: "One thing else, Charley. As far as I'm concerned, we're still partners. . . ."

The cowboy Betty had hired in Dodge City reported for work next morning. He was Sam Hogan, a redheaded, long-waisted youngster with a sunburned nose and the kind of complexion that never tans; he had come up the Trail only a couple of weeks before with a Lampasas outfit, and had intended going back to Texas after the herd was sold.

"But I aim to go back with a stake," he told Charley, and blushed. "Way it turned out, I tried to buck a poker game, and didn't have sense enough to quit while I was ahead."

"Not many people do," Charley observed. "Who cleaned you?"

"Man named Corbin."

Charley grinned. "Son," he said cheerfully, "you've come to the right outfit. Just stick around for a while, and I think you can go back down to Lampasas with that stake. Somebody's luck is bound to change pretty soon!"

But it didn't change for the L Bars that day, or the next. Three of the emaciated steers got down in the mud the herd had churned into a loblolly at the rim of the creek; Charley

had to rig a tripod of willow poles, and hoist them to their feet with block and tackle. On the second day, two sore-backed cattle died, and he discovered that at least fifty of the others were badly fly-blown, and suffering from screw-worms as a consequence.

He sent young Hogan to town for chloroform and dry sulphur, to be used as worm medicine, and then set about the distasteful chore of dragging the dead steers to a safe and sanitary distance beyond the bed grounds. They were not even worth skinning for their hides.

Betty found him, later, lost in a brown study, in gloomy contemplation of the cattle. She was riding sidesaddle; she had changed the divided skirts and man's shirt for a blue gingham dress, soft and feminine. He looked up to see the sunset make a glory of her hair as she turned her horse and reined in close beside him, smiling.

"There's no reason for such a long face, Mister Foreman," she said lightly. "After all, two steers don't amount to much, compared to the losses we've had."

Charley shook his head morosely. "Any day a ranchman loses even one cow, it's a bad day. I took this job to save these cattle—not to be dragging them out for the coyotes and buzzards. I'd rather see stock rustled than to see it die."

"You're different, after all," Betty said. "Different than Crowder and the others. They didn't care. To them, a steer was raised only to be slaughtered. . . . Do you think we'll lose many more?"

"No. We'll move them to better grass. We'll pull them through. It'll take a little time, but we can do it!"

She saw his knuckles tighten over the saddlehorn, and leaned out impulsively to place her hand over his. "Charley," she said softly, "I'm grateful for the decision you made the other night, and sorry for some of the things I said in the beginning. You *are* different. I still don't understand why you shot Yoder. But I think I'm beginning to understand *you.*"

He looked up to meet the blue directness of her eyes, and saw only friendship there, and nothing he had ever learned from Kitty Sims or any of the other girls like her helped him to find the words he wanted to say.

Betty withdrew her hand with a little laugh and said, "I'm not flattering myself. It was the cattle, wasn't it? They're a challenge to you. That's what I'm beginning to understand about you. You love cattle."

"I reckon," Charley admitted. He chuckled, thinking how much affection this particular herd could use, and what tenderness there had been in the moment was gone. He said, "I shot Yoder because he had his gun out and was doing his best

to kill a boy that wasn't packing a gun, and was too drunk to use one, anyway. But I went in the Lady Gay to have it out with Corbin. Sooner or later, I will have it out with him."

"Why?" the girl asked.

"Because it's the only way. He's crooked, and yet, so far as I could prove, I reckon he hasn't broken any law. It's like the crew you had with these cattle, here—Crowder didn't break the law, maybe, but he didn't play square. Ace Corbin hasn't played square with Ben, or anybody else."

Betty shrugged. "Perhaps I'm no judge, and I've only met him twice. But he has acted like a gentleman."

"You're entitled to that opinion," Charley said coolly. "But a trail outfit can have only one boss. As long as I'm running the L Bar herd, he'll have nothing to do with these cattle, and he'll stay out of this camp!"

"We'd better talk about something else," Betty said. "I came out to remind you it's time for supper."

They rode in with a cool silence between them, and immediately after the meal Charley went back to the herd to relieve Bill Sanger. Sam Hogan wouldn't be back for a while, and tomorrow was going to be a hard day, with fifty wormy steers to doctor. Besides, he wanted time to think.

Each of those fifty steers had to be cut out from the heard, roped and thrown, before the chloroform could be applied to kill the screw-worms, and the sulphur dusted on to dry up the sore. It would have been much more than a one-day job for three men, but Ben Collins showed up at the L Bar camp before mid-morning, bringing the two hands Charley had requested.

They were Jack Needham and Pecos Gurley—both in their twenties, medium-sized, wiry, and toughened to the saddle. Pecos was riding Charley's sorrel horse, and was therefore doubly welcome.

Ben had something on his mind, but he saw there was little time for talking. He said, grinning, "It's the same old story—these boys rode into town to see the elephant and hear the owl, and they woke up with nothing but the clothes they slept in." And he shucked off his coat and turned to with the others, despite Charley's protests.

By sundown, the cattle had all been treated. Charley and Ben rode in to the wagon together and splashed the dust from their faces in the tin wash basin beside the water keg. Betty had cooked supper, and she came around the wagon to eye Charley with a look of concern.

"He hasn't been out of the saddle since yesterday morning, except to change horses!" she told Ben. "If he keeps

that up, this outfit will have to have another foreman—and there'll be a *real* funeral."

Ben winked at Charley and laughed. "Don't worry. He's made out of rawhide, Miss Betty. I've seen him go for longer than this."

Betty watched them as they ate supper. She was learning that there were loyalties among these men in which she had no part: their friendship for each other, Charley's concern for the cattle he handled, his love for his horse. She listened, and remembered life in a small Southern town where her beauty had made her the belle of the community; and she felt left out of too many things.

But whatever weariness Charley had was gone as he ate. He had enough hands, now; he was building up an outfit. Tomorrow, he told Ben, he would ride up Mulberry Creek and pick new holding grounds. Find a spot with enough grass to put some meat on L Bar bones. Next day, they'd move.

Ben nodded patiently, and beckoned Charley over to the wagon tongue after super was over. He motioned for Charley to sit down, then exploded his bombshell.

"I reckon," he said quietly, "that we've lost the Running K's."

Charley slid off the wagon tongue and stood up. "You mean Corbin's going to handle them?"

"Looks that way. Now I know why he's kept quiet these last few days—about Young Dan's disappearance. He was waiting to spring this. He claims he bought that herd outright from Young Dan, the evening Yoder was shot. Says he paid him in full for eleven hundred steers—twenty-two thousand dollars." Ben's voice rose angrily. "And he's hinting around that Young Dan skipped the country with the money!"

Charley ripped out an oath that Betty must have heard, over by the fire. He said, "Why, the dirty, double-dealing skunk! It'd be bad enough to say that if Young Dan was here to defend himself! This way it's a sight worse! But nobody will believe him, Ben!"

"I'm afraid they will," Ben said. "He's flashed a signed receipt. He'll show that to the Running K crew, and demand delivery. They'll wire Old Dan, and tell him the boy was killed, and if Old Dan kicks up a fuss, Corbin will take it into court. Even if they dig up the boy's body and have it properly identified, Corbin will still have the receipt."

"I suppose there'll be some of his gang to testify they witnessed the deal!" Charley said bitterly. He strode up and down, swearing again, and halted to hammer the wagon wheel with his clenched fist. "There's just one thing to do,

Ben. This wouldn't have happened if Corbin had been packing a gun that day, because I'd have sure as hell killed him! And whether he's packing a gun or not—"

"Now hold your horses!" Ben cautioned. "You made a little deal, didn't you? You shucked your gun and checked it with the lady, yonder."

"That was while I'm handling these cattle. I can quit."

"You're not running out on her. And you're not gunning for Corbin. I've got an idea that he may have overreached himself at last—he saw a chance to clean up more than twenty thousand dollars without spending a cent, and he took it. I figure he took Young Dan's signature off one of those IOU's he got in the poker game."

"How'll you prove it?"

"I don't know—yet. But sit tight, and I'll work on it. Besides, there are other herds. This one, for instance."

Charley snorted. "To deliver to Asa Hill? He'd take one look at them and laugh in your face."

"I'm not so sure about that," Ben retorted. "I've got a little idea milling around in my mind."

"You'd better work fast!" Charley warned. "It takes time to make the drive to Cheyenne. And it's a dry year, and fewer cattle coming up the Trail all the time."

Ben slapped him on the shoulder. "Get to bed," he advised. "I'll head back to town. We've both got a busy day ahead."

Charley's day was busy enough. He woke with daylight, and saddled the sorrel immediately after breakfast, riding up the twisting line of willows that marked the creek, studying the grazing land. Nesters were coming into this section; the herd would have to be taken around their places; nesters had a habit of claiming damage to trampled crops, and collecting.

It was nearly seven miles before he found a stretch of open prairie in a convenient bend of the creek. The grass had not been grazed over for a year or more, and a scatter of ancient buffalo chips indicated that no nester had claimed the ground —else the chips would have been collected for fuel. There was room, and more water in the creek at this point, and shade for the campsite.

He turned back in high spirits and reached the L Bar camp shortly after noon, coming up behind the wagon and shucking off his saddle at the picket line.

A dozen horses of the remuda were tethered here, feeding from their morrals, switching off the flies that pestered them. Charley started around them, carrying the saddle. Wind blowing across the wagon brought a man's laugh to his ears,

and he stopped. The man's voice said, "Well, you're the boss, Miss Betty, and don't let anybody else tell you what to do with your cattle. But we could talk business on the way to town. A pretty girl like you oughtn't to be stuck out here on the prairie!"

Charley dropped the saddle, went through the line of horses and stepped over the wagon tongue. There were two strange men squatting near the campfire, drinking coffee. Sam Hogan sat in the shade with a plate of beans on his knee, and Bill Sanger lay stretched out on a bedding roll in the shade beneath the wagon bed. Charley could see Betty's blue skirt through the spokes of a hind wheel, and the legs of a man standing close to her. And yonder was the new buggy, its team tied to a bush.

Charley turned along the side of the wagon, walking like a cat. Corbin's wide back was toward him, his bulk concealing Betty's face. He wore a black broadcloth coat and a white collar, and was holding a fine beaver hat in his hand. He looked cool and clean and prosperous.

The scent of his pomade came to Charley's nostrils. Charley hadn't shaved for three days. Dust lay in the black stubble of his beard, and the smells of sweat and saddle leather and worm medicine were upon him; and one surprising thought crowded into his mind ahead of all the other reasons he had for hating Ace Corbin. It was, *Damn him, he's trying to beat my time with Betty!*

He stopped between the wagon and the campfire, checking that thought, conscious only of the joyous, reckless knowledge that he could get his hands on Corbin.

"Turn around, you sweet-scented son-of-a-bitch!"

Betty stepped back and saw him, her face gone white. The big man turned without haste. A quick fear passed over his face, and vanished when he saw Charley wasn't wearing a gun.

"Watch your language, Greer!" he said sharply.

Charley's black eyes mocked that spasm of fright he had seen. He said, "She'll hear worse than that before I'm through with you. Betty, get in the wagon!"

"I'll do nothing of the kind! And I won't have you picking a fight here. Mr. Corbin was good enough to keep his word about bringing out a couple of hands. He—"

"Get in the wagon, I said!"

Bill Sanger came crawling out into the open, grinning, standing up to take Betty's hand. "Come on, Miss Betty," he urged. "You don't want to see this. But I shore do!"

Corbin looked over Charley's shoulder. His two men had put down their coffee cups and were on their feet, waiting;

they'd be the kind to back any play Corbin made. But Bill Sanger, climbing into the wagon after Betty, lifted the tarp and thrust the barrel of a .44 Winchester across the sideboard.

"This here," he announced coolly, "is goin' to be a two-man fight, and you jaspers will stay out of it. That goes for you, too, Sam!"

The boy hastily swallowed a mouthful of beans. "Hell, I ain't lookin' for any fight! But I'd like to see my hundred and fifty dollars took out of Corbin's hide!"

Corbin dropped his hat on a bedding roll and turned toward Charley. "You won't be happy till you get licked, will you?" he asked with a sneer. "You're sore because I took Kitty away from you!"

Charley ignored the taunt. He said, "I'll give you just enough time to take off that coat, Corbin!"

The commission man removed it and rolled up his sleeves, displaying white arms, thick and muscular. He would outweigh Charley by forty pounds.

"Stop them, Bill!" Betty's voice pleaded. "Stop them! Somebody will get hurt!"

Bill Sanger said, "I shore hope so, ma'am!" And then Corbin stepped out from the wagon, light on his feet for so large a man.

Charley moved into the attack, driven by a cold and savage anger, and for the first couple of minutes they fought toe to toe, neither giving ground. Corbin's shoulders were thick and powerful. He hammered at his opponent with short, heavy blows, none of them traveling far, some of them knocking down Charley's guard. Charley circled, driving a fist into Corbin's middle, and the big man grunted sharply and crowded him, retaliating with a blow that glanced upward across the cowboy's chin and split his lip.

Charley tripped and staggered back. He thought, *I ought to have taken off my spurs,* and the warm, salty taste of blood was in his mouth, and some of the recklessness shocked out of his fighting. He came back more warily. Corbin was muscle-bound; the way to whip him was to keep him at arm's length. He heard Bill Sanger shouting encouragement. The fighters circled again, and out of the corner of his eye he saw that Betty had raised the wagon tarp and was watching, too, her face white.

He made a long, looping swing that jarred Corbin's head. The big man bored in again, bull-fashion, forcing Charley to retreat through sheer weight of body and fists. They battled around the campfire and through it, kicking smouldering embers across the hard-packed ground. Charley kicked over

the coffee-pot, and felt the heat of the scalding liquid on his tender ankle, and a cloud of vapor swirled up between the two men. Through this Corbin's face showed: his nose was bleeding and his eyes glittered under a scowl. He cursed Charley and tried to grapple with him, and Charley slammed him hard in the stomach.

Corbin grunted, bent forward under the impact. His hands closed on Charley's shoulders, but the cowboy wrenched free and drove his right fist upward.

All his weight was behind that punch. It caught Corbin still bending forward—caught him solidly on the jaw and snapped his head back. He twisted sidewise and fell across the edge of the fire.

Charley stooped and caught the commission man by the belt, dragging him out of the hot ashes.

"Stand up!" Charley panted. "Stand up and fight!"

"He ain't man enough!" Bill Sanger jeered.

But Corbin was rising, and Charley gave him time. He had blood on his white shirt front, and a scorched spot from the fire, and his heavy face was a smear of sweat and white wood ashes. He shook the hair out of his eyes and rushed for Charley again, head lowered, fists flailing.

This was the way Charley wanted him, in a crazy-blind rage. Corbin couldn't take defeat. *This way, some day, I'll make him go for his gun.*

Charley sidestepped and cracked his knuckles against the big man's jowls. Corbin went backward, toppling, crashing into the rear wagon wheel with a force that shook the entire wagon. Then he slid down the wheel grotesquely, the back of his head bumping on the spokes.

"That's for Young Dan" said Charley.

He walked over to the water keg and reached a shaking hand for the tin dipper. The two men Corbin had brought were still standing silently, eyeing Sanger's gun.

"Put him in the buggy and hit for town!" Charley told them. He sat down on a bedding roll, fighting the sick breathlessness in the pit of his stomach and rubbing his skinned knuckles. Corbin's boot-toes dragged twin furrows in the dirt as the two men carried him to the buggy.

One of them looked back. He said, "Ace Corbin ain't going to like this. He'll nail your ears on his barn, if it costs him every cent he's got!"

"He knows where to find me!" Charley retorted. He looked up at the wagon, but Betty wasn't in sight. Bill Sanger climbed down, his grin multiplying the wrinkles in his face, and came over to where Charley sat.

"She's cryin';" he whispered, and shook his head. "Women

are mighty strange. You never know whether they're cryin' because they're glad or sorry!"

Sam Hogan went around the wagon, unbidden, to retrieve Charley's saddle. He brought it back and said, "Boss, you want this rig on your horse?"

Charley took a cigarette from his bruised lips and regarded the youngster through the smoke. He said, "Yes, might as well saddle up, Sam. Much obliged."

The boy swallowed and his sunburned face worked. "You —you goin' to drift?" he asked.

"You know a lot, for a kid," Charley grinned. "What makes you think I'm pulling out?"

Sam glanced at Bill Sanger, hesitating. Then he kicked at the dirt and said, "I was around town. I heard all about it. You've *got* to hit the trail, now! Soon as Corbin gets to town, he'll have the law after you." He looked up again, hero-worship in his eyes. "Let me go with you, Charley! I ain't got anything to hold me here!"

"Whoa!" Charley said, and winked at Sanger. "How about that stake you were going to take back to Texas?"

"It was worth it," the boy answered. "I'd have paid a hundred and fifty dollars any time to see what you did to Corbin!"

Charley shook his head doubtfully. He thought, *Nothing has been settled, nothing gained.*

He ground the cigarette stub under his heel. "I'm not leaving, Sam," he said quietly. "There's too much work to do. Whatever happens, I'd like to see you stick with this outfit and help pull it out of the hole. You saddle Paisano for me, then ride out to the herd. Tell Pecos and Jack to bunch the cattle. We're moving—right away."

Sam Hogan left on the run. Bill Sanger grinned, and Charley knew the outfit was going to hold together. He turned to the wagon and called Betty's name.

"I'll be out in a minute," she answered. Whatever her storm of emotion had been, it was past. When she climbed down from the wagon her eyes were slightly red, but she faced Charley calmly. She had changed into her riding clothes and was wearing the soft, wide-brimmed hat.

Bill Sanger got up, whistling, and found something to do on the other side of the camp.

"Well," Charley said, "I'm not apologizing for the fight. It'll be that way every time I see Ace Corbin. And if I knocked you out of a trip to town, I'm not sorry about that, either. Not with the kind of company Corbin keeps!"

Betty's glance was scornful. "Like the girl he took away from you?" she fired at him. "Kitty, I believed her name is. And the other night you told me you were going to have it

out with him for other reasons—more high-sounding reasons. He didn't play square with Ben, you said. I might have known better. When two men fall out, there's always a woman back of it!"

"What I want to know is, am I still working for you?"

"That's up to you!" the girl said coolly. "Please don't think I'd allow your romantic affairs to disturb our business relations!"

He thought, *We'd never get along!* but she was close again, and tantalizingly beautiful. He laughed recklessly, took a step nearer and looked down into her eyes.

"Meaning past romantic affairs?" he drawled. "Or present?"

"You haven't denied what Corbin said about that girl!" Betty declared. "You haven't—oh, Charley, Charley!"

She was suddenly in his arms. Crying again, and laughing at the same time, to his complete bewilderment. He tilted her chin and kissed her on the lips.

"Kitty Sims," he said, "never meant anything to me and never would. I've been a kind of a lone wolf. I—"

Betty broke away. "You've got to go, Charley! I heard what you told Sam. But they'll find you if you stay with this herd. Go on, now—start for Texas! I'll sell the cattle and follow you there. Don't you see? It's the only way!"

He saw what change love could make in a woman's way of thinking; all her scruples concerning the law vanished when her man was in danger.

But the stubbornness rose within him. He had doctored those cattle, and—in a way that nobody but a cattleman would have understood—he had a stake in them. They were not yet ready for market. In jail or out, he would see the L Bars built into good, sound beef steers.

He shook his head, and looked around for Bill Sanger. The old cowboy came up with a straight face, but there was a suspicious twinkle in his faded eyes.

"Hitch the wagon team, Bill," Charley told him. "Betty, you'd better drive. We've got seven miles to trail and it'll take us till after midnight."

Betty stood looking at him after Sanger had gone for the team. She said, softly, "You're the most headstrong man I've ever known! If I fired you now would you start for Texas?"

"No." Charley grinned. "Not with you, and these longhorns, and a fight on my hands."

She drew a deep breath. "Well!" she exclaimed. "For a wonder, you put me ahead of the steers, that time. . . ."

The L Bars left a broad trail in their slow and painful drive to the new holding grounds. Anybody, Charley told

himself, could have followed it with half a moon and a couple of matches. But Major Stoneman and the marshal's men waited until after daylight.

Charley had bathed in the creek, changed into some of Sam Hogan's clothes, and shaved his four-day beard. He looked out over the prairie and saw the horsemen; there were four of them, with the major in blue uniform, and they spread out with the plain intention of surrounding the camp. He shouted for them to save their horses, and sat down on the wagon tongue beside Betty.

"Don't act so busted-up," he told her. "It'll be all right. There's enough grass here for a month or more, and Bill can find another spot when that's gone. By that time, those steers—"

"A *month?*" Betty wailed, as if he had said forever.

"I won't be gone that long. I'll try to get bond."

She put her hand on his. "Don't lie to me, Charley. Is there any danger you'll be convicted?"

He said, "Not a chance. It was pure self-defense." There was no need worrying her by admitting that only Corbin's witnesses were left. He squeezed her hand, and stood up, smiling.

"Good morning, Major," he called.

Stoneman grunted, and gave Betty a reluctant salute. "So he wasn't hiding in your camp that day, Miss Larrabee!" he said.

"Have you got a civil warrant for me?" Charley asked.

"They've got one for your arrest for murder," Stoneman said. "And I've got one to search the premises of this camp. If he's hiding any of Yoder's money here, Miss Larrabee, you'd better speak up!"

"I'm sure you'll want to look for yourself, Major Stoneman," Betty said with her head high. "Please do."

The stocky Fort quartermaster got down from his muley saddle, climbed into the wagon and rummaged there, while the deputies waited and showed a singular lack of interest. After a few minutes, Stoneman emerged. He said, "You probably buried it."

Charley grinned. "Some day I'd like to hear all about that money—and what Yoder was doing packing it." He turned to Betty, and she came into his arms unashamed. "This is worth going to jail for, honey!" he said, and kissed her.

Then he strode to the picket line and cinched Paisano's saddle. Betty smiled, and threw him a kiss, and didn't cry until the riders had topped the swell of the prairie.

Ben Collins, they told Charley in Dodge City, hadn't been

around for a couple of days. Charley was taken to the sweltering little office of the justice court and arraigned on a charge of murder.

Ace Corbin wasn't there, but Charley knew his influence had reached into the place when the judge fixed the bail bond at five thousand dollars. Nothing was said about the robbery charge, but he learned from a deputy that they were trying to make a Federal case out of that. Stoneman claimed Yoder was carrying government funds to buy cattle with, and Stoneman was responsible for the money.

Charley said, "You mean they'll hang me first for shooting Yoder, then try me in Federal Court for robbing him? That'll take too long!"

The deputy spat tobacco juice onto the jail floor. "Son," he said, "it ain't a joking matter. You better get Ben Collins busy finding that Parker boy. You're going to need a witness!"

So Young Dan's death hadn't yet become public knowledge! The Running K's were still out on the holding grounds, then; and maybe that was where Ben was, trying to block Corbin's deal. Ben, Charley told himself, would show up tomorrow.

But he didn't nor the next day. The jail was stifling hot and a-swarm with flies. At night the sounds of revelry drifted up from Hell's Half Acre, and what sleep Charley could get was broken by the intermittent arrival of cowboys who had celebrated too well, or failed to check their guns before coming north of the deadline.

On the third day Sam Hogan came with a tender little note from Betty. He said, while Charley was writing an answer, that the cattle were doing pretty well.

"We doctored some more wormies," the boy explained. "Now we call 'em the 'Hell Bars'—they're in such a hell of a shape!"

That night the familiar rattle of keys and stamping of boots awoke Charley. He sat up, blinking at the lantern light, and the voice of Ben Collins said, "Charley, next time you run a man out of town, don't run him so far!"

Lonnie Sears, sullen now, and as nervous as ever, was shoved into the lockup.

He said, "You jaspers think you're smart!" and went to the far corner. The jailer allowed Ben to enter Charley's cell for a talk.

He had taken a little *pasear* by train, he said, to Kansas City and Abilene, and in Abilene he had found Lonnie running a faro game. Getting him brought back to Dodge was

fairly easy: the law agreed that Lonnie was a material witness to the killing, and therefore should be arrested and held until the trial.

"One of the other gamblers didn't like Lonnie," Ben went on. "He told me Lonnie tried to come back to his old job with Corbin, just as soon as he heard you'd been buried in Boot Hill. Corbin sent word that he had no use for a man that scared so easy."

"Well," Charley said, "that means Lonnie probably didn't take any money off Yoder. If he had made a clean-up he wouldn't have wanted to come back."

"Maybe not—and again, maybe he counted on Corbin's protection. Now he hasn't got that. Maybe we can get him to talk."

Charley grunted. "If he knows anything, Corbin won't let him rot in this place. Did you see Ace tonight?"

"No. Why?"

"Take a good look at him. He ought to be shy a couple of teeth." And Charley told Ben about the fight, and how the L Bars had been moved. He said, "I wish you'd ride out when you get the time, and check up on how Betty's getting along."

Ben grinned. "It's not the steers, now, is it?"

"It's both," Charley answered.

"I've got to get you out of here, then," Ben said. "I spent quite a little bankroll on that trip, Charley. But I reckon we've still got credit. Tomorrow I'll hire a lawyer, and scrape up that bond."

"If you can raise five thousand dollars," Charley protested, "you'd better apply it on a herd of prime beef to deliver to Asa Hill."

The lawyer came next day, and immediately got busy, with the result that trial was set for three weeks later. Raising five thousand dollars cash bond wasn't so easy. Dodge City was beginning to feel a financial pinch: the drought hung on, and now the stream of Texas cattle had dwindled to a comparative trickle. Banks and merchants alike knew that Ben Collins' business prospects were not good; they knew that Ace Corbin's monopoly had become almost complete.

But they had respect, too, for Ben's conservatism and his reputation for solidity. At the end of a week he had scraped together the money, and Charley was released to wait trial—under bond to keep the peace, and remain within the county. But Lonnie Sears was still in jail.

Ben wasn't in his office. Charley went to the livery stable to get Paisano, and had to wait until a stream of red longhorned steers had passed before he could cross the street. Their brand was Dan Parker's Running K.

A cowboy with a red bandanna over his mouth was riding drag, and Charley called to ask where the herd was going. The horseman rode over.

"Loadin' pens," he said briefly, and with bitterness. Then he pulled the bandanna down, and added, "Ace Corbin got a court order—somethin' they call a writ of sequestration. Old Dan is goin' to have to know about his boy, now. He won't only be heartbroke, he'll be plumb busted if he don't get the money from these cows!"

The sun was low when Charley approached camp. From a distance he saw that three huge, high-sided freight vehicles were standing near the chuck wagon, and when he came nearer he made out extra horses on the picket line. He thought, *Some freighter must have stopped for the night.*

Then Sam Hogan yelled, "Here he comes, Miss Betty!" and there was the flash of blue gingham as she ran out to meet him.

He leaned from the saddle, laughing, and lifted her in front of him, and it was enough at the moment to hold her in his arms. When he had swung her down at the campfire, Ben Collins came up, grinning.

Ben was wearing a brown ducking jumper and a blue work shirt; he looked as if he had kissed the commission business goodbye. Charley jerked a thumb toward the wagons and said, "Who's the company?"

"Me," said Ben. "That's my outfit. I'm hauling corn. Putting some meat on the L Bar cattle."

Charley said, "You're crazy!"

"Come out and take a look, and you won't think so!" Ben retorted. "We haven't been corn-feeding a week, and you can already see the improvement. Give me three months, and I could put their average weight up two hundred pounds!"

Charley knew, now, how Ben had spent so much money on the trip to Kansas City. They rode out to the herd. Charley said, "Ben, they're Betty's cows. I don't know how she's fixed for capital."

"The cost of this corn," Ben explained, "comes out of the commission of Collins & Greer. I've talked it over with Betty. Our contract with Asa Hill calls for us to deliver him a thousand head of three-year-old beef, as good or better than the ones we sold him last year. These will be as good —maybe better. We'll have to find about a hundred head, somewhere, to make the thousand. But we can do it. We'll start up the trail with one or two freight outfits loaded with corn, and feed on the way. Nobody ever fed corn on a trail drive, that I know of."

"Good reason," said Charley. "You won't break even."

Ben made a little gesture. "Who cares if we lose the commission? Betty will still come out ahead. And this is an experiment, Charley. If it works halfway on these cattle, the shape they were in to start with, it'll sure enough work on a hand-picked herd! We'll build pens outside Dodge and advertise grain-fed beef in the Chicago and Eastern markets. What they've done back in Illinois on a small scale, we'll do with Texas cattle!"

His enthusiasm grew as he showed Charley the long, shallow feeding troughs he had built of rough pine lumber. "Two ways of doing it," he went on. "You can feed shock corn by just driving the wagons around and throwing it out on the ground. There's a lot of waste in that method, and these cattle don't need the fodder. They'll get enough grass for roughage. With the troughs, you feed husked corn. Look at your L Bars, now!"

The longhorns had improved, indeed. Their hides had taken on a gloss, and they looked far less gaunted.

"Well," Charley admitted happily, "*something's* working, all right!"

He remembered the Running K's, then, and Ben Collins' jaw tightened as he heard about the court order.

"I'll hit for town right away," he said grimly. "Send Old Dan a telegram. If I know Old Dan, he'll come booming up from Texas as fast as he can travel!"

He left without waiting for supper.

Ben had contracted for corn by the carload, and Sam Hogan made two hauls from Dodge City during the next two weeks. The L Bars continued to improve. Charley caught Ben's contagious enthusiasm for the feeding project. He worked harder than ever, ranging the cattle up or down Mulberry Creek during the day and bring them back to the feed troughs at sundown to top off the roughage with corn.

Keeping busy in this manner, he had little time to worry about the approaching murder trial, or to think of Ace Corbin. Ben brought word that Corbin was out of town—and that he had threatened to ruin Collins & Greer if it broke him. And Sam returned from one of the corn-hauling trips to announce that Lonnie Sears had at last raised bond of a thousand dollars, and had immediately disappeared.

"Somebody's out that much money," the boy said. "Folks in town say maybe Corbin got him out and paid him to skip his bail. Anyway, he's gone."

It didn't make much difference, one way or the other, Charley thought. Ben rode into camp the next day with more important news. Charley's lawyer—his name was Cummings

—had been hired by Old Dan Parker, and Old Dan was keeping the telegraph wires hot. Cummings had just won an injunction which prevented Corbin from selling or moving the Running K herd for thirty days. Now Old Dan was coming up from Texas, determined to identify the body of his son if possible, and bent on proving the receipt Corbin held was a forgery.

Also, Ben reported, the price of cattle had been jumping all week, on account of the shortage. He said, "If the drought sticks down in Texas, they'll go sky high."

Charley grinned. Not even Ben's conservatism could take the gambling out of the cattle business. Asa Hill was to pay the market price for the thousand three-year-olds; if cattle went up, Betty would make more money.

"What did your father pay for the L Bars, down on the Llano?" he asked her.

"Nine dollars a head, range delivery. Why?"

Ben smiled, too. "They may be worth twenty-five or more in a little while."

Charley had planned to ride into town the afternoon before the trial, but he waited until late. When it was time for the crew to bring the L Bars in to the feed troughs, he saddled Betty's horse and asked her to accompany him on an inspection trip.

They reined their horses in the shade of the creek willows. The L Bars were streaming past in the dusty sunlight—reds and roans, white-mottled *sabinos,* and linebacked steers of that wild brush-country strain the Texas called *bayo coyotes.* Charley leaned forward, resting his arms on the wide pommel of the saddle, pride and a quiet satisfaction in his eyes. She had seen something of that look in his face after the fight with Corbin.

The once stiff-jointed shuffle of the cattle was gone. They walked, heads up, with a lumbering gait that was wild and free. The drag went by, and Charley turned Paisano back toward camp.

"Well," he said slowly, "they're in shape, now, whatever happens. Give 'em another month, and they can trail-drive and still not lose weight. They can stand a Wyoming winter, when one good blue norther would have killed them, before. That's something!"

It came near being everything, for him, Betty thought. "Whatever happens," she repeated softly. "Charley, you've always said you had to have it out with Corbin. I know he's done everything he can to get you convicted. You whipped him once. If you're acquitted, now, won't that be victory enough? Couldn't you drop the feud?"

She saw his lean face harden, the lines tightening around his wide mouth. She hurried on: "I don't want a love overshadowed by hate, Charley, or mixed with fear and dread! I don't want to lie awake being afraid that you may have been killed, or even that you may have killed Ace Corbin!"

"Neither do I," he said. "But the thing with him started before I met you. Before we fell in love."

"Does that make it bigger than our love?"

"It's different, that's all. A job that has to be done."

"But you don't have to stay in this country. And when Ben gets his feeding business going, Corbin won't be able to hurt him any more. Promise me you'll call it quits!"

"You don't know Corbin, Betty," he said finally.

"I'm afraid I don't know *you!*"

That was all. At camp, he helped her down, and took her in his arms briefly, but her slender body was taut and unyielding. He said, "Well . . . *adios!*" and rode into gathering dusk.

The little courtroom was packed. Corbin sat in the second row, with Kitty Sims beside him in a blue silk dress, and a half dozen of the card sharps and cattle handlers he employed. From his chair inside the railing, Charley saw the L Bar outfit come in: old Bill Sanger wearing a coat and a tie that apparently choked him, Sam Hogan with his red hair slicked down, and Betty dressed in white and wearing a poke bonnet that framed the delicate oval of her face. She looked, he thought, like a little girl, wide-eyed and scared.

But she came to the railing, and he met her there, and it was not a little girl's kiss she gave him. Over her shoulder, he saw Kitty Sims watching.

"I'm sorry about last night," Betty whispered. "But it was because I love you, Charley. Good luck!"

She went back to her seat. The gavel was sounding.

The trial opened swiftly and without formality. Charley looked over the spectators and saw that Ben Collins had not arrived. Harris, the prosecuting attorney, put the Lady Gay bartender on the stand.

"I seen Charley was lookin' for trouble, the minute he come in," the bartender said. "He went past the bar, and Lonnie Sears hollered that nobody was packing a gun. Lonnie told him twice they didn't want no trouble. Charley kept goin', and I sent for Ben Collins. The next thing I knew, Charley had pulled his gun and was shootin'."

"Did Greer shoot first?" Harris asked.

The bartender's pale eyes flicked to Ace Corbin's face. He said, "Well, if he didn't he was goin' to. Mr. Yoder was set-

tin' down. He got up before he ever pulled his gun, and it was too late."

"Your witness," said Harris.

"No questions," said Cummings, the defense attorney.

"Ace Corbin," Harris called.

The big man took the witness stand with his self-possessed, important air. Charley saw Major Stoneman come in the door and find a seat near two other officers from Fort Dodge. Corbin was repeating the testimony the bartender had given, elaborating upon it.

"I warned Greer," he added. "I told him to stay away from me while he was packing a gun, that I didn't want to get mixed up in any saloon shooting. He was insulting, and demanded that we break up the poker game. Mr. Yoder asked him politely to leave, and he began abusing Yoder. Then he pulled his gun and the shooting started."

"Who shot first?"

"Charley Greer," Corbin said.

Harris turned the witness over to the defense. Cummings said, "Did you try to stop the shooting?"

"I did not. I would have been a fool to try to take Greer's gun away from him."

"How much whiskey had Yoder drunk?"

"Perhaps two or three drinks. We had been discussing a cattle deal. He wasn't in the habit of drinking during such discussions."

"Isn't it true that Yoder drew his gun first and fired two shots at Dan Parker, who was both drunk and unarmed?"

Corbin said, "Greer was standing behind Parker's chair. The shots naturally came that way. But Greer fired first."

"That's all," Cummings said.

Charley saw Betty's face, white and drawn, and old Bill Sanger whispering something to comfort her. He thought, *If it keeps going this way, she'll need it!* and heard them calling Kitty Sims to the witness stand.

The jurors leaned forward. Kitty was pretty in a painted, overdressed way, and every man on the jury knew where she worked. She avoided Charley's eyes, and recited in a monotone testimony to back Corbin's up to the point where Charley had drawn his gun.

"Then," she added demurely, smoothing her blue silk skirt and facing the jury, "I fainted dead away!"

One of the jurors snickered openly, and Cummings took the witness to inquire sarcastically whether she hadn't seen a number of shootings, without fainting, during her employment at the Lady Gay.

"Yes . . . but this was different. I—I could see Charley was mad. I knew somebody was going to be killed."

"As a matter of fact, you'd been quite friendly with Mr. Greer until that day, hadn't you?"

"I've been friendly with quite a few men," Kitty parried, to the further amusement of the jury.

"But you had been in love with Mr. Greer, hadn't you? And until he saw you with Corbin, that day—"

The prosecution objected. There was a wrangle over the relevancy of the question, and the objection was sustained. Cummings had no further questions.

"Your Honor," Harris addressed the court, "there was only one other witness who is known to be alive. The State asks that the bond of Lonnie Sears be forfeited. The State rests its case."

Cummings rose and bowed with mock courtesy. "The defense," he announced, "will produce Lonnie Sears within five minutes, and ask that he be sworn!"

The crowd stirred. Ace Corbin scowled and leaned across Kitty Sims' perfumed bosom to whisper to one of his confederates. Charley caught Betty's eye and grinned, and she gave him a tremulous smile. Then the door opened, yonder, and the witness entered.

Ben Collins was closed behind him, almost shoving Lonnie through the door. The gambler appeared less nervous than previously; he glared at Corbin as he went by, and his upraised hand was steady as he was sworn.

Watching him, Charley realized that Corbin had made the mistake of ignoring Sears. It was hatred that steadied the man, now; he was still scared, but his resentment of Corbin's treatment outweighed his fear.

Cummings hastened through the preliminaries. "Tell the court," he said, "what happened on the afternoon of the shooting."

"I went to work at three o'clock," Lonnie began. "Corbin told me he'd have a sucker there by that time."

"Object!" cried the prosecutor. "Mr. Corbin is not on trial. Neither are his business methods!"

"Your Honor," Cummings said, "this is a cow town, and the dealings in cattle play an important part in the lives of all of us. I propose to show, through this witness, that some extraordinary financial transactions preceded this shooting, and had a bearing upon it. Mr. Corbin has admitted he made no attempt to disarm either of the participants. Why? Because"—and he pointed accusingly toward the commission man—"because he *wanted* Yoder killed!"

Corbin got halfway out of his seat, his heavy face darken-

ing. The judge's gavel banged, and one of Corbin's henchmen pulled him down.

"Objection overruled," the court said. "Proceed."

"He said he'd have a sucker there—a trail boss. It was Young Dan Parker. But they were late, and Yoder and I waited at the card table. Yoder was drunk, and he got to bragging. He told me about a big deal him and Corbin and Major Stoneman, yonder, was going to pull off. Yoder said he had supplied Corbin with ten thousand dollars in Government money, for a quick purchase of cattle for the Army. It was pretty clear that they were going to get Parker drunk and try to get his cattle for a song. It was up to Major Stoneman to certify the payment later, and to certify to the count and weight of the beef."

Stoneman shouted hoarsely, "That's a lie! You can't drag me into this, Sears!"

"The way they worked it," Lonnie went on after another objection had been overruled, "was playing both ends against the middle. After getting a herd cheap, they were going to cheat the Army on count and weight. They split the profit three ways." He paused, looking steadily at Corbin. "I knew a lot more," he added, "than Ace ever thought I did."

"Proceed," said the court.

"Corbin figured on getting the Running K's. Collins & Greer had that herd lined up, but Corbin knew he could get Young Dan drunk, and in the hole a few thousand dollars at poker, and then he could swing the deal. Well, he got word that Charley had blood in his eye, and I was scared. But Corbin said he'd handle Charley. Yoder and Young Dan both kept getting drunker. Charley come in and tried to make Young Dan go to the hotel. Young Dan swung his hat at the floor to show how drunk he was, and knocked some of his cards off the table.

"Yoder touched the cards, and Young Dan stomped on his hand, and Yoder come up out of his chair and pulled a gun out of a shoulder holster. He shot once, and I ducked under the table. I heard him shoot again, and I seen him start around the table to kill Young Dan, or Charley. Then I heard Charley shoot, and Yoder fell."

"And so far as you know," Cummings said, "Major Stoneman didn't know that Yoder had already given Corbin the ten thousand dollars?"

"I know Major Stoneman didn't know it," Lonnie said.

"Your witness," Cummings said triumphantly.

Most of the fight had been taken out of the prosecutor. The case went to the jury before noon.

The verdict was in ten minutes later.

"We, the jury, find the defendant not guilty . . ."

Betty ran into Charley's arms, crying softly. Ben Collins moved quietly to Lonnie's side and stood there until Corbin and his crowd had left the courtroom.

"Now," Ben said jubilantly as they started for camp, "the shoe's on the other foot!"

They took Lonnie Sears to camp with them, and Ben saw him safely aboard another train a couple of nights later. It had been Cummings who had arranged for Lonnie's bond, and hidden him, promising protection against any revenge by Corbin.

Charley and Ben knew Corbin had reached a point of desperation. What had been set in motion by Lonnie's testimony might well ruin his cattle commission business. Proved or not, the story was all over town, and men going back to Texas would take it with them.

Charley drew all his energies into getting the L Bars ready for the drive. Trailing any herd to Cheyenne in a dry year was no easy matter. It was late July, now, and all over the wide plains country the skies blazed and burned and gave no rain. There would be sandhills and parched tableland; sometimes there was quicksand in the Solomon, and the way between the water of the Republican and that of the South Platte was long.

Ben Collins brought a telegram out from town and showed it to Charley. It was from Asa Hill:

I HEAR YOU FIGURE ON DELIVERING ME A HERD OF SOREBACKED SCRUBS. YOU OUGHT TO KNOW ME BETTER THAN THAT. I WANT PRIME THREES AND WILL GET PRIME THREES IF I HAVE TO BUY THEM FROM CORBIN. WHAT IS MORE I HAVE GOT TO HAVE THEM BY SEPTEMBER 15.

Charley said, "Why, the hard-headed old coot! He's stepped up the delivery date by more'n two weeks!"

"He's heard from Corbin," Ben said. "Corbin's trying to hamstring us. He'd like to cut in on the deal with a herd of his own, and he'll try it."

"Let him," Charley observed. "We'll have the L Bars there on time."

That night he woke with a start, sitting up in his bedroll to hear angry shouts from the far side of the herd, and a sudden drumming of horses' hoofs on the hard-baked ground. He called Ben, and stamped into his boots as he ran for the wagon.

"Betty!" he yelled. "Hand me my gun! Somebody's trying to stampede the cattle!"

Ben Collins ran to the picket line and began saddling. Betty's face showed in the moonlight at the pucker of the wagon sheet. She said, "Please, Charley! Don't take it—don't get into trouble again!"

Two shots cracked flatly in the creek willows. Charley leaped on the wagon tongue, swearing. "That's our boys they're shooting at!" he exclaimed. "Give me that gun!"

She handed it down without another word, and saw him buckle it around his waist and hurry to the horses. Ben had Paisano saddled. Charley said, "I'll see you out there," and left the camp on a run.

He headed east, turning wide around the herd, which seemed to be undisturbed. He stopped at the far end to listen, and the hoofbeats sounded faintly, far beyond the creek and still going fast. Nearer at hand, he heard Sam Hogan cursing, and Pecos Gurley coming from the other direction, calling Sam's name.

Charley found the boy as Pecos rode up. Sam sat on the ground near his horse, holding his left arm. Blood crept between his fingers.

"Just pinked me, Charley," he said between his teeth. "I'm all right. But if I'd 'a had me a gun—"

"You'll have one, from now on!" Charley promised grimly. "We're through running a Sunday school outfit. What happened?"

"I was coming around the east rim of the herd, and I could hear Pecos singing on the far side. I seen two riders turning back into the creek brush, and I hit spurs to my horse and hollered at them. Next thing I knew, that bullet knocked me sky-west and crooked!"

Charley sent him to the wagon. Ben Collins arrived, and they searched the creek brush without finding anything, and concluded that Sam's yells had frightened the prowlers away before they had a chance to stampede the cattle. Charley spent the rest of the night on guard.

He ate a late breakfast next morning, while Ben and the others were stringing the herd out to range it up the creek. Betty said, "Yonder come some of the boys—something's happened!" and Charley got up to see Ben and Bill Sanger headed toward the wagons with their ropes on a pair of stupid and staggering shorthorns.

There were two men with them, and Charley recognized them as Jim Davis and a lanky, big-nosed youngster named Wilkerson. Both were inspectors for the Kansas Livestock Association.

He put down his tin cup. "What the hell's the meaning of this? Those shorthorns don't belong to the L Bar!"

"Looks like Corbin made us a present of them last night, Charley," Ben said angrily. "When we started stringing out the cattle, we found them, too sick to move. And they're wearing L Bar brands that aren't over a day old!"

Betty watched, mystified, as the shorthorns were dragged stumbling into camp. At their worst, the L Bars had never looked so bad.

"What's wrong with the poor things?" she asked.

"Texas fever!" Charley said shortly, and turned on the inspectors. "This is a put-up job, and we won't stand for it!" he declared. "Corbin had you sent out here!"

"Now wait a minute, Charley!" Jim Davis retorted. "Maybe I don't like Corbin any better than you do, but I know he's not running the Association. I can tell you what happened. We inspected a herd Corbin put on the trail yesterday, and he knew we would be working on up this way."

"Where's the herd headed?" Ben asked.

Wyoming," said Davis. "That Running K outfit is still tied up. Corbin bought a thousand threes that just come up from Texas—the Triangle D outfit. He put his own crew on them, with a man named Crowder for trail boss."

Crowder—the man Betty had fired, the man responsible for the pitiable condition of the L Bars when they arrived! Charley thought, *I owe him something, too!* He said, "There you are, Ben! Corbin figured to get us tied up, and grab the Asa Hill deal himself!"

Davis said, "Boys, the cows was there, and no telling how many ticks your L Bars picked up. You'll have to be quarantined for at least thirty days! You know Texas fever as well as I do. Longhorns don't get it, but they can carry it and infect any domestic cattle they come into contact with. Sorry, but I've got to leave Wilkerson here as the quarantine guard. I'll gladly ask the Association to shorten the time as much as possible, but you know it sometimes runs to sixty days."

When he was out of sight, Charley turned to Bill Sanger. "Get your Winchester and put 'em out of their misery. I'm riding to town!"

Betty faced him, calm and very pale. She said, "You mean you're going gunning for Corbin?"

"Yes, damn him!"

"Charley, you promised me—"

"I promised I wouldn't pack a gun on this job. I reckon I quit as of last night, because I'm packing one. If you ever want to hire me back—with no strings—Ben will know where to find me!"

"No," Betty said. "All the strings are off. And so is everything else, if you're taking the law into your own hands!"

"Law?" Charley repeated, and laughed mirthlessly. Out yonder where Bill Sanger and Wilkerson had taken the shorthorns, a gun cracked twice. Charley said, "That's where the law gets you!"

Ben Collins followed him to the picket line. Ben said, "Charley, we might telegraph Asa Hill and ask him to give us till the first of October. We'd have a month, then, after the quarantine was lifted. I—I hate to see you and Betty bust up, this way!"

"Don't grieve yourself about any bust-up!"

He cinched Paisano's saddle, and mounted the sorrel, his mouth grim and set. The first hot burst of anger at Corbin's trickery had passed; he was cool, now, and could think back. Betty would never know how near he had come, of late, toward a willingness to drop the feud. He had whipped Corbin, and he had been acquitted. Corbin could do him no personal injury without openly inviting a fight, and a fight was welcome.

But Corbin had struck at the cattle, and the cattle were defenseless. Charley had sweated over them, doctoring them and breathing the dust they stirred.

He said, "Ben, I reckon you're the L Bar boss from here on out. But it'll do no good to fool around. You ought to throw 'em on the trail tomorrow—and take Wilkerson along at the point of a gun!"

He was gone without a backward look, without saying goodbye. Betty picked up his coffee cup and plate, washed and dried them. She turned to the other tasks of the camp; she was dry-eyed and silent, and Ben Collins could not tell what she was thinking.

Wilkerson and Bill Sanger had gone out to the herd, leaving Ben to his own thoughts. There was nothing he could say. He was a man to whom anger came slowly, but it was coming now, growing as he tried to plan a way out for the L Bars. He had none of Charley's reckless nature, but once aroused he could be dangerous.

Conservatism led nowhere, now. Asa Hill was hard-headed and practical: if he wanted cattle delivered by September the fifteenth, there would be no use asking for an extension of time. Meanwhile, the L Bars would have to be almost entirely corn-fed, because the quarantine regulations would not permit them to be ranged far, and the grass would play out.

Ben fretted through the morning and in the middle of the afternoon he came to a sudden decision. Charley's way was all that was left. It was time for sharp and decisive action.

Tomorrow, quarantine or no quarantine, they would throw the L Bars on the Wyoming trail.

A new buggy topped the rise and turned toward camp. Ben hurried that way, thinking, *I'll handle Corbin myself!* and wishing he had a gun. But it wasn't Corbin. It was Kitty Sims, pulling the team to a stop.

She said, "Hello, Ben," and sat for a moment regarding Betty with a twisted smile. "Go ahead and say it! It wouldn't be worse than what I've called myself."

Betty said, "I've nothing to say to you, Miss Sims."

"Well, I come out here to tell *you* a few things!" Kitty retorted. She wrapped the reins around the whipstock and got down to face Betty, who was sitting on an empty canned tomato box. She said, "I lied on the witness stand and you know it. All right, I did it for my man, and I'd do it again! It was my way of fighting for him."

"Against a man you were once in love with."

"That's right. I was pretty sweet on Charley, once. Maybe you wouldn't understand why I dropped him. For one thing, I knew he's too damn good for my kind. For another . . . well, with me it's a matter of plain business. I've got to get mine while I can, and Ace has got it. With you, it's different."

"I don't see the connection," Betty said coldly.

"That's the difference." Kitty's voice rose angrily. "I can tell you one thing! I liked Charley for what he was. I didn't try to make him over. I didn't say, 'You can't do this, you can't do that,' and 'You can't pack a gun!' "

Betty was silent.

"Charley had a fight on his hands before he saw you," Kitty went on. "There's men who'd've laughed in his face if he backed down after starting that fight. But did you help him? If you knew men like I know 'em, you'd realize the fight had to come off, sooner or later."

"Where is Charley now?" Betty asked in a small voice.

"In the Lady Gay, waiting for Ace to show up. And getting drunk! He's got Ben's gun, brought it for Ace to use. But if Ace finds him drunk, it won't be a fair fight—Ace don't fight that way. And if Charley's killed, you can blame yourself. He wouldn't be drinking so heavy if it wasn't for you and him busting up!"

Betty said, "I still don't understand why you came out here. If you love Corbin—"

"Love?" Kitty laughed harshly, and went toward the buggy. She looked back and said, "I ain't heard that word in quite a while, kid. But I've got some things about me that are decent. I don't worry about Ace. He's a man and he knows

what he's doing. And . . . I still think Charley Greer is a damned fine boy!"

She brushed her hand across her eyes and climbed into the buggy. Betty was suddenly on her feet.

"Wait!" she cried. "Wait! Take me in with you!"

Ben Collins saddled and rode after them. He caught up with the buggy a few miles from camp.

"Where is Corbin?" he shouted.

"He rode horseback," Kitty answered. "Maybe he went out to that herd he's trailing."

"Get Charley out of town, Ben!" Betty pleaded. "I'll do anything he says—only get him out of there!"

Ben said, "I'll see what I can do," and put spurs to his horse to pass them. The sun was going down when he came to the toll bridge. He walked the horse across it, letting him blow, and stopped to ask the bridge keeper whether Corbin had come back to town that way.

"Not yet," the old man said. "And when he does, he's goin' to run into a sight of trouble!"

"You mean Charley Greer?"

"Charley ain't but half of it. Old Dan Parker hit town this mornin' on the train, and identified the body of his boy just as soon as they dug him up—seems Young Dan broke his arm when he was a kid, and it growed back with the bones crooked. Old Dan showed a letter the boy wrote the day he got here, sayin' he was goin' to turn the herd over to you and Charley, like he was supposed to. That makes Corbin's claim sound pretty slim. And that ain't all! The Federal grand jury has indicted Ace and that major out at the fort for conspirin' to defraud the gover'ment!"

Ben whistled. "That news is worth two bits any day!"

"Earp's out lookin' for Corbin right now!"the old man called after him.

That way, Ben told himself, everything might be taken out of Charley's hands. He rode on across the Plaza and into Front Street. His thoughts were far ahead of him; he was planning what had to be done.

Paisano was in an adjoining stall at the livery stable where Ben left his horse. He crossed over to the Lady Gay. The first thing to meet his eyes as he stepped inside was his own gun, lying on the near end of the bar.

Charley Greer stood at the far end, a whiskey bottle and a glass before him. He called, "Just leave that gun lay where it is, Ben!" and took a drink.

Ben moved down the long bar, studying his partner narrowly, and Charley waved toward the bartender.

"Give us another glass here, Honest John!" he ordered, and grinned at Ben. "I call him Honest John, now, because he swears he'll tell the truth the next time he goes on the witness stand!"

The bartender came, sweating, uneasily watching the entrance. He said, "I been tellin' Charley I hoped him and you didn't have no hard feelin's. You know how it was, Ben. I got a job here. I'm a family man."

"Get back up front, Honest John," Charley drawled. "Maybe Ben wants to talk."

"I do," Ben said, pouring a drink. "I want you to go to the office. I'll take care of Corbin. You're drunk, Charley!"

Charley laughed. "A man's drunk when he falls down and can't get up to take another drink. You just stay out of my way, Ben!"

"Give me your gun," Ben urged. "After all it makes no difference who shoots Corbin—except to Betty. It makes a big difference to her, Charley."

"Not from what she said this morning," Charley said bitterly. "And it's like I told her the first time I ever laid eyes on her—right out in front of this place. I told her I'm the kind of man who drinks when he's dry. This is one of those times, Ben. I told her once in a while I had to cut loose my wolf. Well this is his night to howl!"

He lifted his glass and Ben noted curiously that his hand was steady. All at once Ben thought he understood what was happening here. Honest John would get word to Corbin that Charley was drunk. Corbin would try to take advantage, just as Kitty Sims had said.

But there was still Betty to consider. Ben put his hand on Charley's arm and then all at once it was too late for argument. Boot-heels sounded heavy on the wooden sidewalk. Ace Corbin's big fingers showed over the top of one of the swinging doors. He pulled it open and his bulk was framed against the fading daylight.

Over his shoulder Corbin said, "Oh, I'll beat the damned indictment, Crowder! But you'll have to take the Triangle D's up the trail yourself."

He turned, then, and saw Charley and Ben, and something passed over his heavy face and was gone. He came on into the saloon, with Crowder following. Crowder wore two gun holsters, slung low. One was empty.

Corbin glanced down the bar, rage smoldering in his dark eyes, and said, "Greer, you stirred up this trouble for me! Some day I'll kill you!"

Charley laughed. "What's wrong with now?"

Corbin motioned to Honest John, and the barkeep put

glasses and a bottle on the bar. Corbin reached for them, and saw the revolver lying there.

"Pick it up, Corbin!" Charley urged in a cool, tantalizing voice. "I put it there for you so you couldn't claim you weren't armed. I'll give you ten seconds to decide whether you pick up the gun or whether we go out into the street—where the whole town can see me whip the hell out of you!"

Ben Collins saw a curious expression touch Corbin's eyes. "I don't want your damned gun!" Corbin said slowly. "We'll step outside!"

He gave the .44 a shove that sent it sliding down the polished surface of the bar halfway to where Charley stood. Then he drank, and let his hand drop to his side, and only Ben saw the quick, almost imperceptible lift of his right shoulder.

Ben thought, *He's got Crowder's other gun!* He yelled, "Look out, Charley!" and Charley Greer, already starting forward along the bar, froze where he stood.

The agonizing space that followed seemed minutes to Ben Collins. He saw Corbin jerk at the gun in the pocket of his coat, and the front sight caught, slowing him. It seemed to Ben that Charley would never draw.

Crowder sprang to one side, around the front end of the bar, hand at the butt of his holstered gun. Ben knocked Honest John sprawling, and snatched up the .44 from the bar. He yelled, "Keep out of this, Crowder!" and just then Corbin's pistol laid its thunder down the room, jarring the glasses back of the bar.

That first shot jerked wild as the sight tore free from Corbin's pocket. It splintered the ceiling above Charley's head. Corbin cursed and fired again as Charley's gun was clearing its holster.

Charley winced as the bullet burned across his ribs under his left armpit. His gun spat a rope of flame.

Corbin took a step forward as if nothing had happened. The hammer of his .44 rose again, but it stopped halfway back, and the weapon slipped from his hand.

Charley had pulled the trigger again. The big man said, "You"—and spun halfway around to clutch the bar. He stood there, weaving. Then his knees gave way.

Charley holstered his gun. He said in a strained voice, "Who shot first that time, Honest John?"

The bartender was pale and staring. "Ace," he said, as if repeating a catechism. "Ace shot first."

Men were crowding into the door. Kitty Sims appeared there, fighting her way through the crowd until she could see Ace Corbin's body sprawled along the footrail. She went

to the bar, resting her elbows on it and burying her face in her hands.

Ben Collins touched her shoulder. "Where's Betty?"

Kitty looked up, her eyes stony and dry. "I told her to stay in the buggy. Over at the livery stable." Her voice was hard and calm. Then it began to rise: "I knew it would happen—I knew it!" and she began to sob.

Ben took Charley's arm and moved him toward the door. They met Crowder there. He said hastily, "I didn't have nothin' to do with this! Corbin got word that Greer was drunk, and waitin' for him, and he borrowed my gun." He swallowed hard. "I just went to work for Corbin day before yesterday."

Charley said, "There's no future in your job, Crowder," and seized the trail boss by the shirt front. "You can drive that herd on up to Wyoming if you want to, but if you so much as cross my trail, I'll beat the hell out of you for the way you treated the L Bar cattle!"

"That can wait, Charley," Ben told him. "Betty's over at the livery stable. Do you want to see her now . . . or are you as drunk as you made out?"

Charley Greer grinned. "I want to see her now."

It was three days before the L Bars left the holding grounds on Mulberry Creek, with the chuck wagon and the freight outfit lumbering out on the trail ahead of them. Charley had insisted on remaining in Dodge until an inquest was held, and he had been informed that there would be no arrest. And Ben had haunted the Livestock Association office, pounding the table and arguing until the harrassed officials there met his terms, Wilkerson, they said, could accompany the L Bars to the State line—if Ben would pay his salary. He would lift the quarantine at the Nebraska border. Those difficulties were behind, now. They pointed for the Solomon River, making upward of ten miles a day. There was enough corn, Ben thought, to last until they were in Nebraska.

"That's be long enough," Charley said, as they rode point with Betty. Even if Crowder took the Triangle D's up to Cheyenne, the L Bars could beat him—and arrive in better shape.

"I'd like to corn-feed 'em a little longer," Ben said wistfully. "With a little time, you could work wonders. You could practically domesticate these cattle!"

Betty reined her horse in close to Charley, and reached over to squeeze his hand.

"I don't think you could, Ben." She laughed. "They're Texans. And even if they could be tamed, I think I like them better the way they are!"

The Man at Gantt's Place*

by STEVE FRAZEE

WITH THE TIME AT HAND for the actual break, Lew Gantt was a little nervous. He did not return to the wild-horse corral after dinner to continue replacing posts that old Stump had chalked as unsound. Work was all there ever had been around this place—fix something before it busted, get ready for winter, get ready for summer, scatter grass seed from heck to breakfast, push yourself into old age by trying to look ahead so blamed far.

Lew was seventeen and one day. He had waited the one day so Stump could not say it was because of his birthday. He went down to where Stump was watching Railroad Costigan lead a big, wall-eyed bay gelding around the breaking corral.

Stump did not ask why Lew was loafing. He did not even look at his son, and that made Lew more uneasy. Old Stump just stood there watching Railroad and the bay, and after a while he said, "Try a blanket on him, Railroad."

The gelding did not like the blanket, and Costigan had a devil of a time. The way to break horses was to top 'em off and show 'em who was boss, and get things done without a lot of fooling around. But no, Lew's father would rather get six mounts half gentled in two weeks than break a whole corralful in a week; he did everything that way.

Old Stump had just been too long up here in the hills, looking down at Revelation Valley, where they did things with a bang. He was pretty old, all right—anyway past forty, Lew figured. He studied his father from the side. Not a very big man at all, but he was pretty tightly put together. He didn't care much what he wore, even a patch on the seat of his pants. His mouth was sort of tight, and he did not use it much. He shaved every morning. He never leaned or sprawled all over things, like Lew was doing right now. He favored a

bench to sit on, or a stool. Chairs with backs made men without backbones, Stump always said.

Lew knew plenty about his father, and none of it was very interesting. Lew put both feet on the ground.

"Work him until he'll carry the blanket," Stump said. "Don't rush him. There's going to be a good saddle horse."

Don't rush nothing! Stump had been here when he could have taken up the choice part of Revelation Valley, where the Mexican Spur had its home ranch now; but no, he had to settle up here in the dry hills where there was water one year and not much the next year. He let the cattlemen run over him, even let them range some of their stuff up here without saying boo about it. If he saw a critter that was loaded up on larkspur, down and bloated and dying, he took his knife and tried to save it. Generally he never even bothered to tell anyone.

"What is it, Lew?"

"Uh—I—" The old man was looking at him like he knew just what Lew was thinking. Aw, it was just that slow way of his when he threw a study on anything. "I'm leaving, Stump. I got to do something besides fix fences and make little dams and fool around with horses, and besides . . ." Lew let it drift away like smoke.

Stump never let anything drift. "Besides what?"

You couldn't tell old Stump about things he had never felt, of the wishing rock in the pines where Lew sat sometimes at night, looking at the twinkling pinpoints in the valley, wondering what everybody was doing down there; about his clothes and the beat-up wagon when he went to Revelation for supplies, and saw the cowboys thundering down the street, yelling and shooting, plunging off their horses in front of the Valley Saloon; about the time the four fancy women from Arbor's Dance Hall passed Lew on the street, looking at him with the merest brush of interest that died before it really lived, telling him that they figured him in a class with the nesters from the range east of town. Stump wouldn't understand those things at all.

"I'm riding out," Lew said.

Stump put out his hand. "So long, son." They shook hands, and Stump turned back to the corral.

Lew spun away and went to the house. Lew's mother was sitting in the big rocker with brass-capped arms, looking out the bay window at Gantt Creek and the pines with sunlight on them. She wasn't much for sitting around. Nobody who stayed around old Stump did much sitting, Lew thought bit-

terly, except Odalie, and she was only a brat sister. He heard Marian in the kitchen.

"I'm leaving, Ma," Lew said.

Mrs. Gantt did not seem surprised, and that nettled Lew a little. "Where are you going?"

"Down in the valley for a spell. If I don't like it there, maybe I'll drift on west a few hundred miles." He had not intended to add the last, because his vague plans extended no farther than the valley, but now that it was out, it sounded pretty good. Some of the riders who brought horses up to Stump had told Lew of far places that old Stump didn't even know about. Why, out there on those distant ranges, where a man wasn't known just as Stump Gantt's boy . . .

"We packed your things, son."

Lew blinked. Marian came on into the living room with a sort of scared smile on her face. Anyway, there was one person around here who thought it was bad that he was going so far away. Marian was a pretty girl, with her mother's slenderness and dark good looks, but she was just another sister.

"Well, I'm going," Lew said. He wanted to tell his mother how crazy it was for all of them to stay up here in the hills and work themselves old for Stump. But his mother did not look so old right then. In fact, she did not look a heck of a lot older than Marian. She sure was a healthy, strong woman, to look so good after putting up with old Stump all these years.

"I guess I'll get my stuff." Lew went upstairs to his room. Odalie was there, her face buried so deeply into his pillow that only her red pigtails showed. "What the devil are you—" She raised her head and he saw that she was crying, so instead of finishing by asking what she was doing in his room, he said "—bawling about, Odalie?"

"You're going away!" she wailed.

"Well, cut it out. I'm only going a couple thousand miles, and maybe in a few years I'll come back."

"A few years!" Odalie began to wail louder.

"I'll bring you back something."

Odalie rolled over and looked at him. She sniffed a little. "What?"

"A parasol."

"I want a saddle."

Lew considered. He probably would be in the chips when he returned . . .

Odalie saw his hesitation, and began to screw up her face.

"All right!" he said. "A saddle."

"With silver trimmings?"

"I make no promises about that."

Odalie began to laugh. "You look just like Pa when he says that!" She wiped at her tears with the bends of her wrists, then laughed some more.

She sure was a pug-nosed, scheming little brat. Lew scowled at her, and then he grinned. "Where's my warbag?"

"It's in there." Odalie pointed at a flat leather bag lying on a chair. "So's your noisy old six-gun that Pa wouldn't let you wear."

Lew looked disgustedly at the bag. "That thing!"

"Ma says that folks who carry their belongings in warbags don't know where they're going. She says—"

"I know what she says. I know what everybody around here says! That's why I'm going away for keeps."

"You said you'd be back, with my saddle—with the silver trimming."

Lew shook his head. Sisters, parents—they gave you nothing but arguments. Odalie trailed him downstairs. Marian was standing by Mrs. Gantt, and Marian was getting ready to bawl. Lew gave them each an awkward hug. He would have hugged Odalie, but she made a face at him and ran out the back door.

Mrs. Gantt looked at Lew the way she had when he was a little boy. "Stay decent, stay clean, Lew." She looked at him a moment longer and then started toward the kitchen. "Come on, Marian. Let's finish the dishes."

Lew threw his sprung saddle on old, rough-coated, slow Ranger, the only horse he had ever owned. Stump did not even look away from the breaking corral when Lew rode past, but Railroad stared at the black bag behind the saddle, and then went over to the bars and asked Stump something.

"He's going out to try on a new pair of britches," Stump said. "Put the saddle on the gelding now, Railroad."

"Good luck, Lew!" Railroad called.

Lew waved. Over in the pines Odalie was jumping up and down on the wishing rock, yelling his name. He waved at her, then turned toward the valley.

Mrs. Gantt and Marian cleaned up the dishes in silence, then Mrs. Gantt went to the back door and called Odalie in from the wishing rock.

"Go down the trail after Lew, Odie. When you get near the gyp rock caves, watch Ranger's tracks carefully until—"

"I know, Ma! He'll stop and switch his plunder from that suitcase into his dirty old warbag, and hide the suitcase in one of the caves."

Mrs. Gantt smiled on the thin line between laughter and tears. "Bring the suitcase back, Odie."

Marian said, "At least, he didn't ride away looking like a saddle bum, even if nobody but us saw him."

Down at the corral, Stump's brown, clean-shaved face showed no change, except that his mouth was a little tighter. From the corner of his eye he saw Odalie running down the trail, but mainly he watched the bay gelding circling nervously with the saddle on its back.

"Ride him, Railroad."

Slim and wiry, Costigan stopped in mid-stride. "What?"

"I said ride him!"

Railroad's eyes went sidewise, toward the valley.

"You don't mean that, Stump."

"No, I guess I don't." Stump Gantt walked away toward the upper meadow.

Railroad called after him, "Never was a kid that was any good didn't pull his picket pin a few times!"

Gantt went on walking. Railroad resumed his patient circling of the corral, now and then speaking to the bay in a soothing voice, and all the time thinking of the days when he was seventeen down in Arizona Territory, many years before. He made a dozen trips around the big corral before he noticed the gelding was no longer humping or pulling sidewise in an effort to get from under leather.

Railroad stopped then, facing the emerald flatness of the distant valley, looking far beyond the purple ranges. He was glad that his guns had long ago been laid aside. Here was the only place he had ever been at home, at peace. If he were seventeen again . . . if he were seventeen and knew what he knew now . . . life would be awful dull.

Free, with fifty dollars in his pocket, Lew strolled the main street of Revelation. Now that he was here, all the things he had longed to do when he was not free to do them did not have the same appeal. He would be a little cautious about what he did first, sort of get the feel of things. There was no rush.

He saw Mexican Spur horses in front of the Valley Saloon, and four or five Short Fork horses before the Green Grass Saloon. There was not a single nester wagon in town. It was time the danged nesters learned they couldn't move right in on cattle range. They claimed to have legal right, but Lew did not take much stock in that; in fact, he knew only the superficial facts about the trouble that was shaping up, but his sympathy was with the cowmen, so he did not need to have many facts.

Gaunt, blistered Custer Wigram, owner of the Spur, came from the Valley as Lew was passing for the third time. He bunched pale brows at Lew and said, "Howdy, kid. What's Stump doing in town in the middle of the week?"

"He ain't here, Mr. Wigram."

Wigram sized the youth up once more. Lew's levi's were new, but he had soaked them for a week in mild lye water to take away their giveaway blueness. He was wearing the long-barreled .44, for which he had traded a month's work at Wigram's hay ranch the year before.

"Oh," Wigram said in a long breath. "You're out on your own now, huh?"

"Yeah."

Townspeople passed. Four cowboys drifted from the Green Grass to the Valley. They all spoke with deference to Wigram. Lew did not mind at all being seen talking on equal terms to the biggest rancher in the country.

"How does it look out there?" Lew nodded east.

Wigram shook his head. "We overlooked a thing or two when we settled here. Then we didn't work together." His eyes strayed toward the west hills. "A few days ago four farmers filed on the very ground Joe Hemphill's home ranch stands on."

Hemphill owned the Short Fork. Lew cursed to show concern. Not used to profanity, he overdid it. "That won't stand, will it?"

"I don't know." Wigram shook his head dubiously.

"You ought to run every nester out of the country right damn now!"

The Spur owner smiled vaguely. "That would be quite a drive—now. You want a job, Lew?"

Lew's heart leaped. Never be overanxious, Stump always said. "Well . . . my horse ain't too good with cows." . . .

"All you'll need him for is to ride to Spur. I want some range stuff broke."

That was a wet slap. Break horses! There was no fun in that, not doing it Stump's slow way, which was the only method Lew understood.

"Your old man says you're about as good as Costigan."

"Huh!" Stump had never mentioned that to Lew.

"No, thanks, Mr. Wigram. I don't much care for that kind of work."

The corners of Wigram's eyes crinkled. "Too much like home, huh?" Then he started up the walk. "Ride over if you change your mind."

The youth swung his gun belt around and went into the Valley. Spur and Short Fork riders at the bar were talking

about the nesters. There was a pause until Shindy Lemons said, "Aw, that's only Stump Gantt's boy from the west hills. C'mon over, Lew, and have a drink."

Lew was awkward at the bar, not sure just what to do with his hands. He saw the others watching him closely, and knew they were guessing it was his first drink of whiskey. It was. No rush about it. He took his time.

"Hmm!" a cowboy said. "Old Stump must run a still up there."

They all laughed. Lew tossed a coin on the bar. "Have one around on me." It was the thing to do, but he sure didn't like to see the money go into the till. There were better ways to spend money, and while the whiskey was loosening social tightness inside him, he still didn't think it was worth good gold that he had been a long time saving. He had a drink on four others, and he could honestly say that, other than a sort of warm pushing behind his eyes, the whiskey did not seem to affect him.

Before it was his turn to buy again, he thanked the cowboys and strolled over to a poker game in the corner. Confidential Pete, the houseman, was having a bad time with Buck Hodel, the Spur foreman, and a slim stranger dressed in gray. Ivers, the liveryman, and two cowboys were in the game, too.

"Jump in, kid, and get your feet wet," Hodel said. He was a broad, black-browed man, about half drunk at the moment. He had a pretty bad temper, they said.

"No rush," Lew said. "I like to see where the power is before I jump."

"You sound just like your old man," Hodel said.

The stranger in gray smiled at Lew. It was hard to figure that one out. He was a handsome devil, gray eyes, curly brown hair and a clean grin. His face was brown and so were his hands, and he wasn't dressed quite like a gambler, not the kind old Railroad talked about, leastwise. But he was dressed just a little better than a range hand, too.

Lew watched the game. One of the cowboys won a small pot. The stranger won a big one when the houseman bucked into a full house with two pair. After a while Lew got things figured out. The man in gray was merely having a big lucky streak, and the others were letting him draw too cheap when they should have been raising the devil.

At least, that was the way Railroad Costigan would have figured it, and Lew had spent many an evening playing poker for fun with Railroad.

This beat drinking whiskey. Lew itched to get into the

game, but he waited a while, watching how they played, before he bought forty dollars' worth of chips.

Confidential Pete hesitated before he shoved the stack across. "You sure you know how to play this, Gantt?"

"I learn fast."

Pete grunted. "I don't want your old man on my neck after you lose your money." He was half afraid it was Stump's money.

Lew grinned. "Worry about the man who owns this dump getting on *your* neck after I take *his* money.

The stranger laughed. "You'll do, Gantt. Smoky Cameron." He put out his hand as Lew settled into a chair beside him.

"Lew Gantt." The name had a fair sound, at that. Cameron's hand was hard, with work bumps there, all right, but not the dry-raspy kind. He had not worked recently, Lew figured.

Lew drifted along for about a half hour, like someone who wanted to make his forty bucks last a long time. And then on a pot that Hodel opened for five dollars, five men stayed. Lew was the last one. He raised five. One of the cowboys dropped out. Everybody else stayed. They drew cards. Ivers took one. He cursed. Before he tossed in his hand he spread it to show how he had missed a flush. Nobody paid any attention. They were all watching Lew, who had not drawn any cards.

"Beginner's luck!" one of the cowboys muttered, and threw away his hand.

Hodel bet five dollars, scowling at Lew. The houseman stayed, and raised five more. When it came to Lew he met the raise and pushed in all the chips he had.

"Never try to bluff a dumb kid," Pete said. He tossed his hand away.

Cameron got out with a laugh, and that left it up to Hodel. He scowled and grunted and tried to read Lew's face, and at last threw his hand away with a curse. "What have you got you're so proud of?"

Lew pushed his hand into the discards. "You didn't pay to see, Hodel." Lew had been bluffing.

"I think he was pulling a whizzer," Cameron said good-humoredly.

"He's too dumb for that!" Hodel growled. But still he was not sure. It showed in his eyes, and it would keep eating at him. The next time he would call anything, Lew figured. And that was just what happened an hour later. Hodel was still far ahead of the game, and Lew had made steady little winnings, so he now had about two hundred dollars.

He got a full house, queens over sixes, on the deal. When

the smoke cleared there was about two hundred dollars in the pot, with only Lew and Hodel left. The Spur foreman had drawn one card, and Lew was sure he had filled something. Hodel pushed out chips to match everything Lew had. His face went splotchy red when he saw the full house. He slapped a Jack-high straight on the cloth, and pushed his chair back savagely.

"You're just too damned lucky, Gantt, or else—"

"Else what?"

"—or you're too slick for this game. You'd better get out now."

Cameron said, "Don't push on the lines, Hodel. The kid's been lucky, and played good poker."

Hodel's face swung like a club at Cameron. "You keep that little thing under your nose quiet, tinhorn. I ain't just sure about you anyway."

"Is that a fact?" Cameron rose. "Just what is it you aren't sure about?"

Lew had his chance to get from under, but he wasn't letting anyone carry the load for him. "It's a free country, Hodel. Get out yourself if you don't like the way I play." An instant later he thought that maybe the whiskey had not been quite as harmless as it seemed.

"Why, you little west-hills pup!" Hodel kicked his chair away. He was a blocky, solid man, and it was his boast that he could lick any man in the valley.

Confidential Pete's voice was a lost squeal. "No trouble in here, boys! No trouble in here!"

Across the room a Spur rider said to the bartender, "No, Sammy. Just lay your little white mitts on the cherrywood and watch the fun."

"I guess," Hodel said, "I'd better slap some manners into you, Gantt." He flung aside a cowboy who was struggling to rise with his feet entangled in the baling-wire braces of his chair. Hodel walked through the space toward Lew.

Lew went around the table. He was hot-scared, but he was not going to run.

"Stay back, Hodel," he said.

The Spur foreman made a lunge. Lew kicked a chair in front of him and went farther around the table. Hodel crashed over the chair and fell. He came up insane with anger.

"Stay back, Hodel." Lew kept the table between them. He saw it coming then. He could almost smell the brimstone scent of it.

Hodel went for his pistol.

He was not fast. No one in the Revelation country was

fast with a gun. Lightning draws were merely something men like Railroad talked about. But Buck Hodel was faster than Lew Gantt, who had never drawn his .44 quickly, except in secret practice against old Railroad.

The explosion almost deafened Lew. He did not hear or feel the bullet, and he did not know where it went until someone told him afterward. He smelled the great bloom of dirty-gray powder smoke that obscured the middle of Hodel's body. Lew had drawn by then, and now he shot, trying to aim through the rising murk and hit Hodel in the right leg to knock him flat. Instead, he shot Hodel through the side. The man twisted back and fell into the check rack.

Lew had to step to one side to see through the acrid fumes. Hodel was lying there, his mouth open with shock. Lew Gantt stared. He was scared to death, and sick.

Smoky Cameron was against the wall, off to one side. His gun was in his hand and his eyes were on the Spur and Short Fork men. "Was it fair?" he asked.

After a moment grizzled Rip Goodwin said, "Yeah, it was fair." He sent a sullen, wicked look at Lew. The cowboys went over to Hodel.

With his gun still in his hand, Lew started to run. He would get Ranger. He would ride as fast as he could, clear out of the country. He had killed a man, and a deadly fear was riding him and urging him to get away quickly.

Cameron caught him at the door. Lew clubbed his gun and tried wildly to beat the man away, but Cameron caught his wrist and hurled him against the wall.

"Where you going, Gantt?"

After a while Lew stopped struggling. He stared at Cameron. The man was calm and friendly. "I know," Cameron said. "You want to run from here to the Pacific. I know how you feel. Put that gun away and sit down there in a chair."

Lew obeyed, gaining control from Cameron's quiet voice. The man in gray went back to the poker table. He scooped Lew's chips into his hat. He stood there a while looking steadily at Confidential Pete, and after a few moments Pete took his hand from his coat pocket and added a fistful of yellow chips to the hat. Cameron found two more in the pocket.

"Them are mine!" Pete protested. Cameron dropped the chips in the hat.

"Interest on a filthy trick," he said. Pete slunk away.

About then Lew heard Hodel curse weakly and say something to Goodwin. A breath of terror went out of Lew.

The sheriff came in with Plug Riddle, the druggist, who was also the doctor for men and horses. A lot of people

streamed in, crowding close to Hodel, then turning to stare in surprise at the boy in the chair by the door.

Riddle said loudly, "If he don't get complications or something, he may be all right in a month or so."

Lew stood up, and his legs held him without shaking. He wanted to tell Hodel he was sorry, but just then Wigram came over, a savage, calculating look on his face. "For a punk button, you sure messed things up, didn't you?"

"He started it."

Wigram turned away and went to the bar. Cameron came up and handed Lew a canvas sack. "Five hundred and twenty-five."

Lew wanted to throw the gold through the window. He wished he had never left home. No matter whose fault this was, it made him sick again to see blood dripping as they carried Hodel out.

Sheriff Nate Springer was a big, slow-moving, chunky man who surveyed everything thoughtfully from green eyes almost buried under his brows. Stump said he got that way from figuring how to stay in office the rest of his life.

"I don't figure to make a fuss," the sheriff told Lew, "but you better come down to the office with me."

Wigram turned around at the bar. "Let's hear what you got to say right here, Springer."

"He said his office." Cameron took Lew's arm and hustled him outside, and a moment later Springer followed, relieved because he had not been forced to argue the matter.

They did not go inside. Springer kept his office neat, and he did not like dirt on the oiled floor or things moved out of place on his desk.

Springer said, "You'd best get on back home right away, Gantt—and stay clear of town for quite a spell."

"What for? I didn't start anything."

"I don't like trouble here."

"It wasn't my fault!" Lew said.

"Nobody said it was. Go on home."

"You want to run me out of town just because I'm only a kid, but you don't say nothing about running the others out because Spur and Fork elect you."

Springer nodded slowly. "That's right, as far as it goes. Also, I don't want to have more grief when some drunk cowboy sees you around and jumps you."

"I'll take care of myself."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Springer said quietly. "Stump Gantt's likely to have enough trouble on his hands, without his son trying to be a gun fighter."

"I don't want to be a gun fighter, and I didn't start anything, so I don't see what right you got to tell me to beat it."

The sheriff looked at Cameron. "It's still the best thing for you, kid."

That was what Lew was mainly tired of, someone telling him what he ought to do.

"You ordering me to go?" he asked.

"No, but I sure suggest it strong." Springer sighed. He turned away and went into his office.

"I wasn't figuring to stay anyway," Lew said to Cameron. "Now I might."

Cameron asked casually, "What are you planning to do with the money?" Lew was still holding the sack.

"Half of it is yours. If you hadn't picked the chips up, I wouldn't have any money at all. And I think you had me beat that first hand I won, when I shoved in everything I had."

"Yes," Cameron said, "I knew you were bluffing." He smiled briefly. "It would have saved a lot of trouble if I'd busted you right there."

"Yeah," Lew said, thinking of the way Hodel had looked on the dirty floor. "I don't much care about this money now."

"I'll be glad to ease half of your conscience."

They went behind the livery stable to divide the gold.

"You drifting out?" Lew asked. He'd go along with Cameron if Cameron asked him. "You won't stand much chance to get a job here now—after siding in with me today."

"You may be right," Cameron said vaguely. "But I thought I'd look the ranches over and see what I could stir up. I sort of like this country."

"Huh! It ain't much."

Cameron gave him a grave look. "Maybe you've lived too close to it to see its good points, Lew."

A short time later Lew watched Cameron ride away on a leggy claybank that was a jim-dandy. Lew thought of old Ranger there in the stable. He had enough money now to make a trade for a good horse, but he hated to part with Ranger. No need to rush things. Maybe later, when Cameron returned from looking for a job nobody would give him, the two of them could ride away together.

Lew put a hundred dollars in the bank. He did not know just why he did, unless it was because Stump was always saying a man ought to save something out of every chunk he made. The banker was glad to take the money. He asked a lot of questions about how Stump was, and you'd have thought old Stump was a big wheel around the valley.

In two days the draw game in the Green Grass took every-

thing Lew had in his pockets. He walked past the bank several times before he went in to get his hundred dollars. The banker was just as polite as before.

When Lew went out the nesters were coming into town. There was quite a bunch of them. Judging from the rifles and shotguns on their wagon seats, a man could say they were ready for trouble if it came.

Lew studied the farmers pretty closely. They were clean, quiet, going about their business as if they figured to be in the country a long time. A few days in Revelation taught Lew that the town was not against the nesters. Maybe the farmers did have some right on their side.

A nester named Cranklow, a rawboned, sun-blistered man with a square jaw, said hello to Lew, and the youth remembered him from the times Cranklow had been to the horse ranch to talk to Stump about grass seed and dams. Cranklow stopped to talk, but Lew just said hello curtly and went on toward the Green Grass.

Lew was pretty lonely right then, and it occurred to him how he would have felt if someone had been short with him for no reason. A lot of people had talked to Lew, but generally only to ask how he had become so fast with a pistol.

He was cleaned out in three hours, losing his last twenty dollars when he tried to run a busted flush past the houseman's two pairs. He was hungry when he reached the street. At noon he had eaten well, but now, knowing he was broke, he was hungry ahead of time. He stood there wondering what his mother would have for supper that night.

Three cowboys from two-bit outfits were lounging at the hitch rail, watching the farmers leaving town in a body.

The devil could take the whole works, he thought angrily. He did not want anything to do with nesters, and cattlemen wanted nothing to do with him since he shot Buck Hodel. The thing to do was get as far away as possible from this two-bit valley and find a good riding job where nobody knew he was Stump Gantt's kid from the west hills, or that he had shot a man. Something deep inside him warned him that he was not thinking straight, but he was too flushed with resentment to pay any attention.

To heck with Smoky Cameron, too. Cameron had taken half of the five hundred and not even asked Lew to ride out with him. Lew Gantt was on his own. He did not owe anyone anything. He could do as he pleased. He was . . .

Pitching hay at a nester place two days later for a dollar a day and all he could eat. The whole deal had been Cameron's idea, after he returned from riding the ranches and reported

no jobs available. Cameron was pitching hay right alongside Lew. The weather held good. For a month they moved from place to place. Lew kept his eyes open and learned a lot.

The last place was Jemmie Cranklow's, on Little Elk, smack in the middle of what had been Spur range. Cranklow had put in a pile of work. He was figuring on planting winter wheat, and building a canal to water his upper eighty.

"This is as good farmland as any in the valley," Cameron explained. "It's even more sheltered." He put up a shock of hay to Cranklow's youngest boy on the rack. "The thing is, these people have made legal filings. Some of the ranchers don't even own the land where their buildings are. Wigram got wise two years ago and protected himself, but Hemphill waited too long. Now he'll have to compromise or lose the very land he lives on."

Lew looked sidewise at Cameron's gray clothes. "You know quite a bit about this valley, don't you?"

"I do." Cameron hoisted a shock that made the fork handle creak. "You favor law, don't you?"

"I guess I do. What happens, though, if there's a big fight?"

"There won't be," Cameron said. "Not on this side of the valley. The farmers are too strong here now."

Lew couldn't seem to get his fork into shocks just right for a long time. Stump had been throwing grass seed around in the west hills since before Lew—or even Marian—was born. He owned rock claims, timber claims, placers, five homesteads that had fizzled—just about everything that was worth a dime over there. Come to think of it, Stump had been building something slowly in the west hills. A man could run cattle there now, not like it used to be on this side, of course, but still the west hills would stand grazing. Spur and Short Fork were already running stuff over there.

The cowmen were beat on this side, but over there—just one man standing between them and all the range.

"My father has got legal claim to everything he holds!" Lew said.

"I know. So have the farmers over this way."

Sheriff Springer had it figured out. That's what he had meant when he said Stump was going to have trouble. Wigram said he had overlooked something, and then he had glanced toward the west hills.

"I was at your father's place after I left Revelation," Cameron said casually. "I never saw so much good solid craftsmanship in everything around there."

"My father does things right!" Lew was darned sure of that now, having seen plenty of work that wasn't done well.

In the shadowy bunkhouse at Stump Gantt's horse ranch the owner and Railroad Costigan looked at each other past a dim lamp on the table between two Walker Colts that were shiny-worn.

Costigan's face was as brown and wrinkled as a frost-rotted apple. "They might be a little afraid of him, Stump. It wasn't luck when he shot Hodel. They might want him out of the way."

"Cameron's with him."

"Cameron has to go prowling at times."

Gantt shook his head. "He's on his own. It's got to be that way. We've got to let him make his own decisions, Railroad."

He shook his head sadly. "I never thought it would come down to this again. I guess I've just been blind to everything you've been doing here, Stump, scattering seed, making those little rock dams. . . . Of course, it's been only the last year or two that the results began to show up."

Stump nodded somberly. "They still call 'em the 'dry hills,' but Wigram and Hemphill have seen, and Springer saw it long ago."

"Springer won't be no help."

Stump smiled. "When did we ever ask the law for help?"

"Maybe I'm getting old," Railroad said. "Maybe I've slipped since I been here, but it seems to me this is one time when the law ought to work. You've spent the best part of your life here, Stump, raising a family, building up a range that no one wanted, putting every dime into developing something. Now—"

"That makes it all the more worth fighting for. I didn't want the fight. I hoped they'd learn from what was happening over east, but now a fight is all that's left."

"Wigram is ordinarily a reasonable man." Railroad picked up the other gun. "Joe Hemphill isn't much on fighting."

"Wigram is desperate now. I offered to lease the west hills. I made him a good offer. Hodel was the one who made him stiffen when he was about to come around. Wigram knows he's been beat over east. He knows it too late, and it rankles all the more to think he let the west hills get away from him. He's carrying Hemphill, too. Joe don't want the fight. Joe was the one who stopped Wigram from burning out nesters years ago, when the cowmen might have made it stick.

"Now Wigram is working on Hemphill by telling him what a terrible mistake that was. They're both ruined unless they get the west hills, and Hemphill's ruined any way you figure it, because Wigram will ease him out later if they win. I've let them run a few cattle over here, Railroad. They let me

take a beef whenever we needed meat. The hides have always been right there on the fence for anyone to see. I got the worst of it, of course, but I wanted to see just how well the west hills would stand up under grazing. They'll stand it, but we'll have to watch the dry years and cut herds—and there will never be a time when my range will stand one third of the cows Spur and Short Fork have."

Costigan picked up both guns. His eyes had a young look in his old, brown face. "A man never changes, Stump. I thought maybe you had, since the old days in Arizona, but you're just the same inside." He scowled. "How about Emily and the kids?"

"Emily got sore when I tried to edge around to sending her away. She knows what we both know, Railroad—nothing is any good to you unless you get it the hard way and hold it the same way against all comers."

Stump hesitated at the door, looking at the warm lights of the house. When Cameron, that young United States Marshal, had been here, he and Marian had looked at each other with the same expression springing in their eyes that Stump remembered from long ago, when he first saw Emily.

Stump looked toward the valley. It was overcast tonight, with a threat of rain, and the lights down there were not visible. Why didn't Lew come back? He must know by now how things were shaping up. But if he did not come back, he was still a boy that Stump Gantt was mighty proud of. Stump's mouth was sort of loose when he thought that perhaps he should have hinted that to Lew now and then, but such things came hard to Stump.

Stump's mouth was tight when he turned again toward the room. "You and me both know how easy it is to stop a fight before it gets started."

Railroad's eyes were wicked and narrow. Both Walkers were in holsters on his hips, and he was standing there with something on his mind that made him look as wound-up and dangerous as he had been in the old days. Stump and Railroad had ridden much of the West together as young men, and Railroad was the only man Stump had ever known who could actually use two guns with quick accuracy. There was a cold spot on Costigan's conscience; he had never worried about killing men who asked for it.

"Yeah," Railroad said. "Blast a rattler's head and all you got left is a lot of sickening twisting and humping. The trouble is all gone."

"Hodel is up and around," Stump said slowly. "He's been making talk about Lew, and about the west hills, too. It

struck me that you might figure to go down and take Hodel and Wigram."

"Did it?" Railroad stood there, thin and wrinkled, wearing the tough, blank look Stump had almost forgotten.

"You wouldn't figure to come clear," Stump said. "You think you've lived a long time, but the older we get the better we like the thought of getting still older. We both want to live to see Lew running this place, see the girls married off to decent youngsters, with you and me having time to fool around with blooded horses, like we've always wanted."

"Sure," Railroad said. "I've thought of all that. I've also thought that we ain't got much chance, waiting for them to come after us."

Stump had never been one to try to make words change facts. He said, "That's right. But we've got to stay with the law all the way. That's the way this place was built, and that's the way I want to leave it. We've got the right to defend ourselves, but we can't go out and start killing before we're attacked."

After a while the tenseness went out of Railroad. He sat down on a bench and he was just an old man wearing two pistols that were out of date. "I wish Lew would come back," he muttered.

"Maybe he will." Stump peered again at dark mist over the valley. He shut the door quietly and went toward the house. Before he crossed the flagstone porch he straightened his shoulders and composed his face, so Odalie, at least, would not know what he was thinking. With him and Railroad gone, Emily would still be in legal possession of most of the west hills. Wigram knew that, and he also knew that women could not run a horse ranch. After doing half his work by violence, Wigram would do the other half legally, letting shock and necessity wear Emily to the point of selling everything at his price.

It was worry about Lew that made Stump feel scared and helpless. They would figure to take Lew first. He went inside. Emily read his face, and then glanced toward the bedroom where Marian was waging a battle to get Odalie down for the night.

"Has the rain start—" Emily asked.

"Pa! Lew's going to bring me a silver-mounted saddle, just my size, and a real Navajo bridle!" Odalie popped out of the bedroom.

"Is that a fact?"

"It ought to be. I've told you about ten times," Odalie said. "When's Lew coming back?"

"When he gets ready. Get to bed, Odie." Stump looked at his wife. "It's fixing to rain, all right."

Blocking the bedroom door, Marian turned her head to look at her parents. There was a starkness in the room as the first drops began to fall.

In the mow of Cranklow's barn Lew shook hay from his blankets and prepared to go to bed. "I'm going home tomorrow," he told Cameron.

Standing by the ladder, fully dressed, Cameron was silent as the rain hit the roof in a steady whisper. Then he said, "It's too far now, Lew, too far across the valley and up through the rocks to the west hills."

"I don't think I get you, Cameron."

"You wouldn't get there, Lew."

After a while Lew asked, "Wigram?"

"In a day or two I'll need your help. We can keep this thing from ever starting, maybe. Will you stay with me, Lew?"

"I don't know what you're going to do." Lew decided he did not know much about Cameron at all. The man had a habit of riding out almost every night, and never saying where he went.

"Believe me, you can help your father more by staying with me and helping me than by getting waylaid on your way home."

"I'll stay two days."

"Wear your gun," Cameron said. He went down the ladder. Ten minutes later Lew heard him head the claybank toward Revelation.

The slender little man rode into the yard while Lew was still eating breakfast. The others had finished, but Lew was having one last stack of pancakes when he heard the man ask, "How do you get to Stump Gantt's place?"

Cameron's voice was casual. "How'd you happen to get so far north of the road, stranger?"

Lew took his gun belt off the peg by the wash bench and strapped it on before he went out. If the man looked at him at all it was merely a side flick of eyes like black chips. "I got off the track last night," the fellow said. "Where at is this Gantt place?"

"What do you want with Stump Gantt?" Cameron asked.

Whew! Cameron sure didn't mind asking personal questions.

The man didn't mind answering either. "That old cutthroat gave me a rasping on a horse I bought from him a few months back. I aim to get some satisfaction."

"You waited quite a while to squawk, didn't you?" Cameron glanced at the man's mount, a deep-barreled bay with a beautiful saddle. "That the horse?"

"Yeah."

Lew was walking forward stiffly, so mad he could hardly see. "You're a dirty liar, mister," he said. "My father never cheated nobody in his life, and you're another dirty liar when you say that horse ever came from his place."

"Easy, Lew!" Cameron said.

It was too late. The man swung his face toward Lew, and the boy got his first full glimpse of the stranger. There was a deadly sort of blankness in the face, a frozen look of concentration in the black eyes. Lew realized he had stepped full-on into something pretty stout. It did not make any difference. Nobody was lying about old Stump while he was around.

"You call me a liar?" the man asked.

"Twice," Lew said. "What do you want to do about it?"

The man stretched thin lips across rows of teeth that were small and brown and strong. "You know I can't take that kind of talk, sonny."

Lew was not angry now. The thing fell into place in his mind. If he had used his head at all a minute before, he would have seen how raw and direct the whole plant was. He ought to back out right now. Native pride would not let him. He sensed that this little man would not make any of Buck Hodel's mistakes.

"Kid . . ." the man said casually, and went for his pistol. It was all too fast for Lew. He saw the fellow's gun come clear. He heard the ear-stunning roar, and saw the man spin clear around and almost fall. And then the stranger was standing there, gray-faced, his gun on the ground, his right arm hanging heavily, with blood sopping all around the elbow.

Cameron's pistol was in his hand, and a cloud of stinking, acrid smoke was drifting away from it. Lew Gantt had not even got his pistol out of the holster.

"It had moss all over it, Martin," Cameron said.

The black eyes glittered in the cold-gray face. "Who are you?" Martin asked. "How do you know me?"

"I'm Smoky Cameron."

"Ah . . ." the fellow said in a long breath. "I can feel a little better about this now." His eyes grew blank. Pain and shock dropped him. His cheek slashed along the hard earth. His hat came off and showed a bald spot at the back of his head. At the wrinkled crook of his right coat sleeve bits of bone from his shattered elbow showed in the bloody fabric.

Lew sensed some of it, just enough to know that he was far out of his class, that years of experience separated him from complete understanding. He knew that he was just a greenhorn who had tried to sit in a high-rolling game. The feeling was heightened when, after Cameron dressed Martin's wound and put him on his horse, Martin went away without another glance at Lew.

Lew heard him tell Cameron, "I sort of got sucked into something, didn't I?"

"You hired out once too often."

It took a good deal of self from Lew's thinking. Sure, they were afraid enough of him to send a killer to drop him and help clear the way to the west hills, but that did not make him feel important. It did not scare him, either. It made him more anxious to go home and ask Stump what he could do to help. Tomorrow his promise to Cameron would be up.

Worry ran the sharp points of restlessness through Lew as he waited for Cameron to return. He offered to start digging the canal for Cranklow.

"Too rainy, Lew," the farmer said. "You just lay low today, and trust your friend."

Cameron came back through the rain that night. He took care of the claybank and ate his supper. He did not have much to say, other than that he had taken Martin to Revelation and turned him over to Sheriff Springer.

"What's the charge?" Cranklow asked.

"No charge. Just holding him. He couldn't go anywhere with that arm, anyway."

Lew felt that a mighty wall of violence was building in the valley, with him not able to understand all the details. When he and Cameron were crossing the rain-greased yard on their way to the haymow, Lew said, "I've decided not to wait the other day. I'm going to start for home tonight."

Cameron did not answer until he was in the mow, struggling out of wet boots. "Tomorrow. We'll win or lose the whole deal tomorrow."

"Is that all you want to say?"

"Yeah."

Lew sat down on his blankets. "Who hired that Martin?"

"I don't know," Cameron said.

It was still raining when they rode out before daylight. Lew figured they would go toward Spur, but they went downvalley instead. Where the roads forked a mile from town, Sheriff Springer was waiting under the cottonwoods. He looked gloomily at water darkening the skirts of his rig, and he showed no enthusiasm for what lay ahead. His slicker rat-

tled as he turned his horse toward Short Fork. There were tracks of five or six horses already in the muddy ruts.

"You were right, Cameron," Springer said. "I got the word that it starts from Short Fork."

"Wigram has got to push Hemphill all the way, but he's pushing a dead horse now. How's Martin?"

"Plug Riddle was taking his arm off when I left. You'd a done him a favor to kill him instead of that."

The Short Fork yard was full of horses. A poker game was going on in the bunkhouse. The four men lounging out of the rain on the wide front porch of the main building paid little attention to the riders drifting in through the misty drizzle until Lew and his companions were right at the gate. Then someone said, "Oh, oh!" and went quickly into the house.

Custer Wigram was on the porch by the time the three dismounted. The bleak planes of his face were white with anger. Hemphill came out and stood beside him. He was a stocky man with a big shoulder reach and a pugnacious face that said he was willing to tackle the devil and give him odds; but that only went as deep as his face, which right now was flushed, and more stubborn than determined.

Buck Hodel and Rip Goodwin, followed by nine or ten others, came from the bunkhouse. Hodel was a little pale, Lew observed, but otherwise he seemed all right.

There ought to have been some better way to get things stopped than this, Lew thought. His stomach felt like it was flat against his backbone.

Cameron went out in front of his horse. "You're not taking a gang to Stump Gantt's today, Wigram—or any other day."

Wigram looked at Springer. "How'd *you* get into this?"

"First, because the U. S. Marshal here asked me; second, because he's right." Springer unbuttoned his slicker. He removed it and let it drop in a stiff heap over a puddle of water. Under his corduroy coat he was wearing an old black sweater, with his gun belt buckled over it, and the trim, curving handle of his .45 right in handy reach.

He looked pretty solid and dangerous, Lew thought, and wished he could make some kind of gesture, too; but all Lew could do was gulp at dry cotton in his mouth and try to hold a poker face.

"You're licked, Wigram," Cameron said. "You know it. To start what you want to start you're going to have to kill us three, and you'll have to do it before Hemphill, a man

who no longer owns a cow or piece of land in the whole valley."

Wigram swung his gaunt head toward Hemphill, who stared at the floor of the porch.

"So that's why you backed out!" Wigram said.

Hemphill raised his head. "By God, I've had about enough of your abuse, Wigram! Sure, I sold out! What right I had from use of the land here I relinquished to four farmers. I told you two years ago we couldn't beat this thing."

"You chicken-livered, gutless—"

"Shut up, Wigram, or I'll knock the blisters off that skinny face of yours!" This was a personal affair now.

Even in his rage Wigram realized that. "What'd you do with your cattle?"

"That's none of your business," Hemphill said.

"Buck Hodel, your own foreman, took an option on them, Wigram," Cameron said. "Does that give you an idea of what might have happened to you, if you'd been lucky enough to grab the west hills?"

All Wigram's rage seemed to evaporate, but it was worse than ever inside him, Lew figured, as he watched the Spur owner pace deliberately from the porch and start toward Hodel.

"Is that the truth, Buck?" Wigram asked.

"Just a minute!" Cameron's voice was a hard crack in the tension as men moved away from Hodel, as Spur and Short Fork began to separate. "Lew here has a little business with Hodel first. Hodel is the one who sent for Trey Martin to come in here and kill Gantt."

Hodel was set like a spring. "That's a dirty lie."

"It all came out of Martin—this morning while Pong Riddle was taking his arm off without chloroform."

Lew saw on Hodel's face that Cameron had bluffed through to the truth. The Spur foreman's mouth loosened. His eyes flicked from side to side. He was alone with hostile men.

"What do you want to do with him, Lew? Cameron asked in a flat tone.

For a moment Lew did not want to do anything, and then he gathered thoughts about Hodel from here and there, and the feel of watching men helped, and he brought everything into a great cold lump that resembled reason, which said that he must kill Buck Hodel in the name of justice.

He started slowly toward Hodel. This second time would be easy. Hodel was scared tight, so desperate that he would try to do everything at one time—and be wild and helpless. Lew Gantt was cold and sure. For the first time he under-

stood the intangible factors that old Railroad Costigan always claimed were the real weights in a pistol scrap—complete disregard for life; don't think, just shoot.

For three slow steps Lew Gantt was as impersonal as death, a stocky youth with a tight mouth and blue eyes knife-cold with blankness. He was geared to kill, and the rest was nothing but obedience. Then he stopped. The reasons he had summoned fell apart before the trapped look in Hodel's eyes. Habit and training made Lew weigh the forces that pushed him. He remembered the fine green lines of evil in Trey Martin's face. A man could become another Martin too easily.

"I think," he said slowly, "you better get clean out of this country for good, Hodel."

"I'll go," Hodel said.

Cameron made a little nod and something quick ran across his face. He was saying that Lew had done the right thing.

Springer's eyes were pale points under the cliffs of his brows. He did not look at Lew. The tension of a waiting mountain sat in Springer, and Lew wondered why the sheriff did not realize that the backbone of the fight was broken.

Wigram said, "The kid is soft, Buck. But I can't let you go."

"Yes, you will," Springer said suddenly. "It's time I got my spoon into this mess. Hodel is drifting. I'm arresting you, Wigram."

Wigram thought a moment. "What for?" he challenged.

The cone of interest now ran its point between the bulky sheriff and gaunt Wigram, but Lew observed that Springer was only half watching Wigram. And then, standing there in the rain beside the tepee of his yellow slicker, Springer drew his gun. The thick fumes of black powder smoke hung in the damp air.

Across the yard Hodel's mouth dropped open. The pistol bearing on Lew fell into a puddle, and then Hodel went down in the mud like a head-shot beef.

Springer looked angrily at Lew. "You can't turn your back on a man like that. Don't you ever learn nothing?"

"I slipped, too," Cameron said.

Wigram only glanced at Hodel. "You can't arrest me, Springer."

"I know it," the sheriff said. "You're bad beat, though. You got your choice of clearing out or going to Stump Gantt on his own terms if you figure to run cows in the west hills."

"Dead as hell," a Short Fork rider said, turning Hodel over.

"I get paid for it," Springer said bitterly. "Let's get out of here."

The sheriff did not like the mud on his floor, or the way

Cameron pushed things aside to sit on a corner of the desk. But he did his best to cover up his feelings. "You put me in for another term, Cameron. Considering the farmer vote that's come in the last two years, I wouldn't have made it this fall."

"Nobody *dragged* you out to Short Fork this morning," Cameron answered.

"Uh-huh," Springer looked at Lew. "I guess I earned my votes all right." In a curiously somber voice he asked Lew: "Do you know what it might have meant if you'd gone over the hump and killed Hodel when you started to?"

"I guessed. It wouldn't have been so good for me."

"Maybe you did learn something down here," Springer said. "Maybe you crossed the line between being a kid and a man. You can go back to Stump now and see how much he's changed."

Cameron's face was dead sober. "You may find that your old man has learned a lot since you been gone."

Springer knew Mark Twain, too, but he had never heard him so aptly quoted. The sheriff forgot the muddy tracks. He made little noise but he was laughing all the way down when Cameron and Lew stepped outside.

"Tell your sis—tell your father—I'll be up in a few days," Cameron said. "Don't forget the rig for that pig-tailed demon. She told me all about it when I was up there. I see just the answer in Bixler's saddle shop every time I go past."

"Yeah. That's where Odalie saw it. I couldn't buy a secondhand saddle blanket now, let alone a silver-trimmed rig."

"Try the bank," Cameron said. "When I start splitting with a man in a poker game I'll know I'm not fit to make an honest living. You must have about two hundred and fifty bucks left." He gave Lew a little shove, and then went back into Springer's office.

For a while Lew stood on the walk with his hat brim drooping lower in the rain. From the corners of his eyes he saw them watching him from inside. It would take a little time to straighten out and sort some of the things which he had learned. But there was no rush.

This rain was going to be mighty good for the grass in the west hills. Lew Gantt went slowly up the street toward Bixler's saddlery.

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