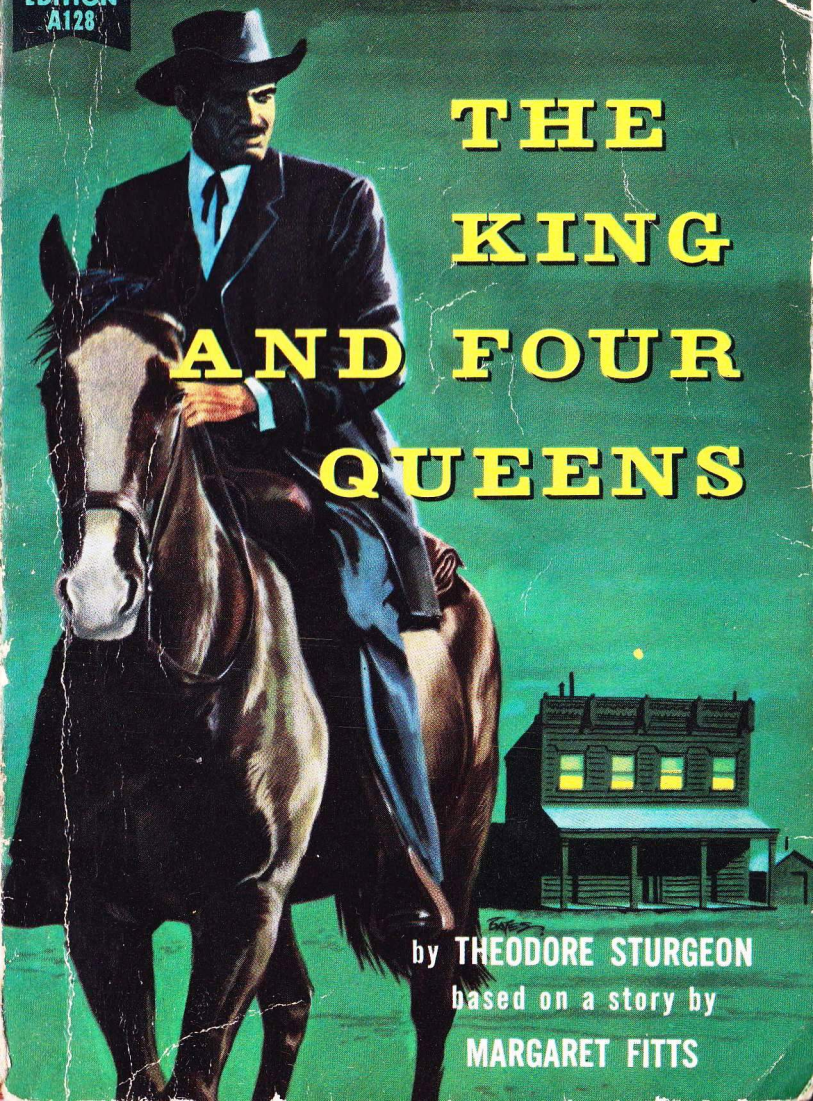
DELL FIRST EDITION A128

He rode with a gun and a silver dollar
the silver dollar was for luck

35¢

THE KING AND FOUR QUEENS



by THEODORE STURGEON
based on a story by
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A DELL FIRST EDITION

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1

"You four stay here," said the sheriff. "Ain't nothin' but a bighorn or a bird'll get out o' this valley without they cross this bridge. Come on, boys."

They came, and still they came, the biggest posse this angry country had ever seen. On foot they came, filed across the bridge, fanned out southeast, southwest, cautiously in the predawn, scanning the high rocky walls for ambush, searching the clotted shadows of the ghost town for the church and its deadly steeple. A breeze sighed down from the high places and whispered in the old burying ground. Something swirled in the river which moated the town. To the east, some white-water chuckled. Nothing moved. Everything was alive and quiet, waiting. The posse crouched, frightened and dangerous. Its quarry crouched, frightened and dangerous.

The posse outnumbered the outlaws just twenty-two to one. But then the outlaws were the four McDades.

"Whatever you do, watch that steeple," said the sheriff to the deputy on his right, who knew the sheriff was talking to himself. Someone scrabbled up on the left. "All across, Tom."

"Good," said the sheriff. He looked into the blackness at either side seeing little or nothing, but knowing that his men were deployed from river bank to river bank on this tongue of land with the bridge at its tip behind them, and that they faced this box in the land with its floor a ghost town and its thousand-foot sheer walls

somber crag. "We'll sit tight till we get a little daylight. Just enough to move without fallin' over each other. I'll whistle. We'll take the church first an' then go on to the hotel, an' search every damn last shack an' outhouse on the way. Got it?"

"Gotcha, Tom," said the voice on the left. "I'll pass the word," muttered the man on the right, and scrambled off.

They waited forty minutes. Not a long time, but the longest stretch of time any of them had ever lived through.

Tom Larrabee whistled one note, high and steady. It was still black dark, but somehow there was a skyline now, there were blacker-than-black masses which were houses and sheds and men on the move. By the time they got to the church they could almost see details: the collapsed roof, the broken door. The sheriff stopped the line there and straightened it while he and three others went inside and blundered around in the dark until they found the belfry ladder. They inched up, one step, listen, one step, listen, *"Shut up down there!"* and listen again to their own breathing. There was no one at the top. There was no one anywhere in the church.

Outside again, Larrabee said, "Might've known. They always got someone up there to shoot any man tries the bridge. But not when they can't see to shoot."

"I don't think it's that," said a deputy. "I think if there was one of us, two, they'd be somebody up here whatever. I think they know we're here. I think they know anybody waitin' in the belfry might get three, four of us but that's all, we got 'em boxed. Matt McDade, he's the biggest damn fool of all four of the McDades, but I don't think even he's that much of a damn fool."

"You think a whole lot," said Tom Larrabee. "Let's go."

The thin line of men advanced on the town, to be combed out by two streets and three alleys. Every paintless store, shed, house and outhouse fit to hide anything bigger than a coyote got searched, while the men in the open waited outside to re-form the line and keep it straight. It was slow work. When they were past the town and had nothing but the hotel to get to, they knew that if the four McDades were hiding here at all, they hadn't been hiding in anything they'd passed so far.

The sky was bright now, and a help to them, though the rocky box they crawled in was still in the mountain's shadow. The hotel and its horse barn, over by the river, were all they had left to search. "They ain't here," mumbled the deputy who thought a whole lot. "By God they kep' us up all night and got us scared o' ghosts, an' they ain't even here."

"Feel a little like I went up ten steps of a nine-step flight," admitted the sheriff; and just then the dust spouted four inches in front of his left boot, followed in a split second by the whip-crack of a Winchester.

The sheriff found himself in a spraddled crouch, aching with shock and tension, looking at the rifle in the arms of a leather-faced woman on the front stoop of the hotel. He looked to right and left, and saw that his carefully planned line was gone. Men were prone. Men were suddenly out of sight. Here and there men were crouched as he was, motionless because they didn't know which way to jump.

"Get off my land, Tom Larrabee."

"Shore, Miz McDade," said the sheriff. He looked down at his right hand and saw with genuine surprise that his gun was in it. "Like to take your boys along with us, though."

"They ain't here."

"Like to look around."

"Get."

The sheriff sighed and holstered his gun. He stood for a moment looking at the woman, the brown shawl over her shoulders, her old-fashioned black woolen skirt and white shirtwaist, the gleaming weapon she held so lightly in her hard old hands.

He began to walk toward the hotel, not hurrying. Behind him there was a sound like lazy fingernails dragged over a washboard as a dozen or more guns were cocked. In front of him the Springfield came up all of a piece, stock to the brown shawl and the bead on his heart. "That's all, Tom," she said into the thick silence.

He slowed a little, but did not stop. "Do a thing like that, Miz McDade, and you'll be dead before you can drop that rifle, an' you know that's so." Behind him there was a scurry of feet, and the rifle spat. He felt the bullet split wind three inches away from his left ear. The running feet stopped.

"I'll talk with you, then," she said, her voice not unlike that of her rifle. "But keep them others where they're at."

He turned to look. The man who had tried to back him up lay on his face in the dirt thirty feet away. As the sheriff looked at him he climbed to his feet, banged his hat on his knee, put it on and sheepishly brushed at dust. The sheriff said mildly, "I didn't tell you to rush, Smalltown."

The deputy looked foolish. "I just thought—"

"Thinkin' again," said Larabee, wagging his head. "Just get back now. Pass the word to keep that line. If I happen to go inside an' y'all cluster around, them McDades'll walk right on by you an' out."

"If they're here," said the woman.

"If they're here," acknowledged the sheriff. He walked up to the hotel steps.

"Far enough," said Mrs. McDade. "I can hear you real good from right where you're at."

The sheriff put one foot on the bottom step and regarded her. "I got no quarrel with you, Miz McDade. Yet. Let's don't start one."

"Fine."

"I got to hunt them boys of yours."

"You been," she grunted, indicating the ghost town with a small movement of her head. "Find 'em?" And she grinned briefly.

"I got to hunt them boys," said the sheriff again doggedly. He thumbed at the hotel. "Here, too. I got to do it an' I'm goin' to. I'd ruther do it peaceable, but I'm a-goin' to do it."

"What you mean, peaceable?"

"I tol' you. I got no quarrel with you."

"What about the gals? I got Prince's wife here, an' Matt's, and Roy's. I don't fix to stand by and see 'em mauled by that Valley riffraff."

"It'll be hands off."

She puckered her eyes to read his face with care. Abruptly she nodded. "The boys ain't here, so no harm to anyone if you look. You ain't fixin' to march the whole Union Army through here?"

The sheriff turned. "Smalltown! Git five more an' come on here to search this hotel. The rest of you stay put till we're done or till you hear shootin'." He turned back to the woman. "That suit you, Miz McDade?"

In answer she let the Springfield drop, its stock on the porch floor by her foot. The sheriff waved and six watchful deputies shambled across the yard, guns in hand. They clattered up the steps, eyeing the rifle. Larrabee knew they were wondering why he didn't disarm the woman, and wearily decided not to explain to them that this was no time for an argument about whether or not they should be disarmed as well. Ma McDade would sure put one up, too. "You get on inside, split up and go over the place. You know who you're lookin'

for. If you lay a finger on anyone else, you'll answer to me." They growled and grumbled, but in they went. "After you, ma'am," said the sheriff, nodding at the door.

Mrs. McDade hesitated, reading his face again, then shrugged and went inside, carrying her rifle slanted down from the crook of her arm in that knowledgeable way known to the snapshooter. The sheriff followed her and stood just inside the door.

The last of the search party was disappearing up the stairs. He heard someone clumping around in the back. He drew a deep breath and met, head on, the hate-filled gaze of the three young women who sat in the lobby.

The Mexican girl was Matt McDade's Ruby; knowing the big man and what he liked, the sheriff could see why. The blonde with the frizzed hair and the cold green eyes was Prince's wife. He didn't know Prince but he knew her. "Hi, Birdie."

"Don't talk to me," she spat. The last time he had seen her was as the head of a delegation which gave her twelve hours to leave town.

He shrugged and looked at the other girl, the child. She couldn't be seventeen yet. This had to be Oralie, Roy's new wife. He shook his head slowly, pityingly. She lowered her eyes.

He said, "Boone not married up yet?"

"That's Boone's business," said the old woman icily.

There was nothing he could say to that. They endured the strained silence for an endless moment, while the clumpings, bumpings, openings and slammings of doors around the old building served only to make the silence thicker. Finally, just to be saying something, Tom asked, "What in tarnation did you buy out this no-good land-title for, Miz McDade?"

"I could get it for next to nothin', is all. Can raise

chickens here."

"Last I heard, a man who knew his way around here could raise a hundred thousand dollars in other people's gold dust."

"That's a lie!" snarled Mrs. McDade.

The sheriff shrugged, and just then all hell broke loose.

"The barn! The horse barn!" Somebody upstairs bellowed from near a rear window. There was a rattle of firing from behind the hotel, answering shots from near by. There were shouts, running footsteps.

Two of the girls screamed. White-faced Birdie said, "That fool, that damn fool Prince, ruther shoot at a posse than live."

"The barn, huh," grunted the sheriff as his men came pounding down the stairs. "Sorry, ma'am," and he had the Springfield before she could part her lips. For a big man, Tom Larrabee could move amazingly fast.

"Holed up in the barn—they know it all the time," said Smalltown unnecessarily.

"Get out there," said the sheriff. "Try to hold some o' that line, in case they try to slide through. Packy, Fellowes, you two step out on the porch a minute till I call you. You others go with Smalltown. Get!"

They tumbled out. In what he was about to do, Larrabee had already decided where to start. "On your feet," he told the startled Oralie, and before she could draw a whole breath he had gone over her body with quick competent hands, front, back, sides, and with a shove headed her into the little room behind the clerk's desk. It was an interior room with no windows where the safe once stood. "Inside!"

"I told you hands off—" began Mrs. McDade furiously.

"Shut up!" he snapped. "That was before," and dove for Birdie as she began to stoop. He caught one wrist

and bent it around behind her, twisting until her body began to arch backward. Without hesitation he plunged his free hand up inside her skirt and withdrew the snub-nosed double derringer he—and a lot of her old acquaintances—knew was strapped to her thigh. He marched her to the room where Oralie cowered and spun her inside. She spat in his face. He ignored it and turned to Ruby. She rose slowly from the bench and stood with her feet apart, her arms out from her sides, and her head high. As he touched her, her black eyes half closed and she said in a throaty half whisper, "My Matt, he weel keel you for thees." He finished with her; she was unarmed. He thumbed at the clerk's room and she ambled over to it, swinging her hips.

He turned to Mrs. McDade. "Wouldn't you do the same, you was me?"

In answer she put one hand inside her shirtwaist and withdrew a sheath-knife, which she threw scornfully at his feet. She turned her back on him and marched to the clerk's room, banging the door behind her.

"Fellowes! Packy!" The two on the porch returned, glancing longingly across the porch as a new burst of gunfire was hurled back and back again from the cliffs around them. "They're in there," he rapped, pointing to the closed door. "One of you put a chair against it and set. Don't open it and don't do nothin' to 'em except throw 'em back in there if they pops out." They nodded and he flung himself out the front door. He felt he had chosen well; both guards were newly married.

Once outside, he cursed. Of his carefully planned cordon, there was no sign. As he had known they would, his men had stampeded to the horse barn and surrounded it. For a moment he fooled with the idea of running back to the bridge to warn the four there

to keep an extra sharp eye out for anyone slipping through or floating down river right under their feet, but shook his head and turned his back on both idea and bridge. The bridge guards were supposed to be doing just that.

Up at the barn, which perched on the second of two knolls behind the hotel, the ground was dotted with men—men prone behind small boulders, men in the long grass, men cleaving to the corner posts of the corral, peering out of the saddle shed. A haze of gunsmoke hung low on the scene.

The sheriff emerged from the back of the hotel, took in the scene in a flash and shrank back under cover of the kitchen corner. Then, running doubled up and zigzagging a bit, he made it to the saddle shed. He found two men beside it and three inside. "Where's Smalltown?" he gasped, just as Smalltown ran up from his cover behind the corn crib, having seen Larrabee coming.

"They really in there?"

"It ain't Comanches."

"I mean all four of 'em?"

"I think so. They got a big root cellar dug out; they can cover all four sides right at ground line. I think they all *got* to be there. I don't think two men could run that fast, to cover all sides that way. How many we got—eighty-five men? Ninety? I think they could stand off nine hundred in there. I think—"

"Anybody hurt?"

"Couple. Not too bad, I don't th—"

"Who found 'em?"

"Nobody. I mean, they found Long John. He been through the barn already, what do you think about that? An' he's on his way out, never thinkin' there even was a root cellar. An' somebody snaps a shot at him, he says, just while he's trippin' over a rock. Slug

takes him through the shoulder. From behind. I think they're loco."

"That had to be Prince McDade. Ruther shoot a posse than live," said the sheriff, knowing he was quoting. "Light a fire."

"What?"

"Get a fire goin'. Some place where the cover is good. I'll guarantee you they'll really cut loose when they figure what we're up to."

"Oh," said Smalltown. "Fire, huh?"

Larrabee sighed and trotted out to the southeast. Lead whined past his head and sprayed dust in his eyes as he made it to the tall bank by the corn crib. He worked away from the barn until he found a dry wash, and moved up it and around the knoll until he was on the opposite side. Twice he met deputies and gave his orders.

The way the land lay, the barn was higher than the ground around it on three sides and level on the fourth. Right by the northeast corner was a stack of baled straw, typical of such a place owned by men who bought their fodder and bedding rather than cut it themselves. Hard by the bales the big door was open, yawping at the valley walls like an astonished mouth. Again Larrabee gave his orders, and this time a runner backtrailed the way the sheriff had come with a message for the men on the hotel side. Larrabee, meanwhile, with the eager help of the men around him started still another fire.

In less than fifteen minutes, nine faint blue columns of smoke rose into the daybreak all around the barn. At last the runner's message took effect, and the gunfire on the hotel side increased until, with the echoes and re-echoes, the valley sounded like Bull Run.

"I'll go," said Smalltown. "I think you—"

But he was already talking to thin air. Larrabee had waited only until the fusillade at the front caused a

dwindling in the answering fire on this side, as the outlaws rushed to counter whatever offensive it was that was making all the noise. The sheriff sprinted straight from his cover to the straw bales, not bothering to zigzag or stoop. Ten seconds, twelve, and he was crouched by the bales. In his hand was a cluster of flaming faggots. One, two, three, four he lobbed through the doorway, into the stalls, high up into the haymow. He drew his knife and jammed it behind the baling wires, cut one, cut two, broke the blade on the third. From the loosened bale he dragged out straw, throwing and scattering it. Into it he jammed his last torch. He sprang clear, and keeping the bulk of the bales between himself and the barn, ran straight back toward Smalltown and his fire. Almost there, he flung himself sidewise and down. Three bullets punched dirt. He sprang at the dust they kicked up, and more lead thunked into the dirt where he had just been. His next leap carried him over the brow of the knoll and, but for Smalltown's shoulder, would have landed him in his own bonfire. He fell to the ground beside it, and for a time did not even try to get up.

The firing ceased. That, somehow, was noisier than anything.

When he had his breath, Larrabee got to his knees. Smalltown said, "I think that'll smoke 'em out."

The sheriff crawled to the brow and peered over. The inside of the barn was full of smoke, and here and there on the east pitch of the roof a separate shingle was framed with a bubbling curl of it.

"Wonder if they can smell it in the root cellar yet," said Smalltown, crawling up beside him.

The sheriff hitched himself a little higher, propped himself on his elbows, and cupped his hands around his mouth. "You McDades!" he bellowed. The echoes caught his voice, batted it back and forth, higher and

fainter. "Throw down your guns and come out!"

They answered promptly, with a crackle of guns. The shots were fanned, and therefore wild at that range. But it was an answer.

"All right then," said the sheriff. He said it quietly, not to the McDades or Smalltown, but to himself. He slid backward just far enough so he could still see through the hilltop grassroots, and watched fire tracing the lines of pitch on the sheathing under the shingles. And suddenly it wasn't a shingle roof any more; it was a bed of flame. They began to hear it.

There were no more shots.

When the ridgepole went and the roof fell in, the sheriff sighed and said to Smalltown and another man, "Cut round the south side, Harry. You go around the north. Pass the word to lay low until I signal. A whistle they might not hear on the other side, an' shots might not mean nothin' at the time. Tell you what, a Reb yell. Anyone hears it, yell too. That'll get around fast enough. Then charge in, from every place at once. It's goin' to cost us; but if that cellar's braced good enough it might take us a week to dig 'em out."

"I heard that yell o' yours," said Smalltown. "I think it's the noisiest noise I ever did hear, and what with these echoes, I think—"

"Think while you're runnin'," said the sheriff. "Get."

To right and left, here and there he could see men. He could see when they got the word because they would back down, get smaller, hunker out of sight. He waited ten minutes, and saw the north wall tip and fall inside, sending a great shower of sparks up into the windless dawn.

Still he waited. He had seen a lynching once and never wanted to see another. He had a secret: he had seen a lawful posse shoot down men who deserved it, and his secret was that that made him feel just as bad

as he had felt at the lynching. He liked to bring in his man and turn him over to a judge and a jury when the time came. That freed him and still finished the job. Any other way wasn't good enough. It made him feel that there must have been a better way only he'd been too dumb to think of it.

He opened his mouth to give them one more warning and closed it again; they'd never hear him now. The fire had taken on that deep roar like a flash flood on the way, like summer thunder in canyon country; and for the McDades, squatting right under it, it must fill the world.

So he filled his lungs and gave his yell till his throat hurt.

And nobody heard it.

For a split second the barn seemed to be swelling but staying intact, like a growing soap bubble. Then it was gone, simply not there any more; instead there was a ball of heat, solid as an orange and too bright to believe. In the flick of time it took to see it, it was followed by a concussion that drove the air out of his lungs in one great hoarse bleat, slammed his face into the dirt.

He thought he would never again be able to drag air into his lungs. His ears were roaring before he could, and even when he could the roaring continued. He struggled to his knees and looked around him. The mountains all about were answering that incredible blast with a voice of their own—rock slides, rumbling and growling and throwing their hiss and shatter back and forth from wall to rock wall. In the high air, like motes in a sunbeam, frightened birds wheeled and screamed.

The barn was gone. A lake of flame had taken its place. Bolts, burning chunks of beam and planking, scraps of harness and harness metal fell all about him.

He stood up in it and absently slapped at a glowing hole in his shirtsleeve. He began to walk to where the barn had been, stumbling as in a trance. From all around the hotel buildings men emerged, sleepwalking toward that raging center.

They couldn't get very near it. They stood around it helplessly for a long time, drawing near to each other in small clumps on the land, not saying much, just watching.

At last the sheriff turned away from that speck of hell and trudged back to the hotel. The back wall was a row of blind eyes, all the windows and frames blown inward. The roof was bald sheathing with here and there a scab of crumpled shingle.

Larrabee walked up the steps heavily, like a man with a corpse on his back. The door to the clerk's cubby stood open. Fellowes was gone. Packy was gone. He didn't blame them, and wouldn't. A man just had to go look at a thing like that.

The four women were in the lobby. In a strange way he could tell which of them had gone to look—outside, upstairs—and which had not. The two who had not were in each other's arms, crying. Ruby was crying grief. Oralie was crying fright. Oralie was crying for what might happen now. Ruby was crying for what had happened.

Birdie wasn't crying. She looked him right in the eye like a man and said, "You son of a bitch."

Ma McDade said, "You're proud o' yourself."

Larrabee shook his head. He had to try twice to get his voice to working again. "No, ma'am. By God, I ain't. You got to understand this, once an' for all. Them boys killed themselves. I called them out an' they wouldn't come. I wanted them alive, maybe as much as you did. I'd 'a' shot one of my own deputies tried to hurt 'em, once I had 'em. They killed them-

selves when they wouldn't come out." He drew a deep breath. "They killed themselves first time they robbed a stage. They done it when they blown up the Langaway Bank. They killed themselves for each one o' the twenty-three men they sent to the grave. Don't hang it on me, Ma'am. I carry enough."

"I'd like to call ye a liar, Tom Larrabee." He could barely hear her. Suddenly in her normal voice she demanded, "What you going to do?"

"Do? Well, you answer me first what *you're* goin' to do. I already got my plans. *How* I do what I got to do depends on you."

"What I do is my business."

He sighed. "Chicken farming?"

"What's it to you?"

"Just this. Things is different now than before. I figured to get some help from your boys in the little matter of that hundred thousand or so worth of gold they got cached some place."

"Fat chance!"

"I got to hunt that gold, Miz McDade. I got to hunt it and find it if it means tearin' every board in this town away from every other board. I got eighty-eight men out there with the same idea. If you're fixin' to stay here in Wagon Mound you'll want a roof over your head. Mind, I still got to go through this place like brook water through a gold pan. Difference is, you want me to slit the mattresses up a seam or take 'em out in the yard an' kick 'em to pieces?"

"Why are you takin' that kind of trouble over us?"

"Ain't 'us.' Just you. I had enough o' the four McDades. I reckon you have too. I don't think you asked for—" He waved his hand toward the back, where all her life lay in the flaming crater. "You stuck with it. You come out the other side. I tol' you before, I got no quarrel with you."

"By God, I do," said Birdie between her teeth. As before, no one paid her the slightest attention.

"Well, all right," whispered Ma McDade. "If I didn't krow before what to do, I know now. I'd like to say thanks, Tom Larrabee, but I don't think I could choke it out."

"That's all right," he said, and quietly he walked out.

2

IN THE LATE AFTERNOON the mountain walls which had shut away the morning blazed like the fire; but the fire was done. They poked through it with sticks; they wore coats over their faces to get close enough and ran back to breathe.

They found a body.

It had lain on the cellar earth while the heavy beams and sleepers above flamed and charred. Hours. The clothes were gone, the hair, the fingers. The eyes had boiled away.

They found another, curled up like an unborn babe. It was even worse.

The third one must have been under the dynamite when it blew—under all the sticks and caps and powder left by the mines when the veins ran out.

The fourth wasn't—

It just wasn't there at all.

It was black dark when the sheriff went to the hotel to tell the mother. He stood at the foot of the steps, trying to get words out and string them in the right order when she spoke to him out of the dark. "Come on up."

He clumped up the steps and took his hat off. Ma McDade was sitting in a rocker on the porch looking down the valley toward where the bridge was and the great shoulder of mountain that rose beyond it. He told her what they'd found. She didn't say anything. He found

her hand in the dark and gave her the two plugged silver dollars he had picked up. Each McDade had one on a string around his neck. They would make fine souvenirs now. He was surprised he had found two. She took them and thumbed them and put them away. She still didn't say anything.

He sat down on the top step and let some time pass. Then he said, "They're out by the old buryin' ground. Couple of the boys give up their blankets. Your—your sons need 'em more'n we do."

She didn't say anything to that either, and he wondered if she understood. "What I mean," he said with difficulty, "you won't want to look at 'em. It wouldn't—tell you a thing, one from the other."

"I'm their mother," she said at last.

"I don't care!" he shouted. "Dammit, ain't you got enough to remember about 'em?"

"All the same," she said, "I got to."

"All right. Want we should dig?"

"We'll take care of our own."

"I'm sorry I cussed just then," he said, and stood up.

"Tom—"

He waited for such a long time that he decided he might as well sit down again. At last she said, "You really mean to get that gold— It means that much?"

She's going to tell me, she's going to tell me, he thought. He said, "Ma'am, not a grain o' that dust ever did a particle of good for a McDade."

"You been about as kind as you could, Tom Larrabee."

He snorted so hard he had to take out his bandanna and wipe his lip. He looked away into the darkness, at the flickering eyes of his posse's campfires scattered in the flat land out past the church.

High in the air something flamed white, shaded to red, and was gone.

"What in tarnation was that?" he asked.

For the first time the gentle rocking of her chair had ceased. It was replaced by an incredible, unbelievable sound.

Ma McDade was crying.

Embarrassed, he rose and tiptoed down the steps, wanting to get a way from that.

"Sheriff!" It was her regular voice, thickened only a little. "This is my land," she said. "Once you're off'n it, I tell you here and now that any man sets foot across that bridge is gettin' one shot for warning and one to kill him, right close together."

"That's your right," he said.

"You can look all you want tomorrow. You been—kind—an' I'll let you look wherever you want. But I tell you straight, you won't find no hundred thousand dollars in dust in this valley."

"I got to look."

"Now I'm a-goin' down to the church to toll my bell for my boys."

"It's late, ma'am. Dark."

"I know the way."

"You got to?"

"I got to."

"I'll have to go with you."

"No!" When he did not speak or go away, she said with anguish in her voice, "Why do I always got to see it my way and your way, too?" Then she came down the steps.

They went away through the dark. She gave him an end of her shawl to hold and went on ahead quickly. When they got to the church he stayed down below. She climbed the old ladder and found the rope and tolled for her sons. Not too much.

3

THE NEXT DAY the posse tore the town apart, all but the hotel. They left that wrecked. It was the most orderly wreck anybody ever left, but it was a wreck for all that. One hundred thousand in dust is a fair-sized package, which is all that saved the building. They didn't find it or any part of it.

With the rest of the town they were not careful. They stayed a second night and left late on the third day. It rained while the women were digging. They kept at it and accepted no help. Ma McDade looked into all three blankets and said not one word to anyone for a long time.

The days went by, the weeks. Larrabee didn't sleep right. Something just around the corner of memory bothered him. He thought for a while it was that moment of conviction he had had: *She's going to tell me,* but in time he realized it wasn't that. That was only part of it. He lived over and over that moment in his mind instead of sleeping right.

And one night he sat up in bed and grunted. He closed his eyes and put himself back again in his mind to that night when he sat on the porch looking out at the blackness and his fires out on the flat.

And then that light in the sky.

Sky?

The skyline from that little pocket in the earth was

almost over your head. That light came from the mountain across the river.

Then what, after the light?

Then he had lost the feeling, *she's going to tell me.*

Then she had cried.

That had shocked him so because a woman who had lived with the amount of grief she had had is immune to grief. Rather, she contains it. What else would she cry for then?

Yes, cry and then run to ring the church bell "for her sons."

And only three bodies.

Suppose, now, just suppose the light was a familiar signal and the bell a familiar answer. What would it tell her?

What would it tell her that would so shake her she would cry?

"By *God!*" the sheriff shouted, and shocked his wife awake. He put on his pants and went downstairs away from her questions to think some more.

Only three bodies.

Which one got away?

He laughed mirthlessly at that one. To him it wouldn't matter, not a damn. To others it would. To a couple of widows and a wife it would matter. Some day a McDade would be back to claim one of the three. Or if it was Boone McDade, probably to kick all three out. And it would matter to Ma McDade, which one got away.

At this point he swore never to fret again about Ma McDade's worries. Or anybody else's, if he could help it.

But what could he do about it?

He put on his sheepskin against the early morning cold and got his horse and set out.

It took him till mid-morning to get to the mountain.

He didn't go near Wagon Mound itself. He climbed the mountain which overlooked the river, the bridge, the ghost town. He saw a curl of smoke from the hotel chimney. He saw the battered steeple sticking up out of the valley floor like a wooden matchstick dunked out in dirt. He sat on the mountain and figured the altitude of that flare of light he had seen; then he turned the figures upside down and worked it from here. After a time he tethered his horse and began casting back and forth down the face of the mountain.

He found it.

You couldn't call it a cave. Too small for that. There was a ledge sticking out over sheer nothing, and an overhang, and then this deep hole. It slanted upward so water would never drain in.

He knelt and reached cautiously inside, and for a moment his heart leaped so he could hardly breathe. *The gold, the gold!* But it wasn't. It was a nail keg. It was half full of oiled-silk packages, fifteen or sixteen of them. Each was full of black powder—eight to ten ounces—enough to charge a cannon, or split a boulder, or, if poured on a flat rock and lighted, to give a white flash dying to red.

He put the pouches back in the keg and the keg back in the hole. He squatted on his heels for a moment thinking, and then lay down on his stomach and hung his head over the edge. He grunted. Far below him he saw treetops. One was a gnarled Engelmann spruce, and caught in its needles he saw two tattered yellow patches.

Sure. Empty a pouch, set your signal, fire it. A man wouldn't be thinking of little things at a time like that. He'd have the empty pouch in his hand and he'd just naturally toss it out to the wind. Who'd ever find it? And if anyone did, way down there, what could it mean to him?

He climbed back to his horse, and started back to town.

What to do?

First of all, watch Wagon Mound.

Then what? Suppose he rode in there with a posse and ran those women out of there? He shook his head. Those women were bait. The McDade, whoever he was, had two good reasons to go back. The wife, the mother. He shook his head again. A McDade might risk his neck for gold, but not for love, he thought cynically.

For gold?

The gold wasn't there. He'd swear to that.

Well, if it wasn't there, what would keep those women in Wagon Mound? Ma might stay there, wait out the rest of her life for her son. But the others? Oralie, so very young. And that Ruby, she'd have to have a pretty powerful reason to stay in a henhouse away from some sort of rooster. Birdie, too, a honky-tonk girl.

So—watch 'em. If they stayed, it could only mean one thing—the gold was there, but they didn't know where. The missing McDade would have to come back and get it and his wife. Unless it was Boone. He hadn't heard of Boone marrying. If the girls left, any or all of 'em, then the gold wasn't there; or it was there and they didn't know about it. If Ma McDade stayed on alone, it might mean the gold was there but probably not; probably she'd just be waiting, and she'd have a hell of a wait.

If the gold was there—wouldn't they whack it up and get out?

Not with Ma sitting on it. She'd kill anyone, even the girls, if they even thought about taking her lost boy's gold before he came for it—if only because she would know, way down deep, that it was the only

thing that *would* bring him back.

Which brought up the idea that Ma knew where it was, and the girls didn't. He didn't know about the child Oralie, but the other two would be ready to kill for it in about three months, if only to get out of that ghost town.

Has to be, has to be, he muttered intently. Ma knows where it is, and the girls don't. She'll sit on it, and she'll sit on those girls to be sure that whoever it is comes back will have his gold and his girl—intact.

Has to be. When she thought they were all dead, didn't she just about hand it over?

Take a posse in again, and this time *find* it.

Yes, and never catch that fourth McDade.

There's got to be a way to take both.

He was down from the mountain now and idling along the trail back to town. A patch of dust far ahead became a horseman coming to meet him. He straightened up in the saddle and came back to earth.

He was wrong. It wasn't a horseman.

When he was a diffident kid, there was one variety of female he kept away from—the ones who were so beautiful they scared him. It wasn't that he didn't want them; it was just that he honestly couldn't see what they'd want him for. He really and truly felt he wasn't good enough for them; and this doomed him from the start. He hadn't changed.

This one rode astride, easily. She had a tall pile of red hair under a dinky, pretty little green hat, a dark green jacket and split skirt that fit her just so. She had long green eyes and that kind of skin you sometimes see on redheads but not often. To complete his inner panic, she looked him up and down fearlessly and smiled the kind of smile that, like a bright light, makes a man squinch up his eyes.

" 'Morning," she said, reining in. He nodded be-

cause that was as much as he could do at the moment. He hoped his star gave him a certain amount of standing and then realized he'd left it on his shirt, and that was hanging over the foot of his bed. He had his sheepskin on over his long johns and he had his pants on; but he felt just as bad as if he'd left them home, too. "Am I going right for Wagon Mound?"

"Wagon Mound?" he echoed stupidly.

She laughed musically. "Every time I ask anybody about Wagon Mound they always say it right back at me, just the way you did."

"You better watch yourself, goin' to Wagon Mound, ma'am. They like to shoot you first and then ask your name."

She laughed again. "They all say that too." She sobered. "They won't shoot *me.*"

"Why not?"

"It's my home." The self possession left her for a split second, to be replaced by a flash of uncertainty, of helplessness that twisted something inside him, made him catch his breath. The sad, stiff smile that followed it made him want to get down, unsaddle her horse and put the saddle on his own back. "The only home I've got—now."

"You're not—"

She nodded. "Sabina. Sabina McDade."

"Boone's wife. You—you got some bad news coming to you, Ma'am."

"I've had the bad news. That's why I'm here. Boone's poor mother, she's all I've got, now that—that—"

Oh, my God, he thought, *don't cry. I couldn't stand it.* Then she cried, and he couldn't stand it.

"I'm sorry," she said brokenly, and dabbed at her eyes with a silly little scrap of lace. "I've got to be braver than *that,*" she told herself aloud. Then she smiled at him. It hit him just like the crying.

"Maybe you better not go out there, ma'am," he said earnestly. "It's rough out there, and those folks—Well, you'd be better off if you didn't," he finished lamely.

"I've got to," she said fiercely. "If it's the last thing in the world I do, I've got to. I promised him that if—if ever— Well," she said brightly, "here I am and here I go. What's your name?"

"Jones," he said unhesitatingly.

"Well, good-by, then, Mr. Jones, and thank you for listening to a silly lonesome girl. Maybe I'll see you again one day."

The very thought, and all that went with it, made it impossible for him to answer. He saluted feebly and she smiled and cantered off.

He was almost back to town before he recovered sufficiently to think. His first coherent thought was deep and basic to his problem. What would bring her here? What would keep her?

He made a mighty effort and dragged back his new cynicism. It hurt, but he did it.

If the four wives—the three widows and a wife—stayed in that rat hole, the gold was there.

If the gold was there, McDade would be back.

He passed the word. Deputies spent time out that way. Men found the hunting good out toward Wagon Mound. Indian boys got promises of fabulous rewards, and the woods were full of them.

The weeks went by, and the months went by.

Ma McDade began coming in twice a week on a buckboard with eggs and fowl.

The girls stayed. All of them.

Hit and miss, one way or the other, Wagon Mound was watched. Most of the time.

A sometime deputy got drunk in the saloon one night and couldn't pay for his last drink. Only then did the missing plugged silver dollar show up. It stayed in the till as a souvenir of the four McDades. It was shown. It was famous. It was legend.

The months went by, and the years. Two years.

4

DAN KEHOE rode into Touchstone a little before noon on a hot September day, looking as if he was glad to see the place. Anyone who ever entered Touchstone feeling that way was glad for his own reasons, Touchstone itself being a run of the mine sheep and prospectors' town, a little shabbier than most, spit on by cattlemen and monotonously cursed by visitors and residents.

He had a good horse and a fine tooled saddle and a plaited rope, and a gun he was proud of. He had a little more linen in his shirt than a working man ought to, and hands a little tougher than a card sharp's. He carried a good deal more than the price of a meal in his jeans, and a good deal less than the price of a ranch. He had two deep creases across his brow, put there by curiosity, and a deep one vertically between his eyes, put there by a ready anger. He had a crisp straight mustache and good teeth. He hadn't been called "kid" for a lot of years, and it would be a lot of years before anyone called him "Pop." If he lived. He was so neat and all of a piece that a man might look twice at him from close up to realize that the dust, the blue-black stubble-shadow on his chin, and the dogged gait of his horse all meant that this man had been on the trail all night or most of it.

Touchstone stands on high ground; and as he entered it he stopped and half turned, narrowed eyes looking back along the winding trail, finding it again

on a distant mountain shoulder and again to the east as it stitched its way across the foothills. Satisfied, he rode down the main street, his head high and his face forward but his eyes everywhere.

"Howdy."

He reined in at the voice. A wizened old man straightened up in the mouth of the alley beside the mercantile. He didn't quite straighten all the way, and he was grinning timidly. Kehoe could see by the one milky pupil and the crinkled eyelids that the man might be able to tell light from dark but not much else. "Give an old man a hand, feller?" He pointed, and Kehoe saw the tombstone.

Kehoe grinned and said, "Sure. Who's the old man, bub?" at which the gnome cackled. He dismounted and threw the lines over and around the rail in a four-flush hitch, secure enough to nudge a wandering mount back in line but ready to slip at a rider's sharp tug. He went to the oldster, who had two planks angled up against the buckstage and with four pieces of log for rollers was trying to bulldog the tombstone up off the ground and on to the stage. "Must've been a big man in these parts," observed Kehoe, "takes a stone that size to hold him down."

Again the cackle. "Big enough. He an' his brothers killed twenty-three men in their time."

" 'McDade,' " Kehoe read off the stone. "No Joe or Jim or Jehoshaphat. Family plot?"

"You're a stranger," said the old man, nodding his head wisely and peering in Kehoe's general direction. "Warn't enough left of any of 'em to know which was which. This yere's the third one their ma ordered, all alike. Jus' 'McDade.' " He chuckled happily. "Holed up in a horse barn with two ton o' blastin' powder. Bah-*lammm!*" he squeaked, throwing his arms up and out.

Kehoe flicked an anxious glance at the hitching rail

lest the little man had spooked his horse; then bent swiftly, nudging the stone-cutter out of the way with the movement, and in one quick surge had the stone up and over and thumping on the platform. He stood back and dusted his hands, while the old man fumbled vaguely at the planks, the edge of the stage, and at last got a knuckle on the stone. "Knew we could do it," he muttered. "Thanks, son."

"Sure we could," grinned Kehoe.

"You be around tomorrow this time, Ma McDade'll be wantin' to load this on her buckboard. You could make a dollar."

"I got a dollar," said Kehoe. He waved and went directly across the street to the saloon.

It was dim in there, looking a lot cooler than the white dust and bleached wood outside. It wasn't, but it looked that way. The bartender had his back turned, but saw him in the mirror. He was shaving. "Howdy. Doggone it, I always wait till I jus' *know* ain't nobody comin' in, an' somebody always does."

"Shucks, you go right ahead. I want whisky, but I don't *need* it," smiled Kehoe.

"I'll get it," said another voice, and out of the far corner, trailing a mop, limped a short man with a bullet-creased cheek, the scar pointing like an accusing finger to half an ear.

"Thanks, Claude," said the bartender. The man called Claude leaned his mop against the bar, went round behind, and poured for Kehoe. Kehoe put it away and signed for another and one for himself and the bartender. "Not *that* bottle, Claude," said the bartender from a swamp of suds. "You know I don't drink that stuff. I just sell it. Thanks, mister."

Claude guffawed and poured from another bottle. There really was a difference.

"On the other hand," said Kehoe, eyeing the shaving

mug and brush standing on the back bar, "though I don't *want* a shave, I do need one."

"You just help yourself," said the bartender affably.

Gratefully Kehoe stripped off his coat, folded it, and laid it across the bar. Both the other men eyed his shoulder holster, a rarity in these parts, and, politely, neither said a word. Kehoe drew the gun and put it on his coat. In appreciative silence, the men looked at the gun.

From his waistcoat pocket Kehoe took a folding razor. "Mind?" he said and stepped behind the bar to range alongside the bartender with the shaving mug between them.

The bartender distorted his mouth to eliminate a diagonal furrow from nostril to the corner of his lip, and said, like a man yawning, "Saw you fetch up that McDade tombstone out there. You never learned to do the likes of that hoistin' a faro deck."

Kehoe turned a brief, laughing look at him and went on shaving.

"An' yet you look like a gambler."

"You might say I'm a sort of gambler." Kehoe laughed at this for reasons of his own, and the other two snickered courteously. He nodded at the street and the tombstone. "I raise a little hell whenever I can."

It was a poor joke but it hit a mother lode. Claude snarled, "Now you said it, mister, you said it good. Where that stone gets planted, hell's at ground-level. See that?" he said furiously, thumping his stiff hip. "See that?" he bellowed, thumping the scar on his face. "That's what they done to me, the motherless rats."

"Now you just calm down," said the bartender tiredly, without turning around. "It was a long time ago, Claude. An' besides, whatever kind of rats they was, they warn't motherless by a damn sight. Anyhow they're dead now."

"One got away."

"You don't know that." It had all the earmarks of an old argument, gone through time and time again when nothing else was happening, until the participants had it memorized and could think about other things when they performed it.

Kehoe broke in. "The old man said there was three stones like that. You mean there were four McDades?"

"Now you shut up, Claude," said the bartender instantly. "I'll tell 'im. You'll just get yourself all lathered up." And as if to prove that he wouldn't, he wiped off the remainder of his own lather with the bar rag, set his back to the bar, folded his arms, and launched into the saga of the four McDades and their women. Kehoe met his eyes occasionally in the mirror but went on shaving imperturbably. The only sign he gave of having heard anything out of the ordinary was when he mentioned their last robbery—seven men dead and one hundred thousand dollars' worth of gold dust. At that Kehoe's razor stopped for perhaps three-quarters of a second, while the two creases across his forehead deepened. Then he went on shaving and listening. Claude had four unprintable words that he chanted in a low rumble every time the bartender spoke the word "McDade"; it sounded a little like the responses in a tent meeting. "An' that's it," the man finished. "Four gals an' a ol' she-devil holed up out there in the badlands, just waitin' for a man that'll never show. Less'n he crawls out from under one o' those slabs."

"I tell you one got away," insisted Claude. "Dammit, he was seen in the Dakota Territory, warn't he?"

"Everybody knows that, nobody can say who seen him," said the bartender disgustedly.

"The plugged dollars, what about that?" yelled Claude. They were back in the memorized argument.

"Them, yeah. Look, if one of 'em was anywhere near

that powder cache, maybe even right on top of it, it'd blowed him into pieces smaller'n snuff, an' his dollar along with him. Why, after the blast that fire was hot enough to melt a gun barrel like tallow fat, let alone a silver dollar."

"What dollar was that?" asked Kehoe, more to break into this recitation than to get information.

By way of answer the bartender stalked dramatically to the cash drawer in the back bar, slid it open, extracted a coin and flipped it to Kehoe. It was a dollar with a hole in it, mounded up on one side like a moon crater. "They all had 'em, them McDades," said the bartender. "Around they necks on a string. Lucky piece."

"Three was found," said Claude portentously. "Three, not four."

"Lucky, hm," said Kehoe. His free hand sought his waistcoat pocket.

"See what you mean," snorted the bartender. "Anyways, they could toss a dollar, draw an' plug it like that 'leven times out of ten. And from what I hear, all them women can do the same."

"Especially Ma," Claude put in. "*Twelve* times out o' ten."

"Nice trick," said Kehoe, thinking of a nice trick. "These wives—"

"I know what you're thinkin'," said the bartender. "Ain't a one over twenty-three. Purty, passionate, an' poison."

"Two entire whole damn years," Claude pointed out.

Kehoe decided on his trick. It was what is known as a French drop, and though anyone could see the plugged dollar he drew back to throw, that was not the dollar that clattered into the cash drawer. If anyone had asked him why he did it, and if he had been willing to tell the truth, he would have said, "Well, it just

seemed a good idea at the time." He palmed the plugged coin into his southeast waistcoat pocket and shrugged into his coat, happy to see the bartender pushing the drawer closed with his left buttock.

"If the gold ain't there," Claude began the ritual argument again, "why those fillies hangin' around? Answer me that."

"It ain't," said the bartender absently. "Was on that posse my own self. Weren't but a dollar in that whole box canyon, and it lays there," and he pointed at the cash drawer.

"Wonder if they hung that Kehoe yet," said Claude.

Kehoe looked up sharply. Claude was leaning on his mop, looking out over the batwing doors. Across the street, by the mercantile, horsemen were gathered. Two had dismounted to examine Kehoe's mount, finger the saddle. Nobody here had asked Kehoe his name, and he wasn't in the habit of volunteering it. He said, "Hung who?"

"Some Kehoe they're houndin'. Nobody a gent like you'd know, or want to," said Claude, still eyeing the group. "Chased him all the way from Windin' Stair this mornin' and last night, so they say. They're beat-down tired and red-eye mad. Barreled in here a hour ago lookin' for this Kehoe. Went up-street. Reckon they been drinkin' ol' Hoagie's firewater down to the Broken Brand Saloon."

The bartender nodded gravely. "They look it. Stuff'll turn a gelded goat into a mountain lion, jest afore he drops dead."

"I just come from Winding Stair," said Kehoe. "I didn't see no part of anyone like that."

"You wouldn't," said the bartender, his gaze still on the men across the street. There were six, and they had their heads together drunkenly. "Quickest way is by the back pass. They figured their man come that

way and crucified theirselves an' their horses to catch up with him."

"They say why they're so anxious?"

Claude scratched his head and met the bartender's eyes. They both shrugged. "Tell the truth, they didn't. It was just Kehoe that son of a bald-headed devil, Kehoe that side-winder, Kehoe that yaller—"

Kehoe's feelings were mixed. "Who are they? Know any of 'em?"

"They ain't from around here," said the bartender.

"That spindle-shank one with the teeth out," said Claude, "he's the maddest one with the biggest mouth. They call him Sweetcake."

Kehoe loosed a burst of laughter, short, loud, and immediately bitten out of sight. Suddenly he understood.

She'd sworn she was a widow, yesterday in Winding Stair. She'd batted her eyes at him and minced around him in the hotel lobby and dropped her reticule and passed the time of day, and he'd been polite enough until he got the idea she had a loose rivet some place. He'd said good-by and moved out, and there she was on the duckboards beside him, whimpering about the mud and she just had to get across to the bake shop. So he had carried her, and that was it.

And down at the livery an hour later when he went for his horse, the stableman had said, "You're well out o' here, Mr. Kehoe. Saw you a-totin' Polly Atwater out of the hotel. She's coot-crazy. Next thing it'll be all over town if it ain't yet, and her husband Sweetcake'll demand to know, an' God knows what she'll tell him, but it won't be the truth an' it won't do you no good. Sweetcake an' his brother an' their four cousins, they don't all six of 'em total up to one set o' brains. They'll licker up mad an' holler rape an' massacree, an' there won't be a word o' sense from anyone can get to 'em."

Kehoe hadn't believed a word of it, had mounted his horse and laughed. The stableman had caught his bridle and begged him to watch out. "I swear she does it to make 'er feel good, her men out protectin' her, Mr. Kehoe. I know it's crazy as hell. But she done the same thing to a drummer last April. I hid him right here in the straw for four whole damn days until they calmed down an' the cousins went back to their ranch. I know it's crazy as hell," he had said again, "but that don't signify to a forty-four."

Kehoe had wagged his head in amazement. "Yeah, the ol' equalizer. Makes a good big man as good as a good crazy man."

He hadn't wanted to leave town then, but he'd been in Winding Stair long enough. He still wanted distance between himself and the Territory; he still had business to attend to east of the badlands; and trying to straighten out anything as fuzzy as this made him feel like a damn fool. He had ridden slowly up the length of the main stem and back, and again up, and on the way back had stopped in three bars, just to make himself known. In one of the bars somebody had slammed out the back way when he came in, and he was told it was Sweetcake Atwater by men who looked as bewildered as he himself felt. He guessed now that the cousins hadn't arrived yet for the family posse, and Sweetcake wasn't making a move till they did. At last he had cursed himself, the Atwaters, the town and for good measure the moon for its influence on lunatics, and had left town at a walk on the wide flat trail that led through Touchstone to where he wanted to go.

Now he stood in the Touchstone Saloon watching the six ragged drunken pokes cross to the rail and tether their limping, winded mounts. Any of them, any three of them, wouldn't have bothered Dan-Kehoe, but six? A man doesn't need to fear water to have sense enough

to get in out of the rain.

He nudged the bartender's elbow with a gold coin. A double eagle. "Keep it," he said. "Thanks for the entertainment."

"What in tarnation's this for?"

"The damage," said Kehoe, and before the man could answer him the batwings crashed open.

They came in bunched, to keep their insanity going, and stopped in a clump midway down the bar. The skinny one with no teeth thumbed across at the mercantile. "Who belongs to that bay stallion yonder?"

"Why," said the bartender, "that gent there," and he pointed to the end of the bar. He saw Claude go bug-eyed and turned to look, and did the same himself.

There was nobody there. Kehoe's gun and razor had lain side by side down there not four seconds earlier, and they were gone, too.

"What gent where?" growled the man they called Sweetcake.

"He was—" said the bartender, and gulped. The gulp flattered Sweetcake, and he puffed out what little chest he had. Actually it had nothing to do with him. The gulp was the result of Kehoe's crawling across his feet behind the bar. "He was here a minute ago," he said stupidly. If he was hoping that something would happen to save him from finding anything else to say, his prayers were answered. Dan Kehoe popped up in the door corner with his gun in one hand and his razor in the other.

Three bullets ran nose to tail up to the soft-iron link which supported the five-foot, ring-shaped gasolier. Down it came, timber, chains, fittings and all. It didn't quite lasso the invaders, but it came close enough. Bunched like that, they were in each other's way to begin with. Down they went in a tangle of feet and fittings, bawling and kicking. Two guns went off, and

another, and still another, and bullets thunked into the bar, the ceiling, the floor.

Kehoe hit the doors like a squirted apple seed and they crashed outward. One came off and the other swung back in just in time to catch Sweetcake on the edge of the cheekbone. Down he went, and down went the two cousins who had found their feet by then in a pile-up at the door.

Razor in hand, Kehoe ran down the hitching rail, slicing the lines in two, and yipping "Git-git" at the horses. Two bolted south and three north; the sixth, a flea-bitten mare with a hide that looked like a tenting ground, reared and plunged and spun around twice before she made up her mind to head cross country. Kehoe vaulted to his bay, snatched the lines clear, and took the mare's advice. He was faster and fresher, but he'd had time to see the two new Springfields and the long-barreled kaintuck in the saddle-boots, and he wanted no part of the open road. Downslope from the town and away from the road was broken land wild as a man could want, and he wanted it wild. Bullets spattered near him, but he knew they would stop quick enough; and they did while the maddened Atwaters went howling for their horses.

Kehoe found a dry wash, then another, and then hard rock for two hundred yards where he could leave as much tracks as a flying owl. After that he reined in and took it easy, picking his way east and laughing at himself.

The jams he'd been in—the deals he'd pulled—the chances he'd taken—and walked out of whistling. And now, for a loco little smalltown housewife and her crazy relatives, he was quarry for a pack of maniacs. Oh, well. He shrugged. It all evens out. This was for nothing. Well, more'n once there had been something, and no posse, not even a crazy one.

Then a spruce tree spit bark at him and one second, two seconds later he heard the flat slam of the kaintuck, and he knew he had underestimated these bubbleheads. They were trackers—real trackers. No wonder they didn't have brains. They had instinct and second sight.

And they knew the country.

He found that out when he began to mount the ridge that turned into a hogback. He was in a pine grove and couldn't see far enough to be sure what was ahead, so he dropped off to the right. A Winchester slug suggested that wasn't a good idea. He angled up to the crest and tried the other side down. The kaintuck was over there. They weren't chasing him any more. They were herding him.

Plodding along the crest again, he suddenly thought, *This can't be really serious, can it? Can it?*

He glanced back and quickly popped his heels into the bay's flanks. They were closing. "Go, boy," he told the horse gently, and the animal increased his pace again with no other reminder from the heels. That was a hell of a horse.

The spur became a ridge and the ridge a hogback at last, and he was moving at a good canter, when the sides fell away sharper than they ought to.

It turned to naked rock, with a long bad slide down each side to toothy beds of rubble.

Behind him horses came busting and blowing out of the brush, close enough that he could hear the hoofs scraping rock and a shout and something going by his face sounding like a deerfly, and right after it the whang of the Springfield that threw it. He snugged down closer and heeled his horse that was already going faster than good sense in such a place. He didn't look back; when they quit with the rifle and opened up with .44's he'd know all he cared to about how close they

were.

If he had any of that laugh left he lost it about then, because his horse reared and snorted, and he found out why the horsemen had been so willing to let him go ahead. That pitched roof of a path he was riding had a busted ridgepole; the hog had a broken back. There was a clear break of better than twenty feet right in front of him. Beyond that the ridge was wider, turfed a bit, and evergreen cover a few yards beyond. All he had to do was get across.

He slipped out of the saddle and freed the thong on his rope, all in the same motion. He turned the stallion end for end, the four nervous feet close enough to stand in a meat-platter, led him back a quick fifteen yards, turned him and with one almighty yell loosed him at the break in the ridge. The stallion bounded once, twice, and up, while Kehoe let the coils of rope fall away from his forearm freely enough so there wouldn't be an ounce of drag on the pommel.

The horse came down on the far side, didn't quite go to his knees, didn't quite get a footing with his hind legs, scrabbled, scrambled, and stood. A .44 slug took away a piece of rock close enough to cut Kehoe's leg, and bansheed away and down to the right. Kehoe flung a hitch on the gnarled root of a jackpine and went over the edge of the break. Hand over hand on the rope he went, too low to be a target. He knew they had caught on to what he was up to when he heard a flight of bullets go over, high; they were shooting at his horse. One must have nicked the animal because he whinnied and reared up, and the rope slackened and then went taut. If he hadn't been all the way across by then, that would have been all for Kehoe. But he was on the other side and safe when the rope threw him sprawling, and he scrambled to his feet and ran doubled over, zigging as much as he could on that narrow track, pulling his

sheath-knife as he ran. He slashed apart his rope and swung aboard and cut out of there, and was already in the pine thicket when the one wild unlucky shot got him. It kicked like a bee-stung mule and spun him half out of the saddle. His horse shied at the same time and spun him right back on again; and then he was riding hell-for-leather, rocking with shock and growing pain from a broken thigh.

But whatever they wanted, they weren't going to get it from Kehoe this day. They straggled out on the hogback, yelling things about Kehoe's mother that he couldn't hear any more than she could, and wasting lead in the spruce needles.

Kehoe pulled up his horse as soon as he could command wits enough to do it. He gentled him to a walk and stopped him, patting his neck, grunting with pain, working to drag a look-see in through the mist in front of his eyes.

He was on high ground, looking down into a box valley. Its rock walls towered high and sheer like battlements, and it had a small shining river turning into it, cool and far enough away to make a hurt, thirsty man's tongue cramp at the root. In the bend of the river, someone had built a town, and someone else had burned it; except for a two-story hotel and a gutted church, nothing stood but a chimney here and there and some broken, charcoaled timbers.

Kehoe looked up at the sun and down again at the ghost town. He fumbled in his lower left vest pocket and thumbed out the silver dollar with the hole in it. He tossed it, caught it, looked at it, put it back in his pocket.

He turned his horse and, favoring his hurt leg as much as he could and watching the lost blood clot and hoping it was clotting where it mattered, he began angling down toward the valley mouth.

5

IT WAS DUSK when he reached the flat, and already dark in the hollows of the mountain. Kehoe wasn't quite all there, though he was more present and accounted for than an ordinary man might be after such a ride. He slumped and rolled in the saddle until his mount's hoofs thumped on the bridge boards; then somehow he got hold of the right drawstring and pulled his spine straight and rigid. He threw his head up and balanced it on his wobbly neck like a pumpkin on a broom handle, and from a distance you'd swear here was a man tall in the saddle, knowing where he was going and in no special hurry.

A hundred yards past the bridge was a stand of cottonwoods, and nailed to them was a board with lettering on it which he could read only because he happened to be aimed at it when he saw it. It said:

WAGON MOUND

Private Property

KEEP OUT

"Go, boy," he murmured to his horse, and ambled through the trees and out the other side.

He thought he saw movement in the bell tower of the little church, but he just didn't care. "Go, boy," he crooned, and in the growing dark he caught the barest flicker of flame from the belfry, heard the unmistak-

able sharp syllable of a Winchester, and simultaneously an angled spout of road dust not eight inches from his horse's left front foot. "Whoa."

Either the marksman in the tower was a damn good shot and had tried to kill him and failed, or he was better than damn good and was saying something very definite.

Kehoe sat still and figured the angles, which didn't take long; there weren't that many. He reached forward and turned his hands over and got a hard, short back-grip on the lines. He had never felt so miserable and helpless in his entire life; his stomach was hollow and he tasted brass and bile just behind his back teeth. But whatever else the feeling did to him, it cleared his head a little. He held still and took apart the details of the bell tower with his eyes until he saw the hard straight splinter that was the rifle barrel, askew and at rest while the marksman studied his intentions.

Kehoe let go the left line and patted the horse's neck once, and took up the line again, short as before. He said "Go, boy."

The horse stepped forward, the rifle ceased to be a splinter and became nothing at all as the bead was drawn. For one count, two counts, almost three counts, Kehoe became the rifleman, seeing himself down here, laying the bead in the notch and on head or breast, figuring wind and drop and target shift, squeezing and holding for that last split-second check-through, finger balanced exactly on trigger spring, and then the smooth finish of the squeeze; and there, right *there,* Kehoe slammed back cruelly on the lines, and saw the fleck of orange just between his horse's ears as the animal's head rose between his own and the bell tower. The slug passed through the rearing horse's throat and exploded out of the base of his neck, to glance off the steel-cored, leather-armored hickory of the pommel. Its spi-

nal cord severed, the horse came down jarringly on its rump and fell over sidewise. There wasn't a thing Kehoe could do but let it fall on his good leg, while the other lay crazily up and over the heaving withers with what looked like two knee joints in it.

He heard the brazen voice of the old church bell; and then the time came when he couldn't take any more of it, and he put his head down in the dirt and quit trying.

After a couple of years or however long it was, twelve hours or a week or some such, the blackness changed from the kind that covers the world to the kind that will go away if you open your eyes. So he opened his eyes. That hurt, so he closed them and turned his head and tried again a little more slowly. He saw light on a wall and a window curtain, turned gingerly to where it was brightest, and saw a coal-oil lamp with a green shade turned down sputtering low. He lay looking at it stupidly until a gnarled hand with a broad gold ring appeared from no place and turned it up. He couldn't turn his head away quickly enough so he closed his eyes tight and waited until they caught up with what was going on.

He was flat on his back in a bed. His hurt leg was being assailed by two little men with two big pickaxes, or maybe it was only his pulse; the beat was the same. Then he realized there were no little men, but only a woman with gray hair who stood over him. She was holding his gun in a sure casual way that convinced him she'd never mistake it for a tack hammer. She had a leather face and bright blue eyes. Looking at her was like looking through two holes in an old saddle at the sea some noontime.

Abruptly she said, "My name's McDade. What's yours?"

"Damn it," he growled, "you shot my horse."

"I asked you a question, mister."

"He was a good horse. By the Lord he was more of a man than you'll ever be."

There was a metallic glint in those bright eyes. He didn't know what it might mean. She said again, "I asked you a question, mister."

"I heard you. You just hold on a mite. Somebody killed the best horse I ever did have and somebody's just naturally got to get chewed out for it, and you're it." He had to rest from being so angry. After a while he opened his eyes again. "Now, what was it you wanted to know?"

"Let's start with your handle."

"Kehoe. Dan Kehoe."

"You know where you're at, Dan Kehoe?"

"I saw your sign."

"Says 'keep out,' don't it? Why didn't you?"

He was glad the talk had come around to the sign. It put him right back there when he first saw it, and all the figuring he had done there and up on the cliff, and when he'd taken the plugged silver dollar. It made him wake up the rest of the way. He said, "A fellow told me about this place. Said if I was ever in a crack to head for here and ask the lady of the house to put me up."

The McDade woman bent a bit closer to search his face. "What fellow was that?"

"We didn't exchange cards."

"What'd he look like?"

"I never saw him clear. It was dark in that cell."

"Cell?"

"We spent a night in jail together," said Kehoe tiredly, as if long explanations were out of order for a sick man, "up in Dakota Territory. I told him I had a job of work to do in these parts and reckoned to do some hard running afterward. That's when he men-

tioned Wagon Mound and—"

"What was he in for?" she demanded.

"Didn't say. And come morning, he was gone."

"Huh!" It was an oddly triumphant grunt. "*Broke* out."

"That's right."

She turned away from him and abruptly back again, wetting her lips. "Didn't he send me no word? Think back, mister. Didn't he tell you nothing to tell me?"

There is a time to hold your ace, and a time to play it. Kehoe decided which to do in that split second. "Where's my clothes?"

She looked at him strangely, eagerly, and then all but ran to the door where his clothes hung from a hook. She thrust the gun into the waistband of her skirt and reached for the clothes.

"Just the waistcoat's all I want."

She brought it. He passed her a swift smile which might have meant anything, and pawed into that southeast pocket. His face went blank, and then blank again in another way, the blankness of perfect and rigid control. He quickly rifled the other pockets, snorted through his nostrils, and pitched the garment on the foot of the bed. He closed his eyes as if he had gone tired again. And he had.

"Lose somethin', mister?"

Without opening his eyes on the vista of excitement and frustration he heard in her voice, he said quietly, "You wouldn't have the makin's on you, would you?"

He heard a long breath hiss out, and knew he could open his eyes on the same kind of control he had just used. When he did, she said, "Answer what I asked you."

"Answer's no," he grunted.

"No word? Nothing?"

"Just what I told you."

If she did have the makin's, he thought to himself, looking up at those blazing eyes, *I know where I could get a light.*

In a voice like a wood rasp meeting a cut nail, she said, "Don't lie to me, mister."

Kehoe honestly couldn't have said where his sudden blast of anger came from or the energy to throw it with. "What would I want to lie for?" he roared. "My trail's hotter'n the Fourth of July—maybe you heard the fireworks—"

The woman nodded. In these rock hills—

Kehoe said more gently but brimming with disgust and defeat, "I'm played out. I couldn't beat my own mother from a standing start. You're all the luck I got left, good or bad. Don't go badgerin' me, Miz McDade. If anyone makes a move, it's got to be you. I can't fight and I can't run, not now anyways. You might say I ain't my problem any more; I'm yours."

He met her eyes, fierce and probing.

"You got a worry?" he demanded. "What's the matter—afraid the law might trail me in here?"

She made a sudden sound with her lips like spitting. "The law don't come here. They *been.*"

"Well, it ain't the law," said Kehoe wearily. "Not this time anyhow." He looked up again to find her eager, angry gaze still on him, and assumed the overpatient air of a man waiting for a greenhorn to clean up a misdeal. He outlasted her, and finally she said, "I'd feel a lot better about you, Kehoe, if you could remember something about that man in the Dakota jail."

He had nothing to say to that; so he said nothing. After a time she took up the lamp and went out.

Kehoe lay looking at the dark and resisting the temptation to wish he'd played it some other way.

6

THE LAMP SHE CARRIED brought a lot of decayed elegance out of hiding, a lot of dust and curlicue carved wood, corner mirrors with the silver clouded and the gilt eagles cracked, hall carpeting with a floral pattern of pink and gray where the pink was graying and the gray was going. The oaken staircase had long since lost its tread carpeting, though most of the risers still carried it. The banister was missing half its spokes, but all the same it swept around the newel post at the bottom a time and a half, real pretty.

This they used as a parlor; but nothing would ever make it anything but the lobby of a typical boom-town hotel. The desk clerk's cubby, counter, racks and all, was still here, and the usual hard-bottomed mahogany settles and shrieking wicker chairs with more and more cushions piled in them to compensate for their ever-sagging seats. A flame-seared melodeon, freakishly spared from one of the house fires, stood in the corner.

Here also were three widows and a wife. Except for the scratching of a pen and an occasional soft hoot from the melodeon, there was complete silence, total attention on what might be happening upstairs. Occasionally Sabina, the tall slender one with the mass of glowing red hair, would sigh and turn a leaf of her ledger on the desk, dip her pen, and idly straighten the bar of a 4 or the line over a total. The blond curvy Birdie was in suspended animation—but for her slightly bulging and

very attractive eyes—in front of the melodeon. Ruby, the Mexican girl, could have pillowed herself on granite, and was quite comfortably a-sprawl across a hard settle, her great gold hoops motionless, her glossy breasts just this side of obedient to her neckline. And last, Oralie, youngest of the McDade women, a slender twenty, and the only one to wear black, stood by the window with her back to the stairs, clasping and unclasping her slim white hands.

Sabina's pen was moving busily.

Birdie's fingers, with a thoughtless life of their own, strayed to the keys of the melodeon:

> *I sing ye the song of old Joe Clark,*
> *He was—*

They had long since ceased to care what Joe Clark was, or even to hear the notes; they were all the notes Birdie knew, and hearing them was like hearing a cicada; you just didn't.

Then the footsteps, the lamplight, and Ma McDade stood at the top of the first flight. The four girls turned to her as one, and all spoke at once; and all immediately fell silent, giggling.

Birdie recovered first. "How is he, Ma? You goin' to let him stay, Ma? What you goin' to do with him?"

"Hang him, stick him, bleed him, and salt him down. What else?" growled Ma. She came down the rest of the way and set her lamp on the clerk's desk.

"How bad is he?" asked Sabina's cool voice, and Ruby guffawed. "Eef he bad enough, geev'm to me."

"Shut up, Ruby," said Ma. To Sabina she said, "His leg's broke, is all, and he's lost some blood." She gave her odd snort of amusement. "By the Lord I thought a man had to be a McDade to get that mad that quick." She sobered instantly. "I ain't thought past patchin' him up. So don't ask me no silly questions."

"He ees handsome?" crooned Ruby.

"I'm too old to tell," said Ma dryly.

"You saw him. You saw him, Sabina. Tell us!" said Birdie.

"I helped Ma bring in some dirty cordwood with blood on it," said Sabina.

"Eef he's a man he's handsome," said Ruby under her breath.

It was Oralie who asked the important question. "Who is he?"

Ma seemed to wonder whether she should tell them. Then she shrugged. "Name's Dan Kehoe. He's on the dodge. I didn't ask him what he done and he didn't tell me. I reckon that's all needs to be said."

Birdie slid off the melodeon bench and skipped toward the stairs. "You want someone should sit up with him?" she bleated.

"No, I don't!" Ma barked. "I don't want none of you goin' near him—hear?"

"A man on the dodge," said Sabina to no one in particular. "In strange country"—her cool voice got very thoughtful—"and he just happens to stumble into Wagon Mound. Just lucky, I guess."

"It wasn't exactly luck," said Ma. She frowned. "I reckon you all got a right to know. Somebody steered him here."

No one made a sound until, behind her hand, Oralie uttered a faint small scream. Shouldering aside the sudden chorus of "Who? Who?" which followed, Ma McDade went right on with her thinking aloud. "Somebody passed the word he'd find a welcome in Wagon Mound, that's all." She looked sharply around. "Don't get yourselves to frothin' and faintin', now. Could've been just about anybody. I—he—"

Only the women in that room could have been quite so startled at the sight of Ma McDade uncertain, grop-

ing. They knew her, and this was something—it was something beyond belief.

The old woman moved her shoulders in annoyance, and loudly bent and cracked her knuckles. "Well, there was that Jim Easter rode with the boys one time, he could've been the one. Or that crazy Blackleg, that gave back all his shares and went out to preach."

Ruby pressed herself upright and leaned forward, eyes avid, hands pressing her breast. "Eet was my—"

"*No!*" It was like a gunshot.

"Why not?" Birdie shouted at her. "Why not my man, or hers," she cried, jerking her head at Sabina, "or even Oralie's?"

Shocking as her crackling "No!" had been, Ma's choked half whisper was infinitely more so. "He'd have sent word to his ma."

No one seemed to want to deny that. Not out loud.

Oralie whispered, "No message? Not—not to any of us?"

"Not a one, child."

"Did you ask him? What did he say?" Sabina demanded.

"Did I ask him!" spat Ma scornfully, and then told them about the jail, the jail break, the dark, the name that never got mentioned.

"He'll remember," said Birdie intensely, like a promise. "He'll remember something."

They found themselves staring up at the second floor, all five of them, where lay the slim but only hope of two lonely years, the bare chance of an answer to the question *Which one? Which one?* Which son was alive? Which widow was a wife? Which one had a man and a fortune to dangle and tease the other three with? And then they all caught each other staring, and—except Oralie—jeered at one another for it, each in her way.

But Ma understood what had happened, what was

behind the eyes that had just raked the stamped-tin ceiling. If Kehoe knew which one—if he even knew without knowing that he knew—they meant to get it out of him, Oralie with her little girl, little mouse ways, Birdie with her bounce and glitter and I-dare-you, Ruby with her— Yes, Ruby would melt him down like a candle under a burning-glass; and Sabina—that Sabina, she'd pin him to a door with two cool words and out-think him.

Ma went to the melodeon and blew out the lamp which stood there, and turned down and blew out the one on the mantel. She picked up the green-shaded night light she had brought down and looked at them. She found them all watching her.

She said, "Stay away from that Kehoe man, you hear?"

No one said anything.

The light flared up from below, strangely painting Ma's strong facial bones, making her brilliant eyes invisible in the depths of two black holes. In a low, thick voice she said, "I got a boy out there some place. I can't put a face or a name on him, but I know he's there, and I know he's dependin' on his ma to ride his fences for him. One of you belongs to him, by the laws of God and this Territory. And when he comes back to claim his property, he's goin' to find everything just like he left it. *Everything*—understand?"

For a moment the silent girls and the resolute leathern gargoyle stared challengingly at each other. Then Oralie dropped her eyes and drifted toward the stairs, and Birdie followed, and a sullen Ruby, who could not quite loose the hot, hating glare she had ready as she passed. Sabina walked by Ma smiling. Ma McDade smiled back, briefly.

7

RUBY WAS FIRST INTO THE KITCHEN, a half hour earlier than usual and wearing a dazzling gold-and-blue swirling skirt and a blouse cut even lower than usual. Her gleaming black hair was pulled back and to the side and finished in a neat knot, into which fresh flowers were thrust. She paused to look at her reflection in the ornate mirror someone had transferred from behind the registration desk, and she nodded and smiled, liking what she saw. She tossed her head to see if the flowers were secure, and bent close to fix one that bobbed more than she liked. Once that close, she curled her lips to admire her teeth; and while she was thus engaged Sabina drifted in.

"Fixing to bite someone, Ruby?" she asked lightly.

Ruby started violently away from the mirror before she could control herself, and glowered at Sabina, sleek and slender in bone-white, a dress which covered her up to the jawbones, but which carried as well a deep fan of peekaboo eyelets. "You look deleecious thees morn'," said Ruby between her teeth. "Jus' like tortilla." She turned away triumphantly, and Sabina availed herself of the split second before the mirror to press a wave into her startling red hair.

Ruby busied herself over the stove, kicking last night's embers into life and feeding them up out of a box of chips.

"Don't bother, dear," said Sabina. "I'm in the mood

to whip up an omelette this morning."

"Soddenly you wan' cook, you," said Ruby with scorn. "Seedown. Me firs', I make good garbonzas an' maybe a leetle Spanish eggs, no?"

"No," said Sabina. "Let me just—" But she sat down at the table abruptly as Ruby turned smiling away from the stove. She had a meat cleaver in her hand, which she tossed and caught deftly. The slight motion caused her blouse to slip off one shoulder.

"Don't catch cold, honey," said Sabina.

Ruby looked admiringly down at the fallen sleeve, and went back to her cooking. "I like. Matt like." She shrugged contentedly and by some miracle the second sleeve stayed where it was.

"Yes, that was the nice thing about your late husband," Sabina said reflectively. "Willing to share everything."

"You want coffee?" blazed Ruby, raising the big pot to about shoulder height and advancing on the table.

"I'll have a cup, please," said a little voice in the doorway, and in came Oralie dressed in a starched sailor blouse with little blue stars on the square collar, her fine dark hair in two braids with a blue ribbon bow. A pleated navy skirt begged the world to prove that here was a waist a man could circle with his two hands. Beside the racy lines of Sabina's outfit and Ruby's earthy charms, she looked very young and lost.

"God," said Sabina, "school's out."

"Ah, *bambinita,*" marveled Ruby, "but he ees too old, and too young too, to play weeth leetle girl."

Sabina granted this a laugh, while Oralie sank down into her place at the table and peered with her large unhappy eyes over the edge of the big earthen coffee cup.

After a time, "What are you making, Ruby?"

Sabina answered her. "Spanish eggs. It's real good for fever."

Ruby tossed a surprised look over her shoulder, then gave another of her eloquent and miraculous shrugs, obviously concluding that she had missed the barb for linguistic reasons.

"Oh, how very nice," Oralie murmured, increasing Ruby's astonishment and creating some in Sabina as well. Ruby and Sabina turned calculating looks on Oralie, who dropped her heavy lashes and studied her coffee. Then she set it down gently, and in her mouse-like, light-footed fashion, left the room.

"What's she up to?" Sabina demanded, frankly staring after the girl; and like an echo, Ma's voice, "What are you up to, Oralie?"

"Oh," said Oralie lightly, backing into the kitchen as the only alternative to colliding with Ma, "Ruby's making some lovely Spanish eggs, and I thought I'd just slip up and wake Mr. Kehoe and tell him breakfast was ready."

"Thought that, did you?" Ma grunted. Her quick eyes flicked at the other two. "You Ruby, you thought you'd just whip up some fancy vittles. That leaves you. What was it you thought, Sabina?"

"Why," said Sabina, with her special smile, making a joke of it, sharing it, "I thought I'd just take it up to him soon's Ruby's got it done."

Ruby whirled on Sabina and opened her mouth to deliver a cascade of polyglot profanity. "Shut up!" rapped Ma, and she shut. Ma said evenly, "He don't want no more breakfast. He's had his beaten egg an' bread'n milk an' he's back sleepin' again." She looked at the three faces one after another and uttered a great shout of laughter. "Eh! You look like three back issues o' Godey's Book. Now let's all set and eat an' not let that nice fancy breakfast go to waste."

"Me eat that?" wailed Sabina.

"You eat that," nodded Ma, "or by the powers I'll run ye out of here with a birch rod come dinner-time."

"Come, eat," said Ruby with grim enjoyment. "Ees good for fever."

"Where's Birdie?"

They looked at each other and back at Ma. And as if in answer there came through the window the true—if not sweet—tones of Birdie's voice:

"Wisht I was in Tennessee,
Settin' in a big armchair
One arm 'round the whisky-jug
T'other round my dear. . . ."

"Great day in the cotton-pickin' mornin'," said Ma, "what's *her* game?"

They crowded to the window, and there was Birdie, truly a dazzling sight in a ruffly, rustly, bustly dress and strings and strings of beads flying a-clacking on her bosom, her yellow hair tightly curled and bouncing in the breeze. She was perched prettily on the old swing that had hung for thirty years on the first limb of a hanging tree near the hotel, pumping like mad and singing at the top of her lungs. Every time she swung toward the hotel her skirts billowed up around her waist, and everytime she swung away, her carefully unbuttoned dickey flew invitingly skyward.

"What's she—crazy?" demanded Sabina.

"No," said Oralie in a small voice. "She's swinging right in front of his window."

Ma made her spitting sound and wheeled away, to be back in four seconds with a shotgun. "Stand clear, you prettified brood-mares, while I cool some of the heat around here."

"Ma! Ma! You can't!"

"Don't tell me what I can't or you'll be next," Ma

blazed. She laid her cheek on the stock and squinted. "Only on the rise, or you're no gentleman," she murmured, quoting somebody, and braced the gun barrel against the window frame.

"Ma!"

"Shut up, I said," growled Ma in a transport of concentration.

Birdie sang:

"I climbed up the oak tree,
He climbed up the gum,
Never did see a handsome man
But what I loved him some—"

Her last note turned into a long shrill wail as the two charges of shot tore through the left-hand rope, just under the limb, as if it was so much noodles. In case there was anyone looking who cared, there was a fine though brief view of long shapely legs and lace as Birdie turned over twice, stabbing and kicking all ways at once in midair, and then with a huge brown splash disappeared into the duck-pond.

Ma broke the gun and blew out the smoke. "We won't wait on Birdie," she said, and herded them out into the kitchen and sat them down and said grace; they quietly ate Spanish eggs until the tears ran down their noses.

8

So began the struggle of three widows and a wife to get near Dan Kehoe, and so it ended—on the surface, and for perhaps six weeks. They were weeks of idleness for Kehoe, at first a grateful and protected kind, and for a short spell a luxurious kind, but after that intolerable, maddening. Ma McDade did everything for him, from feeding to pitching out slops. She conversed with him mostly in grunts and glares, and when she had nothing to do for him she left him strictly alone. He found something to read—Volume Two of a dreary Englishman's dreary travels through Wales, printed in small blinding type on yellowed cracking paper. There was a Bible too, and half a hymnal, and that was all.

The door was kept locked except when Ma was in the room. He heard movements and voices occasionally from the depths of the old hotel, and the constant conversations of fowl from the large chicken run which had been built on the burying ground, its rise to mob violence at feeding time, its gossiping and alarums over the night visits of owl or polecat. Once he heard the tentative fluting of the melodeon, ending in a harsh brawl from Ma as she chased the player away. And that about summed up his contact with anything human in the world.

Three times a week Ma McDade loaded the buckboard with excelsior and egg crates and left for the all-day drive to Touchstone and back. On these days she

would leave extra bread and cheese with Kehoe, and a stone jug of milk with a cloth wrapped around it, standing in a basin of water to keep cool, and a little extra wash-water; and if he ran out of these he just did without until she returned, for the door stayed locked and the key rode with Ma. Twice Ma was asked—once by Kehoe and once by Oralie—whatever would happen if there was a fire, and to each she gave the same answer: a tight grin, and, "Solve my problem and yours too, wouldn't it?"

No one would have called Ma McDade a gentle nurse, maybe not even a kind one. But perhaps her healing was better and faster for that. She had approached the problem of setting and splinting Kehoe's broken thigh the way a schooner's mate might tackle the splicing, fishing and whipping of a broken gaff. Her idea of a splint made of hoe handles and cinch leather was designed not for lightness nor beauty nor comfort nor anything else in the world but to put the broken ends of bone together, fight the efforts of cramped, angry, big leg muscles to pull them out of line or force them, and then to hold them that way until they quit and behaved themselves. When at the end of the third day she made Kehoe lie flat on his back with his heels together and his soles against the footboard, to see if the injured leg was knitting short, he was quite certain of her competence to break the leg again and reset it, and of her intention to do just that if it needed doing, without consulting him with anything else but the heavy end of his gun. When she grunted with satisfaction and covered him up again, and he realized that her first splint was going to do the job, he all but wept with relief, and Dan Kehoe was not a weeping man.

Downstairs the girls behaved themselves, yet it was not a return to normal. The shadow of a hundred thousand dollars in gold and the one-in-four chance of

queening it over the others—this, as ever, hung over them all, was part of the air they breathed. Yet it was not the same thing any more. It stayed real, but it was background now. It couldn't be as immediate as the man upstairs. He was *here*. The husband, whoever he was, was somewhere else, and so, to all intents and purposes, was the gold. But Dan Kehoe—

And Dan Kehoe, as if he had known that even they couldn't think steadily about something for two weeks without some sort of proof, some signal, Dan began making himself known. When the idleness got to be more than he could take, he got out of bed. He used a straight chair as crutch and cane, and stumped and thumped back and forth in his room until the old building shook. He hung out the window and glared at the rimrock, shoved himself back inside and clumped and clumped up and down again until he sweated, and then went back to the window again for air.

The sound and shake of it penetrated each of the women like toothache. And in the same way they could not keep the tongues of their attention off it. Talking together, they would fall silent when it started, avoiding each other's eyes. If they could, they would separate, be alone with the thump and pulse and crash of the caged man. Once at dinner Ma McDade looked up from her plate and around a suddenly silent table: at Oralie studying her delicate interlaced fingers; at Ruby with eyes closed and nostrils flaring; at Sabina with her head tilted and her eyes down, her disturbing smile directed nowhere; and at Birdie, beating time gently on the table beside her plate as if the sounds from above were music from a dance down the street. "That is goin' to stop," Ma rasped, standing up so violently she tipped her chair over; and the girls, who agreed on very little these days, said with one immediate voice, *"No!"* And Ma, her lungs inflated to damn and blast them all and

state her case, saw in all their faces that they could hardly hear her; she had interrupted their listening and they had answered, but now they were lost in it again. She picked up her chair and sat down again, wagging her head wryly, and went on with her meal.

9.

At the end of the fifth week Dan Kehoe had graduated to a stick made of a hoe handle and was ready for a showdown. Ma McDade was quite aware of this, and honed her caution to a fine edge. Day by day she made the distance between herself and the door smaller, until at length all she did was unlock it, turn the handle, push and stand back, a dish or linen in one hand and the gun in the other. Only when she could see him across the room would she move forward, to toss him the linen or set the dish down on the floor inside, her sharp old eyes never leaving him as she stooped. If dirty dishes or laundry was within arm's reach, she reached, otherwise she ignored it. If the slop bucket was anywhere else but by the jamb, it just didn't get emptied. If he stood anywhere else but across the room, she would wait until he moved. Once he tried to outwait her. She reached forward, after a time, snatched the door to, locked it and went away. That was noon. He got no dinner and no supper either. In the morning she brought breakfast. They didn't discuss it. They didn't have to.

She stopped wearing her broad gold wedding ring. She wouldn't say why.

Yet these weren't silent or angry visits. They understood one another very well indeed. His window had become the biggest thing, the best thing in life to him; she understood that. Except for the meals, which didn't change much, the window was the only thing that pre-

sented any change at all. Sun, and the walking shadows. The birds. A man got to watching the grass grow—literally. Find a clump by a certain rock, get it straight in your head exactly how it is. Don't watch it tomorrow, or the next day. The one after, you let yourself see it, how it's changed. There's also the matter of the ground; how far away it is from the window sill. A thousand feet, a mile, when your leg's broke. Not so bad when you can get around with a stick, but still too far away. It comes up, though. Not as fast as grass, but it comes. And she understood all these things, his rush for information, his questions about what he could see, or almost see, or not see.

He in turn knew perfectly well what she was up against. He could josh her about the egg business and how to get a longer laying day—"Chop down them mountains"—and make exaggerated, good-humored complaints about the food, and half a hundred other irrepressible bits of nonsense. But some things were heavy on her, not to be talked about or hinted at. That pack of wild women downstairs and what he had done to them just by being here, for one. For another, the menace of him hanging over the flimsy structure she had built out of her own slender hope and the savage loneliness and greed of the four girls. The gold, always the gold; was it really here? If so, where? And if he should find it—what then? What about all of them then? Because you don't think soundly in the face of gold. Not that much gold.

And above and beyond everything else, the constant mute appeal: *What of my boy?*

Which boy?

So talking with her was like having two conversations at once. Only one you didn't hear. It was just there.

"You got a nice face, ma'am."

"Stop your nonsense."

"Only thing is, I never see another one. Look, the—those other ones, they never come around this side. That's your doing."

"Yup."

"Let 'em walk out there sometimes, Miz McDade."

"Nope."

"Not to talk to. Not hangin' around near. I don't mean that. Out there in the flats, I don't care how far away."

"Nope. They got no business this side o' the building. Chicken runs, river for washing, clothes line, everything—they got no call to come around here."

"I'm no help the way I am, ma'am. But things can get real rocky around here if I go out o' my head, and I faithfully promise you I will if I don't see another face pretty quick."

She gave him a lopsided grin. "Take more'n six weeks, or six years, to do that to the likes of you, Kehoe." And he gave her a dazzling smile back and threw up his hands. "You're right, but it was a hell of a nice try, wasn't it?"

And underneath, *You know I can't let you near those girls, Dan Kehoe. Don't let's put a match to this.*

He thought at first he would see something of the girls when Ma went to town. He was wrong. They watched each other like four battlers in a ring in the last ten seconds before a free-for-all. When Ma returned they relaxed a little, let her do the policing. She couldn't, not every second. He found a note under the door. His eyes were excellent and his hearing was better, but he didn't hear anyone come or go. There was just the little white point of the paper sticking into the room on the sill. Whoever did it had taken a hell of a chance. Suppose he hadn't seen it and Ma had? She'd have found out; she'd have torn the head off the one who did it.

I am thinking about you.

That was all. No initial, no nothing. Well, that was playing it safe. But it wasn't safe. Ma would know which one. Might've seen her writing. Might've seen her bringing it up.

He stood there in front of the door and read it again. At first it had seemed silly, a foolish thing to put down on a piece of paper. He read it for the third time, and that feeling went away. He began to see it for what it was—the only words someone out there could find for two solid years of three-to-one-he's-dead, of sleeping alone and waiting for today to go by so she could wait tomorrow, too. Again he looked at the paper. It was all there, and lots more he couldn't begin to know.

His own starvations rushed up in him abruptly as he read down into what the paper said. The words flicked off a layer every time they passed through his mind.

What was she thinking about him? Why, herself and him, naturally.

He thought about that, vividly. He heard a moan and shook his head violently, recognizing it as breath squeezing through his own choked throat.

I am thinking about you . . . now. Now she's thinking about me, instead of—which one?

I am thinking about you (and it got to be more than I could hold by myself, I thought I'd break in two, and the only thing I could do was tell you; it meant more to tell you just that than who I am).

All that from five scratches on a scrap of paper. He filled his lungs until it hurt, and let the air out quietly. "I'm thinking about you, too," he said aloud to the locked door.

It sighed.

It was a heavy door, like most in boom town hotels where a guest liked to lock up tight when he wasn't in, or when he was. It fit its frame a little loosely; some-

times in the night a little draft could move it and set the bolt thumping quietly in its socket. It thumped now, a tiny single sound. Something—someone—was bearing on it from the other side.

He had a sudden blinding image of a woman just those two wooden inches away, pressed tight to his door, speechless with the sound of his voice just now. Come silently with the note, staying silently until he read it.

He was going to speak, but he heard her leaving and he held his breath for the faint whisper of her feet, bare feet; one step, two, and he couldn't be sure of the third. He hung there by the panel until his ears were roaring and he had to breathe. Then he straightened up to quell a wild impulse to tear down door, wall and all—the very thing that would bring Ma McDade on the run, perhaps to meet whoever it was in the hall outside, with her feet bare and God knows what in her face.

He stumped over to the window and gulped outdoor air. He leaned on his elbows, his injured leg sticking straight out behind him with the weight off it. It throbbed from tension. He stayed there a long time, until the late light flooded the eastern cliffs with yellow-orange.

The ground didn't seem so far away today.

He looked at that for a long time, and at what it meant to him, and then let his gaze travel across the flats to the tumbled bases of the cliffs, and up and up the face to the high rim. A man might, he just might—and with them watching the bridge— It was just then that he saw the little flash high up on the skyline.

It came again. He had seen the like before, somewhere. He shrugged. It would come back to him. He kept watching, and saw what looked like a small boulder detach itself and move along the cliff, rise suddenly and become the tiny, distant head and torso of a man mounting a horse. Then it was gone.

The ache he felt for a moment eclipsed anything his leg had given him. God, he thought, the times I forked a horse with a big sky over me, free to go any place but straight up, and thought nothing of it—like him up there, whoever he is.

The door opened behind him. He didn't bother to turn around.

"Three," said Ma McDade after studying him.

"How's that?"

"Three sheets. I reckon it's time you began figurin' how many sheets would make a rope to the ground, so I thought I'd save the strain on your brains. The answer is three."

"Tell you the truth," he said bitterly, turning to face her, "I hadn't thought of that, Miz McDade. I was fixin' to nail my belly button to the sill an' lower myself by my gut."

If he had shocked her, she didn't show it, though she seemed to be holding in some laughter. It passed. She stood just inside the open doorway, right thumb hooked in the waistband an inch from the butt of the Colt's. "You couldn't rightly do that, Kehoe," she said gravely. "Not without you get me to haul the nail out after you're down."

"I was sort of countin' on you."

She snorted. "Here's your chow. It's the last, or the last but one."

"How d'you mean?"

"How do you feel?"

"Do you mean do I feel good enough to leave? I felt that good when I was only fit to crawl."

"Mind your lip," she said, "or I'll forget I owe you a horse." But she was not annoyed.

Some of the caged bitterness left him. "You don't owe me, ma'am," he said sincerely. "I'll take the horse be-

cause I need it, if you can spare it. But you don't owe me."

"I can spare it. But you'll take it an' get, and don't poke into this valley again. You're not a stranger no more, mister. We give two bullets to strangers here, one to warn. You don't get but one."

"You don't need to push, ma'am. Savin' your presence, I don't like it here."

"That's what I was hopin'. Anyway, long as we understand each other—"

That should have been enough, but she stayed where she was. Once she wet her lips briefly. He waited. Abruptly she stepped forward, slid a dog-eared tintype across the table at him, and immediately stepped back to the door. "You look at that."

Curious, he limped to the table and got the picture.

It showed four men, stiffly posed, with a phony painted mountain behind them and a phony marble balustrade at the side.

Kehoe shot her a look and went back to studying the picture. "Your boys?"

"They didn't favor me," she said. She swallowed. "Handsome as sin, all four, 'cept Matt had that sort of hump to his shoulder. Big fella, ain't he? The one with the mole, well, it ain't a mole, it's more a birthmark there on his cheek, that's Roy. Sing? Why, you never heard a man sing till you heard Roy. Prince, he's the one standing up there, all the time trying to stand as tall as the rest, the youngest. The other one's Boone."

"Boone forgot to smile," said Kehoe, just to be saying something.

"Boone shot his fool finger off that day on a bet," she said with a flash of peculiar pride. "Little one on the left. Claimed he never used it for anything better."

Kehoe looked again and saw the left hand thrust into the right sleeve of what must have been a borrowed

dress coat. He shook his head noncommittally and leaned forward to slide the picture back.

Ma McDade took it and put it away, watching him. "Which one was it, Kehoe?" she hissed. He looked up at her face, startled. Her eyes were slitted and her nostrils flared.

"I don't get you, ma'am," he said stupidly. And for a moment he thought she was going to draw the gun. From the kind of movement she made toward it, he knew that if she had, she'd have been past thinking of aiming it. She'd have beat out his brains with it. "That Dakota feller!"

"Oh," said Kehoe. "I can't just say, ma'am."

She slumped, but her eyes stayed on him.

He said, "I told you—it was dark in that cell."

"If you can't say which one, was it any of 'em? Or can you swear it wasn't?"

"No'm, I can't."

She backed a pace to the doorway. "Maybe there wasn't no Dakota feller."

He shrugged. "I'm here."

"You took a long chance on a stranger's say-so."

"I wasn't in no position to pick and choose who to believe," he reminded her.

"Maybe not," said Ma McDade, "but *I* am." She shut and locked the door. Kehoe kicked viciously at the bedpost. It hurt, and perversely, he was glad of it. He sat down and began methodically to curse every man who had ever had anything to do with Ma McDade, himself included, and ended by cursing her just as roundly.

10

SHE'D SAID THE MEAL was the last but one, and that had to mean he would be free in the morning. He slept well, better than he had any night since he came. The open window was no longer a temptation nor the locked door an enemy. The sound of the key in the lock woke him, and he laughed half angrily as he sat up in bed and saw the bowl of grits and the huge chunk of sourdough bread standing there. It was the locking of the door which had awakened him, not the opening. Sly old hag, he thought, and then his eye fell to the boots standing by the taboret. He almost yelled hello to them, it had been so long. They'd been cleaned and greased and they had new rawhide laces. And the clean old patched jeans—a McDade heritage, he reckoned—which usually hung over the back of the chair, they were gone today, and he thought for a moment that the old lady planned to turn him loose in his long johns and his boots. Then he opened the closet door; and there was his suit and his fancy vest, all pressed up and mended, and on the shelf was his hat, brushed and blocked and with new black ribbon on it.

"Well, damn," he said quietly. He sat on the edge of his bed and ate his breakfast. He felt real queer, and wouldn't let himself think why.

He washed and dressed himself carefully. He wished he could shave off his six weeks' beard. His shirt had never been so white, though he suspected it wouldn't

last too long. These squatter women would rub a wet shirt thick with yellow soap and hang it in the sun to bleach; and if it fell apart the second time around—the hell with it, it sure looked clean. On a hook in the back of the closet he found his belt, his money belt and his shoulder holster, as well as his tooled knife sheath. No knife, of course, or razor or gun, though all the cartridges on the belt had been replaced. He fanned through the money belt and if there was anything missing, he couldn't recall it. Except the plugged dollar. One way or another, he meant to inquire about that dollar.

Which reminded him of something else, and he went to the window to think about it.

Where was that gold?

From all accounts, Ma McDade had let upward of eighty men search to their hearts' content through the ruined town without complaint. Could it really be that the dust wasn't here at all?

But it had to be; it always came back to that. The wives were here. The odds were against each of them that their man had escaped, but that made the odds all the stronger that the gold was right handy. To stay here, they had to be sure that whoever the missing man was, he wouldn't quietly pick up the gold from some cache in the hills and slide off with it. That meant he couldn't get it without them knowing. They never left Wagon Mound, so it had to be in Wagon Mound.

He could take it one step further. He didn't know these women, but he could guess what kind of women they were—or at least he could be sure what kind of women they weren't. Chances were good that if they knew where the gold was, one or two or all of 'em would have gone with it long since. Except Ma, of course. Suppose, now, that only the missing McDade knew; Ma would wait, gold or no gold. But if she didn't know

where it was, would even she be able to hold the girls in line?

He doubted it.

So either she really did know where it was, or the girls had good reason to believe she did. And the odds were that the four wives didn't know where it was.

He shook his head at that. Too bad. Given the chance, he might fool with the idea of prying the secret out of a young and pretty woman. But it would take more than his brand of fast talk to get it out of Ma McDade.

I got to try, he thought, glowering out at the flats and the cliff. *I can't let myself get run out of here without I try, just a little.*

Try how?

He shrugged. Something would turn up. Something always turns up if you let it. If it don't, you make it turn up.

And if he couldn't do it this trip, he could always come back.

He smiled grimly at that, thinking of the bridge and the sharp eyes in the bell tower. Fat chance.

And in that second something did turn up; and the sound of it struck him like a fist, so that he fell back from the window and had to grab at the table to steady himself on his stiff leg.

The bell.

Somewhere in the hotel, a door slammed. He heard running feet, and Ma's heavy voice, crackling, "You, Ruby, take the shotgun and cover the north wing. Oralie! Oralie! Jump, gal! Fetch me those three boxes of cartridges from the kitchen shelf." He heard running feet again, and some more orders, too far away for him to understand.

A high, clear voice, "You got enough shells, Ruby?"

A gusty, nervous laugh in a full voice, and a Spanish

phrase. There was a great clatter from the chicken runs, and then he heard Ma's voice out on the street, which was on the opposite side of the building from his window. "Come down from there, Sabina! Get on in here! I'll cover you!"

A tense silence. Then a shot, followed instantly by a man's bull voice from far away, "Who done that? By the Lord, you'll hold your fire till I give the word, hear?" and then running feet on dirt, on duckboards, up the porch steps.

Kehoe took the door handle and shook it violently. Then he backed away and bit on his thumbnail for a moment, considering.

Suddenly he pounced on his breakfast dishes, the bowl, the spoon.

11

DOWNSTAIRS, Ma McDade clapped her rifle under her armpit and caught the weaving girl by the shoulders as she gasped up the steps. "You all right, honey?"

Speechless, Sabina nodded. She rested for a few seconds in the hard grip, then pulled herself together and stepped clear. Ma McDade immediately shouldered the Springfield again, and, without taking her eyes off the street, said, "Larrabee?"

"I saw a star on him," panted the girl. She pulled her left arm across her brow and eyes, then took up a position on the other side of the steps with her rifle at the ready. "I didn't dare shoot, Ma. Too many of them—twelve, I think. Came right on in. All I could think of was ring the bell."

"You done good, honey. Now get on inside."

"No, Ma, I can—"

"Inside. You can cover me from there. I talked this fool down many's the time before an' I can do it again, but I don't want no distractions."

Sabina touched the old woman's shoulder. "If anything hap—" she whispered, but Ma said roughly, "Get along in."

The redhead backed into the doorway, watching the street, and stopped just inside. "There they are!"

The sheriff rode down the center of the street, his men bunched behind him. Almost completely concealed behind the porch pillar, Ma slowly raised her

rifle and squeezed off a shot. Dust fountained a foot behind Larrabee's horse, between him and the posse.

"That means you, an' not them, Tom Larrabee!" she called at the top of her powerful voice.

The sheriff stopped and held up a hand. The posse stopped too, watchful and tense. There was open ground nearly a hundred yards wide between the end of the street and the hotel; the men were reined in on the street itself. There was a certain amount of cover there, but they couldn't spread out. Ma let the sheriff come out into the open perhaps twenty yards and then significantly raised her gun again. He stopped and folded his arms, as if to make it quite clear that his guns were in leather, and looked at her calmly.

" 'Morning, Tom." In some strange way she seemed to be enjoying herself. "You come all this way to hear me tell you this is my land, an' get off it?"

Larrabee shook his head slowly. "You know what I come for," he said in a grave voice. "Send him out with his hands up, Miz McDade. We can do this quiet and nobody hurt; it's up to you. Just send him out."

Ma McDade laughed shortly. "Send who out?"

"Look," said the sheriff tiredly, "land or no land, this is the end of Wagon Mound for you, Miz McDade. I left all kind of things out o' the business between us so far—aidin' an' abettin', an' concealin' stolen property, an' lots more of the same. I got the right to bring you in, all of you, material witnesses, accessories—all that lawyer's talk. I never done it."

"Not while we was bait," said Ma bitterly.

The sheriff was unruffled. "I'd as soon leave you the way you are. The one single chance you got to keep your home an' chickens an' all, is send that boy out with his hands up. I can't play this cat 'n' mouse game with you no more, and that's all I got to say."

"You're makin' the biggest mistake of your life, Tom

Larrabee. He ain't here."

The sheriff turned his head. "Billy!" he called.

A rangy youth with glossy black hair cantered up from the street. Ma raised her rifle tensely as he came, but said nothing. The boy drew up beside the sheriff. He had a battered set of Union binoculars on a thong around his neck. He played with them nervously. The sheriff said, with something like sadness, "Billy Little Bear here, he seen your boy with his glasses yesterday. Miz McDade," he said suddenly, "I don't recall you ever tol' a flat lie. I'd ruther you do anything but that."

"My boy ain't here," said Ma doggedly.

The sheriff sighed. "I got to look for him then."

"An' you won't find 'im. Then what?"

"I already said. Maybe I did think you an' the girls'd draw that boy back here. That's better'n two years ago. If he's here, good. If he ain't— Well, this country's better off with nothin' in Wagon Mound to bring him."

"You're really fixin' to run us off, whatever," Ma said slowly.

" 'Less you send that boy of yours out here in five minutes."

"I can't do that."

The sheriff unfolded his arms and turned the palms up. "I tried," he said quietly. "You know I tried. All right. Now we got to come get him. We don't figure to shoot first, Miz McDade, but we're goin' to protect ourselves. If we got to shoot women, and burn 'em out, we got to. Don't make us."

Her voice was thick. "Why won't you believe me, Tom—why?"

"Because," said the sheriff almost gently, "if he was here, you'd never in this world send him out. You'd say every word you just said. Now ain't that so, ma'am?"

Ma McDade said nothing, but dropped her eyes to the gun stock. Detachedly, she watched her old bronze

hand stroke the trigger guard and slip cosily around the pistol grip. Suddenly she whirled and crossed to the door.

"Five minutes, mind," called the sheriff. He folded his arms again.

Inside, Sabina stood wide-eyed and white, waiting for whatever word Ma might produce. She met the girl's eyes and had nothing to say to her. "Oralie," she said roughly, "go get Ruby. Where's Birdie?"

"She went upstairs," said Oralie, and began to weep. "Can he do what he says, Ma?"

"He *will,*" said Ma. "Jump, now!"

Oralie ran out crying. Birdie came flouncing down the stairs. She had powder on; some was spilled on her collar. "Should I take all my clothes now, Ma? Will they give us a chance to pack?"

Ma pointed scornfully to the lounge. "You set there and shut up while we talk this out, 'fore you go to makin' plans."

Birdie shrilled, "For what? For what? Go on, stay if you want to, get shot at, burn. I don't care. I'm goin' with them!" she started hysterically for the door and Ma McDade's hand met the side of her face explosively. Excess face powder puffed out at the point of impact and hung for a moment in a sunbeam. Birdie backed away to the lounge, where she plumped down, her hand pressed to her face. Oralie and Ruby ran in just in time to see the slap, Ruby to release her great shout of laughter, Oralie to utter the scream which the shocked Birdie had been unable to make. Ma bellowed for silence; and silence came in that total way it suddenly does sometimes at a crowded table and makes everyone start and look at each other. Into this Sabina's low, cool voice said, "Well, good *morning!*"

Her tone was nothing that belonged in this room at this time; she could not have drawn more attention if

she had neighed like a horse. As one, they all whirled to stare at her, and back again to follow her astonished, amused and quizzical gaze at the stairs.

Halfway down was Kehoe, a piece of hoe handle tucked under his arm, his hat in his hand, and a broad smile on his face. "Howdy," he said easily, and helped himself down by the shaky banister.

"You get on back up them stairs, mister," gritted the old lady. "I got no time for arguments with you. Hear?"

Kehoe shifted the stick to his other hand and came limping across to her, nodding in a pleased fashion to Oralie and Ruby as he passed them. "I couldn't do that, ma'am. Not with y'all in this trouble."

"It's no business of yours!"

"Beg pardon, ma'am, it is. I heard that little pow-wow, you and the law yonder. It was me that Injun saw."

"That couldn't be."

Kehoe shook his head. "It was. I saw the flash off his spyglasses yesterday, up on the rimrock. Never thought of it until just now, or I'd 've said something to you. It's a poor way to pay you back for all you done."

"Depends," said Ma McDade, with a glint of her hard humor, "if you mean for savin' your hide, or for lockin' it up so long. How'd you get out, jus' by the way?"

He grinned and fumbled in his side pocket and came up with a tin spoon. He put it down on the arm of the settle. "Pushed out the hinge-pins with this. You ought to remember that, ma'am, when you lock up a man where the door opens inward."

Ma grunted. "Surprised you didn't think o' that before now."

"Oh, I did. I just couldn't figure my moves from there on, is all."

"And now you can?"

"Reckon so."

"You're not going out there!" It was Sabina who spoke. He looked at her. She looked back, eye to eye, with no blushes or foolishness.

"Sure am, miss."

"Mrs.," said Sabina, coldly. "You know that wolf-pack out there wants blood first and explanations later."

"Didn't sound quite that way to me," said Kehoe gently.

"You only heard the sheriff," said Ma McDade. She moved between Kehoe and the redhead, impelled by some vague feeling that unless she did, they would not hear her. "Anyway, it wouldn't make no difference. He means to run us out whatever."

"If it makes no difference," said Kehoe just as gently, "I'd as soon go on out there."

Ma looked quickly at Sabina, who shrugged. She glanced back at Ruby, who was eyeing Kehoe's big frame with open admiration. "Ees too bad," she murmured. Somehow, that seemed to make up Ma's mind. "Go on then," she said quickly; had she not been quick, she knew he would have gone before she let him.

Kehoe stood at the top of the porch steps with his hands up, one holding the stick. The sheriff, moving much faster than a tired man ought to, slapped his thigh and came up with a gun. There were some scattered yells from the posse, sounding like the shrill barking of a coyote pack. They broke cover and started out.

Tom Larrabee turned his head as far as he could without taking his eyes off Kehoe and his heavy voice came out like cannon-fire, "I'll shoot the first man who fires before I say to." The yipping stopped, and the galloping; still, they came on. In the comparative quiet, the sheriff said, "I mean to let the court have this man. Now get back there. How long'd it take to lay out all twelve of us if we bunch out here under them windows?"

The words were sobering. All but two of the men stopped and reluctantly withdrew to the end of the street. The sheriff apparently decided not to bicker with these two, but sat his horse, held his gun, and waited.

Kehoe, having clumsily negotiated the steps, came out slowly and steadily.

After what seemed to everyone an interminable length of time, the sheriff spoke without turning. "Billy."

"Yeah, Sheriff."

"You ever see a McDade?"

"Why, no, sir. My pap, he—"

"Billy," said the sheriff, more tired than ever, "that ain't a McDade."

"It's the self-same man I seen from the—"

"I wouldn't doubt it," mourned the sheriff, "but it ain't a McDade."

"Well, damn," said one of the two posse men. "Well, damn," said the other. To Kehoe, who was twenty feet away, the sheriff said, "That'll do," and Kehoe stopped, leaning on his stick.

He said, "Something I can do for you boys?"

The sheriff said, "Watch 'm," holstered his gun and slid off his horse. The deputies kept their weapons on Kehoe while Larrabee approached. Without instruction Kehoe half raised his arms and let the sheriff slap his underarms and hips.

Larrabee stepped back a pace, tipped his hat to the back of his head, and looked over his man. "What's your name?"

"What's yours?" asked Kehoe peaceably.

"What are you doin' in Wagon Mound?"

"Restin'."

"Who's here beside you?"

"Just the ladies."

"You got a horse?"

"I could get one."

"Saddle up. You're ridin' back with us."

"What for?"

The sheriff pulled his lower lip thoughtfully. "I'll think of something, or I won't. But you'll be two days in Touchstone jail 'fore I admit it. I don't know what business you got in Wagon Mound, but it ain't goin' to interfere with mine."

At this point there was in interruption from one of the watchful deputies on horseback. "By God, it's Mister Kehoe! I didn't know you with them whiskers. I thought you was dead!"

"Howdy, Claude. I didn't know you without your mop. Who said I was dead?"

"That Sweetcake. He come back in town tellin' about you so full of lead you sunk spang into the ground."

"He got the wrong man," said Kehoe very softly.

Claude laughed self-consciously. And he put up his gun.

"So you're the one," said the sheriff.

"I'm the one got bushwhacked in the middle of your law-abidin' community, yes," said Kehoe. "I figure you owe me a little something on that." He thumped his injured leg with the stick.

The sheriff's lips twitched, as if he had thought of something to smile at. But he didn't turn it loose. He said, "How do I pay what you figure I owe you?"

"Nothing out of your pocket." He glanced over at the deputies. "I'd as soon not tell the world."

Larrabee glanced over, too, then turned his back on the horsemen and walked with Kehoe a few paces toward the hotel. "Your deal, Kehoe."

"All right. Now take a good look at your cards, Sheriff. You're holding the king and four queens."

"Meanin'—?"

"You want McDade, don't you?"

"I want him," said Larrabee.

"You keep a lookout posted hereabouts, day and night?"

The sheriff looked at him thoughtfully. He said nothing.

"I know you don't," said Kehoe. "Or you'd knowed all about me bein' here more'n a month ago. Look, Sheriff, the way it is, if you don't like your hand, you don't have to play."

The sheriff hung to his own thoughts for another moment before he nodded. Then he glanced up at the rimrock and said, "Billy Little Bear's the most lookout I got. His folks settled over the hill a ways, couple months ago. I ain't got the men to keep a steady watch, although there's plenty comes and goes when they get a chance. I been bankin' pretty heavy on McDade comin' back here to see his wife an' that dust everybody talks about an' nobody sees."

"So what's to prevent McDade slidin' in here between times, pickin' up his chips, and haulin' freight for good?"

"Not a thing," said Larrabee.

"Wrong," said Kehoe, and grinned. "There's me."

"You!"

"I'm a parlor boarder here. McDade shows up, I'll pass you the word."

"You're takin' a chance even to think of such a damn fool thing. You know what that ol' lady would do to you if she heard of it?"

"I know."

"You know what McDade would do if he heard there was a man livin' here?"

"He might come in a little sooner."

"S'pose you wear out your welcome?"

"I can handle that." Kehoe laughed a little. "It's good for a time, for the man who saved their place for 'em."

"By God, you copper everything. An' how you going to explain *that* to Miz McDade? She knows I don't back off easy."

"I'll think of something."

"By God," said the sheriff again, "I do believe you will. What about gettin' that word to me?"

Kehoe scanned the ruined town. "I won't be able to come and go much," he admitted. "A smudge fire, maybe."

"In this box valley? Might not see it for a week."

"Shots. Three and three."

"One shot sounds like fifty in these rocks. I got it! The bell!"

"Bell?"

"In the church tower yonder. You heard it this morning. It still hangs there, and they ain't hardly touched it since the barn blowed up. When it rings you can hear it miles around. Billy Little Bear'll hear it sure, or his folks. I'll come a-runnin'. You—you're goin' to have your hands full about then, Kehoe."

Kehoe shrugged. "Worth it."

"What about that? What's in this for you?"

"Whatever's on McDade's head."

"Five thousand. And another five if you find the dust."

Kehoe snapped his fingers. "An' you talk to me about chances!"

"I'll talk to you about this one," said Larrabee soberly. "You're a gambler an' you think fast and you talk fast and from what I hear you're pretty fast on the draw, too. Now me, I wouldn't try to outtalk a stone-dead deaf-mute with his jaw tied up, and I reckon I could drown in a pail of milk before I could think my

way out of it. But there's a thing about me you got to know, and that is if a man outsmarts me an' makes a fool of me, I'll hound him till I get him, no matter how far, no matter how long. It ain't a thing I got to work at, it's the way I am. You, now, you take a lot of chances. But this here's one you wouldn't want to tackle."

Kehoe chuckled and swatted the sheriff on the shoulder. "You made a speech."

Larrabee did not yield to the blow and he did not smile. "I got one more thing to say to you, Kehoe. There's nothin' in our contrac' says I got to like what you're doin' or like you for it."

Kehoe's smile disappeared. Cold eyes held cold eyes for a long moment, and then Kehoe said levelly, "I'd say you were in the wrong business, friend."

The sheriff closed his eyes very slowly and let them come open again. A man who could say a thing like that had to know him too well, or see in to him too far. He gestured toward the hotel and said, "I'd say you were in the right one." He turned his back on Kehoe and stumped tiredly back to his horse.

Kehoe stood spraddle-legged and watched them out of sight. After a long time he looked down. He saw a mud-wasp nosing a greasewood sprout. He cut at it so hard with his stick that he broke it.

Without the stick it took him a while to get to the hotel, which was just as well. He was almost back to normal by the time he started up the porch steps.

12

THEY WERE OUT ON THE PORCH, all of them, as he came up. He gave them a grin.

"They gone?"

"They be back?"

"What'd you tell 'm?"

"Come inside—let him inside. You look real peaked, Mr. Kehoe," said Ma McDade. "Leg hurt?"

He denied it with a hearty grunt. He stalked across the porch and into the lobby, and fell gratefully into one of the overcushioned wicker chairs. He stretched his long legs and took a luxurious deep breath which annoyed him by sounding more like a moan than he cared it to. He cocked his head and slitted his eyes and grinned. "Brain work. Rather cut a cord o' wood with a bowie knife."

"They really gone, Mr. Kehoe?"

"Yup."

The one with the long green eyes, the redhead, came across the room with a cushion. Ma McDade snatched it out of her hands before she got close and put it between the hard wicker back and the nape of Kehoe's neck. "Thankee. You don't need to—"

"What'd you tell him?"

"I said I liked it here and I'd be miserable if I had to do my own cookin'."

They all laughed too loud, nervously. From somewhere, out of thin air, out of the floor, the little one,

the dark young scared one, appeared with a big earthenware cup of water. He took it gratefully, smiling with his eyes over the rim. She could not have seen him; her long lashes lay right down on her cheeks as she stood before him with her small curled hands pressed tight against each other and her breast. The water was cool and sweet. When he had finished it he handed back the cup; she took it and was gone so quickly he hardly saw which way she went. Besides, Ma was talking, nudging him. "I thought you couldn't do it. And I figured we'd seen the last of you—he'd take you, or you'd just go anyway. What did you want to come back for?"

"It was wonderful. Just wonderful," somebody said. He looked past Ma. It was the blonde, the one he had seen get slapped. She had straightened out her powder and arranged her dress so it fell away from her as she perched on the lounge, like a picture of falling water. She had her hands clasped over one knee and held her head a little to one side so the golden ringlets bobbed gently against the side of her face. If it wasn't for the reddened eyes you wouldn't know it was the same girl.

Somebody laughed. Tall, olive-skinned, too wide-shouldered for a woman but on her it was all right. She wore a blouse he couldn't quite believe, and big gold hoops in her ears. Her hair was parted in the middle, black as the hole in a .44, shiny as a blued barrel. She was laughing at the blonde. He had seen women like that before. Not often. You look at them once, and from then on you don't need to look again to know where they are, the way you don't need to look to see where a log fire is.

He said, "I can tell you something you'd like to hear or I can tell you the truth."

"I'd like the truth," said the old woman.

"No, ma'am, you wouldn't an' you won't." He looked

swiftly at all their faces, catching them all by surprise with their eyes where he shouldn't notice them: the blonde's concentrating on smoothing her bodice down tight; the Mexican girl's brooding and angry on the old woman while she forgot to display her fine teeth; the little one's frightened-animal eyes looking straight at him; and the redhead's off in space, pulled the least bit askew by one hard-thinking eyebrow that frowned and the other that arched. They all reacted instantly: the redhead looking at him, all interest, while the Mexican and the youngster looked away, one smiling secretly and the other confused and blushing. The blonde had her head tilted again and turned to what she surely thought was "my best side," and the curls swinging. This whole exchange took perhaps four seconds, and he laughed out loud at them all, and quickly hung some words to the laugh. "Your sheriff can't handle but one idea at a time. When he goes hunting McDades, he won't have a Kehoe at any price."

"He got neither one."

"He got a promise."

Ma's eyes narrowed. "You didn't promise him no Kehoe."

Kehoe was silent until the idea sank in. He knew that when it did, he was going to see something new in the way of fury.

He was right.

In the most frightening whisper he had ever heard, Ma McDade said, "I'm a Christian woman, or that's what I've tried to be, and before my good Lord I prove it by not drilling your Judas head here and now—" She paused, panting, and he tried to speak, but she overrode him. "Get out of here, Kehoe, and pray with me that God gives me the strength not to shoot you in the back as you go. I ain't got it now, Lord forgive me." He had not known a face could be so contorted with

rage. Three of the girls were transfixed at the sight; the fourth, the redhead, moved quickly to the old lady and slipped an arm around her shoulders. "Ma! Ma!" she called softly, like someone looking for a friend in the dark where enemies might hear. "Hear him out. He wouldn't, Ma. He *wouldn't!*" That last she flashed at Kehoe, a challenge.

"Sit down, ma'am," he said as gently as he could, and to the redhead, "Make her sit down. I'm afraid for her."

The Mexican girl ran up with another wicker chair and put it behind Ma McDade. They pressed her down into it, and the whole time her angry blaze never left his face. Once down, she blew explosively from her nostrils and whispered, "Get him out."

"You better go," said the blonde, all eyes for the old woman, for once frightened out of herself.

"I can't do that," said Kehoe. "I'm Larrabee's hole card. I'm all he's got to count on in Wagon Mound. If I leave he'll be back with a posse and run you out like he said."

Ma McDade leaned forward, her elbows on her knees, her hands together. Again he noticed the silky band of smooth flesh on her ring finger, against the brown bark of her hand. "Ruby! Birdie! Get your guns on him. Herd him upstairs and hold him in his room till we get that door fixed so he—"

"I'm sorry to distress you so, ma'am," said Kehoe earnestly. He sounded as if he meant it, because he really did mean it. "But you can't do that either. Larrabee has lookouts on the rimrock. I got to be out where they can see me or they'll be back to find out why. If I leave, you leave. If I'm dead, you leave. If I'm locked up, I'm just as useless to the sheriff, and out you go."

Ma McDade raised her face blindly and said to all the world and the sky, "Why, *why* didn't I roll you into the river when I had you down?" and because her

crazed eyes happened to be pointed that way, the terrified youngest girl answered in a tiny, breathy soprano, "I don't know, Ma," and then fell back, blushing like a wet sunset.

The old woman lowered her head, and the redhead began to massage the nape of her neck, murmuring little shushes, gentling her. He wondered if she had ever broken a horse. He looked from her good hands to her face, and found himself looking into those long green eyes. They were very wide apart, the kind of eyes you think you're looking into and find your only looking at.

She said, "I think you better tell it nice and easy, Mr. Kehoe. There must be something in it we all don't understand yet."

He looked down at the old woman's grizzled head, shifting slightly under the girl's firm slow movements. "I'd like to be sure Miz McDade hears me out."

The girl laughed. "She doesn't miss much, Mr. Kehoe."

"Good. Then—I'm mighty sorry, ma'am, to stir you up like that. There's only one way to tell it, an' that's the way it happened. So, yes, I did tell Sheriff Larrabee I'd stay here to nab your boy, if only he'd leave you all here."

"And Sheriff Larrabee agreed because he thought you were a big-hearted man trying to do some ladies a favor?"

"He agreed because I stand to collect five thousand dollars blood money and the same again for the dust."

Ma McDade slowly sat up straight. Her voice was cracked and spent as she said slowly, "You're takin' a terrible chance sittin' here talkin' like that."

Surprisingly, Kehoe laughed. "No I ain't, ma'am. I won't harm your boy nor any of you. Whatever Larrabee thinks, I don't want any part of that kind of

Judas money."

"What do you want?" asked the redhead flatly.

"Just to stay quiet, right where I'm at. You know how I come here, an' you know it wasn't law chasin' me. I want to finish mendin' and I want to lay low until things quiet down for me outside. I eat light an' I'll help with the chores."

"For how long?"

Kehoe shrugged. "Till Larrabee decides to leave you the roof over your head without me under it. Or until he gets tired of waitin'."

"Or until my boy comes home."

"Oh no, ma'am. I already said that. That would be the thing to make the sheriff get tired of waitin'. If your boy can slide in and slide out an' no one the wiser, an' if the lookouts see me sashayin' around here day after day—why, they could only think he ain't got here yet."

"You'd do that?" croaked Ma McDade.

"With your help. An' his."

"Just for a hideout?"

"It's the best."

Ma McDade shook her head dubiously. "You got the dangdest way of layin' about you with the truth, Kehoe, even where you bust yourself over the head with it. I'd like to believe you, the good Lord knows I would, but I can think of five better reasons for you stayin' here. Four of 'em stand right here"—she twitched an inclusive thumb at the girls—"an' the last is a sort of rumor we don't talk much about. Now if you said you was after any of them, I'd get myself mad all over again, but at the same time I'd find your story a little easier to swallow than that poppycock about a hideout."

Kehoe's eyes twinkled. "With any of the items you mention, ma'am, I reckon I'd be a mite happier. Without the hideout I'd be dead. Savin' all you ladies' pres-

ence, I like my own reasons the best."

Ma McDade sighed and stood up. She shook her head ruefully. "I wish I'd never seen you, Dan Kehoe. But I did an' now we got to make the best of it." She glanced around at the four girls. "Kehoe, you know what would start the worst kind of trouble the quickest around here?"

Kehoe glanced around as she had. He didn't quite chuckle. "Yes'm."

"You goin' to start any of it?"

"No, ma'am!" he said positively.

"Sabina. Ruby. You, Birdie. Oralie. You know what I'm talkin' about?"

"Yes, Ma."

"Yes, Ma."

"Ay, perro si!"

"No. What, Ma?" asked Oralie, and fell back under the explosion of laughter.

13

"IT HAS TO BE AROUND HERE SOMEWHERE."

This was a chorus to the hours and the weeks. It was a thing you said to yourself more often than "Good mornin'," or "Howdy," out loud.

The women had done wonders with the place, but they couldn't cover the lack of a man's hand. Birdie, surprisingly, was a pretty fair carpenter and little Oralie was good with the chickens. Ruby had a real green thumb, a strong back and energy like anger; she seemed at her happiest fighting a plow with a four-horse team on it or slamming seeds into the ground with a hand drill hour after hour under the sun until her olive skin had a sheen to it. Sabina was content with the books and the business most of the time. Occasionally she entered into orgies of cooking and baking, but most of the time she was content to sit in the belfry with her ledgers and her Winchester. Her books were neat and absolutely accurate. Her marksmanship was uncanny. Any time you figured you knew what she was thinking, you were probably wrong. And Ma McDade was everywhere. Especially when Kehoe was out of sight for a while; somehow Ma always showed up wherever he was.

It has to be around here somewhere. Kehoe got to work on the roosting sheds, replacing rotted studs. He scrabbled around in chicken droppings under all the footings of all the sheds for three weeks, and had them in fine shape before Ma dropped the word, with

an unconcealed grin, that they had all been re-built since the big posse searched them. He scavenged up and down what was left of Wagon Mound's streets, picking up hinges, salvaging cut-nails and bits of unburned sill and sash and anything else useful. Once in a while he'd back out of a ruin and bump into Ma McDade, with her cheerful grin and her damned "Find anything worthwhile, Dan?"

Once he wandered out to the burying ground. Three unweathered stones stood there in a straight row. They had no dates, no nothing but *McDade* carved on them. He stood in the wind and looked at them for a long time, thinking about the McDades, and then about all that had happened since he first saw one of these stones in an alley in Touchstone; and then he thought, *It has to be around here somewhere,* and looked again at the mounds. He shoved angrily at the thought that came next, but it came right back again.

"Nothing in those holes but dead people," said a voice, and sure enough it was Ma, just happening to be where he was. "Sometimes just the three, sometimes a sight more. The men they could of been, dead in there too. The little ragamuffins fightin' each other with rocks in their fist, dead too; an' the babies they were an' the babies they never had. Don't listen to me, Dan."

"I seen one of those stones in Touchstone, just before I got hurt," said Kehoe, just to be saying something. "Helped an old-timer lift it up on the stage. Never thought to see it again."

"We only just got it set in. We could've used you. Well, it took a while to get 'em all, scratch for a penny here, scrimp there. But it's over. All I want in life now is to know I got decent graves and markers for the ones that passed, an' the other to have his rights. Then I wash my hands of the whole shebang. They was bad from the start and bad clear through. I tried to—to—

What makes a man bad, Dan?"

"I couldn't say, Miz McDade. Is there another kind?"

She didn't take it as a joke, but thought about it hard. "We wanted to bury our own an' told Larrabee so, but it was hard. No rain for four months, and the rocks here— Well, the posse come and dug for us finally, stood in line with their hats off while I read some words, lowered them down easy and slow, so much better'n we could've done. I thought at the time, that was a good thing to do. Reckon it was, Dan?"

"They was ashamed, is all," said Kehoe. "You think we ought to go around all the time ashamed?"

He meant it as a joke for sure this time, but it didn't sound like that standing there in the wind and her thinking about it. He turned back to the hotel, cussing to himself, knowing exactly why the posse had been so good. Anything on the place that got buried, they had to know what was in the hole. Stand in line, men, hats off. It has to be around here somewhere.

He bathed in the river one time, and came porpoising up to the bank ready to spring out when he saw something white. He backed off and spun the water out of his eyes and there was Birdie, kneeling on a rock and paddling away at a petticoat in the water. She said, "Howdy," and he looked at her and past her to where his clothes hung on a bush. "Don't mind me," she said. "Come on out." He asked her to step downstream a little way, but she smiled and scrubbed and said no, she had to do this petticoat.

"I wonder why you remind me of my husband Prince," she mused. "Must be the mustache."

It was getting chilly. The water was chest deep and fast enough so he had to brace against the current, and the steady pressure bothered his leg. In his mind's eye he suddenly saw the tintype Ma had shown him. "He have a mustache?"

"Never," said Birdie composedly. "So the whole time I was with him I used to wonder what it was like gettin' kissed by a man with a mustache. I still do."

"Miz Birdie, I'm not one to take liberties with a married woman."

"I'm a widow."

"For sure?"

"Oh, yes," she said complacently. "Prince, he wouldn't never run off like that. He always done just what the others was doin'. If they wanted to stay and get blown up, he'd stay and get blown up, too. Come on out."

"You're goin' to get something more than you bargained for, Miz Birdie."

She dab-dabbed at the petticoat and held her head so that the curls bounced. "When?"

"Soon's I get it ready. Will you set back on the bank and face downstream and not turn around?"

"Oh, all right."

He swam upstream and got out and cat-footed up to the other side of the bush and got his slothes.

"When can I look?" she called.

"You'll know," he said. He put on his clothes and got away from there. Birdie was mad because her petticoat floated away in the river and was never seen again.

14

"IT HAS TO BE AROUND HERE SOMEWHERE." He crossed and recrossed the flats, looking at the ground, seeing if the rubble at the cliff base had anything to tell him. The wind howling in the high end made such a racket that he never heard the buckboard until it was just around the near rockfall. "Prospectin'?" called Ma McDade. She hated to mount a horse. She always used a buckboard.

"No, ma'am. Just figurin'."

She got down and he walked to meet her, leaning on his stick. He didn't need a stick any more but he liked to act always a little dumber, a little slower, and a little sicker than he was. In a world where everybody else acts smarter than they really are, the advantage was his.

"What you figurin'?" she asked him when she was near enough to talk.

"This shade," he said, pointing to the east wall which kept a third of the valley in dusk until almost noon every day. "An' see the dew on the rocks, this late in the mornin'? And no rain now for half a year."

"Well?"

"Buckwheat'll grow here."

"Who wants buckwheat?"

"The chickens."

"They got oats."

"Eggs'll shell out better if you mix 'em. How many

eggs you bust yesterday?"

"Too many."

"Well, you try three oats to two buckwheat to one horsemeat, and see if you don't get more eggs and tougher."

"Horsemeat?"

"Sure. Didn't you ever watch your own flock eatin'? You ever notice some birds'll eat grubs and white ants an' weevils and others'll spit 'em out?"

"I noticed it," she said.

"Know which is which?"

She shook her head.

"If they eat bugs or meat, they're layin'. You separate 'em out an' you'll see. So then feed this horsemeat mixture to the ones ain't layin', and half of 'em will start."

She gave him a long silent look. Then, "You can talk your way out of anything, Kehoe. When you do, how do you think of what to say?"

"How do you mean?"

"D'you talk pure pooptack that sounds like it makes sense? Or do you really know what you're talkin' about?"

He grinned cheerfully. "That depends on how much time I need."

"Explain me that."

"Well," said Kehoe, "take for instance if I just been sharped out of my hotel money and the man says pay up or get. If I just as soon leave right then, I tell him, 'See that feller standin' in front of the mercantile, him with the dirty white hat? He's holdin' my money; just stand there a minute an' I'll go get it,' and off I go down the street and past the mercantile and on out of town. But s'posin' I'd like three days more, why I tell him to wait for the stage that's due in at four, when I'll get my bank draft, an' meanwhile please double my rates."

"And three days later you're gone. I almost hate to ask you this, Kehoe, but what if you need a week?"

"Oh, maybe the man's cash drawer gets burgled into one night, and in the morning I'd pay him his week and a bit over. My conscience wouldn't bother me much on that, ma'am, seeing as it's his own money."

She shook her head and started back to the buckboard. He thought it was so she could turn away and hide a laugh, perhaps from herself. He followed and helped her up into the seat. She gestured him up beside her. "Suppose it was a month you wanted?"

"That's a different kind of operation, ma'am," he said gravely. "One way'd be to go to some other hotel in town and poke around a while, and then call for the owner and inquire as to how much in hard money he wants for his place. Word gets back to the place I'm stayin', chances are I don't get asked for no money for a month at least."

"And you're never outright honest?" she asked, flicking the horses.

He laughed at her. "Don't what I just told you sound like the honest truth?" Then, soberly, he added, "Besides, you never can tell about me, Miz McDade. Odds are there really is a man in a dirty white hat who's holding my money, or a bank draft truly on the way by Friday's stage. An' I really did buy a hotel for cash money one time; so you see, you never know."

"So now you're playin' for the time it takes for me to put in a buckwheat patch, tend an' harvest it, thrash it down and try it out on my flock, before I can prove you're a liar."

"Or that I know something about chicken farming."

Ma McDade bought a sack of buckwheat in Touchstone the very next day, and a spavined buckskin gelding fit only for crowbait, and they butchered it and tried the mix. In two weeks their egg yield was up fif-

teen per cent and the shells thick enough to make candling difficult until Kehoe jimmied up a reflector out of five pieces of mirror. He never said, "I told you so."

15

To FAVOR HIS LEG, Kehoe acquired the siesta habit. After the noon meal he would take a turn outside, smoking, and then stretch out in his room to think quietly. It was no kind of laziness; he was up before the sun most of the time, and would work half the night by lamplight if the work was interesting enough or needful. Also, he would skip his siesta on short notice when necessary. But he liked it, and did it when he could.

On one especially quiet day the old lady was in town, Birdie had taken Oralie berrying, Ruby had gone somewhere in the back foothills with a team and a stoneboat to snake out pine logs for shoring up the porch, and Sabina was drowsily ensconced in the belfry with her ledger and her rifle. Kehoe clumped upstairs and walked down the hall swinging his stick and whistling softly to himself. He went into his room, heeled the door shut, slung off his hat and was half out of waistcoat and shirt together when he saw what was on the bed.

In the bed.

Whoever it was, she had pulled the cover up over her head. The only thing immediately certain was that it was a she; a fool could tell that without knowing a thing about the population of Wagon Mound.

He stood motionless, breathless for a moment, then shrugged his shirt and vest up on his shoulders, shaking

his head, making a wordless, expressive sound with a breath out of his nostrils.

He scanned the room and saw the blouse, a bright orange one, half under the bed on the floor. He scooped it up and squeezed it, palm against palm.

He reached down and snatched away the covers. She was wearing one of her hip-hugging, full skirts, black and vivid orange. She had her hands behind her head on the pillow. Her too-black, blue-black hair was no longer stretched back into its big knot at the back and left side, but was parted in the middle and fell free over the white pillow and her wide, smooth shoulders.

For a long moment they looked at each other. Outside, insects whirred in the warm afternoon sun. Otherwise there was no sound, no step, no voice, no one around.

She half closed her eyes, half smiled, and wriggled her shoulders a little more snugly into the bed. *"Olé,"* she greeted him, *"que pase?"*

"Pase by God *nada,"* snapped Kehoe. "Not with you anyway, Ruby. What the hell you think you're doin'?"

She let her eyes come open lazily and smiled. "I jus' come in to see ees there somesing I can straighten for you."

"Put this on," he said, tossing the blouse which slid across her midriff and dropped to the floor on the other side of the bed, and to which she paid not the slightest attention, "and get on out of here."

"You 'fraid, hm?"

"You're damn right I'm afraid, but it ain't you or any of the rest of you I'm afraid of. I got to do my thinkin' from here up," he said, rapping himself on the chin, "and that's already as much as I can handle."

"You 'fraid of ghost, no?"

"What ghost?"

"My Matt."

"Oh, he's dead, is he?"

She sat up. Kehoe walked around the bed and picked up the blouse again and dropped it in her lap, reflecting that being without it made surprisingly little difference in the way she looked. "I *know* he ees dead," she said slowly. "He never stay away from *me* two years."

"Think a lot of yourself, don't you?"

She looked up at him without raising her face. The effect was important. Her answer was clearer than words. She was more woman than any four women he had ever known, and she knew it.

He could stand four, maybe five more seconds of this. He suddenly bent and got her wrist and snatched her up on her feet. Her lips writhed with the pain and her eyes were full of expectation. She stopped very close to him. "Listen," he said harshly, "I'd like to play games with you and maybe I will. But get this through your head, *chicha*. When I do it'll be on my call, not yours." He pushed her so hard through the door that she had to put out a hand to catch herself on the opposite corridor wall. Her eyes were slitted with a quick fury; he quenched it with a grin before it could explode. "And I don't think you'd want it any other way. Not you, Ruby."

She cursed him in Spanish, but it was a compliment. She walked away down the hall, dignified as a cat, and he regretfully closed the door and leaned against it.

At length, forcing himself not to look at the tumbled bed, he went to the window. She was down there, striding easily out to the wooded patch to the east, keeping the building between herself and the church steeple. He wondered what Sabina would do if she knew what had just happened, whether she might have made a "mistake" and shot at "someone" she saw moving.

The bed called him like a loud noise. He went to it and ripped away the blanket and pounded away the

impression of her body with his fist.

Something, he thought, has got to be done pretty quick around here.

And he thought, yes, but not with Ruby, more's the pity. She'd light up like a jackpine in a bush-fire and burn down the whole shebang. He could just see what would happen if he said so much as thank you to one of the others for passing the salt afterward.

Wasn't any of 'em you could be sure would keep her mouth shut.

Was there?

16

"Come up, Mr. Kehoe."

He looked up, startled even though he knew she had seen him coming across to the church. "Should I fly, Miz Sabina?"

"The ladder in the east corner," said the voice. He peered into the shadows and saw the thing, then and there deciding to fix it when he could, and climbed it, favoring his leg a bit more than he had to.

He came out on a broken platform. The walls of the steeple were intact here, although they were half broken away above where the old bell hung, half in the open air. Sunlight streamed down past it, making him blink.

The platform had been swept clean and repaired wherever it needed it the most. The northwest corner, directly under the sound part of the belfry, was a sheltered spot, where none but a horizontal rain could reach. There was a round stool there and, of all things, a rattan rocking-chair, and a small school desk with an inkwell set into it. On a nail hung a pair of binoculars with one lens broken. Someone had put up some shelves on which were two ledgers and a half dozen boxes of cartridges for the Springfield rifle which stood by the west window—the one which covered the bridge and the flat land across the river.

Sabina McDade was sitting in the rocker with her elbows on a third ledger which lay open on the desk.

The sun blazed off her hair; Kehoe felt the heat and had the crazy idea it came from the color of that red mass rather than from the sun itself. "Find what you were looking for, Mr. Kehoe?" she said.

He laughed. "You sound like Miz McDade."

"I am," she reminded him coolly, lifting her left hand with its broad gold ring. He glanced at it and suddenly looked again. Catching his sudden interest, she folded her hands together quickly to conceal it. He opened his mouth to speak, thought better of it and said instead, "Mind if I sit down?"

She nodded toward the stool, gracious as a city hostess. As he moved to it, turning and tucking his stick out of the way under his arm, he put out a hand to the rope which hung down the center of the room, to steady himself. Instantly she was on her feet, catching his wrist.

"Well!" he said, settling back. "What is it—a dynamite fuse?"

"Whatever you do, don't *ever*— No, just the bell. But that bell rings only for trouble or—"

"Or what?"

"Trouble," she said again; then, as if she had decided to tell him some secret after all, "If one of the boys shows up, he signals first. If it's all clear here, the bell will bring him in."

"Now that's a very interesting thing," said Kehoe, saying complacently to himself *she should know how interesting.*

"Why?"

"Huh?" He looked into—rather, at—those impenetrable, cool eyes. Not for the first time, he was made aware that you didn't talk just any old nonsense to this girl. "I was just thinkin', you must be pretty sure he'll be back, spendin' so much of your time waitin' here."

She dropped her eyes. "Oh, it's quiet here. A good

place to do the accounts and—and think."

"What do you think about?"

"Money," she said. She was looking at the ledger as she spoke but he felt she did not see it. "And—Boone McDade."

"Oh. Miss him?" he said lightly.

She colored slightly. Perhaps she was angry at his prying, and perhaps she had reasons of her own. She did not sound angry, however, as she answered in a low voice, "That isn't an easy question to answer, Mr. Kehoe." She met his eyes and looked away again. When he obviously had no response, she said, "I hardly knew him, you know."

"I didn't know."

"We met and—and married. I didn't know who he was or anything about him. And before—before I knew what was happening, he got a message and went off to join his brothers on that mine thing. I never saw him again. I had no place to go, no one to turn to." She shrugged. "I came here."

"Oh. You weren't here when—"

"I heard about it, that's all."

He wondered what part of the story had pulled the hardest. As if he didn't know. "Why did you stick around?"

She laughed. "Ma, mostly."

"She's quite a hill o' beans, she is. But even so, if you didn't really want to, your own self—"

"We have this in common, Mr. Kehoe," she said with some amusement, "we both know what it's like to be locked up by Ma McDade."

"She locked you up?"

"What else? She didn't know me, never heard of me. All she could be sure of was that marrying me was just the crazy kind of thing Boone might do. For all she knew, I might just be someone greedy enough—insane

enough—to come marching in here and claim to be Boone's wife, just on the chance I'd get near that gold."

"How'd you ever convince her?"

"Just by—by being myself."

He looked her over. "She depends a lot on you."

"I like her." His observation, and hers, came out like question and answer. He could see the whole picture: her arrival, Ma's suspicion, her determination to lock the girl up until the boy—whoever it was—came back to clear things up, time going by, the girl showing up well, making herself useful, until bit by bit Ma accepted her. And while he pondered this, his eyes rested all but unseeing on her hands. Had she not just at that moment made the small movement she made, his whole story thereafter might have been different. It was a tiny thing—just the swift self-conscious concealment, for the second time, of her ring as she saw his eyes on it.

He did a surprising thing. His eyes snapped shut and he covered them with his hand. He had lived for a good many years on his wits, and got away with it more times than not; and one reason for this was an ability to photograph what he saw and keep the pictures on file in his mind. He did this without thinking about it, and sometimes, equally without thought, one of the pictures would pop up front and center and demand of him that he figure out why.

Somewhere he had seen that ring before, and somehow it should mean something to him.

"A penny for your thoughts, Mr. Kehoe."

Slowly he looked up at her, down at her hands. He reached out and captured them, opened the left one. It seemed for a moment as if she would struggle; then she surrendered it. He looked at it with total attention for a moment, and abruptly let it go. His face was unreadable. He looked at her bleakly and said, "Cost you about a dollar, Miz Sabina."

Her white teeth caught her lower lip; yet, strangely, she was smiling a little, and her eyes were challenging. "Why, certainly, Mr. Kehoe," she said primly. She dipped into her reticule and took out a leather purse, opened it, found a coin and handed it to Kehoe. It was a silver dollar, newly minted.

He took it and flipped it with his thumbnail. It rang sharply. He caught it and put it in his vest pocket. "That's worth a few cents more than the one I had in mind," he said levelly.

"I can't imagine what you mean," she said. The challenge still lay in her eyes.

"That's Ma McDade's wedding ring."

"Is it?"

"I know it is. It's the first thing I saw after you shot my horse. A hand turning up the lamp—but it wasn't your hand."

"Well?"

"I noticed half a dozen times the place on Miz McDade's hand where that ring was. She ain't had it off long. I'm told it was you helped get me into the room that night."

"Yes."

"You're not going to give me one word of help, are you?" he said, admiring and angry all at once. "Well, I don't need it. How come Ma gave you her ring?"

"Bless her, yes, she did. I never got one from Boone. There—there wasn't time. He was going to, but— Well, you know."

"I wasn't thinking about Boone. How come she gave you the ring after I got here?"

"I couldn't say."

"Couldn't you, though! There wasn't something special you gave her, now, was there? Maybe something you didn't have till I got here?"

She smiled, but not with those challenging eyes. "Are

you missing something, Mr. Kehoe?"

"You can't say a thing's missin' when you know where it is," he parried.

"You've never said anything about losing a—about losing anything. Why not?"

"I got along all right without it. And besides, I had a hunch."

"Tell me."

"Hunches are hard to tell. You might say I figured if I didn't say nothin', the missin' article might show up. If it did, I'd know who took it. If I knew that, it might be useful."

"Useful." She said the word as if it was a strange object to be put before her, examined, identified. "If you mean to talk about this to Ma, I can't see any use in it. It might worry her and it might make her mad at you, but not much else. You've done very well so far in buttering up to her, Mr. Kehoe—"

"An expert opinion," Kehoe put it.

A swift frown came and went, but otherwise she ignored the remark. "—But in a case of my word against yours, I don't think you'd come out very well."

"You got me altogether wrong, Miz Sabina," said Kehoe, suddenly jovial. "That's not at all what I meant by 'useful.' I just meant it's useful to me to know what breed of people I'm dealin' with."

She rose suddenly, took a turn across the room, and sat down again. "Mr. Kehoe," she said, "why are you staying here now?" She put up a quick hand. "Don't insult my intelligence by saying it's to keep a roof over our heads. Or if you like, say it's that but tell me why else."

"Why, Miz Sabina, you know I got to hide out for a while."

"I'm going to tell you something, Kehoe," she said, and now there was no arch, half playful "Mr." attached,

"Sweetcake Atwater is dead."

He could not conceal his double astonishment. How had she known about Sweetcake Atwater? And how did she dare take a chance in telling him this, and run the risk of his leaving, when she knew what the sheriff would do if he were not there?

And immediately, another thought: how long would Ma McDade hold still for his presence here if she found out he no longer had to hide? She wouldn't believe in his gallantry any more than this shrewd confection here. She would have to put his presence down to two things only: the gold, and the betrayal of her son. "Miz Sabina, I—"

She interrupted him. "Let's put the cards on the table, shall we? Atwater got drunk and pulled a gun on a gambling man from Missouri he accused of playing around with his wife. It was a lie and about fifty people knew it was a lie. Atwater shot first and missed. The gambler didn't miss, and that's the story. From what I hear, Atwater had it coming."

"When was this?"

"Three weeks ago."

"How did you—"

"Never mind that," she said. She was as incisive and sure of herself as a faro dealer. "Just believe the truth when you hear it. Now, I've got one compliment for you, *Mr.* Kehoe; you never did strike me as the kind of man who would hole up like a rabbit over a thing like that. Especially not when you're all well again—so much so you don't even need a stick to walk with."

He had to smile at that. The eagle eye from the steeple; she must have seen every step he took outside the hotel, and who could remember to limp every damn minute? "Now I find I'm like you in another way," she went on. "I like to know the breed of people

I deal with, too. I guess I'm about to find out what you are."

"Are you!"

She smiled right at him. She was one of the most beautiful women he had ever seen, but there was nothing beautiful about that kind of smile. Some men smile like that as part of the act of squeezing a trigger. She said, "You've got to make a move, one way or the other. Now that the coast is clear, you can get out and leave us to figure our own way out of our troubles, or you can stay. If you stay, we can all pretend it's because you love us each and every one, but *I'll* know it's for blood money and gold dust. Either way, I'll know your breed."

Kehoe rose, smiling. He did not feel like smiling, he felt like going down a deep hole some place for a couple of days to think. He said, "Well now, I'll just keep you in suspense until I find out if it's true about Sweetcake Atwater an' his riders. After that I'll stick around until Ma McDade finds out, too, and calls me on it. An' after that—then I'll make my move an' you can make up your mind that I'm a sidewinder or a diamondback. So I'll be around for—"

But she was laughing at him, hard enough to drown him out. He glared at her. "You're a downy bird, Kehoe," she said when she could, "but the wrong kind; you've got into the water and your feet aren't webbed. It was Ma McDade herself who told me about Atwater."

He sat down abruptly. "She knows?"

"Who else would know? Who else ever gets to town to hear the talk?"

He knew, then, that the story of Atwater's death had to be true. "She never said one word to me about it."

She laughed again. "I know that."

He shook his head. "The things that go on," he muttered ruefully and chuckled.

"I'm glad you can laugh at yourself," she said. "You haven't much else to laugh at just now."

"Why didn't she tell me?"

"She didn't say. She told me because it was too good a joke to hold. She hasn't told the others."

"You goin' to tell her I know about Sweetcake?"

"I don't think so. You going to tell her about that—property—you think you lost?"

He understood, in a rush, what all this was about. "I got a little something on you, and you just have to protect yourself. That it?"

"It isn't myself I'm protecting," she flashed. "I don't expect you to understand this, Kehoe, but I like that old lady and I mean to stand by her. She's had a bad time all her life, and anything I can do to spare her extra worriment, I'll do. Time was, she was all I had. Now, I'm all she has. Those others, they'd clear out in a day if they weren't greedy and afraid, and she knows it. She trusts me, and I mean to keep it that way. Now you better clear out of here."

"Out of Wagon Mound?"

"I didn't say that. That's your decision, and I'm going to learn a lot from it. What I meant"—she pointed—"is, here she comes now, and I'd as soon she didn't find you here."

He looked where she pointed and saw the dust-puff across the flats that meant the buckboard. He looked back at her and wondered what she would think if he brought up the subject that had been on his mind when he climbed the ladder—that is, which, if any, of these women could keep her mouth shut if— But forget it, Kehoe, he told himself regretfully. "Thanks for the tea," he said sardonically.

"The pleasure was all mine," she said. "Drop in again when you're in town."

He put his stick under his arm and backed down

the ladder, and stumped back to the hotel. He was leaning against the post at the bottom of the steps, tossing and catching his new dollar, when the old lady drove up.

"Come into money?"

He handed her down. "You got my dogleg on you, ma'am?"

"Always," said Ma McDade, touching the handle of Kehoe's Colt's in the waistband of her skirt.

"Lend me it once," said Kehoe. "I'll give it right back."

"Fixin' to kill somebody?"

"Not somebody. Somethin'. A beautiful friendship." When she hesitated, gravely scanning his face, he laughed. "No blood," he said easily. "Honest."

She put it into his hand, doubtfully. He tossed the dollar high in the air, brought up the gun and cocked it simultaneously, and fired. The coin bounced high again; he stood rigidly watching it until it fell, and then limped over and picked it up. He came back with it and handed her the gun, and then the coin, plugged right through the middle.

"What's this for?" she asked tautly.

"Miss Sabina," said Kehoe. "She collects 'em."

And when she wanted to ask more questions, she got that big easy laugh again and the offer to help with the stores.

17

ON SUNDAY there was no work in Wagon Mound. Ma McDade took her religion seriously. She would read haltingly from a pocket Bible, choosing her readings at random and grimly following them through no matter how many "begats" she encountered, for the Writ was holy and she would not edit. Afterward she would nod to Birdie, who would go to the melodeon and hit middle C, and they would sing "He Walks With Me and He Talks With Me" and "The Old Rugged Cross." After that one of the girls—usually Ruby—would relieve whoever was in the steeple—generally Sabina—after which Ma would rock on the porch while the other girls cooked. They took as much time as they could with it, and a lot of trouble, since it was all they had to occupy themselves, and the results were pretty gratifying.

Kehoe held still for the Bible readings, but the singing afterward was hard for him to take. Ma McDade tended to dominate the proceedings with a heavy drone which had a range of about four tones in the lower tenor register, and Birdie had a hopeless tin ear and an instinct that forced her, every time she slipped off key, to sing louder. Ruby's contralto was rich and clean, but Oralie was the one with the voice, a high clear soprano like a boy's, without effort or affectation. Sabina was not often present, and when she was did not participate.

The third Sunday after his release, and the day after his encounter with Sabina in the steeple, he saw Sabina at the end of the street swinging away from the church and toward the hotel. He slipped downstairs and was lounging in the doorway when the redhead reappeared.

She shot him a strange glance as she mounted the steps—accusing, angry, yet partly amused. He made way for her, nodding casually. She stepped past him, glanced around the lobby to see that the coast was clear, and then rounded on him.

"You have an odd sense of humor, Mr. Kehoe."

He glanced down at her extended hand, and the dollar with the hole in it.

"Cause you any trouble, ma'am?"

"Nuisance is all," she said tersely. He knew that whatever confrontation Ma had made, Sabina had certainly been able to talk her way out of it. "Are you declaring war, Mr. Kehoe?"

"Takes two to make a war, Sabina," he said, making the absence of a courtesy title as evident as he could.

She glanced once again around the deserted lobby, and lowered her voice. "What really brought you to Wagon Mound?"

"A lucky shot from a crazy man."

"The truth, Mr. Kehoe." She supplied the title this time, but in a way more insulting than his lack. "You do tell the truth, sometimes?"

He nodded slowly. "Sometimes. But I doubt you'd believe it."

"Try."

He laughed briefly. "Well, all right. I heard the McDade story in a saloon and got the plugged dollar from the bartender. I never planned to get herded this way and shot to boot, but it happened, and here I am."

"I could make up a better one than that," she said scornfully.

He laughed again. "I told you you wouldn't believe it. What's your story?"

"About you? I think you were given the original of this—" she tossed the coin and caught it—"by the man who owned it. I think he sent you here with a message for one of us. And I think you decided somewhere along the line to deal him out."

"Well, now, that is a likelier story. Know any more?"

She sighted through the hole in the dollar. "I haven't figured out yet why you're so content to stay here. But a man who could do this to the middle of a dollar could do it to the middle of a McDade's back."

"Aw, come on now," he drawled. "If you're goin' to make up stories, make up that I outdrew him."

"I can believe anything I've told you. I couldn't believe that," she said coldly, and went on, "I think that since you got here you've been feeling your way. You thought you could stumble across the gold and you've given up. You thought you might sweet-talk one of us widows into telling you where it is; but you've given that up too, because we just don't know where it is. Next thing you'll go to work on Ma. You already have. You're going to have to give up on that, too, you know."

"You're pushin' real hard, Miz Sabina," he said, showing puzzlement. "Like you wanted me to leave and the sheriff to run you all out of here. I wonder why."

"You're taking too long to show your colors, that's all," she said, "and I'm tired of waiting."

"What are you tired of waitin' for, girl?" asked Ma McDade, coming in from the hotel dining-room.

"She's flirtin' with me," said Kehoe with a big grin. "Make 'er stop, Miz McDade."

He thought for a second that Sabina was going to spit at him. But instead, pale with fury, she stamped out.

"What's the matter with her?" mused the old woman.

"She thinks all kind of bad things about what I might do to you," said Kehoe candidly.

"Does she, then?" She shot him one of her quick, calculating glances. "I've done the same, from time to time."

"I don't blame you a bit," he said easily.

Birdie and Oralie came in just now and he used their entrance to break away from her and begin arranging the chairs for the Bible reading. Ma McDade kept her eyes on him, and then, if she had anything else to say, apparently decided against it. She shook the thought of him visibly away from her, and sat down with her Book.

Oralie and Birdie sat down, Oralie as usual with her eyes downcast shyly, Birdie as usual watching him every second. In a few moments Ruby entered. "She loco, that Sabina," she grumbled. "You take lookout, I take lookout, you take lookout—" She sat down angrily, and as usual flicked Kehoe with a poisoned glance. She made no effort to conceal her distaste for him these days.

" 'Behold, all souls are mine; as the soul of the father, so also the soul of the son is mine,' " Ma began, without preamble. " 'The soul that sinneth, it shall die.' "

Kehoe, idly scanning the girls' faces, turned abruptly to look at Ma McDade.

" 'But if a man be just, and do that which is lawful and right, and hath not oppressed any, but hath restored to the debtor his pledge, hath spoiled none by violence, hath given his bread to the hungry, and hath covered the naked with a garment—' "

Kehoe tensed, thinking, *Old lady, look out.*

" '—he is just, he shall surely live, saith the Lord God. If he beget a son that is a robber, a shedder of blood, and that doeth the like to any one of these things, and that doeth not any of those duties, but even hath eaten

upon the mountains, and defiled his neighbor's wife—' "

Enough, old woman, thought Kehoe; but she read on: "—have given forth upon usury, and hath taken increase; shall he then live? he shall not live: he hath done all these abominations; he shall surely die; his blood shall be upon him.' "

" 'His blood shall be upon him,' " she repeated, not seeing the Book, not seeing her audience, but seeing suddenly, as if for the first time, the sense of what she was reading. Then, slowly, she bent to the Book again and read, " 'The soul that sinneth, it shall die; the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him.' "

Ma McDade looked around the room, at all the faces, as if to discover if they had heard the same thing she had, understood the same thing from it. There was a hopelessness in her craggy old features that twisted something in Kehoe.

He leaned forward suddenly and took the Book from her astonished fingers, met her eyes, then turned two pages and read, " 'As I live, saith the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his evil way and live. If he turn from his sin, and do that which is lawful and right, none of his sins that he hath committed shall be mentioned unto him: he hath done that which is lawful and right; he shall surely live.' " He handed the Book back to her, pointing. "It's right there, ma'am," he said gently. "It'll only let you down if you don't read enough of it."

"Well, by G—" and she looked upward quickly and said, " 'Scuse me, Lord." She closed the Bible and put it by, and looked Kehoe in the face. Her eyes were a bit brighter than usual. "Feller told me once, the better a man knows Scripture, the better man he is."

"Did he know the devil quotes it to his own ends?" Kehoe said.

"We better sing," said the old lady. Birdie fluttered

over to the melodeon and pumped it and found middle C, and they began their version of "The Old Rugged Cross." Kehoe closed his eyes. It might have looked devout, but it was only agony. Finally he stood up, slipped next to Birdie where she sat on the bench before the melodeon, got his feet to the bellows, pumped, found and rejected a C chord—consensus had dragged the tune somewhere south of B flat by then—and began to play.

For a stunned moment the old melodeon had the floor by itself, for they all stopped singing. Kehoe looked up at them. "Well, let's hear it!" he said cheerfully, and they sang, they sang as they had never sung here before, so that the strong tones straightened their backs and filled their lungs and sent the music echoing down the broken street of Wagon Mound to the church and its steeple and the green-eyed watcher there. "Know this one?" said Kehoe, and pumped harder, and his big hands gestured in accompaniment:

"Praise God from Whom all Blessings flow;
Praise Him all creatures here below
Praise Him above, ye Heavenly Host,
Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost!"

until it rang from the cliffs.

"Play it again, Dan," said Ma, because she wanted to sing it louder, and she did.

"Miz Oralie, would you sing one, would you sing 'He Walks With Me'?" asked Kehoe respectfully, and little Oralie stepped up and clasped her hands tight together. Her throat swelled up like a song bird's, and she sang out high and sweet and true; and when she had finished she looked down at him and said, "Oh, Mr. Kehoe—" and began to cry, and ran into the kitchen. "Oh, Mr. Kehoe," said Birdie, trying to reduce the nonexistent space between herself and him on the bench; if he had not grasped the side of the instrument she might have

slid him off onto the floor.

"Get along and help the others," said Ma McDade good-humoredly to the blonde, and Birdie simpered and got up and backed into the dining-room and away. Kehoe swung around on the bench and met Ruby's eyes, and found not the burning casualness of that episode in his room, nor the scorning poison she had since then been dripping on him, but an intensity, an unswerving earnestness that was quite different from anything he had yet seen in her. She rose slowly, and without a word or another glance went into the kitchen.

A little unnerved, Kehoe swung back to the melodeon and began to find chords. He became aware of Ma McDade standing behind him. He waited a long time for her to say something. At last, "You know a good many tricks, mister."

Kehoe nodded, but said nothing. He played the first four fine chords of old Doxology, and drifted into something else. She said, "Where'd you learn how to do that?"

He made a twisted smile. "My Pa was a preacher. Had a tent show. I used to travel around with him—played the organ, sang in the choir, passed the hat."

"The preachin' never took, hm? Never got the call yourself?"

"Not me."

"What are you, Kehoe? What's your trade?"

His hands were quiet while he thought. He laughed a little. "Nobody ever asked me that before in so many words." He thought some more and then turned to look up at her. "I don't know that I ever even asked myself that."

"Well—" she said uncertainly. "A man's a cowpoke, or a homesteader, or maybe a gambler or a railroad man—*some*thin'."

"I reckon I'm—anything. I'm whatever comes up. I

split rails. Keep books. Pan gold gravel. Buy, sell, build up, tear down—" He shrugged. "High time, past time, I answered a question like that."

"Maybe you're lookin' for somethin'."

He shook his head and turned back to the melodeon. He did not play it. He said, "That kind of lookin' is for young sprats. I'm not lookin' for anything. It's the way I live."

"You're a fool, Dan Kehoe," she said angrily. "But bein' a fool's better than bein' bad clean through, no matter what."

You want a son so bad you'd take anything, he thought, but luckily for him, he didn't say it aloud.

She said, with an abrupt change of subject, "How much longer you going to stay?"

"You know that."

"Suppose that boy of mine never shows up at all?"

"Then it's up to the sheriff."

She blew noisily through her nostrils. "I can handle him. If I can't, Sabina can. If she can't—maybe you could."

"Maybe. But handle him which way?"

"Just to leave us be."

"He might be a bit stubborn about that. Savin' your presence, ma'am, but you McDades been a stone in his shoe wherever he goes for a couple, three years now. He's goin' to have to find it and kick it loose."

She sighed. "I wish I knew where that boy was."

"Yeah," drawled Kehoe. "He really could clear things up."

"He might kill you, Kehoe."

"Oh, I dunno."

"Some day," she said to the air between them, "I'm goin' to shoot off one of your ears to see if I can scare you about the other one."

"I'd be scared," he assured her. "But not until you done it."

"That's what I figured," she said quietly. "Then why is a man like you holing up from the likes of Sweetcake Atwater?"

He said nothing but *damn!,* and he said that to himself. He thought of the perfect answer to that: "Sweetcake, he *done* it!", but by the time he did, Ma McDade was out of the room and he was still sitting there in front of the melodeon, calling himself everything but smart enough to pour water out of a boot.

18

THE SUNDAY DINNER, always an occasion, and more of one since Kehoe had shared it, reached some sort of a peak that day. Music, Kehoe grinned to himself, sure has charms. There was jerked venison, well-soaked and larded and done to a turn. There were chick-peas done *garbonza* style and fresh bread and new butter and elderberry jam; potatoes, Spanish rice, turnip greens, sweet potato pie and sweet haw tart. There was a clean cloth on the table—a bed-sheet, but it looked fine—fancily folded napkins, flowers and everything. The girls were dressed to a fare-thee-well and for a brief time it was a happy occasion. Ma said grace and there was that pleasant clatter of serving spoons and "please pass—" and the even more pleasant silence of good food heartily attacked. Then—

It was Birdie, poor bubble-headed Birdie, who had to bat her eyelashes and say, "There's nothing like having a real feel for music. I mean, it's so refined."

Kehoe happened to be looking at Oralie at the moment, and saw such sudden delight, such a flush of pleasure on her face that he concurred warmly. "Yes, Miz Oralie's got about the purtiest voice I heard the last umpteen years," and having said it, realized instantly that Birdie had been talking about herself and her music, herself and him. He should have known that the only one in the place who messed and fussed with

the melodeon would have some such conceit about herself.

So here was a fire laid, and his stupidity rubbing against Birdie's to strike the spark. The puff of breath to blow it up was Ruby's; she instantly caught what had happened and laughed in Birdie's face. Birdie colored, not the warm flood of Oralie's blushes, but an angry mottling which showed up her lips pale. She stabbed viciously at a piece of venison which immediately skidded across her plate and into the butter dish.

Probably from nothing more than tension, Oralie giggled. It was the wrong time for a sound like that. Birdie turned on the youngster and sniffed. She openly sorted through the contents of her brain, which didn't take long, sniffed again, and said shrilly, "Where you get that p'*fume,* girl? You smell like a whorehouse."

"Birdie!" Ma's voice was a whip-crack. "I won't have that kind of talk at my—"

She was drowned out by another of Ruby's sultry laughs. "You wrong, *rubia,*" she purred to Birdie. "She not like you. She not know what it smell like."

Together, Birdie and Ma McDade shrieked, though the blonde's was a wounded bleat and the old woman's a roar of rage; their chairs crashed to the floor as they sprang up. Birdie ran out of the room with her hands over her face. Ma McDade skittered around the table and right, left, slammed her flat, horny hands across Ruby's face so hard she turned the girl's head with each blow.

Ruby's chair and Kehoe's went flying—it looked like some crazy kind of a play. Ruby stood, knees flexed, back bent, head turned sidewise and up; she was coiled down tight, ready to kill. And in her hand, as if it had flown there of its own accord, was the knife from the venison platter.

"Por Dios," she hissed, "I tell you las' year, you totch

me again I keel you."

Dan dove straight across the table, ignoring gravy on his treasured waistcoat, broken crockery, spilled water from the flower vase—everything but the wrist that held the knife. He got it because in that split second it was the only thing in the world for him; and once he had it, he clamped down with about three times the energy he had put into hefting the McDade tombstone. His leap carried him across the table, and down they went. Ruby fought him silently. He bent the wrist behind her and twisted it upward toward her shoulder blades until her fingers opened and the knife dropped. Then he got away from her suddenly, stooped, scooped up the knife, and sprang away. She had her feet under her like a cat, ready to come at him again, but found herself sighting down the blade, which Kehoe held firmly aimed at her left eye. For a moment they were still as a couple of dwarf pines in a picture. Then she laughed quietly, got lightly to her feet, and smoothed her skirt around her, holding his eyes with her own the whole time. Totally ignoring the old woman, she turned and sauntered out, swinging her hips.

Kehoe told himself that he was in a bad way. He had found that woman half naked in his bed and had managed to throw her out; but now the feel of her fighting him, the sight of her shrugging back into her discarded animal dignity, were almost more than he could contain.

Then she was out of sight, and he slowly looked down at the knife in his hand. He tossed it to the table, and the sound brought Ma McDade back so quickly from so deep within herself that she grunted. They stood looking at each other, each trying hard to get here and now and back to normal.

Her lips twitched. "Sunday dinner," she said.

He looked around the room, which looked as if its

honor guest had been a hurricane, and grinned a little.

She looked with him, and shook her head. "I don't know if I can pick up the pieces," she said, and he knew she wasn't talking about broken dishes. Then she turned to face him. "I reckon we're quits, mister."

"I didn't save your life," he said embarrassedly, but he knew he had. "Cat-scratches, maybe."

She moved the knife on the table with the end of her finger, and laughed without mirth. "Now I got to go on thinkin' a way out of this mess." She walked out and he heard her footsteps, dragging, cross the lobby and go heavily up the stairs.

He looked down at his coat and waistcoat, wet and spattered. He shook his head and took them off and draped them over a chair. Only then did he become aware of Oralie. She still sat at her place. She had her left knuckles against her lips, and her eyes were bigger than a small girl's ought to be. Kehoe touched the side of her neck as if she were a kitten, and said, "Pay it no mind, honey. All families fight like that."

"They do?" she whispered.

"Didn't yours?"

She shook her head.

He turned suddenly, and looked out toward the river. "What's that?" It sounded like a ewe, lambing.

"It's Birdie, I guess," said Oralie in her whispery voice.

"I better go see," said Kehoe uncertainly. He had never heard a noise quite like that from a woman before, so he went out, leaving Oralie sitting there like a nestless bird after a storm. As he walked, he found himself lightly rubbing the ball of his thumb against his curled index finger, over and over. Still doing it, he lifted his hand and watched it for a pace or two, as if it did not belong to him, and wondered. It came to him that he still felt the touch of Oralie's warm neck

against his hand. He made a surprised sound. Kehoe, he told himself again, you're in a bad way.

Thunder rumbled somewhere, and in the strange way it had in this kind of country, growled on and on, the echoes reluctant to let go. Kehoe looked up at the high clouds curling over like slow toppling waves, the low clouds slamming along three times as fast and in a different direction. "Go ahead," he told them under his breath, trying to express a wordless pressure inside him for someone, something, to do his exploding for him and leave him in peace.

Birdie was lying face down on the stony bank, making that frightening *baa* and bruising her nose and lips against the dirt. He called to her but she apparently could not hear him. He squatted beside her and turned her over on her back. This made the noise considerably louder. He saw with astonishment that she had dirt in her eyes and was holding them open, as if it hurt her and she wanted the pain. He spoke her name again and she threw her arms across her bloody, muddy face and cried *"No!"* so loud that the cliffs threw it back.

"Here," said Kehoe helplessly, "here, now." He got his bandanna out of his hip pocket and sluiced it in the river and sat her up and let her lean back against him while he washed the mud out of her eyes. She let him. She didn't seem to know what was happening to her.

"You wasn't to know," she said in a shuddery voice, and let out another one of those bleats. Each one of them seemed to come from her bone-marrow and to need squeezing out. She went rigid from head to toe every time she did it. He held her until she was through.

"I wasn't to know what?" he asked her when he figured she could understand him.

"Ruby told you." He wondered what she was talking about, and then it came to him that the remark about

the perfume, about smelling like a whorehouse, was what was bothering her. "Just talk, Birdie. What you care what she says?"

"Ruby told you." He began to understand that this was enough for her, for him and the whole world. She had a secret and it had come out; it never occurred to her that anyone might not understand, or might not believe it. Or might not care. She said, "Prince married me. He knew, he found me there. Ma knows, they told her quick enough. She let me stay. So why's it make a girl so different, to be a—because she used to—"

She squirmed against him until he freed her enough so she could sit up straight and look at him. He had the feeling she wasn't seeing him even so. "I don't understand," she said, "I really and truly don't understand about men. They flock around like flies on honey, they can't wait, they got to. An' then"—she beat her palms together rapidly, four times—"it's all over, an' they don't want to look at you. More than that." She wet her lips and frowned, trying to think something through. "More than that: they hate you. The same ones, the very same ones! They get together and talk about you and run you out of town."

She sat quite still after that, as if she had run down like a wind-up toy. She didn't move her eyes, her half open mouth, or her head. After a long time she drew a deep breath and went on in just the same slack-jawed, puzzled tone of voice, "And I don't understand about women either. I always think any woman could understand, easy as easy, about me and the other—other ones. But they don't. They don't want to or they can't. They sit on it and keep it and never let it go, and that's supposed to be good an' godly. Or they give it away, a little or a lot, an' that's *ro*-mance or it's funny, dependin'. But if they take a dollar, oh my God, that's awful." Again she stopped, all over.

Kehoe waited.

She drew another breath and said, "Ma drops a word every now and then, 'Fleshpots.' Fleshpots! She sort of hints and guesses around about it, fleshpots is supposed to be somethin' like quicksand, somethin' like leprosy, somethin' like a six-month drunk, and somethin' wonderful—all at once. Somethin' you got to have, you got to go back to. Now you know somethin'? I don't see it *matters* that much." She laughed unpleasantly. "What do you know about that, it matters to everyone in the world but me, and I'm the one does it."

She seemed to be finished. Kehoe asked her, "Why you tellin' me all this, Birdie?"

"You found out what I am. That's why."

"That's not sayin' you always got to—"

"Ain't it!" she interrupted bitterly. "Half the world is in the business of tellin' the other half what you are. You can't get away from that. An' meanwhile you got to eat. You was somebody very special to me for a time, Mr. Kehoe."

"Me?"

"Locked away like that, where the rest of the world couldn't get to tell you. Weeks, you didn't know about Birdie. I used to think about that all the time. Now—"

"Well?" he said as gently as he could.

She sprang to her feet. He rose slowly and faced her. One of her curls, damp and muddy, had managed to retain its spring. It swung and bounced against the side of her face as she held it a little to one side. All the rest of her hair frizzed out in a tangle or clung to her face and neck, so the one curl looked pathetic. "Well," she finished, "you're just one other rotten man who knows what I am."

Something flashed in Kehoe's mind; the white corner of a slip of paper under his locked door. *I am think-*

ing about you.

He watched her walk away back to the hotel. He did not attempt to go with her; he felt she would spit in his face, and he was probably right. He thought, *Now I know who wrote it and why, and I don't feel any richer for it.*

It grew much darker suddenly, and again he heard the long ugly mumble of the thunder. "Well, go ahead," he said irritably, and plodded back to the hotel.

19

"HERE I AM, MR. KEHOE."

He hadn't been looking for her; he'd stopped just inside the dining-room to blink and orient himself. With the approach of evening and the thickening sky, the room was gloomy, almost dark, for a man just in from outside. As his eyes began to pick up detail, he saw that the big table was bare and the litter of broken crockery and spilled food had been cleared up or at least scooped out of sight. Light came from the service door, as had the faint warm voice he had just heard. He went back there.

Between the dining-room and the kitchen was what had once been a serving pantry. It was set up now as an eating nook—Ma McDade called it "the trough"—for quick meals when only one or two of the population of Wagon Mound was there, and it wasn't worth setting the big table.

In the short time he had been out with Birdie, Oralie had worked a miracle. The small table had a white cover and candles; and somewhere she had found plates that matched and real glasses instead of the earthenware mugs they usually used. She had salvaged something of the venison and the Spanish rice, and had found a whole red haw tart and a doily to put it on.

"My!"

"Please sit down," said Oralie, blushing.

It would be twice a crime not to, and Kehoe did.

Oralie moved swiftly into the kitchen and out again, like a child playing house. Her little feet made almost no sound on the boards. She smiled briefly at him and said, "Go on, eat," and went out again. As she turned away he noticed that one braid was tied, and the hair on the other side fell free; she must have been combing it when he came in.

He did not eat, and after a moment got up and went into the kitchen. "Come and do that in here," he said.

"Oh dear, I'll be right— Just a minute," she said timidly.

"Please."

She stopped moving for a second, then turned away from the old mirror and came out.

They sat down with the table between them; he shifted one of the three candles so he could see her better. "Go on."

"Please don't watch me!"

"I want to," Kehoe said. He looked at the finished braid. "I used to watch—somebody do that."

Deftly she lifted her hair and separated it. "Your wife?"

He smiled. "In my time I've collected bills, bullets, an' bad language, ma'am, but never a wife. It was my mother. Her hair was gray, o' course, and it made only a little bitty braid like so," and he held up his hands close together.

"Eat," she said. He did, watching her. It was very good.

"I wonder where I'll be when it's gray?" she mused, throwing the finished braid back over her shoulder.

"Where would you like to be?"

"Away from here," she said immediately and with great intensity.

"With Roy?"

She shuddered.

"I'm sorry."

"Roy's dead," she said like a school child repeating something that had to be memorized. "But sometimes, like just then, it's a sort of shadow. I suddenly feel afraid. And then for a second I can't seem to believe he'll never come back. Never hurt me any more."

Outside the wind hissed across the flats, bringing with it the biggest, longest roll of thunder yet. He nodded toward the outside. "It's the rains comin'," he said. "You've seen it before, horses skittish, chickens too quiet, people brawlin' around like we was in there. Sometimes it makes folks feel afraid, too—for nothin'. For nothin' at all."

"Oh, the thunder," she smiled, as if she were talking about a pet duckling. "I don't mind that. It reminds me of back home, West Virginia. It rains there a lot, thunders too. Not like here. I used to walk in the rain when I was a little girl, and thunder only made me laugh. It was almost like having a dad to play with and pretend to be frightened of."

"What happened to the real article?"

"They—both my folks—died of typhoid when I was small. After that my relatives passed me around. The last one was an uncle over to Winding Stair. I wore my cousins' cast-offs and slept with the little ones, three in a bed." She glanced swiftly at Kehoe. "Funny how lonesome it can get, three in a bed."

"When I ask too many questions, you just say stop," said Kehoe. "How did a girl like you ever wind up with a McDade?"

She looked at her hands and then put them away under the table. She went on looking at where they'd been. "Roy was the first person who ever made a fuss over me. I was sixteen. But I didn't believe he was as bad as everyone said. And I thought he wanted me."

"From what I hear, he wanted everything in sight,"

Kehoe said instead of cussing.

"Yes, until he had it." Kehoe had to lean across the table now, because she was whispering. "I could have loved him, if he'd let me. I could have loved anyone who was kind."

He leaned back and looked at her until she met his eyes. He felt something like anger. "You made a bad draw, Miz Oralie. But that's no excuse for quitting the game."

"I don't know what you mean."

"You talk like your life's over. Look at you. You get yourself up like an old lady. Widow's weeds, for a man who wasn't worth the powder it took to blow him up!" He reached across and took her hand. "Wagon Mound is a long way from anywhere, girl, but it ain't the end of the world. Why don't you give some other fellow a chance?"

Slowly she stood up. She did it in such a way as not to disturb the contact of their hands. He found himself rising with her.

She said, "Who'd want Roy McDade's leavings?"

Touching nothing but her hand, and that lightly, he bent down and put his mouth on hers. Her eyes went wide, stayed wide open the whole time, so close and huge he thought he would fall into them like a leaf in a lake. It was the gentlest, the longest kiss he could remember. It outlasted another roar of thunder, a big, near one that filled the box valley they stood in and stayed until it boiled dry. When it was gone, Oralie swayed away from him and smiled, looking up at the ceiling. "My, that was a big one!"

He said huskily, "You hear it too? I thought it was only me."

"Dan," she whispered, "Dan, when you leave, take me with you?"

Very carefully he put her back away from him. "Not

me, Oralie. Not me—" Catching the twist of pain on her face, he added quickly, "It's just you don't know me, honey. You don't know— I ain't for you. Not Dan Kehoe. I'm not good enough for you or anyone like you."

"Oh, you are, you are!"

He shook his head slowly. "Just good enough to know I ain't good enough. Don't crowd me now, honey, or you'll take that away from me too."

She came into his arms again. He folded her in; he had to. Her body was slender, limber, strong—and then she gasped and struggled away. It was not a struggle against him, he knew when he saw her face, terror-struck, staring at the dining-room door, where Ruby stood, hands on hips, her big dark eyes like the holes in a death's-head, her face just that expressionless.

She pursed her lips and spat on the floor between them, turned and was gone.

Kehoe, his mouth an inch from Oralie's, cursed. She seemed not to notice. She met his eyes. Hers were full of sadness.

"What do you reckon she'll do? Tell Miz McDade?"

Oralie shook her head, and with the wisdom of woman on the subject of woman, said, "She wouldn't tell *anyone*. She'd have to tell about me doing something she couldn't do." She stepped back a pace and shook his shoulder gently. "Could she?" she demanded, and she was only half teasing.

"No, she couldn't, she couldn't," he laughed. He kissed her quickly.

"You'd better go, Dan." She waited through a new concussion of thunder. It was almost totally dark outside now.

He looked her up and down, and shook his head in a kind of wonder. "I guess I better while I've a shred of sense left. Be careful, Oralie." He moved his head toward the door where Ruby had vanished. "She's a

wildcat."

"I'm not afraid, Dan." She stood against the candlelight while he backed away from her. She folded her arms as if she had something to hold. "She couldn't take today away from me."

Dan Kehoe turned away from her, crossed the pitch-black dining-room, the lobby, and started to the porch. Lightning split all heaven in two and turned the windows to blue-white blazes. With his eyeballs aching he turned and ran to the door in time to meet the mighty crash of thunder that followed it. He laughed up at it, feeling crazy, feeling wonderful. "That's it, that's it," he said approvingly to the sky, and laughed, and the sky roared back.

20

THE RAIN CAME DOWN SOLID, all at once, smashing the dry ground with an audible impact and driving up a single choking cloud of dust. It beat this down into the ground again, and for a moment it looked as if the earth had a thirst too great to quench, because the ground looked dry again. But at the next lightning flash it was slick, and at the next awash and covered all over with a measles of small muddy volcanoes. No longer solid, the rain was needles, clustered needles, a curry-comb wide as the valley, scratching it down toward the river. There was more water in the air than there ought to be, and more noise in the air than water with the thunder batting back and forth between the opposing cliffs, the rumble of high rock slides, the rain hissing, the nearing roar of flash-water scouring out the gulches with a tumble of boulders and trees and adding echoes to the echoes. Somewhere there was a scream, a wild, ghastly repeated scream, lungs pumping through a rigid, terrified throat.

Kehoe backed into the lobby, partly because of the bruising rain, partly to get shelter enough to wonder what animal had been caught in what terrible way to make a noise like that.

"What's that? What's that screamin'?" croaked Ma McDade from the stairway, and only then did he realize that the incredible sound came from inside the building. Behind the old lady Birdie appeared like a

wan and bewildered ghost in the lightning flares, murmuring, "What? What?" and stumbling down in Ma McDade's wake.

Kehoe never knew if he figured out the source of the sound before or after he started running; either way, he found himself diving through the dining-room ahead of the others, through "the trough" and into the kitchen.

Oralie had been washing up when it happened. A shadow from the shadows in the dining-room, one, two soft steps, a hard hand over her mouth, perhaps a rabbit punch to quiet her. She had regained consciousness in time to see the poker, its tip heated to straw-color in the stove, and the implacable enemy who bore it. *"Ruby!"* screamed Ma McDade at the top of her voice.

Ruby whirled and saw Kehoe charging. She laughed hideously and swung the poker with both hands like a sword. Kehoe dug his heels in and threw his head back; he felt the heat of the poker as it swung past his chin and throat. He snatched up a kitchen chair and held it in front of him like any other cool head faced with a deadly cat-animal. He parried one thrust and lost two legs from the chair as Ruby brought the poker down in a vicious smash. He ran at her while she was trying to raise it again; she had to run backward to get clear. The yard door opened, and in stepped Sabina with her rifle in the crook of her arm. As if she had the action rehearsed, she turned the gun and caught Ruby between the shoulder blades with the rifle butt, shoving for all she was worth.

Ruby was caught completely off guard. She stumbled forward. Kehoe side-stepped and let her go by, raising the chair and turning. He never got the chance to deliver the blow. Ma McDade brought the stove's lid-lifter down exactly on the part of Ruby's hair; the girl hit the floor like a poled steer, skidded and lay still,

face down.

"You killed her," said Birdie, her eyes alight.

"The Lord forgive me, I hope so," said the old lady. She plumped down in a chair and wiped sweat out of her eyes with her sleeve. She looked up at Kehoe with her peculiar crooked grin. "How long you going to stand there like that, mister?"

Kehoe looked slowly from her face to the broken chair he held high over his head, grinned foolishly and tossed it aside.

A low shuddery moan from the floor, and Kehoe dropped to one knee and lifted Oralie in his arms. She looked up at him and smiled; nothing in life had ever twisted him quite like that smile. "You all right? She hurt you?"

"I'm all right—now—"

"You mean all that screeching was just Oralie?" demanded Sabina.

"What would you do if a crazy woman come at you with a hot poker?" asked Ma McDade.

Sabina looked across at Birdie, who was staring with fascination at the slow runnel of blood finding its way along the part in Ruby's hair. Sabina said, "You mean Ruby was after *Oralie?*"

"Whatever for?" asked Ma McDade of the whole room, echoing Sabina's amazement.

Shut up, Oralie, thought Kehoe urgently. Perhaps he should have said it aloud. Oralie snuggled closer to him and looked up at him with adoring, half-closed eyes. "She found us makin' love," she said clearly, smiled, and precluded all argument by fainting dead away.

Kehoe held her and looked up at Ma McDade and around at Sabina. The old woman's eyes began to blaze. Sabina began to laugh. He knelt there holding the limp girl and feeling like a damn fool. Oralie,

honey, he demanded silently, why in time did you have to say anything at all? If you had to say something, why not "saw us kissin' " or "she thought we were" or anything on God's great green earth but "found us makin' love"?

"You got to get out of here, Kehoe," said Ma McDade. "Sheriff or no, you can't stay here another night whatever happens."

He turned to look at the redhead. She met his eyes challengingly and said, "You're right, Ma. I'm goin' to tell him."

"Tell me what?"

"Sweetcake Atwater's dead," she said, still holding him with that dare in her eyes: *say you've heard this before. I dare you.* She recounted the story of Sweetcake and the gambler. "So there's no one chasing you, Mr. Kehoe. You're not holing up for anything."

Ruby stirred and lay still again. Birdie said, "You didn't kill her, Ma," and the life went out of her eyes.

"Look there," said Ma McDade. He looked. Birdie, changed, emptied somehow. Ruby, crumpled on the kitchen floor. "That wouldn'ta happened but for you."

"I guess you're right." He looked down at the slight form in his arms.

"It ain't your fault," said Ma McDade suddenly, angrily. "The mixture was wrong, is all. More'n flesh could bear," she finished, muttering.

He shifted his hold on Oralie. It might have looked like a caress. Sabina laughed again.

"You don't have to laugh," he said shortly.

"Yes, I do."

Unexpectedly Birdie said, "He can't leave in weather like this."

"He can," said Sabina composedly, "and it's the only favor he has left to do us. The lookouts'll be home under blankets in a rain like this and never see him

leave. And his tracks'll wash out. It might be days before they miss him."

"Then what?" he asked bluntly; and just as bluntly Ma McDade answered him, "Then we'll be better off without you, whatever else happens."

"That's the truth," said Sabina.

"You just can't wait to see the last of me," he said to her.

"I'm very anxious for you to leave," she said. She meant something by that, some sort of modification of what he had said, but he was damned if he could think what. He thought, *Redhead, the day may come when I can do what ought to be done to you, but right now I'd turn in a dozen of you for a tin of saddle soap.*

"All right," he said. "I'll go."

Oralie sighed. He sat her up on his knee. She leaned against him and raised her head slowly, stroking his cheek with hers all the way. She met Ma McDade's eyes, smiled tremulously, and tottered to her feet. "Ma—" Kehoe steadied her as she went to the old woman.

"What is it, Oralie?"

The girl bent forward as if to whisper to the old lady, got her fingers on the butt of the ever-present gun, and sprang away with it. "Don't do it, Sabina," she crooned in a much deeper voice than Dan had ever heard, a voice with a steely ring and none of the little-girl softness which was all he'd known of Oralie.

Sabina looked down the hole in the end of the gun and agreed that Oralie had a point. She lowered the Winchester. "On the floor," rapped Oralie. "Butt first. *That's* right. Lay it down easy now and then kick it away from you. Dan, pick up the rifle."

"Oralie!" cried Ma McDade.

"Shut up, you," said Oralie out of the side of her mouth. "And sit down, and stay sat. I've been takin'

your orders for three years now and I'm sick of it. Pick up the rifle, Dan," she said, gesturing with the Colt's.

Kehoe stared at her in complete astonishment. "You ain't pointin' that thing at *me?*"

"Oh, darling, darling, no," she said in her old sweet singing whisper, though her voice was the only thing about her that relaxed. "Birdie, get over there by Sabina where I can see you better. Darling, which one of those tramps do you hate the most?"

"What in tarnation you talkin' about?" Dan roared.

"Sweetheart, we're leaving. Together! And Ma's going to tell us where the gold is, aren't you, Ma?"

"Oralie, what kind of a—"

"Shut up!" Oralie snapped. "I think it's going to be you first, Birdie. Dan, shoot her."

"Shoot? For God's sake, Oralie—"

"Will you do it, or shall I?"

Kehoe picked up the Winchester. Birdie covered her face but said nothing. Oralie said, "In the arm first, honey. Then Ma'll tell us. If not, shoot Birdie's other arm. Then when we're done with Birdie we'll start on sweet precious Sabina with all the brains. We're going to have a look at them 'fore midnight, Sabina. You know that?"

Sabina said to Kehoe, "Now see why I was laughing while you were slobbering over your kitten? The kitten's a snake. I've known it ever since I came here."

Ma McDade apparently could not take her eyes off the transformed Oralie. Kehoe, shaken to the core, was in no better shape.

"You want that gold or don't you?"

"Sure I do, honey," said Kehoe. He raised the rifle, checked the load, and brought the barrel down as hard as he could on Oralie's gun arm. The gun barked as it leaped free of her arm and the bullet passed between

Sabina and Birdie. When the ringing in his ears subsided enough so he thought she could hear him, he said, "I want it, but I don't want it that way and I may not even want it that much." She was bent almost double, clutching her arm. He went to her and gently disengaged her good hand from the bruise. He felt it carefully. "It ain't busted. You'll be all right, Oralie." He looked at her for a careful moment. "I'm mighty sorry you done that, Oralie," he said with genuine sadness. He picked up the Colt's.

"You call yourself a man," was Oralie's last gasp of defiance.

"He's got the right," said Ma McDade.

Sabina said, "Don't feel too bad. In the long run you'll be real glad Oralie did that."

He waved the gun at Ma McDade. "You want this back?"

"I wouldn't send you out without your gun."

"I'm glad you put it that way," he said. "I was fixin' to keep it whatever." He saw his vest and coat hanging on the clothes tree in the corner and went and put them on. The gun felt very good, home at last under his arm. They were all watching him. Even Ruby. She still lay on the floor but her eyes were open. He went to her and helped her to a chair at the kitchen table. "You're a she-devil, *chiquita,*" he said, "but you play it straight. I'm leaving here. I'm—sorry." His "sorry" was not apology, it was regret; and concerning Ruby there was an important difference.

"Birdie," said Ma McDade, "you want to put his saddle on a horse? The piebald."

"I'll do that," said Kehoe, but not before Birdie had nodded briefly and slipped out into the rain.

"I'll say good-by now," said Sabina. She crossed the room and gave him a firm hand, looked for a moment into his eyes, and went out with her rifle.

"I lose her, I'd lose the most I've got," said the old woman as the redhead closed the door.

"I don't figure her," said Kehoe.

"You don't need to," said the old lady. "Where's your hat?"

Ruby staggered to her feet. "Hold on there—" Kehoe said, but he was too late.

"Let her go," said Ma McDade. "I think I know how she feels." She got up heavily, as if she didn't care how her age showed, and punched him on the biceps. "You're nothin' but trouble, Dan, but I wish you didn't have to go."

"So do I. Maybe—"

"Don't say nothin' with a maybe on it," she said mistily, and dropped into her chair again.

Ruby came in with his hat. *"Buena fortuna,"* she said weakly.

He tried to keep his eyes off her body, but couldn't. He sighed and said, "I made two big mistakes since I was here, Ruby." He nodded at Oralie. "You know the other one."

"Hokay, Señor Kehoe." She gave him a lopsided grin that made him want to bite it back into shape.

He didn't say anything to Oralie or look around again. He put on his hat and went out into the rain.

21

THE HOTEL'S OLD CARRIAGE HOUSE was the horse barn now. He pushed open the half door and slopped into lantern light. The mount, a big piebald gelding, was ready. Birdie was near the light, leaning back against a barrel.

"Thanks, Miz Birdie." He went to check the cinches. Women generally cinch loose. This one was fine. He turned to her. "You got wet," he said inanely.

She stayed where she was, looking at her hands. The rain had sluiced her down so that the last spring-curl had given up. The wet hair heavy on both sides of her face changed its shape. The lamplight had something to do with it, too. She looked like someone he had never seen before.

He knew she was going to ask to go with him, and he knew he was going to have to be firm and gentle about it, and he knew that whatever he said would hurt her feelings. Well, get it over.

"Good-by, Birdie."

"Good-by, Mr. Kehoe."

"Dan."

"Dan, yes. Dan." At long last she looked up at him. "Dan—"

"Yes, Birdie." Here it comes.

"Dan, that thing you read out'n the Bible this morning, something about God, He takes no pleasure in punishin' the wicked."

"Yes, Birdie."

"Well, what I want to know, does that mean me, too?"

He couldn't help himself; he reached out and put his arms around her. "Of course it means you, Birdie! Why ever not?"

She yielded to him completely, but in comfort, not in passion.

"I've come to think that what I've done—what I am—it made me different from everybody else. I told you that," she said.

"You're good, Birdie. You're honest and you're humble. There's not many folks are all those."

She smiled up at him. Even Oralie had never made such a shy smile. "Me?"

He hugged her and let her go. "You."

He went and freed his horse from the post and took it to the half door. She followed him with the lantern. "Dan?"

He mounted and looked down at her. The rain ran down her face like tears. "Yes, Birdie."

"If I want to look at that again, what it says about punishment and all, how do I find it?"

"It's in Ezekiel. That's in the Old Testament. Ask Ma. She'll help you with it."

"She'd laugh at me."

"She'll never. Believe me, she won't."

"Ezekiel," she said intensely. "Ezekiel." She walked off in the rain saying it to herself and didn't say good-by.

So it's over, Dan thought, slogging through the black rain, *and I had to give up; and what the hell, what's over the hill from here?*

But he could not cheer himself up for thinking of Ma McDade and her burdens, her faithfulness to something that wasn't worth it, and her dogged desire to do right in a thing where she never examined what was

really right or wrong. And Oralie, the snake dressed up like a little girl; and Ruby, the big girl dressed up like a big girl. And that Sabina. Well, he'd forget that Sabina one day, sooner than he'd forget the others. The others all gave him something he could understand, at least a little. You don't remember what you don't understand. Birdie, now Birdie he'd never forget.

His horse found the street for him and he slogged along it. The thunder had stopped and the wind had stopped and there was nothing left but sheets of rain and mud underfoot. Here passed Kehoe and in a minute you won't find his mark, he thought bitterly, and in his mind's eye saw Ma bending over him asking, "What are you, Kehoe?"

All I know is something I ain't, he thought. *I ain't a man would torture a fortune in dust out of an old woman. I ain't a man would spit on a whore just because she's a whore. I ain't a man dumb enough to go stampedin' my stock up no blind draws. And I ain't a man to be jack in a four-queen hand.*

So all in all, Wagon Mound, good-by and to hell with you and I hope the rain washes you into the river, gold and all. Who needs it?

"Come here, Kehoe."

He reined in. Everything stopped but the rain—his thoughts, his breathing. "The smithy. On your right."

He sidled his mount that way. "Who— Miss *Sabina!*"

"Mrs.," she corrected him. "Come in out of the rain."

His leg touched something, and he slid off, took down the lines, fumbled along until he found a snag to tie them to. He worried a saddle tarp out of his off-bag and got it squared somehow over the saddle. "Where are you?"

"In here."

He felt along the wall of the smithy until it wasn't there any more, and into this nothing he advanced with

his hands in front of him like a sleepwalker.

One of his hands was taken and pressed. He was led the way he had come, but inside now. "There's a beam here," she cautioned. "No, underfoot; we'll sit on it."

They sat on it. She let go his hand and he didn't know where she was. He put out his hand and it touched her breast. She put it down. She didn't hit it down or throw it, she just put it by like an extra dish she didn't need just then. "Kehoe, can you swim?"

He looked toward the door. He couldn't see it, but he knew there was rain enough out there to make a mist just inside. "You figure I can't ride out with that long-legged piebald?"

"Well?"

"Sure, I can swim."

He heard her sigh with some relief of her own. "What would you do for money?"

"Depends."

"I know, I know. I mean for a lot of money."

"What's—"

"A hundred thousand dollars."

"In dust?"

Her silence answered him. A small ball of excitement exploded inside him. He recalled his thoughts about what he was. Here she was asking him the selfsame questions. He said, "I just found out what I won't do."

"Suppose it was over a hundred thousand?"

"*What?*"

"Everybody says a hundred thousand," said the clear voice indignantly, "just because the boys' last haul was around that. What about the others—the Cattle Bank at Giant Step and the stage over to Concourse Creek, and all those? Where do people think they spent all that money?"

"Where did they?"

"No place. Unless it was treasury notes. Then they

bought dust with it."

"They really were loco," he said with conviction.

"They were just waiting for the one big haul. They made it. That's not so loco. So," she said, "what would you do for a hundred and ten?"

"All of it?"

"Half of it."

She couldn't see him, but anyway he spread his hands and grinned. "Why, a good deal less'n I would for a hundred. For that I wouldn't pare the ears of an old lady. You got some soft job in mind, ma'am?"

She paused for a while, thinking. Finally, "Kehoe, do you ever give straight answers? We haven't got all night."

"I have."

She swore. For some strange reason it was a singularly pleasant sound, and he laughed at her. Then he said, "Maybe you'd ought to try a straight question or so, Miz Sabina."

"You're such a mixture, Kehoe. Know your Bible, stack your deck. Come to steal gold, treat 'em like ladies. Lie to the sheriff, lie to Ma McDade, lie to me, and then it's the truth that chickens will eat horsemeat."

"I never lied to you, ma'am."

"Well, never mind what's been. I need to find out what to expect. You wouldn't kill a lady for fifty-five thousand, would you?"

"Not if I liked the lady."

"Would you like the lady if you had fifty-five thousand too?"

"I could get to," he chuckled.

"I'll give it to you straight, Kehoe. With my help you can get that gold. Will you do it?"

"Is it goin' to hurt Miz McDade?"

She snorted. "Hurt anybody to lose that much money."

"That isn't what I meant."

"I know, I know. No, it wouldn't hurt the old lady or anyone else."

"You're talkin' about you and me gettin' it."

"Mm-hmm."

"Then you'd skedaddle."

"We would. Depends. Why do you ask that?"

"She said," Kehoe pronounced carefully, "that if she lost Sabina, she'd lose a lot."

It was quiet in there for a time. Then Sabina said, "She told me she wished you were her son."

It was even quieter. Then Kehoe heaved a deep breath and said, "What do we have to do first?"

She laughed, a hard sound, reminding him unpleasantly of that ring in Oralie's voice when she took the gun. "Well," she said, "we passed that test all right. Kehoe, you'll do."

"Fifty-five thousand worth, I'll do," he said. "How do we get her to tell where it is?"

"We don't. I know where it is."

"If ever I believed anything in my life, I believe that if you knowed that, you'd be gone from here like a scalded cat with a ten-mile lead."

"It's where only a strong man who isn't afraid for himself can get it. But for that, you're absolutely right," she said coldly. "Well?"

"You're a steady head, Miz Sabina," he said. "All right. I think I'll go along with you."

"You think!"

"Tell me something," he said. "What would you do for fifty-five thousand dollars?"

"I've already—"

"Do you ever give a straight answer to a straight question?"

She didn't say anything.

"I'm a nice man and I been ill used," he said, "and

it's been quite a while. So what would *you* do for fifty-five thousand dollars?"

"We've talked enough," she said briskly, and he could hear her rise. He felt for her arm and pulled her down with a bump. She fought back an inch. "If I— I wouldn't—"

"Then you'd be out fifty-five thousand dollars in bright gold dust," he said.

"So would you."

He shrugged. "Might be worth it. Ain't that a pretty compliment to a lady?"

"Oh," she said, "I hate you. I despise you." She said it in low, cold, deadly tones.

Very suddenly they sat apart in the pitch dark. He wouldn't move and she was afraid to.

At last she said, "You really mean it? You actually would let a thing like this stand or fall on—" Her voice trailed away.

"I just been thinkin' about someone I know, what she is. What you are. What I am." He shook himself. "Don't mind me, Sabina. I'm just in a gruesome way," he said briskly. "Sure, I'll help get the gold. What do I do?"

"Ride across the bridge and hole up in the timber just south of it, and wait for me."

"Wait how long?"

She stood up. "Till I come. I'll have to get back to the hotel near midnight, because I always do. Then I have to slide out and get the team and the buckboard."

"Buckboard?"

"You going to tote that much gold in your teeth?"

"All right."

She was at the door now. "Why did you bring up that filthy business, Kehoe?"

"It was on my mind. It wasn't filthy, as I recall. Mostly, I brought it up because you seemed to be *hiring* me. I don't like that much."

"I'll—try to remember." Then there was nothing in the dark there but the sound of the rain. Kehoe fumbled his way outside, mounted his horse first and pulled the saddle cover out from under him second, because it was that kind of a rain; and let the horse find the way over the bridge.

22

HE WAS ALMOST ASLEEP, hunkered like a Mexican under his poncho, when the rumble of wheels jolted him upright. The rain was still persistent, but it had slackened until it was only a heavy rain. He was surprised at how well he could see, considering; but then, he'd been out there for almost four hours.

"First let's get this out of sight," was her greeting. He got the off-horse by the bridle and led the team into the timber where his piebald was concealed. He came back to her. She stood at the end of the bridge away from Wagon Mound, waiting for him, her head bent. She was staring down into the black water near the first pier.

"What's down there?"

"Guess."

"In the *river?*"

She laughed shortly. "Right where it's been all along. Make you feel stupid?"

"It sure does. It had to be here; why didn't I ever think of it?"

"River's way up," she said. "When I said swim I didn't mean just a doggy-paddle."

"Just where is it?"

"Lashed to the pier, right down at the bottom. There's a tarred beam for a footing, and sitting on it, on the upstream side, is a box."

"What kind of box?"

"Solid steel strongbox."

He peered down into the black water and grunted. "Nothin' to it. I'll throw it, you catch it. How in tarnation you expect one man to do a job like that?"

"Depends on the man, doesn't it?"

"You're talkin' to the best man in Wagon Mound," he said wryly. "Well, let's take a look."

He skinned out of his poncho, his hat, coat, waistcoat and shirt. "Savin' your presence, ma'am," he said, and got out of his trousers and boots. Dressed only in his long johns, he vaulted lightly over the rail and lowered himself into the water on the upstream side.

"Cold?" She was leaning over the rail, peering down.

"Wet," he acknowledged. "And fast."

"It's up two feet anyway with this rain."

"That ain't all bad," said Kehoe, finding that he could reach the road-planks from the water. "Well, 'by."

He went hand over hand out to the first pier and let the current press him against it. He pumped air into his lungs and then went under.

He opened his eyes once and found that worse than useless. The water was full of alkali silt and mud, stinging and swift, and it was darker than a minehead at midnight. Something hit him a solid blow in the small of the back and he felt a third of his precious lungful of air swish up and away past his face. *That's all I need,* he thought grimly, *just one big busted tree trunk end-on.* The water was full of trash of all sizes, all in a hurry.

He climbed, rather than swam, down until his feet hit bottom. The current wanted to snatch him to one side or the other away from the pier; he had to keep his back to it and balance, letting it hold him chest-first against the rough wood.

He squatted down and tested the bottom on each side with his hands. Something else in his favor: he could

feel that this had been mostly a mud bottom, dust and silt piling up in sluggish water during the long months of drought. Now it was stripped away to hardpan; he could feel the soft stuff going even as he touched it.

He stretched down to the right as far as he could go, then quickly changed hands and felt at the left. If there ever had been a steel box here, there was no sign of it now.

His foot began to hurt, and he ran his fingers under it to knock away the rock or whatever it was that was grinding into his stockinged foot.

It was a bight of rope.

He felt the rest of the surface under foot. Smooth. Flat.

No wonder there was no steel to the right or left. He was standing right on top of it.

He backed off it, pressing himself upstream away from the pier until he could grip the box with his knees. He felt all around it and the pier next to it, seeing with hands now frantic with haste just how the rope bound the box, just where he might get a new line on to it.

The blackness enfolding his eyeballs began to show spots and sparks. His tortured chest refused to hold bad air another second. He let it out and scrambled up the pier and broke surface.

The air was full of a scream, "Down, Dan! *Down!*"

He didn't stop to look or think or do his lungs any favor. Down he went, and as the water closed over his head, he was grabbed violently and pulled toward midstream by a spinning tangle of lithe wood and torn leaves. He felt the bridge shudder as something heavy struck it and ground massively along the upstream edge. He battered free of the scratching, clawing upper branches of whatever big broken tree it was which had yielded to wind and water and rockfall and had come

sweeping down on him. He reached up and got a hand on the road-plank, only to have it bashed as if a strong man with a club had been waiting for it. He screwed up his face with the pain, threw his head back, got some air, held on. The thing like a club clawed across the back of his hand and was gone. He got his other hand up there and worked his way along the bridge to the bank. He glanced back and dimly saw the tree rocking and shoving against the bridge, slowly disappearing like a lizard into a horned toad's mouth, fighting the whole way but going down whatever. He saw Sabina's slim silhouette tight against the bridge rail over the pier, craning far, still and anxious. He grinned briefly, climbed out on the bank, gained the top, and stood there for a moment against the end of the railing while his mistreated lungs got the air they clamored for.

Then on quiet feet he walked up behind her and leaned close.

"Lose something, ma'am?"

She screamed and started violently, and he caught her as she started to slump. He hadn't meant to put his arms around her, but she would have fallen otherwise. In the dim light he saw her face turning up to his and the eyes open. "Well, well, well," he laughed, "Miss Cold-Steel Sabina got a weak point after all."

"Damn you," she whispered, "it wasn't you I was worried about." He let her go. "Well, did you find it?"

He did not answer. She put her hands tight together and bit her lip. At last she looked up at him and said angrily, "This is no time for your childish foolish—*Oh!*" and she sobbed. He knew perfectly well that the tears were only a little from fear and shock, and the rest sheer fury for having tears at all. He laughed at her and patted her on the shoulder, which she resentfully twisted away from him, and then quite matter-of-factly answered her question. "I found it. It won't be

easy. What I got to do is get a line on to it and then cut it loose from the pier. I think once it breaks free we can make this current help rather'n hinder. Can you handle a horse?"

"Try me."

"I didn't mean that. Can you handle a horse?" she opened her mouth to damn him and he put his hand over it. "You said that before." He took his hand away. "Why, Miz Sabina; you're laughing!"

"I'm *not!*" she said furiously, and then laughed. "All right, all right, funny, funny man. What do I do with the horse?"

He explained what he had in mind, and they got to work.

Down he went again, this time bringing his sheath-knife and the new riata he had spent his spare time plaiting these last few weeks. Digging with his fingers, he made a channel big enough to push the end of the riata between the bottom corner of the box and the river bed it stood on. He slashed away the rope which bound it to the pier, nudged the box upstream an inch, pulled the riata straight up, found the free end and deftly whipped it into a running noose. He came up for air, this time turning just before he broke surface so he could see upstream and do his own warning. This once the water was comparatively free of anything big.

Down he went again, found the bight of the riata, and coiled it. It fouled once, but only briefly. Holding the coils in his left hand, he pushed away from the pier and let the current carry him under the bridge, while he swam strongly for the bank. He overestimated the strength of the flow, and came up too soon, banging his head painfully on the underside of the downstream stringer; he shook away water and pain together, and crawled up the bank with the riata to where Sabina waited with the piebald.

"You know this jackrabbit better'n I do," he said, slapping the horse. "Reckon he'll behave himself?"

"He's all right. You have to go down again?"

"Don't have to," he said sourly. "It's just that I like it down there."

They had taken the near trace-chain from the buckboard as the most reliable line they could get for the final lifting. Kehoe went down and lashed it to the riata just at his drawn-up noose, so that the box now had two separate lines from it. He pushed off and let the angry current carry him and the trace-chain under the bridge, where he surfaced, found footing, and there stopped to bend on a piece of rope, as the trace was nowhere near long enough for his purposes. This rope he carried up out of the water and arranged it so that it led almost straight from the box—on the upstream side—to the side-stringer of the bridge on the downstream side. He took a turn around the foot of the railing here, and went back to the piebald and Sabina.

"Know what to do?"

"Take a strain," she said. "Then slam it once to jerk the box loose, and draw it on under the bridge while you take up the slack on the trace."

"My," he said, and cocked his head on one side, "I never knew girls could savvy that quick, not in this department. Hey, maybe you're not a girl at all. Maybe that explains everything."

"I'm going to kill you," she said; but he could hear the laughter under it, along with another surge of this anger she had every time she responded to him. Before she could chide him again for not sticking to business, he said, "Look, when you say jerk it loose an' then 'draw it' under the bridge, don't think you're goin' to carry it along at a walk."

"I know, I know. Once it's off the bottom I have to rush it fast as I can so it won't settle again."

"Right." He put out his hand. "You sure you're a girl? Le' me see."

She hit him across the face with the reins. Gently. He laughed and went back to the bridge and the place where his rope was lashed to the rail upright. He cast it loose, all but one turn.

He looked through the watery blackness. He could not see her or the horse at all. It was like being adrift in some chilly hell, nothing above but the dimmest of sky-glow, nothing around but wet.

"Take a strain!"

If she answered he could not hear her, so he lay down on the boards and stared at the water until he saw the faint wake of the riata as it surfaced and began to draw a dead-straight line from the submerged box to his saddle pommel, somewhere down there in the dark. He knelt and took a strain on his own rope. *"Hit it!"*

Through the steady hiss of the rain and the river, he distinctly heard the deep hum of the riata as it drew tight, a big live horse at one end and a big dead weight at the other. He flipped a turn of his own rope around his hand and came upward on it with everything he had. *"Go!"* he yelped.

He hadn't hoped that the box would break free so easily. He suddenly had no strain at all on his rope, and fell backward across the road-planks. He couldn't take in slack fast enough; he rolled over on the splintery boards and got his feet under him and took the rope and ran with it, looking backward, his every nerve-ending concentrated toward the first sign of weight on the rope. He hit the upstream railing full tilt and knocked his wind out, but wind or no, he got one half turn of the bight around an upright there. He fell back with this. With the side of his foot he felt the trace-chain as it came up over the downstream edge of the bridge; the box must be almost underneath now, and

moving downstream at a hell of a rate.

Pulling in slack for all he was worth, he got to his knees and then to his feet, ready for the strain when it would come. He *thought* he was ready, that is; but when the moment came—when the line of force ran straight from pommel to box to the rail upright, and then to his hands—he wasn't ready, and no one man could be. He was pulling directly against the plunging horse plus the weight of the box rising out of the stream. It came almost without warning, fire in his palms as the rope burned them, agony in his shoulders as his arms tried to leave their sockets, splinters entering his unprotected soles as he tried to brace back—everything, all at once.

And then the trace-chain broke.

Kehoe hit the downstream bridge railing with the nape of his neck so hard that he was unconscious before he even felt it.

23

SO THIS IS WHAT BEING DEAD IS LIKE, he thought comfortably. It was a ready explanation for this over-all numbness, the feel of a hard mattress under his back, and more than anything else the fact that it wasn't raining any more.

Besides, somebody was weeping for him.

He opened his eyes.

Over him wasn't a box-lid, or the earth, but sky. It was dark and starless, but it was sky all right. He rolled his head and felt the smooth surface of a saddle bag and also one mighty, all-fired, aching patch of bruise. He saw a sort of low board fence to his left, couldn't understand it and dropped the matter to be thought about later. He looked down and saw himself covered with his poncho. Beyond this, past his feet, a sort of wooden platform extended a short way and stopped abruptly at black nothingness. He looked to the right and saw another one of those low fences.

He closed his eyes and unhurriedly considered all these things, and wished the crying would stop. He had never in his life felt this way, cloudy, miasmic. The numbness wasn't really a numbness; more like a lethargy of the senses, where the feelings of heat and cold and pressure and pain were all filtered through a horse blanket, arriving late and weakly. His mind could see the pieces of things quick enough, but took forever to put them together. He had just about completed the

interesting process of comparing things he barely remembered with those fences and so on around him, and had about equated them with what it must be to be lying in the bed of a buckboard at night after a rain, when the weeping got, not louder, but closer, and somebody was kneeling beside him, saying, "Don't leave me alone, Dan. Don't leave me alone. You're my kind of people Dan, you big, lying, thieving, woman-chasing clown. There's nothing good about you and there's nothing good about me but we deserve each other, damn you Kehoe, you're so rotten—" She slowly bowed her whole kneeling body until her face was buried in his shoulder and her bottom was up like a sleeping infant's; like a little girl with a broken doll she howled her grief; like a very tired woman she slowly straightened out, drawn down by the weight of her weariness, until she was stretched out beside him.

He lay there listening to everything and thinking about it slowly, hearing the sound of her breath grow deeper and quieter, with the little unvoiced sob-hiccups coming less and less often and fainter.

The numbness in his limbs was changing in some way. He felt a pins and needles tingling down the outside of the little finger of his left hand. He lay observing this until the sensation became more bothersome than interesting, and he closed his hand. Immediately the tingling began on the tips of all his other left fingers and started on the outside of his right hand. He moved his toes and they started up the same nonsense. At the same time his brains found out how to put pieces together again, and he was suddenly completely conscious.

He reached up and slid his hand around under the back of his neck. He hadn't been hit a lick like that since that Minnesota sodbuster's daughter hit him with the skillet.

He looked at the sky and all its corners, and learned

from it, with the outdoorsman's sixth sense, that the buckboard lay on high ground, heading west and a little north; that this special darkness was just predawn; that a mountain bulked on the left and fell away on the right in one hell of a drop.

He tensed his whole body and let it relax. It felt pretty good, barring a general battered feeling, a stiff puffiness on the back of his left hand where the tree stump had bashed it, a baker's dozen of softwood splinters in his feet and one knee, and similar minor damage.

He tipped his head to look down at the girl. She was dead asleep, snuggled into his right shoulder. He crossed his left hand over and gently worked the edge of the poncho from under her body and threw it deftly so it settled over them both. It disturbed her, but only enough for a weary sigh and a little wriggle closer to him, so he didn't mind. He eased his own shoulders on the mattress at the same time.

Mattress?

What mattress?

He heeled it. It was hard but yielding, like a sandbag.

He felt it with his left hand. Where had he felt something like that before?

Canvas sacks, little ones, maybe four inches thick and fifteen, sixteen inches long. Heavy as lead, and lots of them. Enough to sleep two.

My God, he thought, gold sacks. Half the banks and express companies in the Territories weighed out gold that way, five hundred dollars to each sack, weighing around twenty pounds each, more or less depending on how the dust tested out. And there had to be more than two hundred of them neatly stacked all over the bed of the buckboard.

He had a wild impulse to bellow with laughter, and laugh he did, but kept it silent for fear of waking the girl. How many men since the earth began, he thought

deliriously, ever went to bed with a beautiful redhead on a mattress stuffed with pure gold?

He tucked his chin into his collarbone to look down at her again. He could see the curve of her brow and the line of her nose and the side of her jaw, and that was all. He bent his head a little farther and put his cheek against her hair. It felt fine, and it smelt nice, too—not like soap or perfume or anything else but damp, clean hair.

It turned out suddenly not to be enough, that part of a face, touch of the hair. Very carefully he put his left hand under her chin and tipped her face up. It came easily, and he was much happier about having it all to see, so close. Her lashes were red like her hair, and curled; he recalled this and put the recollection on the faint image he could see in the cloud-muffled sky-glow. She had a good nose with the kind of nostrils which flare out in anger. His hand told him that though there was no cleft in the flesh of her chin, there was one in the bone under it; he liked that, for some reason. Her mouth was full and firm, and she slept with the lips slightly parted. He wondered if he could kiss them so gently they wouldn't close. He'd never tried anything quite like that before.

She was so tired and no wonder, he thought, glorying in his regained ability to put pieces together. She'd put the gold in the wagon all by herself after getting the box out of the water and cracking it open. Then, single-handed, she had put him in, too. The gold came in twenty-pound segments, and if you didn't care how long it took or how tired you got, you could move a mountain of it single-handed. But a two-hundred pound man who'd been slapped too limp to co-operate—that was a different matter. No wonder she was tired.

She was a number of other things besides tired. She was whatever a woman had to be to get that gold loaded

and then think about him. Here was a young kid smart enough to be able to come into a hornets' hive like Wagon Mound and charm an old hedgehog like Ma McDade into trusting her, and all the while scheming to get her hands on that gold. And here was a woman capable of making Dan Kehoe do a number of things he wouldn't ordinarily do, and one or two things he'd have sworn he'd never do, and perhaps one item he was sure he couldn't do, like for example keeping his hands off her last night in the smithy. Yet for all the lies and larceny in her, she also had whatever it took to scrape him up and flake him out in the wagon-bed instead of driving off without him.

What made you do that, Sabina? She did not answer because he had not spoken. She just lay sleeping on his shoulder with her face upturned to his and her lips parted.

I owe you something for that, Sabina, he told her in the same silent language. He had a small idea that she might not like the coin he paid her in; on the other hand, he reflected, when you pay out, you pay something of value to you yourself, or it couldn't be called a payment.

Quite satisfied with this logic, he went about seeing if he could kiss those lips without closing them.

He cupped her shoulder with his right hand just to steady things, and put his mouth carefully over hers. The first thing to touch her was his upper lip, which was high precision for a man with a mustache. Their lower lips met, and there he held it, with a touch so light you could break it with the edge of a cigarette paper and not even wrinkle it.

Time was, he reflected happily, *I couldn'ta done this. What am I, gettin' old?*

Her lips closed and parted again. He did not move; he knew that if he moved at all just then, he would be-

have like that rock-busted tree stump when it hit the bridge down there, just bashing along any old way till it got through.

Keeping their mouths together in that feather-touch and moving almost as slowly as grass growing, he brought up his left hand and very carefully unbuttoned the top button of her shirtwaist. And the second one, and the third. She had on a cotton vest under that, and wherever the buttons were, they weren't in front.

Maybe he joggled and maybe he just breathed too hard; he never knew. But what happened then was a thing he would remember till the day he died and most every day in between.

She woke up, immediately and altogether, and absolutely the only sign she gave of it was when she opened her eyes. She opened both of them wide, and there they were staring into him only a small part of an inch away, unmoving and full of astonishment. Maybe she was so full of his eyes that she forgot where her mouth was; she didn't move it at all; and how long they stayed like that, he never knew, one second or thirty of them. Then she moved.

She moved so quickly and so lightly that she seemed to have left the world like the flame of a blown-out candle. He blinked at where her eyes had been. Then he saw her, standing beside the buckboard, close up. She had spun away and vaulted the side of the wagon, all in a single motion.

She started to throw words at him like hatchets. "You sneaky, rotten, low-down *sidewinder!*" she hissed, buttoning one button for each word she threw and slamming her hands down on the edge of the sideboard when she came to "sidewinder." "And to think I *trusted* you!"

"When was that?" he answered grimly. He sat up ponderously and wagged his head. "I don't know what it

is about the women o' Wagon Mound, but they seem to think I can get used to this, if they do it to me often enough. I won't, Sabina: so help me I won't."

"Don't *talk* to me!" She turned away furiously and turned back again. "And when you do, you call me Mrs. McDade. And when you look at me, just you remember that's who I am!"

A slow and very ugly anger began to grow in him. "Well, the days you don't learn somethin' new, you find somethin' out," he growled. "So that's what you're savin' yourself for—Boone McDade! What else you got to surprise me with, Mrs. McDade? You know where he is? You going to him? Is that what I got myself into?"

"What's so surprising about a woman being true to her husband? Or, come to think of it, it would surprise the likes of you, you—"

"Ma'am, you just talked yourself out of a hired man. You can pole your own bullboat from here on out. Where's that piebald?"

"I killed him. If you want to leave here, that's wonderful. But you'll walk. You're welcome to as much gold as you can carry; I guess I'll just have to take along the rest."

"You will like a eagle swims! What in tarnation made you kill that gelding?"

She dropped her eyes. "He broke his leg bringing the box up. It popped up out of the water and broke on a rock, and the riata came loose and he fell forward with his foot in a gopher hole."

"And for that you risk everything with a gunshot."

"I didn't shoot him, and I won't talk any more about it."

He looked at her in the gloom. He saw immediately what must have happened back there on the river bank after he got knocked out. He imagined the dark and the driving rain and the injured horse, and the girl sud-

denly alone who wouldn't risk a gunshot.

If you know horses, and can find the right stone, you can manage without a gun. But you have to be strong at least two ways to do a thing like that.

"I'm surprised you ain't snow-capped like a Rocky," he said. He meant to be completely insulting, but it wouldn't come out sounding that way. Not completely.

He shuddered, partly from the morning chill. With the poncho off him, he felt it; he still wore only his long johns and what was left of his socks. He fumbled under the seat and found his clothes neatly folded and stacked. They were damp, but they'd keep the breeze out; and he knew these hills well enough to know there'd be plenty of that once the sun got to these slab-sided canyons. He began to pull his trousers on, and from the corner of his eye saw her abruptly turn her back. That made him laugh, and he saw her shoulders hunch up when he did, and he laughed at that, too.

He got his shirt and holster on, his waistcoat and his coat. In the growing light he sat at the back end of the buckboard and pulled off the remains of his socks and got his knife out and began removing the splinters from his feet. "I'm decent, Mrs. McDade," he said. He got a certain low satisfaction out of his success in making "Mrs. McDade" sound like a genuine cussword.

"You don't know the meaning of decency," she said, but at least she came and faced him to say it. "Liar. Thief. Lecher."

"I'm glad you hung that last one on there, Mrs. McDade. I was about to say that yours was the opinion of an expert, but you sure stopped me with that last one." He changed feet and glanced at her. She was concentrating on what he was doing, probably to keep her eyes off his face. "Now that the honeymoon is over," he said, locating a splinter with his knife-point, "there's no reason left for any lies whatever. Right?"

"That's right."

"Well, there's one thing I want you to know, though why I do, I can't say. When I told you I took that plugged dollar on a hunch—" He cut in with the knife, and something made him glance at her as he did it. Her face twisted as she saw the blade hook the splinter and raise it—"an' then got herded Wagon Mound way by accident, you didn't believe it."

"I still don't."

"Well, start now. It's the truth."

She didn't say anything. He got hold of the splinter and drew it out and looked at it reflectively. "I could tell you some more truth if you wanted to hear it. An' if you'd know the real article when you saw it."

"I can expect anything from you, Mister Kehoe. Even the truth."

He probed, aimed, and cut, deliberately watching her face as he did it. She raised her eyes and met his laughing ones. She turned her back and pressed her hands together. "Does this bother you, seeing me hurt myself?"

"I like it," she said without turning.

"It figures." He concentrated for a silent minute, and when he looked up she was watching again. "All right, here's more of the same. What happened just now, I was tryin' to say thanks for not leavin' me yonder, or even rollin' me into the river. You could of, you know."

"I wish I had."

"Why didn't you?"

She didn't answer. He regarded his socks sadly and began to put them on. It wasn't easy to discover which hole was the right one. "Let's figure on that a while. I got it pretty straight in my mind that you didn't do it because you *wanted* me. It must be you *needed* me. Now, what would you need the likes of me for?"

She looked at her hands and was silent.

He tugged on a boot. "I know. You goin' to hire me as a bed an' chamber maid for you an' Boone."

"You hush!" she yelled.

"Sorry. I should've called him Mister McDade." He pulled on his other boot. She stamped away to the front of the wagon, put her foot on the tread, and sprang lightly up to the seat. Once there, she swung herself around the seat back and began fussing with the poncho, spreading it and smoothing it over the bags of gold.

He hopped down and tested his feet gingerly. He looked out across the gloomy hills at the thin line of pale cloud in the east. He felt a mild shock of recognition. They stood on the trail he had found on his way in to Wagon Mound—found by angling through the brush from the peak of this very mountain, the day he had come out of the high pines with a broken leg and a plugged dollar and had seen the ghost town and the river for the first time. He could see it now, mostly through knowing where it was, for it was still black night down there. He remembered the canyon next to the trail, miles of it, dropping away almost sheer, always hundreds, occasionally a thousand feet deep. He felt the first breath of the wind he knew would spring up. It smelt good to him; it was the sort of wind that ought to have the smell of bacon on it, but it didn't. "You didn't think to bring breakfast, Mrs. McDade?"

"No," she said shortly. It occurred to him that she needed something to eat probably worse than he did. He instantly reminded himself that that, by her own dictates, was not his worry.

He walked slowly away from the trail to where he could make out the team, grazing in the woodland margins. He regarded them carefully. They'd seen better days, and they didn't offer much of a choice. The buckskin was ratbait and the chestnut was crowbait with ground-down teeth and three shoes. He took the buck-

skin and led him back to the wagon.

"Would you be kind enough, Mrs. McDade, to toss down my saddle?"

"Certainly, Mr. Kehoe." She manhandled it out from under the seat and picked it up and swung it over the side, far enough out of his reach so he couldn't catch it. It hit the ground and he bent to pick it up.

"Would you be good enough to hitch that horse to the buckboard, Mr. Kehoe?"

He looked up at her to laugh in her face, but didn't quite get the laugh built. Well in front of the face was the round black hole in the front end of his Colt's, held in a very steady hand.

Utterly unbelieving, he slammed his hand into his empty holster, and then straightened up. "Well, I'm a monkey's cross-eyed cousin!" he gasped. "Now that's what I get for walkin' around all those weeks without my iron." He slapped his breast over the holster. "Plumb got used to it."

"Hitch up the team, please, Mister Kehoe."

He folded his arms and glared up at her. "I ain't goin' to do it."

"Stand very still, Mr. Kehoe. I'm going to shoot the lobe off your left ear." She raised the gun and sighted.

"They'll hear it easy at Wagon Mound."

She closed one green eye and curled her finger on the trigger. "And they'll do—what?"

He glanced down trail. Wagon Mound certainly was a long way off, and they had the buckboard and all but one of the horses. "I'll hitch your team, lady," he said.

She was nice about it; she didn't gloat. She watched him hitch up the buckskin without saying anything and strolled along with him when he got the chestnut. She stayed ten feet away, no more, no less. While he was tightening the leather she slipped up on the seat where she could watch him do it without anything to duck

behind or run around.

"What happened to the trace-chain?"

"You busted it," she told him. "Practically single-handed."

"You fixed this?"

"The hired man," she said, "was out."

"Yeah, I remember now, the lazy scut." He tugged at the repair. "Not bad for a bookkeeper," he said grudgingly, "but we'd best not move better'n a walk." He waited, not looking at her, to see if she'd pick up on the "we." She did not. She ducked it, he fully realized, to keep him guessing, and said, "That's all right. There's no hurry."

He felt a charge of stubbornness, and after handing up the lines, he made no move to get up on the buckboard. Let her invite him. He could play it from there.

After a tense wait, with both of them looking away from each other and feeling foolish, Sabina said, "You still in that truth-talking mood?"

"Why sure."

"Just what were your plans when you started saddling that horse?"

"You want just the truth, or all the truth?"

"All of it."

"Okay," he said cheerfully. "I was goin' to ride that horse along this trail and over that mountain, and take my gold with me."

"Your horse couldn't carry all of your share."

"You didn't let me finish. The other horse would take the rest of it."

"*What?* You'd leave me here all alone without horses?"

"You'd have your gold; I'd have mine. Right down the middle. I'd have the horses; you'd have that fine buckboard."

"And that's really the truth?"

"Well, Mrs. McDade, not quite the whole truth. The rest of it is that when I went to saddle that horse I was doin' it to find out what you'd do if I did."

She patted the gun fondly. "You found out."

"Yes'm."

"Well—"

He waited.

"Get up here and drive, Kehoe," she said abruptly. "And no tricks."

"Nice of you to ask me, ma'am," he said. She started over the seat and he put one foot on the tread and with his other fetched the buckskin a mighty kick on the rump. The old horse snorted loud enough to shy his teammate, and together they leaped almost out of their shoes. Sabina went face down in the wagon-bed and the pistol went flying out the back. Kehoe dropped to the ground and dove for it. But he hadn't counted on Sabina, whose reflexes were every bit as fast as his and started from farther back and higher up. She landed on all fours right over the gun. He swept her aside and reached, and just as she tumbled she kicked out. Her foot hit his wrist as his hand touched the gun, and it sailed out over the edge of the bluff.

Sabina sat on the ground watching it, and when it was out of sight she put her hands over her face and began to cry.

Kehoe stood up and watched it for a somewhat longer time. Then he rounded on Sabina and began to bawl her out precisely the way he would an exceptionally stupid hired hand, with his hands on his hips and his face getting redder and redder and the veins swelling on the sides of his neck. He damned the McDades, their blood and bedmates. They'd cost him the best horse he ever owned and the best gun in the west with the states of Maryland and Marriage thrown in. He went on for some time, doing only what Ma McDade had seen

him do; someone had killed his horse and someone just naturally had to get chewed out for it.

Sabina, however, had never been chewed out like that in her life; when she was little, she was too little, and after that she was too pretty. She hid behind her hands for the first part; but when it went on, she climbed slowly to her feet, getting whiter and whiter as Kehoe got redder and redder; and when at last he stopped for breath, she hauled off and hit him so hard she spun him half around.

Kehoe sprang on her and pinned her arms with a bear hug. He squeezed until her ribs crackled and her eyes began to roll up, and then released her suddenly. As anyone will, she went limp momentarily, and he seized her head in both his hands and clamped his mouth on hers. She kicked his shin, and he grunted. But still holding her with hands and mouth, he pulled both her knees out from under her with one of his, and bore her down on the ground. He kissed her—no feather-touches and finagling here. She tried to fight him and he wouldn't let her breathe until she quit. She tried to pull away and could not. She tried to talk to him but he wouldn't let her use her own mouth. She tried to lie like a lump then, until he tired of it.

But she couldn't do that either. When she had lain still for a time and his heavy kisses ranged over her face and neck and back to her mouth, she thought the pressure was less at last, so—she got her hands around the back of his head and pulled it down to make the kisses harder again.

And Kehoe, Kehoe couldn't help himself, he had to worry her with it. Maybe Kehoe had been pushed this way and that just too much since he came to Wagon Mound, and he had a mean streak from it which at the moment was shining like lamplight from a corn crib. He reared up on one arm and laughed in her face. He

bent and kissed her, and backed off a little, watching her with his eyes sparkling; and when she lifted her head to him he backed off again and laughed.

"Dan, Dan," she whispered, "are you going to do it, Dan?"

"By God, I ought to tell you no," he growled. "I ought to, it's your turn now; how's it feel, Sabina?"

"Are you going to?" she cried with her eyes closed.

"Talk me out of it."

"No, I won't." Suddenly she bit her hand. He looked at her, startled, tugged at the hand and couldn't budge it. Fearfully he got his thumb back to the hinge of her jaw, like a vet doctoring a cow, and pressed till the jaw opened. Together they looked at the blood on her hand.

"What in time you do a thing like that for?" He got his bandanna and bound it up.

She said, "I wanted you to, Dan. I did. I do. Dan, there's a way I feel about being married. You're a devil, Dan, a damn devil. You couldn't be within a yard of the way I feel about being married. I couldn't hold Dan Kehoe and the way I feel about being married both together. One would have to go, Dan."

"I won't volunteer, Sabina. The other thing's got to go."

"I wouldn't be what I am without it, Dan. I wouldn't even be what you want."

"I can judge about that."

She shook her head. Her hair had enough light now to be red again. "You can if you want now, Dan. Now or anytime. I'd rather you wait, but you don't have to."

He peered close into her face. He had heard no before a-plenty, and a covey of maybe's, and yes, perhaps more often than a man should. There were plenty of no's that nobody meant, and a couple or three that really did mean it. This was the first encounter with a yes that might not mean it, and it tore him apart. He

said hoarsely, "Wait? Wait how long?"

"Not long. Not long. It—couldn't be very long, Dan."

"Get up," he barked. He snatched her to her feet, whipping her up like an end of rope. "Are you playin' with me, Sabina?"

"Not any more, Dan."

She went forward to the buckboard, up the trail to where the horses had halted and begun grazing. She walked with small steps and her head down; and Dan Kehoe strode along behind her watching every inch of her. Once he stopped and roared *"Damn!"* until it echoed mightily back at him from the opposite canyon wall half a mile away. And once he asked himself plaintively, and aloud, "Why should I *give* a damn?"

24

AT THE HIGHEST POINT IN THE TRAIL they stopped without a word and looked back. There was still night at Wagon Mound, though the east rock wall was beginning to burn at the top edge.

Their eyes met. They turned together for the last look. . . .

Two-thirds of the way up the north slope, where it was still dark, there was a sudden blaze of white light which fell and yellowed and reddened and disappeared.

Their eyes met again. It was totally different this time.

Sabina said, "He's come back."

Kehoe said, "Gee-*yap!*" and slapped the horses' backs with the lines.

They bumped slowly along, staring straight ahead. Suddenly Kehoe laughed grimly. Sabina turned to him, wondering.

He glanced at her and saw her waiting. "Just thinkin'. The crazy way things get all neatened up by themselves sometimes." He flipped the lines again though the horses didn't need it. They paid him no mind.

At last Kehoe said, "He'll fire that signal till they ring the bell in the church."

"Yes."

"I never mentioned to you," he said, "that the signal I set up with the sheriff to come in and get McDade was that selfsame church bell."

"Dan, you *didn't!*"

"Sabina, I *did!*" he mimicked. "I did it before I knew anything about the powder flare."

"Stop," she said. She screamed, "*Stop!*"

He reined in.

"He's going to walk right into it," she whispered.

"He sure is."

"Ma'll have to watch it."

"I don't see what else can happen," he said.

After a time she said, "Ma's going to know it was her pulled the rope and rung the bell and brought him in."

Uneasily Kehoe said, "Maybe she won't find it out."

They both looked at that and dropped it and let it get lost, knowing better.

"We could stop him."

"He don't deserve it."

"His ma does."

He looked at the reins in his hands. "Sabina," he said harshly, "we got all the money in the world and our lives ahead of us. We can leave Wagon Mound and the McDades the hell behind us."

She nodded.

They sat still for another moment and then Kehoe clucked to the horses. The buckboard began to move. Kehoe drove until he found a wide enough place, and turned around, and they started back. Sabina said nothing but, "Mind that busted trace-chain."

It took only an hour and a half to reach the last steep down slope. It started with a switch around a tall white boulder all of twelve feet high. As they rounded it somebody said, "All right, hold it."

Kehoe got to his feet as he turned, arms out and ready. When he saw what sat on the rock, the .44 held

so casually on one knee, he sank down on the seat again.

The man on the rock slid down and shambled toward them. "Just when I needed a buckboard, too," he said.

He was filthy dirty and unshaven. His bristles were black and greasy. His leather chaps were tattered at the bottoms and ripped on the sides. His face was blotched and one eye squinted; his teeth were broken and yellow. His eyes were milky blue and hard with an inner brightness.

Kehoe remembered the tintype of the four McDades. This man, under the filth and the scars and the scowl, with extra whisky on him and extra years, looked like all of them, any of them. The one thing sure at first glance was that he was a McDade.

Kehoe said it out loud. "McDade."

The man sighed. "Now I'm goin' to have to kill you. You wasn't s'posed to reco'nize me first off, mister. Nobody does. Get down."

"McDade, if you're headin' for Wagon Mound—"

"Shut up and get down! You too, lady."

They nodded agreement.

"You first." Kehoe stepped forward, meeting those cold eyes. "Turn around." Kehoe did, and felt the grimy paws expertly prod and pat, leaving nothing to chance, familiar with everything from sheath-knives in the boot to a throwing-knife holstered between the shoulder blades. He threw Kehoe's knife away and when he got to the empty shoulder holster said, "Know what, mister? You're a damn fool, that's what you are." He gave Kehoe a shove; and Kehoe walked back to Sabina.

"Come on, Red."

Sabina walked up to him, standing tall, her face unmoving. "Arms out, honey." He took his time. She would not cringe and she would not speak. She stood

like a carving and took it. "Turn around, Red." She turned around. He went on searching. Kehoe watched it and wished to go blind. No one heard him, so he had to watch. He watched her face as much as he could. It was something to see.

Then he saw the hand that slid up the line of her hip.

It had only a thumb and three fingers. The little finger was missing.

McDade pushed her toward Kehoe. She walked to him with her eyes down and turned and stood beside. him. "You're a big strong feller," said McDade approvingly. "I need a hand for a job of work down to the bridge yonder. An', honey, while he's workin' I can search you some more, see if you growed any new guns in the meantime. Then when he's finished his work, you an' me—"

The big brass voice of the bell, and all its echoes, came crashing through the morning. McDade threw up his head and grinned. It was like something rotten popping open. "Purty music. It means we can get right to work."

"It means you're walkin' into a death trap, McDade."

"One thing I forgot to mention, mister. I shoulda—I really shoulda. That is, next time you open your mouth I'm gonna put a bullet in it. Okay? Okay."

"You got to listen," Kehoe gritted. He began to walk forward.

"I tole you. I really did."

"Listen to him!" said Sabina. "For God's sakes, he's trying to save your life, Mr. McDade!"

The man leered at her. "That there 'mister' done it, Red. Okay, muscles, speak your piece. I ain't goin' to believe a word of it, but the lady made me happy, callin' me that."

Kehoe got hold of his fury and then his voice, and

said, "The sheriff's got hold of that business about the bell, McDade. They got lookouts all around and runners ready to bring him pronto, soon as it rings."

And behind his words, impatiently, insistently, the bell rang. This was no time to let his mind wander; but in spite of himself he saw the bell tower, and the rope, and Ma who couldn't find Sabina, whose other charges were crazy with hatred for her, hauling and hauling: *Son! Son! Come—come. . . .*

"You're a liar, muscles. I don' know what you're up to but it's easy to find out. Let's go on down to the bridge and get to work, an' if you're in on any monkeyshines, you go first."

"What about your mother? You want her to see you get filled with lead?"

"She's seen plenty in her time. She won't never see that."

"It'll kill her!" cried Sabina.

"Ain't she dead yet? All right, all right. Powwow over, chief. Be a good Injun and get on that buckboard."

"For the last time, I'm tellin' you: put your foot in Wagon Mound and you're dead!"

"For the last time I'm tellin' you I don't want you to talk, an' now I'm gettin' riled, an' now I'm makin' up my mind I don't need you after all, an' now I'm goin' to blow out your damned brains."

Kehoe and Sabina both recognized the overtones of madness in the twitching face and the gravelly voice, whipping itself up into a childish, deadly rage. McDade began to crab sidewise toward Kehoe in an insane sort of shuffle, while he bent lower and lower, bringing his ugly face almost down to the gun barrel, squinting up at Kehoe's face with it.

Sabina twisted lithely and reached into the buckboard. She flipped out a sack as if it were full of cotton bolls. She raised it high over her head and

brought it down on the steel tire of the rear wheel. The wrappings burst and gold spouted into the morning sun.

She ran with it to McDade and threw it down at his feet. "There's your gold. There it is. It's what you came for; take it and go and leave us be!"

The crazed eyes dropped to the sack and the mound of yellow at its open mouth. He stooped for it, keeping his eyes on Kehoe as he went down and up, and then flicking them down to the dust in his palm. "I be damned," he breathed.

"Here! Here's the rest, all of it, all the McDade gold!" She twitched away the poncho and picked up sack after sack, showing him.

"Oh, you purty. Oh, you li'l sweetie," crooned McDade. It was the gold he was talking to. He scooped up the open sack and ran to the buckboard and threw it in and flung himself up into the seat. He hauled cruelly on the leather so that the off-horse reared and he had to bang him down with the free end. He all but ran the couple down as he hauled the buckboard around and headed it uphill.

"Get ready to drop," snapped Kehoe to the girl, "but don't start till you see him squeeze that trigger." He watched McDade gather all the lines in his left hand to free the gun. "Watch 'im! Watch 'im—"

A rifle bullet sang off the boulder. McDade looked stupidly at it and then down trail. He saw three horsemen pounding up the hill toward them.

He cursed and snapped a shot at them, though they were still out of range, stood up and flogged the horses. They shoved their heads out and their eyes went wild, and they skittered and skidded and were off up the trail. The buckboard disappeared around the boulder and Dan and Sabina ran to it to look around. When they got there the riders were out of sight behind them

and the buckboard was out of sight behind another jog in the trail, and they were alone in the quiet with each other.

Kehoe said, "You paid a hell of a price for a Kehoe."

"I don't mind," she whispered, stepping close to him.

He kept his eyes on the up-trail. "I do. Half of it was Kehoe money."

"Dan!"

The rocks around them were no harder than Kehoe's face. He watched the buckboard burst into view on a long in-curve near the crest. McDade was still standing, still whipping.

Kehoe dived for cover and dragged the redhead with him as the three horsemen burst around the rock behind them. It was Tom Larrabee and the Indian boy and a deputy. Kehoe didn't call; he just pointed. The posse didn't pause. They all saw the buckboard at once, and two .44's and a carbine let loose like one shot.

Up near the crest, McDade took the last of the in-curves violently sideswiping the rock wall once, and once again. Then he drove for the top. They couldn't see the posse now, but they heard the guns.

McDade glanced back and shook his fist, and then whipped the horses for all he was worth. He drove up the last short straight stretch, striving for the crest and its turn around the mountain shoulder and some measure of cover. Again the guns roared. The sound of McDade's yipping drifted back through the echoing thunder of the guns, and then McDade was at the top, the team leaning hard left, cutting around the turn and out of sight.

The buckboard didn't.

"The trace," Sabina murmured. "The busted trace."

For a long moment—for all the rest of their lives really, because that's the way they carried it—the buck-

board hung in the sky. Its wheels spun and the tiny silhouette of McDade stood in front. He seemed to be whipping yet, flogging the air ahead of him as if he couldn't believe what was happening. Then the wagon tongue tipped down, and the buckboard tipped down, and the driver left the vehicle and a cloud of black specks separated from it, too. They floated down, so slowly, so small, and seemed to touch the cliff face so gently; but everything broke at the touch, yellow puffs in the sun whisked away in the morning wind; wheels, boards, the whiffletree and the tongue, and the distant doll, all broken and whirling.

There was still another eight hundred feet to go when it all passed out of their sight.

"Who was it? Who was it? Dan, we never found out!"

"Does it matter at all?" he asked in this new harsh voice. "A widow's a widow whatever."

"Dan, oh Dan, darling, what is it? Did the gold mean that much after all?"

"It ain't that. It's just—" He turned and looked at her as if he had never seen her before. "I'm sick to death of the both of us."

After that she did not try to speak to him. They waited silently for the posse and the limping, winded buckboard team.

25

"HOWDY, KEHOE."

Kehoe nodded.

The sheriff threw a leg around his pommel, and began making a smoke. "What you goin' to do with all your money?"

"What money is that?"

"Five thousand for McDade dead."

"It ain't mine. It was you spooked him, not me."

"All the same, it's yours to claim."

"I want no part of it. Build yourself a school. Buy another sheriff. Stick it up your nostril."

"You're sort of cheerful today, ain't you?"

"Suit you?"

Larrabee shrugged. "All the same to me, Kehoe. You goin' back to Wagon Mound?"

Kehoe found himself looking into Sabina's eyes, and they pleaded with him. To the sheriff he said, "I reckon."

"Tell Ma McDade I'll do my best to pick up what's left an' bring it in. She'll want it. She won't recognize it, but she'll want it."

"All right."

"Tell her I got no more business in Wagon Mound."

Kehoe squinted up at him and saw he meant it, and saw what he meant. He came off his grouch enough to say, "I'll be mighty glad to be the one tells her that."

"Figured you would be. Come on, boys." They can-

tered away.

"I never knew Tom Larrabee to take that much lip from anyone," Sabina marveled.

"He knows it ain't him I'm mad at. That's a good man, that Larrabee."

They led the horses back rather than ride them. They were a mess. On the way Kehoe picked up his saddle, lying where Sabina had thrown it when she pulled the gun. They passed another place on the trail, too, that they recognized, but said nothing. Kehoe was sunk in his mood, whatever it was, and Sabina was hurt and frightened and finally as angry as he seemed to be.

They put the horses in the carriage house and went around to the porch.

"You go," said Sabina. "She'll kill me."

"You come on in," growled Kehoe. "I want you to see a real liar at work. It's in a good cause so all the stops are out."

They found her alone in the lobby. It was as if she was waiting for them; more, as if she knew exactly what they would say. Kehoe felt he could have passed the word just by nodding his head once.

"They got him, Miz McDade," he said instead.

She looked down into her lap. Her Bible was in it. She tightened her fingers around it. "He drove the buckboard over the cliff yonder. The gold was in it."

"Thank God," said the old woman.

"He must've slipped in here in the rain last night and got the buckboard," said Kehoe. "Then he got Sabina out of the tower and met up with me. He—"

"Don't tell me about it. Don't ever tell me about it," said Ma McDade. She got slowly up out of the chair. "But— Who was it, Dan?"

"The one with the little finger missing, ma'am."

"Ah, Boone, the fool." Suddenly she turned to Sa-

bina and held her close. "I'm sorry, Sabina, you poor thing."

And over the old lady's head, Sabina stared and stared at Kehoe's craggy face.

After a while Ma pulled herself together and grinned crookedly at them and went out on the porch to rock and look at the mountain.

"You knew it was him. You knew soon's you saw him!" Sabina whispered.

"I guess you never heard the story about the finger."

"I never did. Oh, Dan— What you must think of me!"

"I won't bother tellin' you."

"You see—you and your plugged dollar from the saloon—you aren't the only one crazy enough to take a big chance on big stakes," she said. "Yes, it's true—I never saw a one of the four McDades before today." She shuddered.

Kehoe was trying to drop the whole thing but he couldn't. "You and your ideas about bein' married an' how you ought to act!"

She colored up. "The only idea I have about that is that I don't want to give in to a man until I'm married to him. That's all I meant, that's all I ever meant. I lied to you for a while about Boone, but I stopped lying, and you wouldn't *hear* me!"

"You could have told me."

"No, Dan. Ma and I, we've talked and talked about you. You don't know. The one thing we were sure of is that you just have to pick up and put down, do a job and move on. I didn't want to be just another station-stop in your life."

Slowly Dan began to smile. Suddenly he grabbed her wrist and ran her out on the porch.

"Miz McDade, I got something to tell you."

She looked up bleakly.

"Well, it's like a confession. You see, Sabina here, she's goin' to have a baby."

There were two sharp gasps, and then Ma McDade found a grin to match Kehoe's. "You couple of scamps! Ah, well, that Matt of mine, he weighed eleven pounds when he was born and he was a six-months child." She chuckled, sobered.

"So what I wanted to ask you, ma'am, you know I like to finish up a job 'an' move on; would it be all right with you if I stayed here just until we got that boy raised?"

"Ah, *Dan—*"

"Then when somebody asks me what I am, I can say right out, 'Chicken rancher.' "

Which is how the story of Wagon Mound became the legend of Wagon Mound. Dan Kehoe got pretty respectable, and the more respectable he got, the more the story became a legend.

Birdie took orders to become an Anglican nun. She couldn't make it, but she gave it an honest try, and she wound up marrying a baldheaded man in San Diego who carried a wallet full of pictures of her to show everybody, and built her a little house of their own by the harbor.

Oralie disappeared some place in the logging country. They heard once that she was running a honky-tonk, but they never could check on it.

Ruby went back to Mexico, married a hidalgo, had eleven children and wound up weighing two hundred and three pounds, all happy.

After the marriage Dan turned his white lie about a baby into the gospel truth. It wasn't a boy, after all. It was twin girls for Sabina. They made it next time around.

THEY CALLED HIM KING

Dan Kehoe was a lot of man. They said he'd stake his mother's wedding ring on the turn of a card. They said he killed a man in Texas and then preached at the funeral. King Dan—a top hand with a gun, or a woman.

And now, in Wagon Mound, he'd have to back up the legend with action . . . or somebody else would be preaching at a funeral —his.

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