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TOM WEST

DESPERADO DOUBLECROSS

INVITATION TO A BUSHWHACKING



• 2

• 1

The sheriff jerked his gun, leveled it. With his free hand, he slipped the buckle of Mackay's gun-belt, swung the belt off and flung it to the deputy. "Check his iron!" he directed.

Glumly the chunky rider watched as the heavy-shouldered deputy opened the loading gate, swung the cylinder out, eyed the loads. "One spent shell!" he reported.

"So you blasted Jordan," mused the sheriff.

"Quit hurrahin' me!" snapped the prisoner.

"You're slick, Mackay," the sheriff's voice grated like a rusty batwing. "I catch you with your pants down, the loot in your possession and you spin a yarn that would make a jury laugh out loud. This is how I figure things—Jordan hired you to ride herd on his niece, seeing she was packing a fortune in diamonds. You tip off your pards. They stage a holdup. The five of you figure to meet in Nogales for the divvy. You toll Jordan down there, 'cross your pards and grab the loot. Then you beef Jordan, make a getaway with the diamonds—and his dinero. The evidence is right there." He nodded at the pouch and currency on the bureau.

Mackay stood open-mouthed, fatigue forgotten, absorbing the lawman's flat-voiced accusation. "You're crazy as a coot!" he protested. . . .

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TOM WEST

AN ACE BOOK

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ONE

BILL MACKAY felt sorrier than a sick calf. His head could not have weighed heavier if it had been filled with molten lead; his mouth felt as though he had been chewing cinders and the Sahara had nothing on the thirst that possessed him. Worse, he was flat broke.

Slumped gloomily against one of the square uprights that supported the sagging wooden canopy of "The Outpost" saloon, he sadly decided that he had one hell of a hangover, and that poker and bourbon never did mix.

Urged by a raging thirst, he began to carefully explore his pockets, nursing a forlorn hope that he might still possess something that could be traded for liquid refreshment. His lips quirked in a happy smile as his questing fingers encountered the metal of a beer check. Without delay, he pushed through the batwings, exchanged the brass slug for a foaming mug of beer, sank onto a chair by the flyspecked window and gratefully imbibed.

It was hard to realize that he had sashayed into Tucson not twenty-four hours before, riding high, wide and handsome. His pockets had jingled with the proceeds of a six-week job siding Hank O'Mally in the O'Mally-Cotero cattle war—at gunhand's pay—and the world was his oyster.

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Every dollar of that dinero had flowed across the green baize in an all-night poker session, well lubricated by a generous supply of snake poison. Pony and saddle had followed. Now he was busted lower than a snake's belly.

Sorrowfully, he sipped the bitter beer and stared through the murky window into the sun-glare of Meyer Street.

Mackay was young, still in his early twenties; not tall, but chunky, hard-muscled. His sun-blackened features were too square to be handsome, and rendered the squarer by a pugnacious jaw—added to which, his eyes, the hue of a blued gun barrel, held a wary alertness that marked those who lived by gunspeed. But the corners of his wide mouth were usually creased by a habitual devil-may-care grin which, coupled with a thick mat of blond hair with a tendency to curl, usually inspired an inclination on the part of members of the fair sex to mother him. Memory of his own mother was dim—both parents had been butchered in a Comanche raid when he was knee-high. If his holster hadn't been thonged down and flared to facilitate a quick draw, he might have passed for a puncher.

Tucson, not a generation back located south of the border, still bore the impress of Mother Mexico—it was almost wholly an adobe town, with three-fourths of its population dark-skinned. And three-fourths of the balance were of dubious character. According to one chronicler, the town was "a hotbed of speculators, gamblers, horse-thieves and murderers—a paradise of devils." Maybe the writer was prejudiced, could be he had been cleaned out by an adroit tinhorn, or too many snorts of snakehead whisky had soured him, but Tucson

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in the seventies was no ladies' finishing school and a gunbelt was an essential article of attire.

Through ever-hovering dust, the solitary drinker glumly eyed lumbering freight wagons, sombreroed riders, straw-hatted Mexicans, red-shirted teamsters—the never-ending parade that drifted up and down the sandy stretch of street. It was still early in the day and business was slack in The Outpost. Nothing much would be stirring before sundown. The swamper, a ragged derelict, tiredly swept the floor. Two cowpokes rested spurred boots on the brass rail at one end of the bar. At the other a heavy-shouldered man who might have been a cattle buyer toyed with a shot of bourbon. Hidden behind a newspaper at a side table, a hatchet-faced man in somber black stretched out a drink. Mackay mentally tagged him gambler. No one seemed in a hurry—but then no one ever hurried in Tucson, particularly during the torrid days of summer.

On one side of the saloon, whose low ceiling was supported by massive vigas, a wide, arched doorway gave admittance to another room, spacious and bare of furnishings except for a scratched piano, set on a low platform at the far end. In the rear of the room gaped an open doorway. Beyond this lay a narrow passage, doors opening on either side—cribs of the "girls," those gaudy flowers who unfurled their petals at sundown, bloomed lavishly until sunup, then discreetly faded away before the harsh light of day shriveled their tinselled charm.

Gloomily surveying the street, Mackay didn't notice a girl who stepped through the archway. At this early hour she wore a belted wrapper which failed to wholly conceal the curves of a shapely form. Raven-black, a thick mane of hair streamed down her back, hair as shining and smoothly brushed as a pet pony's tail. Her

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face was as smooth as velvet, and high-boned; her features hinted at Spanish blood, an impression that was heightened by the grace of her carriage. But her beauty lay in the lustrous challenge of her dark eyes and the beguiling softness of her lips. Not that Dolores, singer and hostess of The Outpost, was a monument to forbearance. Given provocation, her husky accents could sharpen to a knife-like edge and her languishing eyes harden into glittering chips of jet. She had sharp claws, too, as overpossessive patrons occasionally discovered to their sorrow. But from the viewpoint of "Ace" McClusky, shrewd-eyed proprietor of the saloon, her sterling quality was a capacity to handle men. Dolores could soothe a disgruntled gambler, quiet a bunch of rambunctious punchers, pacify a boisterous drunk, as easily as she could captivate them with ballads reminiscent of home and mother, rendered in a husky contralto. At that, she was an anomaly on Meyer Street inasmuch as she persisted in sleeping alone. Despite this unusual trait, however, Dolores was the most popular entertainer on the street, eyed enviously by the dozen or more saloon keepers in the wild frontier town. Ace's abiding fear was that she'd marry and quit. Hadn't she received, and rejected, a dozen proposals of marriage, including his own?

Now, with features innocent of powder and paint, she looked as demure as a convent girl.

Sauntering past the bar, she smiled at the punchers and paused when they insisted on buying her a drink. The apron reached down a bottle labeled "Kentucky Dew," set on a back shelf, and poured a glass brimful. While the two punchers watched with awe, she half-emptied the glass at a gulp. With a casual "goodbye" wave, the glass in one hand, she drifted across the floor

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to the table where Bill Mackay scowled at the street. Every woman has a weakness; Mackay was hers.

His head came around when the girl scraped up a chair and dropped down on the opposite side of the table. He eyed the half-empty glass of amber fluid with the envy of a man who still yearns for a hair of the dog that bit him.

"Bourbon!" he exclaimed, and ran his tongue over dry lips.

"Cold tea, if you must know," she threw back. "Well, Bill, you sure lost your tail feathers last night."

Mackay merely grunted and built a cigarette, tossed the makin's to the girl. She fashioned a smoke with skilled fingers. He jerked a stinker from beneath his hat-band, scratched and applied light to both cubes of tobacco.

"I just don't understand you," irritation etched Dolores' tone. "You've got savvy and a good rep—and less sense than a Missouri mule. You risk your life, make a stake, and what do you do with it? Throw it to the tin horns! What makes you think you can play poker when you're stinking drunk?"

"Button up!" he growled.

"I will not!" she snapped. "Someone has to try and ram some sense into your thick head. Don't you ever think ahead? Right now, men are making fortunes in this town. Look at Hans Hansen! A year back he didn't have a dollar, now he's on easy street, freighting to the forts. You could do better, and I know men who would stake you."

"To hell with Hansen!"

"I like Hans," she replied composedly and eyed a bracelet that circled her left wrist. It was of silver and

exquisitely chased. After sundown, when she was in full plumage, a dozen such would jingle beside it.

"So he gave you that geegawl?"

Dolores lifted her shoulders. "Why not? He admires me."

Mackay snorted. "A lousy freighter! You sure ain't finicky. Wal, I buck at legging beside a string of stinking mules."

"You'd show a heap more sense if you were less finicky," she bit back, exasperation lacing her tone. "What future is there hiring out your gun to any addle-headed cowman who can afford the price, then dumping the whole kit-and-caboodle onto a poker table? You know how you'll end up?" She nodded in the direction of the eroded wreck of a man who was swamping out. Mockery tinged her accents. "Meet Bill Mackay twenty years from now!"

From anyone else, the taunt would have raised Mackay's hackles, but he merely gazed glumly at the swamper. Dolores was right, he thought; if a bullet didn't take him he'd likely end up cleaning spittoons for a drink and a bite to eat. Right now, what had he got to show for the years he'd faced hot lead? Not a dollar, not a horse, not even a saddle.

"Gunfighting's my trade," he protested doggedly.

"Even a dumb steer could pick a better one," she derided. "When are you going to prove you have something under your hat besides hair?"

"You shoulda been a preacher."

"Preaching's sure wasted on you," she told him tartly. "I don't know why I waste my time trying to promote a good-for-nothing tumbleweed with no more savvy than a long-eared jackass."

"You kin quit!" he responded curtly.

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She sat eyeing him silently, then inquired with resignation, "I suppose now that you're broke you'll drift out of town again?"

"Nope," he admitted ruefully. "I'm stuck like a fly in syrup. Hocked my saddlehorse to Larsen, the liveryman, last night for twenty-five smackers, which melted quicker'n a snowball in hell." With a grin, he added, "From now on I eat grass and drink from the horse trough."

Quick concern showed in the girl's dark eyes. "Now listen, Bill," her voice deepened with earnestness, "you eat at the Imperial Cafe and have the Chink stick it on my tab."

"Like hell I will!"

"Well," she countered, with restrained patience, "if you won't eat on me perhaps you'll accept a lead to a job."

"What kind of a job?" he questioned cautiously.

"See that cattle buyer at the bar?" She indicated the big man, drinking alone. "That's Walt Jordan. He just brought his niece to town. She's taking the Butterfield stage back to St. Louis. Baldy, the barkeep, claims Jordan's hunting a good man to escort the girl."

"Forget it!" he snorted. "I'm no nursemaid."

Her dark eyes blazed. "No," she snapped, "you're just a stubborn jughead. At least you wouldn't be called upon to dirty your lily-white hands with a filthy bull-whip. Oh, why do I waste time on you?" With that, she jerked to her feet and stalked away.

Mackay's glance dwelt on the half-empty glass she had left behind with the longing with which a parched traveler might eye a crystal spring. He reached, took a tentative sip. His square features creased with disgust. *It was cold tea.*

TWO

MACKAY WATCHED the girl, graceful even in the voluminous wrapper, cross the saloon. Common sense told him to take any job that would raise enough to get his pony out of hock. He needed that pony and Larsen was stubborn enough to sell the dun, saddle included, if he didn't raise twenty-five dollars pronto. Yet, thought of acting as nursemaid to some schoolgirl turned his stomach. That was even worse than mule-skinning. Nope, he'd poke around until he located a man-size job. Moodily, he rolled another smoke.

He saw Dolores pause by the cattle buyer. The big man bought her a drink and the apron poured again from the bottle of Kentucky Dew. When she pulled away and glanced in his direction, it seemed to Mackay that her lips were twisted with amusement—or it may have been triumph.

The cattle buyer swung around and his glance found Mackay. Packing a bottle of bourbon and a glass, he began to thread between small tables that dotted the floor.

With no cordiality, Mackay eyed the stranger's approach. The cattle buyer was garbed in a black broadcloth coat, a gunbelt buckled beneath it, and he literally oozed prosperity. A silk cravat secured the neck of his white linen shirt and a massive gold watch chain was looped across his flowered vest. Dark pants were stuffed into the tops of handmade high boots that Mackay knew had set him back fifty dollars. Iron-gray, his

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hair curled beneath a stiff-brimmed Stetson that yelled quality. But the stranger's features drew Mackay's eye. In his trade he was accustomed to weighing men and he decided that Jordan would be a bad hombre to cross. The cattle buyer's craggy features held little more expression than a chunk of granite. There was a sardonic twist to his thin lips and his pale eyes were as hard as twin bullets. Tougher than a basket of snakes, reflected Mackay.

The other dropped heavily onto the chair Dolores had vacated. "The moniker's Jordan, Walt Jordan," he volunteered. He set the bottle of bourbon on the stained table top and invited briskly, "Drink up!"

"It'll be a pleasure!" drawled Mackay, and poured into his empty beer mug.

"You pack that iron for ornament?" inquired Jordan, when Mackay set the mug down.

"There's one sure way to find out," retorted the chunky rider coolly.

Jordan digested this. "The apron gives you a good name," he mused, "and the skirt backs his hand. You open to a deal?"

"Depends on the deal."

"Wal, I'm in a tight. My brother, Jack Jordan, just bucked out. He ran cattle north of Sulphur Valley, orphaned this gal, my niece. Carol's dead set on going East, figures to ride the St. Louis stage that goes through tomorrow. I need a gent to mosey along and ride herd on the gal."

"Who's sitting on your shirt tail?" inquired Mackay blandly.

"I'm tied up, in a deal. The job's worth \$100 and a round trip ticket."

From habit, Mackay made another smoke, consider-

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ing this. But for the fact that he was broke and set afoot, he would have laughed in the stranger's face. True, it was a cinch of a job—for a woman. Nothing to do but laze on the cushions of a stage and endure the company of some pigtailed schoolgirl. But Bill Mackay hadn't sunk to that—yet. Then he thought of the dinero. Easy money! With a hundred smackers he could get his dun out of hock and eat until the next job turned up.

"Wal?" inquired Jordan sharply. It was apparent that patience was not his long suit.

"You pay in advance?"

"Nopel!" barked the big man. "Carol divvies up when she leaves the stage at St. Louis."

Mackay yawned. "Go hire a school ma'am!"

Jordan slowly puffed his cigar, frosty eyes probing. Abruptly, he dug into a pants pocket, brought out a thick roll of greenbacks. Without speaking, he peeled off five twenties, pushed them across the table.

Mentally debating, Mackay eyed the currency. All he had to do, he reflected, was reach and his financial problem would be solved. True, it meant a monotonous trip by stage, herding some school kid who'd never get through firing fool questions. But he hated to lose that dun, even more a sixty-dollar saddle. Cogitating, he glanced beyond Jordan and awoke to the fact that the hatchet-faced man—reflected in the backbar mirror—was regarding them intently. A bulge below the left armpit of his well-fitting coat hinted at a hideaway.

Jordan's harsh accents claimed his attention, "You through chewing it over?"

"Yep!" he told the other, and gathered up the greenbacks. He sure was in no shape to be choosy, he thought whimsically.

"Stage pulls out of the Ornadorff at sunup," rasped

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Jordan. "Be there!" Stark emphasis on the last two words intimated that unpleasantness might follow if he failed to show.

"At sunup!" agreed Mackay impassively. With a quirk of the lips, he added, "I ain't much of a hand with diapers."

For a moment, perplexity was mirrored in the cattle buyer's hard eyes, then his thin lips twisted into the parody of a smile. "Maybe I should pass that on to Carol," he chuckled, and pushed back his chair.

Mackay sat eyeing his new employer's broad back as Jordan strode toward the batwings. Just as soon as he disappeared from view, the hatchet-faced man slid out of his chair, also heading for the street. It almost seemed, thought Mackay, that the hombre was dogging Jordan. Well, it was none of his business.

He poured another drink from the bottle the cattle buyer had left, was raising it to his lips when the sharp, spiteful bark of a derringer hit his ears. The shot had come from the street outside. Through the window he glimpsed men scattering like startled quail, dropping down behind water barrels, dodging into store entrances, darting behind passing wagons. Again the unseen gun blared. Falling glass tinkled. At a run, Mackay hit for the batwings, checked outside and backed against the adobe front of the saloon, glance darting around as he sought the source of the gunfire.

Beyond the mouth of an alley that lay beside the saloon, Jordan slumped against the hitchrail, clutching the sleeve of his gunarm with his left hand. Blood streamed scarlet over his right wrist and pattered down, blotching the plankwalk. Men were beginning to bunch around him, yammering. Beyond, the window of a barber shop was shattered. The white-aproned proprietor,

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razor in hand, stood amid a litter of glass, gazing wrathily up and down street.

A freight wagon had ground to a stop outside the saloon and a bearded muleskinner was emerging cautiously from behind it. Mackay eased under the rail and braced him. "Who's loosing lead?" inquired the rider.

"Damned if I know," admitted the muleskinner. "The bustard took two potshots and ducked down the alley."

"Gambler?" queried Mackay. "Black suit, waxed mustache, thin features?"

"Could be," agreed the other dubiously. "The hombre moved too fast for a good look-see."

Mackay headed for Jordan. The barber was slitting the cattleman's blood-soaked coat sleeve with the razor. A crimson bullet gouge showed, furrowing the fleshy part of the forearm. The barber began wrapping a towel around the arm, while Jordan stood unblinking.

"Who plugged yuh?" questioned Mackay.

"A lousy bushwhacker."

"You lamp the hombre?"

"Maybe," returned Jordan shortly.

"Figure to take it up with the sheriff?"

The big man smiled with bleak humor. "Guess I'll handle this personal."

"You crave I should stick around?" persisted Mackay.

"Nope," returned the cattle buyer offhand, "I skin my own skunks."

Mackay shrugged and turned away. It was plain that Jordan craved no outsider horning into what was likely a private feud.

Heading for Larsen's Livery Barn & Wagon Lot to return the borrowed twenty-five dollars and make arrangements for stabling the dun, Mackay considered the shooting. Maybe, he reflected, the presence of the hom-

bre who had gouged Jordan's gun arm was the reason the cattle buyer was anxious to hire an armed escort for his niece. Could be this mysterious enemy was gunning for her, too. And he'd swear it was the hatchet-faced gambler who had been hiding behind the newspaper in the saloon.

After settling with the Swede, he dropped into the sprawling Horwitz Mercantile Store up street, bought two packages of .45 shells and stocked up on Bull Durham.

Standing in the store, surrounded by bolts of calico and gingham stacked on shelves; brooms, rakes and shovels heaped in corners; patent medicines, jewelry, knives, pipes displayed in glass cases, he remembered the silver bracelet that had adorned Dolores' wrist. Stiff-necked, stolid Hans Hansen irked him and the fact that Dolores apparently regarded the Dutchman with favor deepened his annoyance. If Hans could give the girl a bracelet, he reflected, so could he—and it would be a heap bigger and gaudier than the slim circle of silver the Dutchman had picked out. Fingering his slimming roll of greenbacks, he eased up to a showcase.

Meyer Street by day was as different from Meyer Street at night as boothill from a bullfight. Stars sprinkled the darkened heavens when Mackay, a small, wrapped package bulging a hip pocket, elbowed along a crowded plankwalk. Around him uproarious life pulsed. Lights blazed from saloons and gambling houses, around which men eddied and surged like swarming bees; an unceasing torrent of sound roared into his ears—the hollow drumming of boots on creaking plankwalks; the hoarse yelling of drunks; the mechanical croaking of barkers; the blare of a dance band; the

boom of a sixgun. Grayed forms of riders floated like apparitions through ever-drifting dust fog. Men flowed past like jetsam on a restless tide.

The interior of The Outpost was a jam of bronzed punchers, bearded teamsters, horny-handed miners, blue-clad troopers. Sizzling oaths punctuated the drone of their talk and the shrill laughter of hard-eyed harridans—breasts bulging beneath shoddy silk and skirts high on plump legs—knifed through it.

Jostled by the throng, Mackay stood inside the bat-wings, head swiveling as he hunted sight of Dolores. His gaze shifted to the arched entrance to the dance floor. Through it he eyed a crowded motley of men and their rouged partners, hopping boisterously to the brisk beat of a polka. But there was no sign of the raven-haired hostess.

He fingered the package through the cloth of his pants with faint annoyance. The tinkling notes of the piano cut off. His heart skipped a beat when he focused on Dolores standing on the wooden platform, a very different Dolores from the wrapped girl, hair streaming loose, who had angrily broken away from him that morning. A cerise silk dress clung, skintight, to her curves. Her mass of raven hair was pyramided high and secured by combs glittering with brilliants. Her rounded arms and smooth shoulders were bare, and her skirt, ankle long, was slitted high at the sides, to reveal silken thighs.

With an appealing gesture she raised both arms for silence and the uproar that greeted her appearance gradually subsided. The pianist, a long-haired youth with the stamp of T.B. upon his shrunken features, struck a chord. Her throaty contralto filled the saloon:

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"Oh give me a home where the buffalo roam
Where the deer and the antelope play;
Where seldom is heard a discouraging word
And the sky is not cloudy all day."

When the song ended a yelling rush of patrons inundated the platform. Hoisting the singer shoulder-high, they carried her to the bar. Perched upon it, the center of a swirl of admirers, she sipped from a glass of Kentucky Dew.

Bottling his frustration, Mackay saw there was little chance of a quiet word with Dolores that night, nor would there be 'til sunup—and he was due to pull out at dawn.

Wedging through men lined three-deep at the bar, he gained the attention of Baldy. With two other sweating barkeeps, the baldheaded apron slid drinks unceasingly across the wet mahogany.

"For Dolores, from me!" yelled Mackay, to make himself heard, and tossed the package. Baldy caught it, nodded and dropped it beneath the bar.

Mackay shouldered outside, into the roar of Meyer Street.

THREE

IN THE COLD gray light of dawn Meyer Street looked as dead and desolate as a decaying corpse. The throngs of hilarious celebrants had vanished; stores were shuttered; saloons darkened. Mackay passed a retching drunk, clinging to a hitchrail; another, bleary-eyed, tot-

tered out of an alley. A cluster of "girls" in shabby finery, their drawn faces smeared with rouge, huddled in a doorway, gossiping. Sight of a wasted scarecrow, listlessly cleaning spittoons, brought recollection of Dolores' angry prophecy and a chill chased down the chunky rider's spine.

He felt better when he'd washed down a stack of flapjacks with two mugs of scalding coffee in The Imperial Cafe. Canvas warbag dangling from one hand, he headed for the Ornadorff Hotel.

In the walled courtyard that fronted the square adobe hostelry, a small clump of men, carpetbags and suitcases heaped around them, awaited the eastbound stage with the dejected mien of early risers who would have preferred to remain abed.

Mackay dumped his slicker and warbag on the hotel steps and made a cigarette, looking over his fellow travelers. One was a youthful army lieutenant, buried in a greatcoat. Two punchers, with sacked saddles, chewed quirlies; a grizzled cowman stood as impassive as a cigar-store Indian; a couple of drummers were enveloped in dust wrappers. Mackay tautened when his glance fell on the seventh—it was the hatchet-faced hombre he had last seen leaving The Outpost in the wake of Jordan.

The waiting men stirred to life when the Concord rolled into the courtyard, square oil lamps still burning, its yellow and scarlet body, thick with dust, swaying on leather springs.

With a rattle of harness, the team came to a stop. The whiskered driver set the foot brake. Boots shuffled as men began piling inside. A colored porter loosened the apron that covered the rear and began dumping baggage into the boot.

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Mackay noticed the absence of a shotgun guard. A good sign. It meant that there was no Wells Fargo strong box aboard, and lessened chance of a holdup. Then he realized that although the stage was loading, he neither had a ticket nor was there any sign of the schoolgirl he was hired to escort. Maybe the girl had taken sick, he thought, or the winged cattle buyer had changed his plans. He'd be in a real bind if the trip was called off; that hundred dollars was mostly spent.

The glass-paneled door behind him flung open and Jordan charged through, a suitcase hanging from each hand. At a more sedate pace, a blonde followed—a golden girl. Mackay stood staring at her, jaw slack with surprise. If anything, she was older than himself, a blue-eyed blonde with features as flawless as those of a china doll and with the same brittle beauty. Beneath a perky bonnet, thick coils of hair, the hue of pale gold, were pinned atop an imperiously poised head. She seemed tall, until he realized that the illusion was due to her slim figure and upright carriage. She wore a gray traveling dress, with a tight bodice that buttoned high in the neck. The dress clung tightly to her hips and its folds billowed below, to form almost a bustle.

Jordan hurried over to the boot, where the porter was stowing the last of the bags, but the girl, unperturbed, remained on the steps, an embroidered handbag looped over one wrist, coolly eyeing the proceedings, apparently indifferent as to whether the stage pulled out or remained.

Mackay saw the driver ease off the foot brake and gather up the lines. "Hey!" he shouted. "Hold it!"

Jordan came up at a run, thrust a strip ticket into Mackay's hand and grabbed the blonde's arm. "For

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gosh sakes, Carol," he ejaculated, "what's holding you? Git aboard!"

He hustled her down the steps. Mackay tagged behind, still in a state of bewilderment.

With a flash of white ruffled petticoat and a glimpse of a shapely calf, which stirred a sudden wakefulness among the passengers, the girl set a dainty shoe on the step plate. Hands reached eagerly to help her into the coach.

To the right and left, the brown, leather-cushioned front and rear seats already held their complement of three passengers apiece. One puncher occupied the movable center seat—the most uncomfortable—set between them. With the addition of himself and the girl, Mackay saw that the stage would be jam-packed.

In the doorway, the blonde paused, gazing hesitantly at the undesirable center seat. Her glance dropped to the second puncher, comfortably ensconced on the front seat, beside the window. Her lips curved in an appealing, and somehow helpless, smile.

The puncher fumbled to his feet. "Thank you!" she murmured and sank onto the seat. The waddy slid along to sit beside his pard. Mackay dropped down on the last remaining seat. The door slammed, hooves clattered, the Concord swayed and began to roll.

Wedged between a puncher and the door, Mackay strove to clarify his thoughts. What in thunder had planted the idea in his mind that Jordan's niece was a schoolgirl, he wondered. He sure hoped the cattle buyer hadn't passed his remark about diapers. One thing was sure—the blonde didn't need any nursemaid.

Right now she seemed oblivious to his presence. Facing him, knees bumping his with every jolt of the stage, she gazed out of the window, features composed, utter-

ly withdrawn. Next to her, a portly drummer brought out a cigar, bit off the tip and lit up. Its rank aroma began to permeate the crowded coach. The girl coughed, extracted a tiny square of lace from her handbag and held it to her nostrils.

Mackay rammed the wedge heel of the riding boot on his left foot down onto the toe of one of the drummer's soft button shoes. The victim's thick lips parted with an agonized "Ouch!" The cigar spilled to the door. Mackay casually retrieved it and pitched it through the open window. The drummer's indignant gaze met his belligerent challenge and the corpulent man bit back expostulation.

The girl's gratified smile emboldened Mackay to speak. "Ma'am," he said, low-voiced, "guess you know why I'm here."

Her blue eyes dwelt upon him impersonally. "Uncle worries too much," she replied, with cool composure, and resumed her survey of the landscape.

The last decaying adobe on the fringe of town had died in the distance and the stage rumbled across the flat bed of the valley, specked with lordly saguaro and patched with gray-green mesquite. Northward, the Santa Catalinas hovered above the horizon, wreathed in fleecy cloud; to the south the Santa Ritas made a stark silhouette against the blue bowl of the sky.

As the sun arced higher and heat built up, the crowded passengers wilted in gritty discomfort. If they dropped the canvas flaps over the open windows, they suffocated; with the windows uncovered, choking dust churned in.

The terrain began to break up. Around rose a cluster of hills, gray, grim and arid, split and sundered by erosion. The stage began to bump and jerk. The pace

slowed. Mackay knew that the team was breasting a grade.

Suddenly, the vehicle jerked to a stop.

The off door swung open and a swarthy-featured rider with close-set bitter eyes stood in the doorway, leveled sixgun latched in his right hand. Hardcase was stamped all over him.

Mackay dabbed for his own gun, checked when a harsh voice, almost in his ear, barked "Freezel!" His head swiveled and he stared into the black muzzle of another gun, held by a blocky, saddle-worn fellow standing outside.

"All out, and no shenanigans!" yelled the bitter-eyed outlaw.

In stupefied silence, the passengers began to drain out. Stage holdups were not infrequent, but not this close to Tucson and seldom when no Wells Fargo box reposed behind a shotgun guard's boots.

Mackay was last to leave the coach. He couldn't but admire the girl's composure. Some women would have been screaming in hysterics, but the only indication she gave of strain was the tight set of her lips.

The passengers lined up in the blazing sunglare beside the stage, a shuffling, uneasy row. At one end of the line, Mackay figured the chance of a breakaway and dismissed it as nonexistent. Cradling a Winchester, one bandit watched the driver, hunched disconsolately on the box. A second outlaw, the bitter-eyed man, rode herd on the passengers, his jaw working on a chew, gunarm hanging loose, the fist wrapped around the butt of a long-barreled Colt. Two more bandits were busily throwing luggage out of the boot.

These were no novices at the stick-up game, reflected Mackay.

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Then, in a flash, death struck.

The bitter-eyed bandit whirled into action. Flame tipped the muzzle of his .45. Sound of the explosion reverberating in his ears, Mackay saw the young shavetail, down the row of passengers, pitch forward. With a choked cry he fell limp upon his face. A stubby derringer slipped from his slackened fingers and lay half-buried in sandy dust. The lieutenant was a brave man, but no one but a jughead would try and sneak a draw on these lobos, considered Mackay.

A thin thread of smoke coiling from the muzzle of his gun, the bitter-eyed bandit stood poised, ready to blast again. There was a restless stirring along the line, no more. The limp body of the shavetail gave grim notice that these were killers.

The action of the two outlaws ransacking the boot drew Mackay's attention. Industriously, they were breaking open every suitcase, rifling every carpetbag, carelessly scattering the contents. Around them a litter of underclothes, suits, towels grew. The notion struck him that this was no casual holdup. These hombres were hunting for something they had reason to believe was going through on this stage.

Disgust plain on their weathered features, the two finally quit searching. One yanked off his battered sombrero and began to move down the sober-faced line of passengers. His pard covered him. There was no need for words. With dumb disgust, men dropped wallets, watches, rings into the hat. The blonde removed a string of pearls from around her neck with chilly disdain and donated it. The outlaw snatched her handbag, pawed inside, threw it carelessly over a shoulder.

Last in line, Mackay dropped some loose coin into the sombrero. He'd thrust his few remaining greenbacks

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into a boot top. He expected to have his hand called, but the sun-flayed collector made no comment. It almost seemed, reflected Mackay, that he didn't give a damn.

The blocky outlaw climbed into the coach. Mackay guessed he was searching for valuables that might have been thrust beneath cushions. When he emerged, the bitter-eyed man gestured with his gun and the passengers began filing back into the stage.

When only the girl and Mackay remained outside, the bitter-eyed bandit tapped her on a shoulder. "You stay—ma'am," he grated.

Mackay flicked out his .45, swift as a snake strikes. It blurred up, hip-high, but before it spat fire the steel barrel of a sixgun sledged down upon his skull. Consciousness exploded with a thunderclap. Slack-limbed, he sank down, sprawled limp in the sunglare.

The outlaw who had eased up behind him slammed the stage door.

When Mackay again became aware of his surroundings he was spread on the ground. His head felt as though it had been split with an ax. Still bemused, he levered to a sitting position, blinking into sunlight. The effort started his surroundings swaying in a dizzy fandango. As his vision slowly cleared, he saw that the stage had disappeared. The girl stood cool and defiant, the four outlaws bunched around her. Contents of the passengers' luggage made a disordered patchwork over the stage road.

"Git out of that dress, ma'am," rasped the bitter-eyed man.

"I certainly will not—you pig!" she snapped, defiance gleaming in her blue eyes.

"Do we have to strip you?"

"You wouldn't dare!"

The bitter-eyed bandit grabbed for one arm, the blocky man reached for the other. The girl wrenched free. Hooked, the fingers of one hand raked down the bitter-eyed man's leathery cheek. Mackay fumbled frantically for his gun, found the holster empty. Swaying to his feet, he took a step forward. Another spell of vertigo seized him. He staggered, dropped.

Powerless to intervene, he saw that the girl was now the center of a tangled, cursing knot of men. Clawing and kicking with the ferocity of a wildcat, she strove to break free. One wrenched the gray traveling dress off her shoulders. He heard the rip of tearing cloth as it peeled down. Another wrapped his arms around the writhing girl, lifted her, kicking and screaming, shook her free of the bulky dress, then threw her aside as carelessly as if she had been a sack of sugar. She fell headlong and lay prone, breasts swelling beneath a white silk chemise, frilled petticoat billowing around her shapely legs.

Like dogs worrying a bone, the outlaws tore at the gray dress, exploring its folds with eager fingers. A yell of triumph left the throat of one. He snatched out a stock knife, snapped open the blade, began ripping stitches along the hem of the skirt. Scintillating in the sunlight, a diamond rolled out. Then another—and another. As Mackay lay staring, wide-eyed, a pool of flashing stones grew in the callused palm of the bitter-eyed bandit. The blonde had had a fortune in diamonds sewn into that skirt. Mackay's glance sought the girl. She lay prone, her body quivering with bitter sobs. The notion seized him that her grief came not from outrage, but angry frustration.

FOUR

THE BLOCKY BANDIT led four saddle horses out of a gully that knifed into the chaos of broken rock. In no haste, the bitter-faced outlaw stowed away the loot in a saddlebag. The four mounted, headed down the gully and vanished from view.

Cautiously, Mackay came erect, fearful of another dizzy spell. Pistons pounded in his head as he balanced carefully, but the vertigo had left him. From habit, he fingered for the makin's, began to build a smoke.

The blonde's sobbing had ceased. Features composed now, she came to her feet, stood ruefully patting her disordered hair into place, beat off the dust that sullied the white petticoat. Then, drearily, she gathered up her handbag and the ripped gray traveling dress. Unspeaking, Mackay watched her fish a card of safety pins out of the handbag, pin together the dress, ripped from shoulder to waist. Apparently oblivious of his presence, she slipped it over her head and stood adjusting it.

"Guess I warn't worth a barrel of shucks," he commented apologetically.

The girl raised slim shoulders. "What could you do—against four?" Her voice hardened, "The swinel"

"Warn't that a mighty big stake to pack around?"

"Is there any law against a woman converting her legacy into diamonds and carrying it on her person?" Carol Jordan's tone held frosty challenge.

"Nope," agreed Mackay, "except most folks would have used Wells Fargo."

"Possibly," she agreed coldly. "Unfortunately, I de-

cided otherwise." Her lips tightened. "Who would ever dream that creatures calling themselves men would strip a woman?"

"I'd say that bunch knew just what it was looking for."

The girl said nothing, just stood looking around in the harsh sunlight—at the stiffening remains of the dead shavetail; the litter strewn in the vicinity of the smashed suitcases, the wilderness of upended rock amid which they were dumped. "Well?" she wanted to know. "What do we do now?"

Mackay shrugged. "Set, I guess. When the stage reaches the next way station they'll send a party back to hunt us."

"At least we can take advantage of what shade there is," she returned, and moved toward a ragged band of shadow afforded by eroded rock that walled the trail.

Mackay quested around, hunting his missing .45, found it lying among scattered rock, where it had been carelessly thrown, checked the action and dropped it back into his holster.

Hunkering near the blonde, he considered the hectic events of the past hour. Jordan must have known that his niece packed those sparklers, he reflected, else why would the cattle buyer have hired a guard? Seemed others were wise, too. Those four hardcases knew just what they were looking for—and they'd found it. He felt sorry for the girl, sitting silent and cheerless nearby. Not only had she lost her inheritance, but those hombres had handled her roughly—and he hadn't been of any help. His thoughts drifted to the hatchet-faced gambler and the notion grew that the hombre was somehow involved. It seemed more than coincidence that he'd been keeping cases on Jordan in the saloon, had

ducked out of sight following the bushwhack attempt and then turned up as a passenger on the stage.

The musing rider tautened at sound of rattling rock. His eyes widened with surprise when the man who bulked in his thoughts came into view, picking his way through the loose rock of the trail that snaked up into a tangle of ugly, sun-seared hills.

Mackay came to his feet when the hatchet-faced man drew close. "Where in thunder did you spring from?" he demanded.

"Beyond the first bend in the trail," explained the other smoothly. "I dropped off the stage, was bothered about the lady—and my sample case. The name's Beecher, Jack Beecher. I travel in notions."

Mackay eyed the man who called himself Beecher narrowly. He just didn't look the type who would peddle notions. His carefully tended hands, a guardedness that cloaked his eyes, a hardness about his thin features, all shouted "gambler."

The girl, too, was eyeing him coldly. "Didn't we meet in Yuma, Mr.—Beecher?" she inquired. "If I remember rightly, your business was plucking—and I don't mean chickens."

"I am experimenting in a new line, Miss Jordan," he returned imperturbably, emphasizing the "Miss." "I trust those renegades didn't harm you."

"They merely robbed me of a fortune," she threw back shortly.

"Outrageous!" he commented, his tone bland.

"Miss Jordan packed the price of a ranch, a big ranch," explained Mackay. "You got any notion which way the lobos headed?"

"Certainly! Due south."

"Heading for the border," mused Mackay. "They'll

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cross it before sundown." He eyed the blonde somberly. "Guess you can say 'Goodbye' to them sparklers." Just why had this Beecher dropped off the stage, he wondered. Seemed the hatchet-faced man was acquainted with the girl. Was he also acquainted with the destination of those diamonds?

Before the hour was out a rescue party clattered down the trail. Mackay recognized the cowman and punchers who'd traveled on the stage. With them were two roustabouts. All forked stage company stock, strong, hardy animals, but the outlaws' clean-limbed mounts would leave them standing in a chase. He pointed this out in brief discussion, so idea of pursuit was abandoned. The body of the young officer was roped across a horse and the ruined suitcases and their disordered contents piled beside the trail for later pickup. Three ponies carrying double, the party headed back to the way station.

This proved to be an elongated adobe, squatting beside a bouldery dry wash. Thick wooden shutters, hinged back from glassless windows, were slitted for rifle fire, a reminder of days—not long past—when Apaches were on the rampage. Nearby sat a square adobe barn. The only relief to the mud-colored buildings and the gray monotony of hills bulging around was the verdant green of grass and weeds sprouting out of the thick layer of earth that covered the roofs.

The horseless stage stood forlorn in front of the station. Seated on a bench were the bearded stage driver and a lank individual who Mackay guessed was the station keeper. The two drummers itched nervously around.

Trailed by solicitous men, the girl entered the station. Mackay hit for the rear. Here a tin basin sat on a stool, a bucket of water beside it. A dingy strip of toweling

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hung from a nail above. Gratefully, he stripped off his shirt and splashed tepid water over his aching head.

Feeling in better shape, he stepped into the station. The blonde sat in chilly isolation, plainly not in social mood. Other passengers loitered glumly around the combination waiting and dining room, dirt-floored, a rude table in its center. He learned that a hand was heading for the scene of the holdup with a wagon, to bring in the luggage.

When the wagon rumbled back, everyone became busy sorting out their belongings. The damaged luggage was reloaded in the boot, everyone piled aboard to resume their interrupted journey. Everyone except Mackay and the girl. She had announced her intention of returning to Tucson. Mackay noticed that Beecher remained, too. Just what was keeping him?

It was night when the westbound stage pulled into the courtyard of the Ornadoff Hotel. Throughout the trip Carol Jordan had sat silent and withdrawn. Nursing a sense of guilt, Mackay made no effort to penetrate her reserve. The girl had plenty to grieve over, he reflected. She'd lost her inheritance, endured a humiliating experience and was likely flat broke. And he, Bill Mackay, had been hired to protect her!

Pulling off his boots in a boxy hotel room, he felt tuckered out. Reaction from the day's events piled up. He hung his gunbelt on a bedpost and thankfully stretched out. Hazily, he considered that he should call at the courthouse and give his account of the robbery. The station tender would make a report to the stage company and likely to the sheriff, but the law would want his version, too. There was no rush, he considered tiredly, those renegades were long beyond pursuit.

With a new day he felt as lively as a two-year-old.

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The only remembrance of the slugging was a lump that felt as big as an ostrich egg on the back of his head.

Sheriff Wakely was seated at a rolltop desk as seasoned as himself when the chunky rider entered his office in the courthouse. Like all law offices, it held a picture gallery—an assortment of yellowing "Wanted" dodgers. A row of riot guns reposed in a rack along one wall and several straight-back chairs were lined against another.

At sound of the opening door, the sheriff swung around, and Mackay mentally registered that he was up against a tough old moseyhorn. The lawman's lean form was dehydrated down to little more than a bony framework. Sun-scorched skin stretched drum-tight over his angular features and a faded mustache drooped over lips that met in a straight harsh line. Probing eyes were deep-set below high ridges and when he spoke his voice had a quality that reminded the visitor of a rusty door hinge. He was garbed in dark pants, stuffed into high boots, a blue shirt and a stained, wrinkled vest to which was pinned a tarnished silver badge.

"Wal?" he inquired.

"The moniker's Mackay," returned the rider. "I'm reporting a stage holdup."

"Rest your legs!" The sheriff hooked a chair close.

As Mackay dropped onto it, the sheriff's left hand dapped out and he adroitly scooped his visitor's gun out of the holster.

"Hey, what's the big idea?" protested Mackay.

"I got a habit of playing safe," drawled Wakely, and stuck the gun beneath his own waistband. "Now start talking!"

FIVE

BOILING INWARDLY, Mackay told of the holdup, the shooting of the lieutenant, theft of the diamonds sewn into Carol Jordan's skirt.

The alkalied old sheriff listened in silence, gnarled fingers entwined across his front, eyes leveled on the visitor.

At the end of the recital, Wakely fished out the makin's and slowly made a cigarette. "You—traveling—with Miss Jordan?" he inquired.

"I was hired to guard her."

"So you were wise she was packing the stones?"

"Nope!" declared Mackay.

"You weren't wise but the holdup hombres were," mused the sheriff. "Why you figure this Jordan gent hired you?"

"Like I said—to guard his niece."

"Plenty women ride stages without armed guards."

Mackay said nothing.

"You acquainted with these outlaws?" There was a note in the lawman's dry tones that made Mackay stiffen. "Nope," he replied curtly, "but I could identify two, maybe all four."

"Seems they were tipped off," ruminated Wakely. "You got any ideas?"

"Yep!" threw back Mackay. "There was one gent aboard, calls himself Beecher. I lamped him dogging Jordan in town. He rode back to Tucson with us. Seems always underfoot."

"How would this Beecher be wise to the stones?"

"I wouldn't know," confessed Mackay.

"Now I've got different ideas." The sheriff's cindery tones rasped Mackay's nerves. "Could be you 'crossed Jordan and his niece. You knew the gal was packing the stones, else why would Jordan hire you? You tip off your pards. They clean up and clout you to make it look good."

"Oh hell!" Mackay's voice dripped disgust. "Would I ride back to town if I was tied in?"

"Likely," countered Wakely dryly, "ef you had the gall of an elephant, which I'm gambling you have."

Mackay jerked to his feet, tight with anger. "I'm clean!" he exploded.

"And innocent as a day-old calf," drawled the sheriff. "So innocent you never even wondered why Jordan paid you \$100 and staked you to a ticket to St. Louis to ride herd on this niece. Quit hurrahin' me, Mackay!"

"I didn't ask no questions," protested the rider heatedly, "because I was flat broke. I needed eating money."

"Sure!" There was no mistaking the irony in Wakely's flat tone. "You needed money, and now you figure to collect plenty money. Stick around town! Take it on the lam and I'll issue a warrant. That shavetail's killing was murder."

"You're local!" declared Mackay hopelessly. "And gimme my gun back!"

"Guess I got no option." The sheriff's voice held a note of regret. "Reckon I'm not ready to file charges—yet."

Simmering with anger, Mackay left the courthouse and wandered down to The Outpost. His luck had sure turned sour, he reflected. First the pasteboards had busted him and now he was prime suspect on a murder charge. Seemed nothing had gone right since he hit

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the town. He banged through the batwings, downed a shot of bourbon, poured another and dropped a silver peso on the mahogany. In Tucson there was more Mexican hard money in circulation than American.

Packing the second drink to his former table beside the window, he plunked onto a chair, brooding.

This early, there wasn't a patron in the place besides himself. The frowsy swamper shuffled around, collecting spittoons. Baldy, behind the bar, was immersed in a copy of *The Citizen*, Tucson's weekly news sheet, fresh from the press.

With a grunt of surprise, the apron reread an item, then moved down the bar, newspaper in hand. Lifting a hinged leaf, he headed for his lone customer.

"Get a load of this," he invited, dropping the sheet on the table in front of Mackay. He indicated a boxed paragraph on the front page, headed "LATE NEWS."

Mackay took in the headline—SIDEWINDER PASS HOLDUP—then read on:

As we go to press a stage holdup is reported on Sidewinder Pass, east of the city. About midday yesterday (Tuesday) an eastbound Butterfield stage was waylaid by four outlaws. Second Lieutenant John Fairway, Sixth Cavalry, one of the passengers, was brutally shot and killed when he attempted resistance. Miss Carol Jordan, another passenger, was robbed of a fortune in diamonds she carried on her person. The lady and two other passengers returned to Tucson on a westbound stage, other passengers continued east. Sheriff Wakely states there is little hope of apprehension of the holdup gang, since it hit for the border and was probably beyond United States jurisdiction before news reached the city.

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"So you been having fun," commented the barkeep. "Fun!" echoed Mackay. "The bustards conked me, 'most cracked my skull. Dolores around?"

"Stepped out for a slug of Arbuckle," said Baldy. "She'll be back most any time." He repossessed his paper and returned to the bar.

Mackay's head pivoted eagerly when the gritty hinges of the batwings squealed. Clad now in a crisp gingham dress that came modestly high in the neck and low on her shapely legs, the girl checked and her lips parted with pleasure at sight of Mackay. Dark eyes shining, she undulated between tables, heading eagerly toward him.

"Wasn't it awful, killing that poor lieutenant and robbing the girl!" she exclaimed, dropping down at the table. "You must feel bad about it, Bill."

"You'd never guess how bad," he grunted.

"Well, something else will turn up," she consoled. Elbows cradled on the table, she toyed with the bracelet she wore. To an artistic soul it would have seemed a tawdry gimcrack—a circlet of colored stones, as large as marbles, vividly colored red, yellow, blue, interspersed with gold-tinted beads. "And thanks for the bracelet," she added softly.

"It ain't such-a-much," he protested. "The store clerk claimed them colored stones are Arctic diamonds."

"They're beautiful!" she declared, lowering her head to hide the amusement that flickered in her dark eyes.

Heavy boots clattered as a string of red-shirted mule-skinners clumped in—hardbitten, brawny men, unshaven and dust-powdered from the trail. At their head strode a stocky, heavy-shouldered young fellow with stolid features, against the tan of which his eyes showed brilliant blue. Although he wore the rough garb of a team-

ster, there was an air of authority about him, an aggressiveness in the angle of his jaw, that labeled him "boss."

The newcomers lined the bar. "Serve the boys all they can swallow," roared the stocky young man. "I will pay."

"Well, well, so Hans and his crew are back from Fort Lowell!" said Dolores lightly, but there was apprehension in the glance she directed at the glittering bauble on her wrist.

"That Dutchman always did stick in my gizzard," grumbled Mackay, and took a drink. Unobtrusively, the girl eased the bracelet out of sight beneath the billowing sleeve of her dress.

Mackay scowled at the line of broad backs bulking along the bar, and saw that Hans had focused on them in the backbar mirror. The freighter poured a second glass half-full, then with ponderous deliberation began easing past tables in their direction, a glass in each hand.

He reached the table, ignored Mackay and set one glass before the girl. "You will drink to a good, a very good trip," he invited, standing solid on stocky legs.

"It sure is whiffy around here," commented Mackay.

"Honest sweat, my friend," boomed Hansen, blue eyes sparking, "but what would a gun-dummy know of honest sweat?"

"Simmer down, boys!" begged Dolores, and reached for the glass. As she raised it, the loose sleeve of her dress slid back, revealing the gleaming bracelet.

Hansen's heavy eyebrows raised. "Gottdamnl!" he ejaculated. "Such junk! I give you fine bracelet."

"Junk—hell!" snapped Mackay. His chair toppled as he sprang to his feet.

"Quit, boys!" appealed the girl, slopping her drink.

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"Those are Arctic diamonds," gritted Mackay, "not Mexican brass."

"Baubles!" growled Hansen and banged his glass down on the table. "You think Dolores is a squaw?"

Mackay plunged at him, fists swinging. Nothing loath to mix it, Hansen met the headlong charge with a swinging boot—there were no Marquis of Queensbery rules in a saloon fight.

The heavy boot took Mackay on the belt line. He doubled up, retching.

"Stop—you fools!" screamed Dolores, but her words had no more effect than if she'd spoken to the table. Hansen, with a speed surprising in one of his solid build, thrust forward, aiming another kick at his opponent's downturned head. It would have stunned Mackay, or cracked his skull, if it had landed. But sound of Hansen's scraping feet, or plain luck, brought the chunky rider's head up. He swayed sideways. The boot whizzed past. Grabbing a chair, he hurled it at the freighter. Hans ducked. The chair crashed against a wall behind him. Then they piled into each other, fists flailing, bitter animosity gleaming in their eyes. Helpless, the girl flattened against the wall, dark eyes distended with fear—or it may have been excitement.

Heavy boots drummed as muleskinners charged across the floor, eager to watch the fight.

Chairs toppled, were kicked from underfoot, as the two swayed around, interlocked one moment, breaking apart another, fists smashing.

Bunched knuckles swung against Mackay's nose. He was conscious of a gush of warm blood over mouth and chin. Another blow sledged into his mouth and more blood spurted from split lips. Now they stood toe to toe, slugging it out. Mackay's body quivered beneath

the hammering. He fought back with silent ferocity, and felt no pain in his consuming rage. But conviction began to sink into his brain that Hansen's blocky form, solid as a chunk of lava, could withstand more punishment than his own, that if the battering kept up he would be pounded senseless. Already his features were a mass of numbed flesh and his heaving lungs seemed about to burst through his chest. To survive he had to switch his style of fighting.

Blood streaming scarlet from smashed nose and torn mouth, he pulled back. Hansen, heavy jaw grim-set, waded in again, thick arms pumping. Mackay side-stepped swiftly, threw a hard left at the other's jaw as he blundered past. Shaking his head like a maddened bull, the freighter swung around, again plunging in. Again, Mackay fooled him, swerving to the left. Again he rocked the snorting Hansen with a left that snapped his square head back. Undaunted, the Dutchman took after him again. For a third time, Mackay tried to dodge, but a hefty muleskinner blocked him. He swayed drunkenly as the other's hard fists pistoned into his belly, flayed his bruised features. Through a red mist he glimpsed Dolores, the slender blade of a stiletto flashing in one hand, dark eyes glittering points of fire, driving Hansen's red-shirted followers back.

Blindly, he flung at his square-set opponent, raging in and out, dodging and darting. There was no sound beyond the flat fleshy thud of fists and the gasping intake of the battlers' breath. Without pause, slowed by a cloying weariness, Mackay pressed the slogging onslaught. Unholy joy welled deep within him at the realization that Hansen was slowing too.

The other stumbled over an upturned chair, momentarily his arms dropped as he strove to regain balance.

Mustering every ounce of his sagging strength, Mackay swung at the other's jaw, connected. Hansen went down like a pole-axed steer. The impact of his body shook the floor. He lay helpless, blood dribbling from his gaping mouth. Mackay, exhausted, staggered backward. His head came up tiredly as a concerted yell lanced into his ears. Hansen's muleskinners, sweeping past the tensed Dolores, tossing her aside like a chip upon a raging current, were charging at him, hellbent to avenge their battered boss.

SIX

THE ROARING detonation of a .45 reverberated through the low-ceilinged saloon like the boom of a cannon. The rush of red-shirted muleskinners checked. They paused irresolute, heads swerving as they sought the source of the report. Smoking gun in hand, a gaunt, rawboned fellow with unkempt bushy beard and a wild mane of hair curling to his shoulders, both black as a raven's wing, stood by the bar. Wide open, a cheap cotton shirt exposed a thatch of dark hair upon his barrel chest. Shabby pants were secured at the waist by a rawhide thong, the bottoms thrust into cracked high boots. Strangest of all, he wore an ill-fitting frock coat with dangling tails, shiny from age, and in the crook of his left arm he nursed a big black book. His piercing eyes resembled twin chips of glass set in dark mahogany features, from which arced a great beak of a nose.

"Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord," he boomed. "Blessed are the peacemakers."

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"Ditch that hogleg and keep your snout out of our business," yelled a dust-grimed muleskinner.

"My business, brother, is to help the afflicted, succor those in trouble and preserve backsliders from the evil of their ways," roared the bearded stranger, and thumbed back the hammer of his smoking .45. His piercing gaze roamed over the discomfited muleskinners with cool challenge. Deterred by sight of the gun, they stood shuffling uncertainly.

Hansen struggled to a sitting position and stared around in bewilderment, still half-dazed. Two of his men hauled the freighter to his feet, began steering him toward the batwings. With uneasy side-glances in the direction of the unkempt stranger, the remainder of the baffled muleskinners began draining after them.

Mackay sank onto a chair. Dolores hastened to the bar, returned with a wet towel and began gently wiping off his damaged features. The gaunt stranger holstered his gun, strode over, dumped his black book onto the table and dropped onto a seat, eyeing the operation.

If it hadn't been for the intervention of this whiskered hombre, reflected Mackay, Hansen's boys would likely have booted him into pulp. Busy with the bar towel, Dolores threw a grateful glance at the newcomer. "You sure eased Bill here out of a tight," she smiled, then to Mackay, "You never were a fashion plate, now you look like something the cat dragged in."

"I gamble Hansen's in worse shape," he mumbled.

"The wise man pursueth peace," intoned the bearded man, "and is blessed in the sight of the Lord."

"You go tell that to Hansen," retorted Mackay, exploring torn lips with his tongue.

"Just what are you, mister," the girl wanted to know, "a gambler or a Bible puncher?"

"I am Paul the Preacher, sister, the humble instrument of the Lord, sent to spread the Gospel among unbelievers in this ungodly city."

"With a gun!"

The bearded man's lips twitched. "There is no more potent persuader, sister." He directed his attention to Mackay. "Yours is a thorny path, brother. I hear you met with misfortune on the St. Louis stage."

"Holdup!" returned Mackay shortly.

"A brave soldier consigned to Eternity, an innocent girl despoiled of a fortune," mourned the Preacher. "Satan stalks in this wilderness." He reached over for the untouched bourbon that Hansen had brought for the girl, swiftly emptied the glass and set it down with a sigh of appreciation.

"You drink, too?" exclaimed Dolores, with startled surprise.

"I fear, sister, you are not acquainted with the Good Book," returned the Preacher sorrowfully. "Did not Timothy, an understanding disciple, advise, 'Take a little wine for thy stomach's sake?'" He came to his feet and hefted the black book. "You could peruse these pages with profit, sister."

"I'm almighty thankful that you saved my neck," said Mackay, with a twisted grin.

"Better that I should have saved your immortal soul," returned Paul sternly. "Well, I must be on my way, there are backsliders aplenty to be saved from the raging fires of hell."

Both watched his gaunt form as he strode to the batwings, passed outside.

"Now I've seen everything," murmured Dolores. "Who'd ever believe it—a gunfighting preacher who drinks like a fish?"

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"He sure eased me out of a doggoned tight spot," said Mackay. He straightened slowly, fingering bruised ribs. "Guess I'll live," he decided and grinned ruefully. "Reckon I owe you plenty thanks, too."

The girl eyed his damaged features, dark eyes soft with sympathy. "You're in no shape to move around," she declared. "Why don't you lie down for awhile?"

"That's just what I figure on doing," he assured her. "I feel like I've been on the receiving end of a Missouri mule."

Shadows were beginning to lengthen when he rolled off his bed in the Ornadorff Hotel. He padded across worn carpet and stood surveying himself in a gilt-framed mirror set above the washstand. His nose, he decided, would never be the same again. Apart from that, plus puffed lips, a swollen jaw and sore ribs, he was as good as new.

Mackay was young and as tough-fibered as a range colt. With a surge of energy, he poured water from a jug into the basin, stripped to the waist, sluiced the tepid water over head and torso. Drying off, he decided he was ravenously hungry. He pulled on his boots, buckled the heavy gunbelt around his middle and clapped on his Stetson. Dropping down a stairway, he saw that the usual sprinkling of guests—grizzled cowmen, shrewd-eyed cattle buyers, cigar-smoking drummers—slacked on the leather-upholstered rockers that lined the lobby. Talk rumbled through a blue haze of tobacco smoke. Carol Jordan sat alone, coldly indifferent to admiring glances slanted in her direction. The thought struck him that the blonde was likely without money and maybe hungry. She was the type who would starve before she asked for help.

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When he dropped into a rocker beside her, the girl's china-blue eyes dwelt impersonally upon his damaged features. "I suppose you stepped into a door," she commented, with faint amusement, "or," she eyed the frayed carpet, spur-ripped in spots, "tripping would be a good alibi."

Mackay's square face creased—and promptly straightened, smiling was painful. "Nope," he confessed, and held up a hand, "I got tangled up in a dogfight." Her glance flicked over cut and bruised knuckles. "I can imagine what the other man looks like," she returned indifferently.

It sure took plenty to faze this girl, he reflected, and inquired, aloud: "You eating? My tapeworm's hollering."

She flashed a quick smile. "I could eat a horse!"

The Imperial wasn't such-a-much, considered Mackay, when he held the fly-curtain aside for Miss Jordan to step through the entrance, but it was the best that Tucson offered.

The eating house was packed with men. Usually Mackay slid onto one of the round stools set along the counter, but he had a hunch the blonde would prefer a table. His glance ran over the floor. Every one of the tables draped with red-and-white checked coverings seemed to be occupied. With relief, he glimpsed an empty booth by the far wall and guided his companion toward it.

Good-looking girls were a rarity in the bustling frontier town and he was conscious that every eye in the place followed the progress of the blonde. Not that it appeared to bother Miss Jordan. In no haste, she threaded between tables, indifferent to admiring glances.

A plump Mexican waitress took their order. The girl sat straight-backed, indifferent as a marble statue. Mac-

kay, acutely aware of his battered features, was building a cigarette to cover his embarrassment when the dark-haired Dolores stepped into the restaurant, followed by Hans Hansen, his square face liberally decorated with court plaster.

Mackay saw diners around glance in his direction and their features split into grins. It was plain that the story of the dogfight had already circulated.

A quick feeling of disgust that Dolores was favoring his stocky rival was buried by relief when he saw that neither had sighted him in the crowded dining room. The fiery Dolores was under the impression that he had been hired to escort a schoolgirl and he had a hunch that explanations would be awkward.

The pair dropped down at a table by the steamy windows.

He again gave attention to his cigarette. Miss Jordan's amused tones brought his head up: "That dark-haired girl, by the window, seems interested in you."

He glanced guiltily across the room—and met the impact of two blazing dark eyes. He contrived a smile and nodded. Dolores glared at and through him, then transferred her attention to his companion.

"A friend of yours?" inquired the blonde idly.

"Yep!" he admitted. "She entertains at The Outpost."

"And looks the type!" returned Miss Jordan, with frigid unconcern.

So acutely conscious was he of Dolores' glowering glances, that Mackay did not know, or care, if he was eating sawdust or a steak. His one thought was to get through with the meal and out of range of those accusing eyes. In vain he argued mentally that he had no reason to feel guilty. He had been hired to escort Jordan's niece—he was escorting Jordan's niece. But somehow he knew

that the impulsive Dolores wouldn't see it quite in that light.

With relief, he finally saw that Miss Jordan had finished her leisurely meal. Hastily swallowing his coffee, he inquired quickly, "You crave to get back to the hotel?"

"And away from your lady friend?" Her tone held cool amusement.

"Friend!" he repeated ruefully. "Don't gamble on it!"

When they reached the door, he ducked over to Dolores' table, determined to set things right. The girl's attention was riveted on her plate. He and Hansen eyed each other like two strange terriers.

"Say, Dolores!" he ejaculated. "I'm doing a job. That's the gal I'm paid to escort."

Her head came up and her eyes—gleaming like pools of molten fire—focused on him. "Schoolgirl!" she snapped. "You—Judas!" With that she grabbed the nearest thing to hand, a cup of steaming coffee, and threw it full into his face.

The scalding liquid soaked his shirt and streamed off his face. Momentarily blinded, he recoiled. Then, overwhelmed by a surge of anger, he swung his right hand—slapped the glowering Dolores hard, across the face. Even as she reeled before the force of the blow, contrition flooded him. He froze, arm still outstretched. A chair toppled as Hansen flung at him. In a flash the two were intertwined in another jabbing, wrestling dog-fight.

Events blurred for Mackay. The table overturned, china crashed, men shouted, a woman shrieked. Locked together, kicking, butting, punching, the two antagonists rolled over the floor. Indignant diners swarmed over them, smothered them, wrenched them apart. Mackay

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felt himself propelled by many hands toward the doorway. He shot through it, tangled with the fly-curtain, stumbled and landed on hands and knees on the splintery plankwalk. Senses awlirl, he levered to his feet. Miss Jordan had disappeared. Something warm and liquid flowed over his lips. Remembering the coffee, he wiped it off impatiently. His hand came away red and he realized that his damaged nose had been tapped again. Disconsolately, he shouldered through a circle of grinning spectators.

In acid humor, he plugged back to the hotel, dabbing his nose. Lately, nothing had gone right, he considered morosely. In less than a week he'd gone broke, become suspect in a holdup killing, antagonized Dolores and now he'd made a jackass of himself in The Imperial. After the restaurant fracas everyone in Tucson would give him the horse laugh. Worse, he couldn't duck out. If he left town, Sheriff Wakely had threatened to swear out a warrant for his arrest.

With relief, eager for the privacy of his hotel room, he mounted the stone steps of the Ornadorff, pushed back the glass-paneled door and stepped into the lobby. Miss Jordan's chilled gaze immediately lit upon him. The girl was plainly awaiting his appearance. And seated next to her, glumly chewing a cigar, was Walt Jordan, her uncle.

The girl eyed his approach with frigid displeasure, and Jordan's pale eyes reflected cold hostility. The cattle buyer greeted him with a curt nod. "Wal, mister," he rasped, "someone sure made a hash of your map and you made a doggone hash of everything."

SEVEN

MACKAY WAS in no mood for apologies. "Would you have done better?" he challenged, meeting the cattle buyer's bleak gaze.

"I sure couldn't have done worse," grated Jordan.

"Snarling won't help!" interjected the girl, with icy disapproval. "Wouldn't it be more sensible to discuss this—misfortune—reasonably, and in privacy?"

"Guess you're right, Carol," admitted the cattle buyer. He rose, eyeing Mackay with no friendliness. "Let's beat it up to my room."

They headed for the stairway, Jordan and the blonde ahead, Mackay tagging behind.

The cattle buyer's room was a replica of Mackay's—a brass bed, scratched bureau, washstand and two straight-back chairs. Jordan touched light to a green-shaded Rochester lamp, set on the bureau, and jerked down the window shade. Mackay hunkered against a smooth-plastered adobe wall, he always felt easier when his back was covered. The girl sank sedately onto a chair and Jordan plunked down on the bed. "So four hardcases held you up and beat it south!" he commented.

Mackay, building a smoke, nodded. "The lobos were wise that Miss Carol was packing a load of diamonds," he volunteered. "They searched her—and no one else."

"I could name 'em," growled Jordan, "a gang of no-goods who hung around Sulphur Valley, rustling and raising hell. Reckon they figured Carol packed the price of the ranch—trailed her like a pack of coyotes."

"Yet you took a chance!"

"I hired you, figuring you were slick with that iron." Jordan nodded contemptuously at Mackay's thonged-down gun. "Seemed you weren't worth a barrel of shucks."

Mackay bristled. "See here—" he began hotly.

The blonde's voice cut in, cold as chilled ice: "If you two would quit snapping at each other we might get somewhere." She eyed her uncle: "Is there any chance of recovering the stones?"

Jordan brought out a cigar, stuck it between his lips and sat savagely chewing it cold, brow furrowed. "Knowing the rattlesnakes," he said, "I'd say they'd have an itch to stage a big spree. Nogales lies south, on the border. That's the only town of size within a day's ride. My bet would be they hit for Nogales."

"And you're sitting here!"

Jordan ignored the taunt in the blonde's tone. "It's long odds," he ruminated, almost to himself, "four to one. Now if I had a gun to side me!" His pale eyes dwelt on Mackay.

"What's wrong with my gun—" began Mackay, then cut off abruptly, remembering the sheriff's edict. If he rode south and crossed the border, Wakely would set it down as a plain confession of guilt. That meant his features would ornament the gallery of "Wanted" men.

"Wal?" rasped Jordan.

"I just don't know," returned Mackay hesitantly.

"Scairt?" Derision lay on the big man's voice.

"Quit prodding, Walt!" protested the girl sharply. It was the first time Mackay had ever heard her call the cattle buyer anything but "Uncle."

"Here's the straight of it," he put in, and told of the lawman's accusation that he was working hand-in-hand

with the outlaws and had ordered him to remain in town.

The two heard him through in silence. His heart warmed toward the blonde when she exclaimed, at the conclusion of his recital: "That sheriff's crazy! Why, they almost cracked your skull when you tried to help me."

"And I still pack a bump to prove it!" returned Mackay wryly, gingerly fingering the back of his head.

Carol regarded him thoughtfully. "Don't you think the most effective way to prove your innocence would be to recover my diamonds?" she suggested.

"There's no argument about that," put in Jordan.

Mackay nodded slowly. The girl was convincing, but he wasn't sold on the setup. Granted they succeeded in locating the outlaws, he reflected, the odds would be four to two. Jordan talked tough, but how would he turn out in a tight?

The cattle buyer's harsh tones broke into his cogitations: "You in—or out?"

Mackay raised his shoulders: "In—I guess."

Through the day the two jogged southward, wreathed in ever-rising dust, following the ruts of the Tucson-Guaymas stage road, skirting mesquite thickets, creamy-white with blossom; passing the mud-colored adobes of Tubac; crossing the shrunken Santa Cruz River; traversing rolling terrain thick with fluted saguaro, the dark bulk of the Patagonia Mountains darkening the horizon ahead.

Mackay was conscious of a subtle change in his companion. Jordan seemed tougher, warier. He'd shed his fancy duds, was garbed in a gray flannel shirt and waist Levis. He wore a broad leather gunbelt, a triggerless Colt .45 holstered on either side, and he wore that

gunbelt, considered Mackay, as though he was used to it, which was strange in a cattle buyer.

Close upon seventy miles spanned the stretch of sun-baked terrain between Tucson and the border, and it was a tiring, dusty ride. But the big man endured it without complaint, hunched in the saddle, granite features giving no clue to his thoughts. They spoke little and paused only to water their ponies and take a brief siesta at noon.

At sundown, they emerged from waves of warm brown hills, mantled with yellow desert grass, and rode into Nogales. It was Mackay's first glimpse of the border settlement and he was not impressed. A rambling store, constructed of mud-chinked oak timbers and surrounded by a rude ocotillo fence, sat in a grove of black walnuts. Scattered around were a handful of canvas-roofed shacks and moldering adobes, all slumbering in lengthening shadow. There was sure no rip-roaring life here to attract a gang of free-spending outlaws, he considered.

They drifted on, passed a thick-walled adobe, roofed with red tile. Outside, a flag drooped dispiritedly from a pole and several ragged Mexican soldados lounged around.

"Mexican custom house," volunteered Jordan. "They won't bother us none."

Across the invisible line that marked the boundary of the United States the atmosphere changed. A plaza opened up, around which pink, orange, and white adobes were clustered. Sombreroed Mexicans loitered around cantinas; black-rebozoed women strolled with stately grace; tiny burros, buried beneath burdens of brush, plodded past. Here and there, a more ornate adobe boasted a tiny balcony and ornamental iron grillwork.

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The cloying scent of oleander was heavy on the air and the soft strumming of guitars souged through the shades of evening.

This was more like the Nogales Mackay had pictured. Jordan checked his jaded mount outside a cantina. "Guess we start poking around," he said, as he swung stiffly out of leather and handed Mackay his reins.

"Say," remonstrated the younger man, "I feel like I swallowed the Sahara. How about a drink?"

Jordan shrugged. It was plain that but one idea engrossed him—recovery of the diamonds.

When they ducked through a low doorway into the cantina, Mackay looked quickly around. One glance told him their quarry was not here. Mestizos and vaqueros slacked at tables. An old man, draped in a ragged tilma, drifted over the packed earth floor, coaxing a plaintive melody from a battered guitar.

The two riders stepped up to a plank bar, downed a bottle of Tecate beer apiece and left.

"Can you read the lobos' brands?" inquired Mackay when they stepped into leather again.

"You bet your life I can!" asserted Jordan, with grim certitude.

They moved onto the next cantina. Conscious of quickening tension, Mackay remained in the saddle and held his companion's reins while the cattle buyer ducked inside. He couldn't forget the swift, merciless slaying of the shavetail. If Jordan knew those hombres, they surely knew him. He braced for the roar of a gun that would mark the cattle buyer's demise. If they gunned Jordan down, he reflected, what else could he do but go in after them—and face hot lead from four cutters. The thought wasn't comforting. But, from the interior of the

cantina, the drone of talk, strains of music, continued, with no leaden punctuation.

Jordan emerged. Without speaking, he grabbed his reins and stepped into the saddle. He drew blanks at two more cantinas. There appeared to be only one left, "La Cantina Elegante." It was the biggest, with the brightest painted sign.

Night now enveloped Nogales, velvety night, a scented night of shadows and soft music, the muted laughter of women, the lingering harmony of a corrido. Vague forms seemed to float past on silent zapatos. Overhead myriad flaming stars sprinkled the dark-purpled heavens.

Mackay was convinced now that Jordan's guess had been wrong, but he was not unhappy. This was no night to be tainted by the stench of burned powder, wracked by the roar of .45's.


They reined across the plaza to La Cantina Elegante, which was plainly a popular rendezvous. Saddle horses were tied thick outside; sound of music and singing flowed through its wide doorway and vaqueros with huge spurs and steeple-topped sombreros drifted in and out.

Jordan followed what was becoming a routine. He stepped down, handed his reins to Mackay, jingled inside. When he quickly ducked out, Mackay guessed he'd found what they sought. Fast-stepping, the cattle buyer came up to his stirrup. "Lamped the bustards!" he announced, with taut triumph.

Without speaking, Mackay swung to the ground, wrapped the reins of the two ponies around the hitch rail. "How you figure we handle it?" he inquired.

"I handle it!" grated Jordan. "Your job is to cover me, keep the Mexes off my back." He jerked first one

gun, then the other, checking the loads. This hairpin was no stranger to guns, thought Mackay. "You wouldn't be biting off more'n you can chew?" he inquired aloud.

"Nopel" snapped Jordan, and headed back toward the doorway. 

Mackay raised his shoulders, and followed. The idea of two men bracing four curly wolves hadn't appealed. Now the cattle buyer craved to go it alone. Well, it was Jordan's show.

Dogging the big man, he stepped into the cantina.

The place throbbed with life. In the rear, three crimson-sashed musicians on a platform strummed guitars. A dozen or more couples—vaqueros in tight-legged pants and plump senioritas with swirling petticoats—whirled in a fandango. Around the space cleared for dancing small tables were jammed so tightly that there was little room for movement. Every table was crowded with jabbering, gesticulating patrons, and laden with bottles of beer, vino, tequila. Sound cascaded into Mackay's ears. The excitement and merriment were infectious and the rhythm of the music stirred his blood. His boot toe started tapping. He found himself picturing the lithe Dolores whirling in his arms. Then Jordan's harsh tones brought him back to reality: "Lamp the lobos—in the far corner?"

He followed the direction of the cattle buyer's glance. Every nerve tautened as he focused at the four hard-faced hombres he had last seen in the sun-blasted hills outside Tucson. They were bunched around a table, flipping cards, intent on their game and impervious to the uproar.

Jordan began pushing between packed tables toward them.

EIGHT

ELBOWING ACROSS the crowded floor behind Jordan, Mackay caught glimpses of the card players at the corner table. He recognized them all—the bitter-eyed outlaw who had gunned the army lieutenant; the blocky bandit who'd relieved the passengers of their valuables; a leathery-faced hombre with long mustachios who watched the driver; a long-geared, bony-faced man who helped rifle the baggage. All packed guns, and judging from greenbacks heaped on the stained table top, were wallowing in velvet. Jordan was loco, he thought, if he figured he could handle these rattlesnakes on his lonesome.

Jostled by a press of Mexicans joining lustily in the baile, he eased his Colt out of leather.

Still unobserved, they were almost atop the table now. Apparently deaf to the racket that filled the crowded cantina, the four outlaws imperturbably slapped cards. Mackay could see their lips move as they bid, but sound of their voices was lost in the uproar.

The bitter-eyed bandit was the first to sight them. Of a sudden, his head jerked up and he stared full into Jordan's granite features. For an instant, Mackay read blank amazement in his close-set eyes, then he stabbed for his gun. He was fast, but the cattle buyer was faster. Quicker than a snake strikes, Jordan whipped out a .45 and the gun spilled flame and thunder. The bullet smashed into the bandit's hairy chest, high and center. Impact of the heavy slug slammed him backward. His chair capsized. Already dead, blood oozing scarlet from

a hole beneath his throat, he went over with the chair. Mackay blinked, he'd never seen faster action.

The echo of the report rumbled through the cantina like the beat of a mighty drum, smothering all other sound. The orchestra cut off in mid-beat, the dancers froze and the yammer of talk was abruptly stilled. The three remaining bandits sat slack-jawed with surprise, greasy pasteboards spilling unheeded from their fingers as they gaped at the thread of smoke coiling from Jordan's Colt. Mackay, remembering his own job, spun around, raising his own gun, to face what seemed to be a sea of swarthy faces. All appeared to be shocked into immobility, staring wide-eyed. "Take it easy, folks," he yelled, "and no one will get hurt," and then realized that likely no one understood a word. But the threatening gun was enough.

Behind, he heard Jordan's rasping voice, rock-hard: "Reach, you lobos! Now you, Plug, unbuckle your gunbelt—and no shenanigans if you don't crave to shake hands with St. Peter."

Mackay heard the thud of a falling gunbelt, then again the cattle buyer's grating tone, "Now you, Kelly!"

When the third gunbelt dropped, the crisp rustle of greenbacks reached Mackay's ears and he guessed that Jordan was collecting the currency that lay on the table. Then the hardcases began to file past him, hands shoulder-high, heading for the street. Behind them stalked the cattle buyer, pale eyes restless as a questing lobo's, glinting between narrowed slits.

"Tail me!" he snapped, as he passed.

Mackay dropped in behind them, head swerving for sign of hostility as they threaded between tables. But no one moved, the patrons of La Cantina Elegante seemed paralyzed by shock. Someone knocked a bottle

over and the jangle grated on his ears like a drill against a sore tooth. If someone broke the spell, he thought, and started trouble, he and Jordan would have no more chance of surviving than if they were engulfed in a cattle stampede. He heaved a fervent sigh of relief when he stepped outside into the balmy night air.

"Keep cases on the door!" Jordan threw across a shoulder.

Mackay spun around, back-stepped into shadow. Inside the cantina, he heard a babble of talk break out. Oil lamps, hanging from projecting vigas, silhouetted anyone passing through the doorway. Two vaqueros, more venturesome than the rest, eased into view, stealthily stealing out. Mackay thumbed the hammer, released it, firing high. The two dabbed back out of sight.

From the corner of an eye he saw that Jordan had lined his three prisoners up, facing the rough adobe front wall of the cantina. Arms stretched high, they pressed against the adobe. The cattle buyer, gun in one hand, was methodically emptying their pockets.

Jordan called him over. "Watch the coyotes," directed the big man curtly. "Plug the first who moves. I gotta go through their saddlebags." He moved away, dim in the starlight.

Mackay stood tensed, watching both doorway and prisoners. It seemed a lifetime passed before he heard Jordan's voice again, from the direction of saddlehorses tied thick along the hitchrail, high with triumph, "I got 'em! Let's go!"

"One move and you're buzzard bait," he told the three silently pressed against the wall, and backed away. Just two of them had braced an outlaw gang in Mexican territory, buffaloed them and recovered Miss Carol's diamonds, he thought, with rising exhilaration. It seemed

incredible. What was more, his name was cleared. When they returned to Tucson he could prove Sheriff Wakely a liar.

Vague in the night, he saw that Jordan was already mounted. He jammed his Colt into the holster, ducked under the rail and headed for the dun at a run. Shadow now shrouded the three outlaws, but, he considered, Jordan had drawn their stings.

Breathing hard, he reached his pony, shook its reins loose from the hitchrail and swung into the saddle. A surge of patrons was now erupting from the cantina. Mackay roweled and raised his reins. Neck to neck, the two ponies shot forward, their hooves scattering dirt and pebbles. He heard a low drone, like that of an angry hornet. A choking gasp left Jordan's throat. Their mounts were pounding across the plaza now. Mackay's head pivoted toward his companion. Jordan had collapsed across his claybank's withers, hands latched onto the saddlehorn. Low on his back, the bone handle of a knife protruded like a stubby horn. Reins hanging loose, the pony was bolting, head outstretched, tail streaming.

Mackay kned his dun close, reached and grabbed one of the dangling reins. Side by side, the two ponies drummed over the ground, heading north, for the border. Mackay snatched a glance behind. There did not seem to be any pursuit.

They flashed past the Mexican custom house, dim in the night. Back on American soil, Mackay yanked the hard-breathing ponies down to a trot. Dark masses of brush that bordered the rutted road offered concealment. He wheeled off, crashed through the brush and checked their sweat-plastered mounts.

Dismounting, he ground-hitched the dun and gave at-

tention to his companion. Jordan seemed to be unconscious, but his hands were still locked on the saddlehorn. As Mackay stood pondering his next move, the grip loosened. The slack form of the big man began sliding sideways, thudded heavily to the ground and lay unmoving, face downward.

This was one hell of a tight, reflected Mackay. Jordan was wounded, perhaps dying. They were in strange territory, packing a stack of dinero, not to speak of the looted diamonds, and three outlaws were liable to come helling on their trail at any moment. He eyed the inert form. It was a sure thing he had to remove that knife and pack Jordan to a sawbones.

He dropped on one knee beside the body. Grabbing the bone handle of the blade with one hand, he yanked. The wounded man groaned, his body quivered convulsively, but the knife remained immovable. Mackay remembered that flesh and muscle closed on a blade, holding it like a clamp. Sweating, he tried again, with both hands, jerking and twisting. The blade slid out, followed by a gush of blood that rapidly soaked Jordan's gray shirt. Hastily, Mackay snatched off his bandanna, ripped off a strip, wadded it and thrust it into the gaping slit. He wrestled the slack form back into the saddle, lashed the dangling legs beneath the claybank's barrel and roped the wilted body to the horn. Blood still seeped from the wound, around the makeshift plug. Now, he considered, he had to get the big man more skilled attention—and fast. It was a sure thing he wouldn't survive the long ride back to Tucson.

Mounting, he led the claybank with its burden at a walk through the brush, back to the stage road.

Light showed in the store with the ocotillo fence. Mackay headed toward it, passed through a gateway and

approached the log building. It was fronted by a wide gallery. A stable lamp, hanging by the doorway, cast wan light on several old rockers lined against the front of the store. At his approach, a man rose from one of the rockers. He was undersized, pot-bellied, with black button eyes set in features as brown and wizened as a dry prune. A dingy apron draped his front.

Mackay dismounted. The wizened trader stood watching, shrewd glance darting from the form lumped on the claybank to the chunky-built rider. "A stiff?" he inquired, in piping, high-pitched tones.

"Nope," said Mackay shortly. "Some coyote knifed my pard and he's lost plenty blood. You got a sawbones around here?"

"None closer than the fort."

"Where's the fort?"

"On the Tombstone trail. Twenty—twenty-five miles distant I'd guess."

Mackay stood considering this. "He'd never make it," he decided. "I got to get him to bed."

"Not here!" said the trader, and spat.

A plump woman, with dark liquid eyes and smooth olive complexion, emerged silently from the store and came up beside the wizened trader. She wore the flowing rebozo of the Mexican, and a red skirt flapped against her thick legs.

The two exchanged low-voiced talk.

"He—dodging a warrant?" inquired the trader suddenly.

"Nopel"

"Maybe we could make a dicker." Mackay sensed a more conciliatory note in the other's tone. "My woman doctors folks around here."

Mackay moved over to the claybank, unbuckled a

saddlebag, careful to shield its contents with his body from the scrutiny of the pair beneath the gallery canopy. As he expected, the saddlebag was stuffed with greenbacks Jordan had gathered up in the cantina. He shoved a handful into a pants pocket.

"What's it worth to take care of him 'til I get help from Tucson?" he inquired, stepping back into the dim light of the stable lamp.

The trader considered, an acquisitive gleam in his small eyes. "Five hundred dollars!" he declared.

"One hundred!" snapped Mackay. "Take it or leave it."

"Two-fifty!" piped the other.

"One hundred!" reiterated Mackay, and turned away.

"It's a deal" ejaculated the trader hastily, as he was about to mount. Mackay turned back and counted crumpled greenbacks into the wizened man's eager palm.

The Mexican woman, watching in silence, lifted down the stable lamp. Following her, Mackay packed Jordan's slack form through the store, into a small, sparsely-furnished room that lay in the rear, and laid him on a truckle bed.

Hooking the bail of the lamp on a spike, the woman briskly went to work—yanked off the wounded man's boots, peeled off his blood-soaked shirt and pants.

Mackay watching, she brought in a basin of water and a towel, with a partially filled bottle of bourbon. Gently, she washed off congealed blood around the wound. The crippled man groaned and writhed when she removed the wad that plugged the gash and liberally spilled the fiery liquor over it. Ripping off a strip of towel, she next soaked it in the bourbon and replugged the wound.

As she busied herself, a thought struck Mackay. He

picked up Jordan's pants, fingered the pockets and found a buckskin pouch, secured at the neck with a leather whang. He slipped off the whang and peered inside—diamonds gleamed in the yellow lamplight.

NINE

IT WAS PAST noon when Mackay's pony, jaded and foot-sore, jogged into Tucson. Bleary-eyed and bone-weary, its rider slumped in the saddle. Since sunup of the previous day he'd had little or no rest and he was on the raw edge of exhaustion. He stabled the dun in Larsen's Livery, shouldered his saddlebag and plodded over to the Ornadorff Hotel.

When he booked a room, the clerk cast a dubious look at his unshaven features and trail-stained garb. He guessed he must have looked like a saddle bum, but was too weary to care. The lobby was empty except for two cowmen arguing stock prices and a hatchet-faced individual engrossed in *The Citizen*. He recognized Beecher. That hombre, he thought irritably, seemed always underfoot.

He legged up to the room, dumped the saddlebags in a corner and dropped the pouch of diamonds into a bureau drawer. Then he sagged onto the bed. All he craved was sleep, but he couldn't forget that he'd left Jordan crippled, maybe dying, at the trading post outside Nogales. Odds were the cattle buyer's niece was waiting anxiously to learn the result of their trip. What was more, they had to get a sawbones down to Nogales to aid the wounded man. This was no time to sleep.

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Wearily, he came to his feet and headed out into the corridor. Pausing at #27, Carol Jordan's room, he knuckled. The door opened quickly. Crisp and cool in a tight-waisted flowered calico dress, the blonde stood eyeing his disheveled form. "Where's Walt—Mr. Jordan?" she inquired with quick concern.

"Knifed!" said Mackay laconically.

"Not—dead?" The girl had stiffened with shock.

"Nope," he reassured her, and relaxed tiredly against the door jamb.

"Well—what?" she demanded, as near panic as he had ever seen her. As an afterthought, the girl added, "You'd better come in and sit down."

"Or I'll likely fall down," he retorted wryly, stepped inside and sank onto a straight-backed chair.

He told of the fracas in the cantina across the border, recovery of the diamonds and the knife that had been hurled through the night. "Right now," he wound up, "your uncle's being taken care of at a trading post, outside Nogales, this side of the line. Guess he lost plenty blood. He needs a sawbones."

"Of course he'll need a doctor," she agreed, and added with quick decision, "there are several in Tucson—we should leave immediately."

"First I got to grab a little shuteye," protested Mackay. "Whatsay you round up the sawbones and we'll pull out at sundown."

Plainly agitated, the girl paced the carpet with nervous strides. She checked and faced him, blue eyes hard as glass. "Now!" she insisted.

"Sundown!" he grunted stubbornly. "I just finished a seventy-mile ride and it's seventy back to the border. My pony's gaunted and I'm in no better shape."

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Her tone brittle. "There are fresh horses at the livery."

"Not for me!" he declared. "I got to grab some sleep. Quit sweating, ma'am. Jordan's in friendly hands."

The blonde's lips curled. "And wounded, perhaps dying. Do you call that loyalty?"

"What more do you crave—for \$100?" he growled. He could drop dead, he reflected, and Carol Jordan wouldn't give a damn.

"I'll add another \$100—if we leave now!"

"Sundown!" he persisted and yawned.

"Now!" the girl insisted coldly.

Too bone-weary for argument, Mackay levered to his feet, moved toward the door. The blonde said nothing more, just stood eyeing him with tight anger as he lurched, rather than walked, from the room.

Carol Jordan hadn't even mentioned the diamonds, he thought, heading back to his own room. All her concern seemed to be for the welfare of her uncle. She must think a whole lot of the hombre. As for himself, he'd grant that Jordan was a good man in a tight, but he'd sure never pick him for a pard.

To his surprise, the door of his room was ajar, and he could have sworn he'd closed it. He kicked it back, blundered in—jerked back on his heels as he came face to face with Sheriff Wakely. The old buzzard looked as though he was on the peck, he considered, eyeing Wakely's flat-planed, eroded features.

"Wal?" he challenged. "You still riding me?"

"You've been out of town!" accused the sheriff.

"For the plain purpose of proving you a liar," retorted Mackay. Then he noticed that his empty saddlebags lay on the bed, and a pile of greenback was neatly

stacked on the bureau, together with the pouch of diamonds.

"So you've been gophering around!" he commented.

"And found plenty!" bit back Wakely.

It seemed that everyone was conspiring to pester him, reflected Mackay, fighting fatigue. "I just brought them diamonds up from Nogales," he explained, with faint patience.

"Double-crossed your pards?"

"My pards hell!" exploded Mackay, with rising ire. "Now listen!" He told of riding south with Jordan, playing the cattle buyer's hunch, and again recounted the events of the previous night.

Stony-eyed, the lawman heard him through. When he concluded, Wakely snorted. "Windies! Windies! Windies!"

"I got proof!" asserted Mackay promptly. "You brace Miss Carol, she's in room 27. The gal heard us chew it over before we pulled out."

Wakely looked beyond him. "Go get Jordan's niece!" he said resignedly. Mackay turned and became aware for the first time that a heavy-shouldered deputy had been standing silent behind the half-open door.

Stoically, he listened to the clomp of the deputy's boots, dying down the corridor. Every limb seemed leaded. "You got any objection if I take the weight off my legs?" he asked the sheriff. The lawman shrugged and he dropped onto a chair, slack as a half-filled sack.

He heard the thud of the returning deputy's footsteps. "Twenty-seven's empty," reported the man. "The gal ain't there."

So she'd skipped out, almost at his heels, thought Mackay. Likely she was scurrying around town, hunting

a sawbones. And odds were they'd hit for Nogales right away. It sure played heck with his alibi.

The sheriff jerked his gun, leveled it. With his free hand, he slipped the buckle of Mackay's gunbelt, swung the belt off and flung it to his deputy. "Check his iron!" he directed.

Glumly, the chunky rider watched as the heavy-shouldered man opened the loading gate, swung the cylinder out, eyed the loads. "One spent shell!" he reported.

"So you blasted Jordan," mused Wakely.

"Quit hurrahin' mel!" snapped the prisoner.

The dehydrated sheriff stood looking him over. "That dry blood on your pants?"

"Jordan's," explained Mackay, with tired exasperation, "from the knife wound. I yanked the blade out."

"You're slick, Mackay," the sheriff's voice grated like a rusty batwing. "I catch you with your pants down, the loot in your possession and you spin a yarn that would make a jury laugh out loud. This is how I figure things—Jordan hired you to ride herd on his niece, seeing she was packing a fortune in diamonds. You tip off your pards. They stage a holdup. The five of you figure to meet in Nogales for the divvy. You toll Jordan down there, 'cross your pards and grab the loot. Then you beef Jordan, make a getaway with the diamonds—and his dinero. The evidence is right there." He nodded at the pouch and currency on the bureau.

Mackay stood open-mouthed, fatigue forgotten, absorbing the lawman's flat-voiced accusation. "You're crazy as a coot," he protested. "It was Jordan's idea to head for Nogales. You brace Jordan!"

"Ef he's in shape to testify," drawled Wakely. "My guess is he's dead."

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"You figure I'd ride back to Tucson if I'd grabbed the diamonds?"

"You got gall enough," said the sheriff grimly. "I'm arresting you for robbery with violence. If Jordan's wormfeed, guess we'll switch it to murder. Take him away, Jackman!"

A beefy hand dropped onto Mackay's shoulder, steered him toward the doorway. He moved like a man in a trance, his brain numbed by fatigue and shock.

In the sheriff's office, Jackman relieved him of his personal possessions. The jailer, a stocky, peg-legged man, a jingling hoop of keys in one hand and a smoky stable lamp in the other, led him down a wooden stairway into the cavernous basement of the courthouse. The lamplight gleamed on rugged rock columns that supported the building above, sent shadows writhing into the gloom. A stench that turned the prisoner's stomach lay on the stagnant air.

The jailer unlocked the gate of a steel-barred cell and propelled Mackay inside. The gate slammed shut with a metallic clang. The glow of the lamp receded and he was left in darkness. Gradually his eyes adjusted to the gloom. He discerned gratings, patched gray, high up on the walls, a metal bucket in a corner of the cell and a stained mattress thrown on a low bench. Still in a state of bewilderment, he moved to the bench and stretched out. The mattress was lumpy and it stank, but he was so worn out that he could have rested easy on a cactus patch.

Silence dwelt like a shroud on the basement jail, unbroken except for the faint squealing of rats. The prisoner lay on his back, staring into darkness, his mind seething turmoil. Unconsciously, as his raw nerves were

soothed by the quiet, he relaxed—drifted off into a sleep of exhaustion.

When Mackay awoke, he stared around with perplexity. Gray light filtered through metal gratings; on one side of the basement bars of sunlight speared through the murk like flaming swords. Remembrance of his arrest flowed into his mind. He levered to a sitting position and sat, legs hanging over the edge of the bench, gloomily considering his predicament. If Jordan had checked out, he cogitated, he had no means of refuting the sheriff's charge. Who was to say he hadn't knifed Jordan? And what proof could he advance that he wasn't tied in with the renegades? True, Carol Jordan could testify that he'd ridden south at her uncle's suggestion. But what if she turned sour? The "soft job" Dolores had steered his way seemed likely to end in a noose. Lady Luck must sure have split her gussets laughing the day he rode into Tucson with money to burn.

TEN

BEFORE NOON, the prisoner had a visitor. It was Dolores, a subdued Dolores, carrying a folded copy of *The Citizen*, fresh from the press. Her features were destitute of paint and powder and the demure calico dress she wore covered her shapely calves and buttoned high in the neck. The only touch of color about the girl was a bright red ribbon securing the flowing tresses of her raven hair.

"Ten minutes!" grunted Limpy, the wooden-faced jailer. He subsided against a rock pillar and worried a

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chaw from a block of chewing tobacco. The girl stepped hesitantly up to the cell.

"Howdy, Bill" she greeted hesitantly. Half fearfully, she looked around the gloomy courthouse basement. "They shouldn't keep hogs in this hole. And does it whiff!"

"It's sure no rose garden," agreed the man behind the bars gruffly. "I figured you ditched me."

"I should have," she retorted, with a touch of her old spirit, "sashaying around with that high-stepping blonde."

"Who tolled me onto said blonde?" he demanded.

When Dolores remained silent, he added, with a tight grin, "Guess Jordan fooled us both, he forgot to mention that niece of his had grown into a big gal."

"Big girl" she snapped. "That frozen-faced blonde's thirty if she's a day. And you were fawning on the hussy in The Imperial like a puppy begging for a pat."

"You got to admit that she's a looker."

"So's a china doll—and how come she was trying to sneak those diamonds through to St. Louis?"

"They're her diamonds!"

"According to the sheriff you had a yen to make them yours."

"Wakely got his spurs tangled."

"The boys around The Outpost didn't think so, after reading this." She thrust the newspaper between the bars. Mackay glimpsed a headline: **HOLDUP LOOT RECOVERED**, and read:

Sheriff Wakely reports that the outlaws responsible for the recent Butterfield stage holdup in the Rincóns have been located, south of the border. It will be recalled that Miss Carol Jordan, a passenger, was despoiled of the proceeds from the sale of her de-

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ceased father's ranch, which she had converted into diamonds. These have been recovered from the hotel room of an itinerant gunhand, William Mackay. Mackay has been arrested and is now in the county jail. The sheriff states there is reason to believe that he was working in cahoots with the holdup gang after being hired by Walt Jordan, a cattle buyer, to safeguard his niece. Mackay is also suspected of tolling Jordan south and killing him. Investigation is proceeding and may culminate in a murder charge.

"You believe that hogwash?" demanded the prisoner with disgust, as he returned the newspaper.

"What else can I believe?"

"The truth!" he barked. "Now listen." He told of the ride to Nogales to recover the diamonds, Jordan's knifing and his own return to Tucson. "Afore I could hand the diamonds over," he concluded, "the sheriff grabbed me."

"Why hasn't the blonde cleared you?" inquired the girl, with a puzzled frown.

Mackay raised his shoulders. "I'd say she hotfooted south so fast to help this uncle that she hasn't wised up that Wakely jugged me."

"Perhaps she'll never come back!"

"She will!" the prisoner asserted confidently, "Wake-ly's holding her diamonds."

"And you're due to appear before the Circuit Judge."

"I'll be out before he gets around."

"You should hire a mouthpiece!" declared Dolores.

"What would I use for dinero?"

"I've got plenty—stashed away."

Dolores, beneath the veneer of toughness, was as soft at heart as a watermelon, he thought, and he wasn't

about to take advantage of her good nature. He'd never had any use for hombres who sponged on women.

"You leave it just where it is," he directed curtly. "Jordan and the gal will likely be back any day. They straighten out the whole mess and I walk out."

"You seem very sure," returned the girl doubtfully.

"I'm plumb certain!"

"I could put up bail!"

"You'll put up nothing!" he snapped.

"Don't get your bristles up!" Her dark eyes sparkled.

"Just keep your snout out of my business," he told her brusquely, conscious that his good resolutions were wilting at the prospect of freedom.

Dolores tautened. "If that's the way you want it, Mister High-and-Mighty, why should I argue?" She swung angrily toward the jailer. "Let me out of here! This hammerhead is expecting a blonde." Stiff-backed, she followed pegleg to the stairway.

Mackay stood glumly eyeing the slim form as it receded, mentally cursing his rough tongue. Sight of Dolores and sound of her husky voice had been as refreshing as a shower in the desert, but it seemed that sparks flew every time they got together. Now he had driven away the one person whose loyalty he could bank on.

Day after day dragged, each a monotony of waiting and speculating. He'd figured that the blonde, after checking on her uncle's condition, would have headed back to Tucson to claim her stones, but now it seemed that she was staying at Jordan's side. Even so, he argued mentally, the sheriff had had ample time to get in touch with both and verify his story. But apparently Wakely had done nothing, figuring him guilty. Seemed no one, except Dolores, cared a hoot whether or not he rotted in jail—and he'd brushed her off as if she'd been a pesky

fly. Miserably, he itched around the steel cage. His angry questions and protests flowed off the impassive jailer like loose sand off a lava knob.

Finally diversion came, in the shape of Paul the Preacher. The bearded evangelist swept into the murky depths of the basement like a cyclone, big Bible tucked under one arm, tails of his shiny frockcoat flying. Denunciation in his piercing eyes, he strode up to the bars of the cell. "He that steals commits trespass against the Lord," he boomed. "You have sinned, brother, and sinned sorely. Repent before you are consigned to the raging fires of hell."

"Quit braying," advised the prisoner, scowling between the bars. "I got nothing to repent."

"Nothing to repent!" roared Paul. "You conspire with outlaws, you rob a fatherless girl, and some even claim you have slain her protector. On your knees, sinner, and implore mercy!"

Mackay glowered at the black-bearded evangelist. "I stole nothing, I beefed no one," he asserted brittlely.

"The ill-gotten gains were concealed in your room, brother."

The prisoner resisted an impulse to close his lips and turn his back on the gaunt Preacher, but he couldn't forget that Paul had sided him in The Outpost. It seemed that he had been entombed in this foul hole for a lifetime. Carol Jordan had failed to return and clear him. When each day dragged to a close, hope receded a little further. The Preacher represented a link with the outside. If he, like Dolores, left in disgust, there'd be no one left who cared if he lived or died. Maybe he could convince Paul of his innocence.

"Listen!" he begged. "I'll give you the straight story, and I swear every word is gospel."

"There is joy in Heaven when a sinner repenteth."

"Like I said," persisted Mackay patiently, "I got nothing to repent." The jailer, apparently deciding that a preacher needed no watching, was thumping up the stairway. With his disappearance, the wild-maned Paul's demeanor underwent a surprising change. His mobile lips curved into a smile, he fished the makin's out of a pocket in the tail of his frockcoat, passed them to the prisoner. "I'm listening, brother," he said in matter-of-fact tones, "with both ears."

The prisoner eagerly built a cigarette, drew with a sigh of satisfaction. "I sure can't figure you, mister," he said.

"You got no time for figuring, brother," threw back the Preacher, expertly fashioning a smoke for himself. "Start dribbling—before Stumpy gives me marching orders."

Once again, Mackay told his story. Beyond the bars, Paul puffed his cigarette, digesting the prisoner's words. "My idea is this," concluded Mackay. "Carol, the niece, was crazy over her uncle. She likely grabbed a saw-bones and hit for Nogales right away. Odds are she's still at that trader's, nursing Jordan, figuring I'm holding her diamonds."

"Whereas," put in Paul, stroking his beard, "they are in the sheriff's possession."

"Sure! Now ef you'd take word to the gal that Wakely grabbed the stones and dumped me in the cooler, I'd sure be thanking you. Have her ride up, collect the sparklers—and ease me out of this tight."

The jailer's steps drummed on the stairway. Like a cloak, the bearded man again assumed the role of preacher. "The Good Book directs us to succor the weak and aid the downtrodden," he boomed. "You have

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fallen upon evil days, brother. Should I, like the Levite, pass on the other side? The good Lord directed my steps to this foul dungeon, to bring succor and solace."

"Just bring the gal back," said Mackay.

That Bible puncher was sure as crazy as popcorn on a hot stove, mused the prisoner, when his unexpected visitor had climbed the stairs and vanished from view, yet somehow he inspired confidence. For no good reason, a hunch persisted that the Preacher would help ease him out of the jackpot he'd stumbled into, and hope began to glimmer through the fog of depression. Then the thought came that maybe the blonde had already returned, collected her diamonds and left for the East. She'd never been overly friendly, he pondered, why should she waste time clearing a hired gunman who'd botched his job? Moodily chewing over this new possibility, he dropped on his bunk.

ELEVEN

DAY AFTER DAY passed, but no further word from outside relieved the dreary treadmill of the hours. Hope gradually died in the prisoner and dejection again enveloped him like a shroud. It may have been a week after the Preacher's visit—or more—Mackay had quit keeping tabs on time, when he heard the familiar thud of the jailer's wooden stump on the stairway.

Listlessly lying on the stained mattress, he turned his head uncuriously at the jangle of keys. "Rattle your hocks," grunted Limpy, "sheriff craves a word with you."

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Apathetically, Mackay swung his legs off the bench, dogged the jailer, blinking at the glare of sunlight when he emerged in the courthouse corridor.

Wakely hunched at his battered rolltop desk, lips a tight line beneath the drooping mustache. The sheriff was plainly annoyed. Then the prisoner focused on Carol Jordan, cool and composed, perched daintily on a chair. Her head turned at his entrance and her china-blue eyes ran over him with no more interest than if he'd been a piece of furniture.

"Wal," said Wakely, reluctance on his tone, "I guess Miss Jordan here cleared you, Mackay."

"If he'd ridden down to Nogales with me and the doctor, the misunderstanding would never have arisen," commented the girl crisply.

Mackay stood silent, battling rising anger that his incarceration in the stinking hole below should be so lightly dismissed.

With manifest disgust, the lawman slid open a drawer of his desk, lifted out a large envelope, raised the flap with a thumb and spilled the prisoner's wallet, jack-knife, some silver, onto the desk, reached for a peg and dropped a gunbelt beside them. "Your personal effects," he growled. "Grab 'em—and get out!" It was apparent the release stuck in his craw.

Mackay found it hard to believe that at last he was free, free to go wherever he wished and do what he craved. The proceedings seemed to hold a dreamlike quality. He had a notion that at any moment he might wake up and find himself lying in the stinking basement cell.

Mechanically, he gathered up his possessions, swung the gunbelt around his waist.

Wakely, meanwhile, was lifting a buckskin pouch out

of another drawer. "Your diamonds, Miss Jordan," he said. "Jake Hertel, who runs The Emporium down street, tells me they're worth a quarter-million."

The girl held out a white-gloved hand for the pouch, casually dropped it into a fancy handbag.

"Maybe you should tally 'em, ma'am," suggested the sheriff gruffly. "I'll be needing a receipt."

The girl shrugged. While the three men watched, she dipped into the bag, brought out the pouch and slipped off the whang that secured its neck. Carelessly, she spilled the contents in a scintillating stream into a gloved hand, then slowly dribbled the stones back into the pouch. "Thirty-seven!" she announced, when the last glittering chip of fire disappeared, and flashed a brief smile. "Correct!"

"Then there's these greenbacks," continued Wakely, riffling a thick wad of currency. "They tally \$1,460." He eyed Mackay. "You claim 'em? They were found in your hotel room."

"Nopel" the chunky rider told him promptly. "I emptied Jordan's saddlebags when he was knifed." He didn't add that this was stake money in the outlaws' poker game, gathered up by the cattle buyer.

"My uncle usually carried a considerable sum of money," put in the girl composedly. "May I have them, please?"

The sheriff handed her the wad. "Now ma'am," he said, "sign these receipts and I guess we're through."

Mackay followed Carol Jordan from the office, still battling a feeling of unreality. At the head of the red-brick courthouse steps he paused, stood breathing deeply of the sage-scented air.

"Are you all right?" inquired the girl, turning.

"Fine as silk, ma'am," he assured her. "This air sure

smells good, packs more kick than a mule." He dropped in beside her. "How come you took a lifetime to come up and ace me out?"

"My uncle needed a nurse," she threw back unconcernedly. "He was dreadfully weak."

"How's he doing now?"

"Quite well, he should be able to sit a saddle very soon."

"Guess you're through with me."

"Indeed not!" she returned quickly. "Walt—my uncle—expects you to ride down with me and escort us back to Tucson."

"Maybe I've got different ideas."

"Let's not wrangle," she retorted, with taut impatience. "We'll discuss the matter later."

"You have a visit from a crazy Preacher, calls himself Paul?" he queried, as they paced along the plankwalk.

"One I'll never forget," she assured him, with faint amusement. "The man exuded hell and hallelujah, threatened me with eternal damnation if I didn't hurry back to Tucson and effect the release of a misguided sinner by the name of Mackay."

"So that brought you up!"

"A week later," she admitted candidly, "when I was certain uncle was out of danger."

"Guess you wouldn't know what it's like to be penned in that hole," he said slowly.

"Am I supposed to know?" she inquired, with cold hauteur.

They stepped into the lobby of the Ornadorff Hotel. Among the scattering of guests lounging in rockers Mackay glimpsed the hatchet-faced man, immaculate in white linen and dark suit, and noted that his sharp eyes followed them as they crossed the lobby. Just why, he

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wondered, was that Beecher hombre always hanging around.

Mackay angled across to the desk and booked a bed. When, key in hand, he mounted to the second floor, the blonde was standing at the door of her room. "Would you care to eat—at The Imperial?" She spoke innocently enough, but he detected lurking amusement in her brittle blue eyes.

"Sure would!" he exclaimed. "But first I got to get a bath and shuck these frowsy duds."

"An excellent idea," she agreed, her nose wrinkling. "I'll meet you in an hour—in the lobby."

The attention of a barber, a soak in a zinc-lined tub behind the tonsorial parlor, a clean shirt and pants, and the newly released prisoner began to feel that life was worthwhile.

In an amiable mood, he returned to the hotel, dropped into a shabby but comfortable leather-upholstered rocker and made a smoke. Maybe, he considered, he wasn't showing good sense nursing a grudge against Jordan's niece. It was plain that the girl was so wrapped up in her uncle that she couldn't bring herself to leave him sooner, but he'd gamble that if Dolores had worn her shoes, the dark-haired girl would have aced him out pronto.

Heads around turned and he saw the blonde was descending the stairway, a vision in a cream dress, wasp-waisted and flowing around her ankles. The golden tresses of her hair, smooth-plaited, crowned her proudly-poised head, and her perfectly formed features were stamped with regal aloofness. Carol Jordan was a knock-out, he thought, but she left him unmoved. Sure she was beautiful, but it was a hard, brittle beauty. She

lacked the warm spark of humanity that fired Dolores. He'd be glad to be shut of her.

At noon, business wasn't too brisk in The Imperial and he hurried the blonde into the semi-privacy of a booth. This would be a good time to cut his rope, he decided. The girl and her uncle had brought him nothing but trouble. He'd given plenty service for the \$100 he'd collected. If Jordan craved a gun to guard those diamonds, let him look elsewhere. He, Bill Mackay, had had a bellyful.

They ordered. He cleared his throat to announce his decision but the blonde checked him with upraised hand. Without speaking, she opened her handbag, brought out the thick wad of currency Wakely had turned over. Wondering, he watched as she began stripping off greenbacks. When the stack totalled \$500 she pushed it across the table toward him.

"What's this?" he demanded, forehead creased.

"Compensation, for helping recover my diamonds."

He pushed the money back. "Forget it!" he told her.

"Please yourself," she returned indifferently. "It's Uncle's money and his idea. I'm not asking you to accept the currency as a favor, but simply as a right. Don't you think you deserve payment for risking your life fighting those outlaws?"

Mackay eyed the greenbacks, frowning. In effect, he reflected, Jordan was divvying up one-third of the dinero he had collected from the holdup gang. He'd earned the money and he sure could use it. When he'd paid for this meal he'd be down to his last dollar. With a shrug, he reached, swept up the bills and stuffed them into a pants pocket.

"Now," said the blonde briskly, "when do we leave for Nogales?"

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He half opened his mouth to protest that he was through, remembered the \$500 he had just pocketed, closed it and sat eyeing his companion with angry frustration. The girl had him thrown and hogtied. She'd guessed he intended to quit and had neatly corralled him with the \$500 donation. Now he was under an obligation.

"Well?" she prompted, an edge to her tone.

"What's taking us to Nogales?" he demanded.

"My uncle. He's still weak and he'll need an escort back to Tucson. I heard reports that those outlaws were still lurking around."

"Guess I can pull out—any time," he told her grudgingly, "but, for gosh sakes, stash those stones with Wells Fargo."

"I intend to deposit them in the hotel safe."

At least, thought Mackay, with relief, he wouldn't have a quarter-million dollars worth of diamonds to guard when they hit for Nogales.

Back at the Ornadorff, he waited in the lobby while she climbed the stairs to her room and returned carrying the pouch in a gloved hand.

Together, they approached the desk. "I wish to leave some valuable stones in the hotel safe," the girl told the clerk. "Is it quite secure?"

The clerk, a perky little man, smiled with practiced affability. "Its the largest and strongest safe in town, ma'am," he assured her.

She pushed the buckskin pouch across the counter. The clerk slipped it into a large envelope, sealed the flap and extended a pen. "Kindly sign across the seal," he purred, "then you will be assured that the package will be returned, intact."

The blonde scrawled her signature, the perky little

man handed her a numbered receipt and wrote the number on the envelope. Mackay watched the proceedings idly, not guessing that later he would have good reason to recount every detail.

TWELVE

IT WAS STILL light when Mackay and the girl, dust-grimed, rode into the huddle of shacks and adobes that was Nogales. They jogged through the elongated shadows of the black walnuts among which the trading post stood, and dismounted outside the timbered building.

Like a shriveled mummy, the potbellied trader lumped on a rocker beneath the wooden canopy of the gallery, sloe-button eyes following their every movement.

Carol Jordan stood beating dust off the folds of her dress. "How's Mr. Jordan?" she inquired offhand.

"I wouldn't know, ma'am," piped the trader.

The girl stiffened, eyeing him closely. "What do you mean?" she asked sharply.

"He ain't herel" There was uneasiness in the man's tone.

Mackay, wrapping the ponies' reins around one of the poles that supported the canopy, checked, listening.

"He's—not—herel" repeated the blonde incredulously.

"Three jaspers rode in the day you pulled out, grabbed the gent and beat it."

The girl swung to face Mackay. Her poise had melted, her oval features were shadowed with apprehension and

stark fear lurked in her eyes. "He's—gone!" she almost whispered.

"I heard!" returned Mackay shortly.

He jingled up to the wizened trader, grabbed his shoulders with both hands, lifted him out of his seat, slammed him against the timbered front of the store. "Start talking, before I tear you apart," he growled. "Where's Jordan?"

"Quit!" squealed the potbellied man. "I had no part in it. They left a note."

"Let me see it," grunted Mackay, still retaining a grip on one of the cringing trader's shoulders. The other hastily fumbled at a pocket, brought out a creased sheet and thrust it into Mackay's extended hand. Penciled in rambling letters were three words, THE CANTINA ELEGANTE.

Mackay loosed the man, turned to Carol Jordan, handed her the sheet.

"The Cantina Elegante?" She eyed him, puzzled.

"That's the cantina where we corralled the lobos, across the border," he explained. "I guess the gang got him."

"Why?"

"It's plain as plowed ground," he retorted. "A deal! Jordan for the diamonds."

The wizened trader was cautiously sliding through the doorway, into the store. Mackay jumped and grabbed him again. "You're working in cahoots with the lobos!" he accused.

"My hands are clean—I swear it!" quavered the other. "Hell, mister, what could I do—against three tough hombres?"

"I gamble you sold Jordan out," said Mackay softly. "Maybe I should work you over."

"Loose him!" put in the girl sharply, she seemed to have recovered her self-possession. "His wife was—most kind."

With no enthusiasm Mackay slackened his grip and the potbellied man scuttled inside. "Now what?" he demanded of the girl.

"I'm riding to this Cantina Elegante, right now," she announced.

"Me—not you," he threw back. "You stay right here, on U.S. territory. The setup is as plain as a horn on a saddle. Like I said, that bunch got a trade in mind. They been keeping cases on this joint, waiting 'til he was in shape to be moved. You rode north and they jumped in."

"We'll go together," she insisted. "Perhaps they mistreated Walt. He may need medical attention."

"You'd never know," he said grimly. "If he's kidnapped, he's cached in some spot we'd never locate in a coon's age. Let me duck over the line and size up the setup."

The blonde stood unconsciously kneading the note with her fingers.

More kindly, Mackay added, "Just stay put, ma'am. I'll be back pronto."

Hopelessly, she nodded. Jordan's disappearance, he thought, had taken all the sand out of her.

For a second time he rode south, crossed the border, jogged past the red-tiled Mexican custom house, entered the dusty plaza, framed by flat-topped adobes. Daylight was fading now, purpling the heavens and peopling the plaza with shadow, through which drifted swarthy riders, an old man herding scrawny goats, white-chemised, red-skirted women.

Outside La Cantina Elegante he dismounted and

tied the reins to the rail. It was still early in the evening and there was not the press of ponies there had been before. When he stepped through the doorway he saw that the musicians' platform was bare. A sprinkling of spurred vaqueros lounged along the bar or slacked around tables. His glance flicked around, picked up a knot of card players in the corner, exactly as before, except there were three where there had previously been four. Threading between tables toward them, he recognized the squatty rider Jordan had named Plug, Kelly, the long-mustachioed outlaw and a horse-faced hombre whose name he didn't know.

Reaching the table, he stood watching them, thumbs hooked in his gunbelt. Every man, he noted, held his cards in his left hand. They knew who he was and why he was there. Kelly dropped five dog-eared pasteboards and looked up, right hand caressing the butt of his holstered gun. He was rangy, rawboned, with humorous eyes, clad in a faded hickory shirt and dirt-grimed denims.

"B'jesus," he said, "look what the wind blowed in!"

Three pairs of alert eyes dwelt on the newcomer. Techy as lobos on the prowl, he registered.

"Take the weight off your legs," said Kelly, "and keep your grubhooks on the table."

With a tight grin, Mackay pulled out a chair and dropped onto it.

"Have a snort!" invited the mustachioed rider and pushed a half-empty bottle of tequila in his direction.

Mackay took a snort, a very short snort, of the fiery liquor, and set the bottle down. "So," he commented, "you grabbed Jordan."

"Yep!" agreed Kelly, "We got—Jordan." All three grinned at mention of the name.

"What's so funny?" inquired Mackay, surveying their hard faces.

"You wouldn't savvy, pard," soothed Kelly.

"Wal, what's the deal?"

"A swap!" returned the mustachioed rider promptly. "The sparklers fr Jordan."

"Maybe the stones are out of reach."

"That'll be too bad—for Jordan. Ain't that so, Tod?"

The horse-faced outlaw grunted and scowled at Mackay. A black stubble of beard mottled his lantern jaw and a tangle of greasy black hair showed beneath his weathered Stetson. "Let's quit horsing around," he growled. "We get the sparklers, pronto—or the buzzards get Jordan."

"Savvy, pard?" inquired Kelly, with a grin.

Mackay nodded, and scraped back his chair. "Wal, I got to chew this over with the woman. I'll be back."

"Jordan's wife?" inquired Kelly.

"Nope, his niece."

"The blonde?"

"Yep!"

"Make it soon," said Kelly. "Jordan ain't feeling so good."

Riding back through the night, Mackay pondered on the meeting. There was only one joker in the deck, he considered, there was no proof that Jordan was alive. Odds were he was already dead and buried. That would be the easiest way out for the bunch he had just left. Alive, the cattle buyer had to be guarded, fed, kept in concealment. Dead, he offered no problem. There wasn't a hardcase around that table who wouldn't kill just for the hell of it. South of the border they could laugh at posses and peace officers.

When he stepped out of leather at the trading post

he saw that a shaggy mule was tied to one of the up-rights. Slack in a rocker, long legs outstretched, bulking like a shaggy bear, was the Preacher. On her feet, Carol Jordan fretted back and forth across the gallery. She hurried toward him, her pale features a blur in the uncertain light. "Is Walt—safe?" she inquired breathlessly.

"Guess so," he told her. "Rest your legs and I'll give you the lowdown." He steered the anxious girl to a rocker and gave Paul a genial "Howdy!"

"Man is of few days and full of trouble," intoned the Preacher.

"You said it!" ejaculated Mackay fervently. "Ain't nothing but trouble around here."

"About—my uncle," queried the girl, with itching impatience.

"They'll trade," Mackay told her laconically, "Jordan for the diamonds."

"He who trades his soul for wealth shall burn in hell's fire," boomed the bearded Preacher.

"Hush up!" exclaimed the blonde, then to Mackay, "So Walt is alive and well?"

"Guess so."

"You guess!" she bristled. "Don't you know?"

He raised his shoulders.

"The good Lord marks the fall of a sparrow, sister," put in Paul, in no wise abashed. "Put your trust in him and all will be well."

"Oh, quit psalm-singing," she snapped. "My uncle is in grave danger."

"You crave to make a deal, ma'am?" inquired Mackay patiently.

"Of course I do!"

"Hunky-dory! I'll take word back. Then we'll hit for Tucson at sunup and pick up the diamonds."

Paul came to his feet. "Gold is trash," he intoned, "but what is more precious to a man than life? You are wise, sister."

The girl ignored him, but there was more calculation than concern in the bearded man's deep-set eyes when he turned away and strode toward his mule.

Both watched as he loosed the tie rope, swung a long leg across the animal, drummed its barrel with his heels. "Move, you misbegotten son of Beliel," he roared. "Bestir yourself, sluggard! Oh, that I should be cursed with such an ignoble chunk of depravity!"

Mackay chuckled and the blonde sniffed.

"That hombre's sure a humdinger," said the chunky rider.

"I'd say he was a pest, hanging around and prying into my business," declared the girl vigorously.

"He sure warn't backward in aing me out of a tight."

"I was under the impression that *I* obtained your release from jail," she returned coldly.

THIRTEEN

MACKAY RAISED a hand, gesturing for silence. He froze, intent upon listening. Suddenly, he jumped through the open doorway into the darkened store. In the muted light he caught a glimpse of a vague, moving form. He sprang toward it, stumbled over a barrel, staggered and plunged headlong. Ruefully, he hauled himself to his feet, stood in the gloom, rubbing a bruised shin.

Carol Jordan was outlined in the entrance. "What's wrong?" she inquired sharply.

"I swear I heard someone moving," he replied, "keeping cases on us. Guess the jasper ducked out."

A door in the rear of the store opened and the light of a lamp beyond illumined the trader's squatty form. "What's going on out there?" he inquired querulously.

"Mr. Mackay's nerves are playing tricks," threw back the girl. The trader moved silently down the aisle. "Time I locked up," he declared. "You coming in, Miss Jordan?"

"I suppose so," she said. "Mr. Mackay's riding. Would you have a bed for him, later?"

"I'll spread my soogans in the barn," put in the chunky rider. The potbellied trader, he noted, was breathing hard and he wore moccasins.

It was near midnight when Mackay led his dun into a shanty barn that lay behind the trading post. He located a stable lamp hanging from a peg, touched light to the wick. The girl's roan and Jordan's claybank, he noted were stabled. He slipped a macarty on the dun, led it to a stall and tied it. Then he hunted up a feed bin, scooped up a measure of grain and spilled it into the pony's feedbox. This done, he spread his slicker on a straw piece in the rear of the barn, doused the light—and eased cautiously outside.

Blotched in the starlight, a gelding stood hipshot in a pole corral. One lighted window made a luminous patch against the dark bulk of the trading post. Ghosting along the clapboards of the barn, he hunkered down in a patch of shadow.

Around, silence settled like a shroud, a silence unbroken except by the rattle of a halter rope inside the barn, the scrape of a restless hoof and—muted by distance—the shriek of a questing cougar.

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The light in the trading post blinked out, but Mackay remained unmoving, watching the corral. As he squatted, propped against the clapboards, he pondered on the Jordans and their diamonds. There was something elusive, puzzling, about the pair. How come the girl, frigid as an icicle toward everyone else, showed such concern for tough Walt Jordan, her uncle? Why had the name "Jordan" stirred the three hardcases into laughter? There was something phony about that "legacy" too. He could understand the blonde converting her dinero into diamonds, they were easy to conceal, easy to transport, but he'd swear there was no ranch in Sulphur Valley worth \$50,000, much less a quarter-million. And why in thunder had the girl tried to smuggle the stones through, risking their loss, when she could have turned them over to Wells Fargo for transportation, with the satisfaction of knowing that they were fully insured? And why did that hatchet-faced gambler who called himself Beecher persist in buzzing around like a fly around molasses? Things just didn't add up right.

Abruptly, he tautened, gaze on the back of the trading post. One of the shadows that made a tracery over the ground had moved. As he watched, it drifted toward the corral, took the form of a man—Hudson, the trader. Faintly limned in the night, the trader lifted down the pole that barred the corral, led the gelding out. Silently, he spread a blanket across the pony, set the saddle into place, tightened the cinches, adjusted the bridle. This done, he paused, eyeing the darkened barn. Apparently satisfied, he hauled into leather, and began to walk the pony away, heading southward. Faintly on the night, Mackay heard the gelding break into a trot when its rider had put distance between it and the trading post. Then it began to canter. So his hunch had paid off, he

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reflected. The wizened trader had listened in on their talk. Likely, he was working in cahoots with the outlaws. Now he had stolen off to assure them that the deal for the diamonds was cinched. Or maybe to collect a cut.

Mackay came to his feet and headed for the straw pile inside the barn.

It was night again when the girl and Mackay dismounted in the yard that fronted the Ornadorff and the blonde dragged wearily into the lobby. Mackay guessed she was so saddlesore that every step was torture. It was a long, grueling ride for a man, more so for a woman.

He stabled their gaunted ponies in Larsen's Livery and resisted an impulse to leg down street to The Outpost. Odds were, he thought, Dolores would give him the cold shoulder. It was a sure thing that word had reached her that he was still sashaying around with the blonde.

When he entered the hotel his gaze traveled over weathered cowmen, soberly dressed businessmen, cigar-smoking drummers, relaxed in rockers around the lobby. There were probably more deals closed in that lobby than in any place in town. There was no sign of the hatchet-faced man and, for no good reason, he felt relieved.

Carol Jordan sat stiffly near the desk.

"You get the stones?" he inquired, dropping down beside her.

She nodded tiredly.

"Crave to drop over to The Imperial for a bite?"

"All I crave," she told him wearily, "is to lie down and rest. We'll be leaving at dawn."

"You're in no shape to tackle another seventy-mile

ride," he remonstrated, noting the tired sag of her shoulders, lines of fatigue sharp-etched around her lips, the shadows beneath her eyes. "The Guaymas stage leaves in a couple of days, runs through Nogales. Ride the cushions!"

"Have you forgotten that Walt's life is at stake?" she countered frostily.

Could be that Jordan had already departed this life, reflected Mackay, but he kept the thought to himself. "Your uncle wouldn't ask it," he protested.

"He doesn't have to," the girl declared emphatically. "I've never failed Walt yet and I don't intend to now." With that, she came carefully to her feet and moved gingerly toward the stairway, walking as though she were treading on eggs. Mackay watched her, frowning. Real saddlesore, he thought, stubborn as a mule and worried stiff over Walt Jordan. Curious how the ride had crippled her. Most ranch women were as saddle-hardened as men. Odds were that the blonde would be so stiff and sore at sunup that she'd never make it out of bed.

But the new day was no more than a promise in the east and shades of night still clung to the adobes of Tucson when they jogged out of town, following the snaking stage road south.

Carol Jordan rode tight-lipped, knuckles whitened by her grip on the reins and Mackay knew that every jolt of the saddle was pure agony. Just how long, he wondered, could the girl ride on raw flesh and raw nerve.

They nooned in a palo patch that afforded brief shade from the torrid sun. When the girl slid out of the saddle, her knees jackknifed and she collapsed like an empty waterbag. Mackay swung down, lifted her to her feet and packed her into shade. Puncturing a can of tomato

juice, he trickled the contents down her throat. Lying limp, eyes closed, the blonde seemed close to exhaustion. Mackay emptied a can himself, made a smoke and tended to the ponies, slackening cinches and rocking saddles. Then he hunkered, eyeing the sprawled form of the girl with furrowed brow, chewing on the fact that a good fifty miles of riding lay ahead. It was a sure thing that Carol Jordan would not make it to Nogales, not that day.

There was only one answer, he decided, lay over at one of the relay stations the stage company maintained along the route.

The girl struggled to a sitting position, her eyes dull with pain and fatigue. "Why are we stopping?" Her voice was almost a croak.

"You're tuckered out," he soothed. "You're all through and you need to rest up. Next stage station we'll lay over and jump a stage south."

"No!" she protested vehemently. "Those diamonds must reach Nogales today."

"Them lobos can wait."

"They won't wait!"

Mackay shrugged, realizing the futility of argument. The girl had only one thought on her mind—Jordan's welfare. She might lack strength, but she sure wasn't short on spirit.

"Let's ridel" she implored, levered slowly to her feet and began hobbling toward her roan. He had to lift her into the saddle. She winced when she hit leather, grabbed the horn with a suppressed groan when they moved on. Mentally, Mackay determined that the ride would end at the first stage station they struck.

Wreathed in prickling dust, the ponies jogged between the ruts of the Tucson-Guaymas stage road—the out-

line of a square adobe was patched on the rolling plain ahead, set beside a dry river bed that coiled across the heat-hardened expanse. Behind it stood a long adobe barn. Gaunt cottonwoods thrust high above the buildings and a massive rock wall, upon which thorny brush was heaped, enclosed the whole.

When they clattered through a wide gateway, a sturdy, brown-featured woman, hanging clothes upon a line, paused to eye them curiously. Mules stirred dust in a corral. A big slouch of a man in ragged denims, with a mop of yellow hair, came to the door of the adobe.

Mackay dismounted and made known their needs.

"Sure, mister," the station keeper told him, "you folks kin stay over—meals are a dollar and bunks the same."

"I don't want to stay over!" protested the blonde, sagging in the saddle.

Mackay ignored her angry dissent, lifted her down and steered her out of the sun-glare into the dim interior of the station. "Too much sun," decided the yellow-haired man, dogging them. "Mebbe she should rest awhile. I'll have my wife make her comfortable."

Still protesting, Mackay eased the near-delirious girl into a room furnished with a rude table, with benches on either side. Pelts of wolf and bear were tacked on the rough adobe walls and a Winchester rested on pegs. Through an open doorway he glimpsed a ramada in the rear that served as kitchen. A side door opened on another room with bunks built against a wall. He eased the drooping form onto a bunk. "You're going nowhere," he decreed. "We lay over and grab the next stage."

"No! No! No!" she protested hysterically.

"Quit squawking!" Impatience laced his tone. "You're in no shape to ride."

"They'll kill Walt," she moaned.

"Wal, give me the stones and I'll push ahead."

The blonde fumbled inside the "V" of her dress, fished out the bulging hotel envelope. With shaky fingers she tore open the flap and lifted out the buckskin pouch. It slipped from her unsteady hands, thudded down onto the packed-earth floor.

Both stared unbelieving as the whang slipped off, the pouch burst open and a stream of round black shoe buttons spilled out.

FOURTEEN

"I'LL BE double-damned!" muttered Mackay. "Buttons!" He reached down, gathered up several of the jet beads and eyed them numbly. Carol Jordan began to laugh, brittle, grating laughter that quickly shrilled into hysterics. Emotions beyond control, she flung onto the rawhide lacing of the bunk, screaming, weeping, writhing in hysterical abandon.

Toting the Winchester, the yellow-haired station keeper charged in. "Rattlesnake?" he gasped.

"No—she cracked up," Mackay told the man, eyeing the convulsed form uncertainly. Both men were standing, watching the shrieking girl helplessly, when the woman Mackay had seen hanging clothes outside entered, water slopping from a bucket that dangled from one hand, a towel trailing from the other. Her high-boned face, deep-tanned by the desert sun, bore the stoic stamp of one who has lived long in lonely places, but it was a strong face, and her eyes were understanding.

"You get out of here, Ted," she told the yellow-haired man with unhurried competence. "You, too, mister."

Both men moved toward the door. Sound of a brisk slap reached Mackay's ears as he crossed the threshold. He pivoted. The woman was bending over the gasping, shrieking blonde, callously slapping the girl's pale features.

"Quit that!" he yelled, and jumped for the bunk. The brawny station keeper's arms wrapped around him, hauling him backward. He struggled to break free, but the yellow-haired man hugged him like a grizzly bear, wrestling him out of the room.

"You leave Jean handle this," he panted, back-heeling the door. When it slammed shut, he released his bear hug and stood stolidly eyeing the angry rider. In the fracas he had slipped Mackay's gun out of the holster. He leveled the .45, thumbing back the hammer.

Nonplussed, Mackay stood glaring at him, then became aware that, beyond the closed door, the shrieking had subsided, died down to subdued sobbing. Then that, too, cut off.

"Ain't no better way to handle a female with the screaming heebie-jeebies than slap sense into her," grunted the station keeper. "Hell, mister, you should know that."

An abashed grin slowly spread over Mackay's features. "Guess I acted like a jackass," he admitted. The other eased down the hammer of the .45, handed over the gun. Mackay dropped it back into leather.

The station keeper lifted a square bottle off a shelf, set it, with two tin cups, on the table. "I guess," he said, pouring, "we could both do with a snort."

They were drinking when the door swung open and the woman stepped out. Mackay glanced past her. Carol

Jordan lay quiet, apparently asleep. The towel, dripping water, was folded across her forehead. "She hunkydory now?" he inquired anxiously.

"She will be, the poor thing, after she's rested awhile," the woman told him.

"You better water and stable your broncs," suggested her husband, spilling more gin into his cup.

"Reckon so," agreed Mackay and stepped out into the glare of the merciless sun, glad of an excuse to be alone. He watered the two saddlehorses, slacked their cinches, led them into the barn.

After tending to the ponies, he hunkered in a narrow strip of shade by the square entrance and gave thought to the calamity that had triggered the blonde's collapse. To her, he reflected, sight of the black buttons spelled death to Walt Jordan. He was sorry for the girl. True she was highfalutin', but she was a thoroughbred and loyal to the tough cattle buyer she called "Uncle." She would have sat that pony until she dropped off.

Musing, he considered the diamonds. Someone had stolen them and substituted buttons. That was plain. The only possible suspect seemed to be the hotel clerk. Brow creased, he reviewed the scene when the blonde had handed them over for safe keeping. The urbane little man behind the counter had taken the pouch, unopened, placed it in the envelope, sealed the envelope, in full view of both the girl and himself. Then Carol Jordan had inscribed her name across the flap. The clerk had swung open the door of a massive steel safe, set in an alcove by the keyboard, tossed the bulky envelope inside and slammed the heavy door shut.

He could have opened the safe later, cogitated Mackay, abstracted the stones and substituted buttons. But when the envelope had been returned the seal was

still unbroken and, anyway, how could the clerk have known that there was a fortune in diamonds in that pouch? Somehow, he couldn't bring himself to suspect the hotel employee.

The hatchet-faced man came to mind. He always seemed to be around, sticking like a mustard plaster. Likely he had winged Jordan outside The Outpost. He'd been on the stage at the time of the holdup, every time—he—Mackay—had entered the Ornadorff the jasper seemed to be setting around. What was he waiting for? When the girl had brought the stones back from the sheriff's office, he had been lounging in the lobby. The girl had probably left the diamonds in her room, behind a locked door, while they'd eaten in The Imperial.

If the hombre had been hellbent to grab those stones, he would have known that Sheriff Wakely had taken possession of them, could have guessed the girl had returned to town to claim them, could have searched her room while she was eating. The simple mortise locks that secured the rooms in the Ornadorff would offer no problem to a slick thief. Odds were the girl hadn't opened the pouch and checked the diamonds before she deposited them in the hotel safe. And, pondered Mackay, he couldn't recollect seeing the hatchet-faced man around at the time. Likely he was making tracks so fast his axles smoked.

One thing was sure, the stones had vanished. The sober-clad hombre who called himself Beecher was beyond reach and things looked black for Walt Jordan, if the cattle buyer was still alive. That gang of hard-cases who held him sure wouldn't be in a mood to listen to explanations. And he, Bill Mackay, was responsible, the musing rider considered soberly. He had drawn \$500 to side the girl and her legacy. He'd fallen down

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on the job; for a second time he'd tangled his spurs.

He fashioned a smoke, touched a match to it and drew thoughtfully. Right then he couldn't do anything about the hatchet-faced man, but could he do anything to ace Jordan out of his tight? Gradually, a plan began to take shape in his mind.

He came to his feet. The station keeper was in the corral, doctoring a galled mule.

When he entered the adobe, scent of cooking came from the ramada in the back. The door of the bunk room was open. Cautiously, he stepped inside. The blonde lay limp in a sleep of exhaustion, pale features framed by a disordered tangle of hair. The buckskin pouch had been kicked against a wall and black buttons specked the floor. He dropped on his knees and began gathering the oval pieces of jet. When he'd collected all in sight, Mackay dropped them into the pouch and again secured its neck with the leather lace. Quietly, he slipped out again.

He was throwing his saddle on the dun when the station keeper sauntered in. "You pulling out?" inquired the big man, with surprise.

"Yep!" Mackay told him, "I got business in Nogales. When she's in shape, the gal can follow on the stage." He stripped a twenty-dollar bill off his roll, pressed it into the other's callused hand. "Guess this will take care of things."

"Sure will!" asserted the yellow-haired man with a pleased grin.

"And thanks—for everything," said Mackay, stepping into the saddle.

The station keeper waved a careless hand. "Shucks, we done nothing."

Stars blinked through long before the dun, jaded and

footsore, jogged up to the trading post. Bathed in the wavering light of the bracketed oil lamp, the Preacher's long form sprawled over one of the rockers set in front of the store. Another held the wizened trader. Both eyed Mackay expectantly when he peeled out of leather.

"Them three hardcases was around again," piped the trader, "seemed they had a payoff in mind."

"I brought it!" returned Mackay shortly, tossed the buckskin pouch in the air and caught it.

Without further talk the wizened man ducked inside his store.

Mackay strolled to the angle of the building, and paused, eyeing the dim outline of the shanty barn and the corral nearby. As he anticipated, the trader's squat form came into view, hastening toward the corral. He'd stake his saddle, thought the rider, that the runt was hurrying to take word across the border. Either the outlaws had him scared stiff, or he was tied in with them. Within the hour, the renegades who hung around La Cantina Elegante would know that the diamonds were on hand. Well, that was just the way he wanted it.

Satisfied, he moved down the gallery and dropped into the rocker Hudson had vacated. "That runt skittered off," he volunteered. "The double-crossing son's wising up the gang that's holding Jordan."

"The flesh is weak, brother," intoned Paul, "and the Devil ever busy spreading avarice and deceit. So you have brought the diamonds?"

"Sure!" admitted Mackay offhand. "Take a gander at the stones!" He dropped the buckskin pouch onto the bearded man's lap. Paul slipped off the whang that secured its neck, emptied black buttons into a palm. His

head jerked up and he focused at the other with frowning inquiry. "You hurrahin' me, brother?" There was nothing preacher-like in the tone of the terse question.

"I can swear that the gal packed thirty-seven diamonds in that pouch from the sheriff's office in Tucson," explained Mackay. "She left the pouch in her room at the Ornadorff while we fed our tapeworms in The Imperial Cafe. When we're through we hit for the hotel, she deposits the stones in the safe—gets a receipt. That's what came out."

"A switch!" murmured Paul. He eyed Mackay alertly. "The hotel clerk, brother?"

"I don't figure so. That hombre wouldn't know what was in the pouch, it was sealed in an envelope—and the seal unbroken when the gal drew it out this A.M."

"Not knowing the diamonds had vanished!" Mackay nodded. Paul sat stroking his glossy beard. "The world abounds in all manner of evildoers," he murmured, "and indeed it was a rich prize. A quarter-million in precious stones!"

"That niece of Jordan's got a notion the jasper's life is more precious," returned Mackay. "You know what this means?"

"I can guess, brother." The Preacher's sun-blackened features creased into a grim smile. "His captors are men of violence, they will slay in their rage."

"Maybe he's already dead."

"He lives, brother."

How would you know, thought Mackay, but replied aloud: "Wal, I aim to run a blazer, but I need a hole card—your gun."

Paul's piercing eyes probed him. "I am a man of peace."

"Ain't there something in the Good Book that says the wicked shall be destroyed?"

"All the wicked shall he destroy," mused Paul, and added dryly, "there is no mention of a gun, brother. The Lord abhorreth violence."

"Quit you like men and fight," retorted Mackay. "That's a right smart bit of preaching and it always did stick in my mind."

"So you turn the teachings of the Good Book against me!" The Preacher chuckled deep in his beard. "Well, just why would you need my gun, brother, always remembering that I am a man of peace, to whom violence is an abomination?"

"To even up the odds." Mackay learned forward eagerly. . . . "Now this is what I've got in mind."

FIFTEEN

EXUBERANT LIFE pulsed in La Cantina Elegante. When Mackay and the Preacher stepped through its wide doorway a confusion of sound assailed their ears—the rumble of voices, the jingle of glasses, the scrape of dancing feet, and through it all were woven the seductive strains of the guitar band. Vaqueros, mestizos, peons packed the tables. Drifting tobacco smoke clouded the light of oil lamps suspended from vigas overhead. The air was heavy with the reek of vino, body sweat, cigarillos. And, stolidly ignoring it all, the three outlaws slapped cards at their corner table.

When the two visitors finally worked through the medley and approached the table, the rawboned Kelly

dropped his cards and greeted Mackay with a complacent grin. They knew he was coming, thought Mackay, and were convinced he had brought the diamonds. He'd swear the wizened trader had passed word. Well, that wouldn't hurt his scheme.

Only the horse-faced Tod seemed in ill humor. His puzzled glance ran over the frock-coated Preacher, who stood smiling benignly, clutching, as always, his big black Bible. "Why in thunder you have to bring a psalm-singer along?" he snared.

"I needed a guard," explained Mackay gravely, thankful that Paul's gunbelt was concealed by his long coat. "You gents would feel bad if I was held up."

Kelly hawhawed, "So you hired a Bible-puncher!" He sobered. "You got the sparklers?"

Mackay fished out the buckskin pouch and juggled it from one hand to the other. "How does this look?" he inquired.

"A sight better than Holy Moses," rasped Tod. "Have that hairpin light a shuck, he sticks in my gizzard."

"I offer salvation, brother," intoned Paul, "though your sins be scarlet you shall be white as snow."

"Guess you'll cast your seed on stony ground around here, Reverend," grinned Kelly.

"Maybe so," snapped Mackay, "but I need a sidekick and there warn't no one else around. The Preacher stays or we do business north of the border."

"Quit prodding!" Kelly, who was plainly the leader, told his belligerent cohort shortly. He grinned at Mackay, "Take the weight off your legs!" When the two scraped up chairs, he pushed a bottle toward them.

Paul grasped the bottle and took a long pull. "Strong drink is raging, but the Good Book enjoins that we take a little wine for our stomach's sake," he explained bland-

ly, setting the bottle down. "Now, brethren, we are gathered here to make a trade—a pouch of worthless geegaws for the person of one Walt Jordan."

"Geegaws!" ejaculated the squatty fellow. "Them's diamonds."

"Brother," Paul eyed him with pained reproach, "all wealth is dross, the wise seek their treasure in Paradise."

"Ef you gents would keep a plug in your talk boxes," put in Kelly, "maybe we could get down to business." He eyed Mackay expectantly, "Wal, we kin make the dicker, right now."

"I don't lamp Jordan around," objected Mackay.

"Hell, we got the hombre stashed away."

"In boothill?"

"You claim we're running a whizzer?" cut in the horse-faced outlaw irascibly.

"No Jordan, no diamonds!" decreed Mackay shortly. "I'm not trading blind."

"Maybe you got no say-so," blustered the horse-faced outlaw, dropping a hand to the butt of his holstered gun.

"Jerk that iron and you sure won't have no say-so," threw back Mackay bleakly. "Right now I'm holding a gun on you, mister—under the table."

The other glared at Mackay's right arm. It had dropped down, the hand out of sight. Reluctantly, he relaxed his grip on the gun butt, placed both hands on the table.

Paul sat serenely stroking his beard. "Brethren," he exhorted earnestly, "let there be no talk of violence. The Good Book says—seek peace and pursue it. If you have this Jordan, produce him. If not, suffer us to depart."

"With them stones!" Kelly grinned. "Hell, Preacher,

we'll deliver Jordan." He pushed back his chair, "Reckon we'll need to take a pasear."

Following the mustachioed outlaw, the four elbowed out of the cantina. Outside, the outlaws loosed their ponies and Paul mounted his shaggy mule. In a tight bunch, they jogged across the plaza.

Shadowy in the pale radiance of the stars, the knot of horsemen headed southward, following a winding trail, adobes vague on either side. Quickly, signs of habitation dropped behind and they emerged into open country, dark-specked with brush, peopled by shadows. There was no sound beyond the thud of the ponies' hooves and jingle of bit-chains. Mackay felt his nerves tightening. If Jordan was buzzard bait, he reflected, it was a sure thing the three renegades were running a bluff. These lobos would never allow the diamonds they coveted to get away from them a second time. Likely they were tolling the Preacher and himself out into the hills. There, in some lonely canyon, a few well-placed slugs would end all argument. He touched his pony with the rowel, pulled up beside Kelly, in the lead. Unseen in the faint light, he slipped out his .45, thumbed back the hammer. He figured that the bulk of his body would hide the play from the two remaining outlaws jogging behind them. From accident or purpose, the Preacher lagged in the rear.

"You figure on running a sandy, you'll go first," warned Mackay, aligning on the mustachioed man.

Kelly's head pivoted, his glance dropped to the pointed gun and he chuckled. "Quit sweating!" he advised.

Strung out in single file now, the five threaded through a narrow ravine, clogged with catsclaw. The vicious tiny hooked thorns tore at Mackay's legs. Gun latched in his

right hand and leveled on the dark blur of Kelley's form ahead, he braced for a bullet in the back. But none came.

The terrain flattened out. Bunching again, the riders jingled across a wide meadow, thick-grown with zacate and crusted with stunted shrubs. The bleating of goats carried through the night and a smoldering campfire glowed red through the gloom.

Kelly drew rein at a brush jacal. Nearby, an old Mexican crouched over the fire. A ragged tilma was draped over his shoulders and a wide sombrero shaded his shriveled features. A goat herder, registered Mackay. It seemed the outlaws were holding Jordan in his jacal. He slipped his gun back into leather.

The old Mexican eyed them incuriously while Kelly stepped down and ducked into the brush shelter. Walt Jordan's bulky form was outlined in the entrance, Kelly propelling him forward from behind. The cattle buyer moved with short, jerky steps, his ankles shackled. His arms, too, were lashed behind his back. Beard stubbled his jowls and his shoulders slumped with weariness, but his craggy features were stamped with cold assurance and no fear showed in his pale eyes. He checked outside the jacal, blinking as the goatherd heaped more brush on the fire. Crackling, it blazed high, illuminating the scene with garish light.

Mackay, still sitting his saddle, glanced around, mentally cursing tightening nerves. In seconds, he knew all hell was due to break loose. Three guns would be matched with his own and the Preacher's. If the bearded man failed to deliver, he—Mackay—would last as long as a wax cat in hell. He noted that the two remaining outlaws slacked in their saddles, beyond the fire. The Preacher had pulled apart and dismounted. Almost hid-

den by the barrel of his mule, he was bent, apparently fiddling with the animal's rigging.

Kelly stepped forward, eyeing Mackay. "Wal," he crawled, "we delivered—now you ante up!"

"Sure!" said Mackay, with a tight smile. He fished out the buckskin pouch, tossed it toward the mustachioed rider. It fell short. Kelly bent, scooped the pouch off the ground, loosed its tie string and, with eager anticipation, dipped fingers inside. They came out grasping several black buttons. For a moment, the outlaw froze, gaping at the little jet balls. Then, abruptly, he tilted the pouch. More buttons dribbled onto a palm.

"You double-crossing son of a bitch!" he spluttered, dropped the pouch and stabbed for his gun. The manacled Jordan threw himself flat. Mackay's .45 was out and roaring. One slug took Kelly high in the chest, spun him completely around. Staggering, he threw down on Mackay. A second slug hammered him down, as his gun belched flame and thunder. The bullet droned high as he dropped, rolled over and over, limbs jerking spasmodically. Mackay whirled the dun as lashing gunfire awoke the echoes. By the flickering firelight he glimpsed the goatherd, terror-stricken, darting off into the night like a startled jack rabbit. Whining, a slug ricocheted off his saddlehorn. A shriek of mortal agony cut through the mingling roar of forty-fives. Everywhere, it seemed, guns were spitting fire and thunder. The Preacher, down on one knee, was firing beneath the mule's barrel. The horse-faced outlaw was triggering, while striving to control a restive pony. As Mackay threw down in reply, a slug from Paul's long-barreled Colt knocked the bandit clean out of the saddle. As he went over, his pony panicked. It raced off, a shapeless bundle bumping and bouncing beside it. The horse-

faced rider's heel had caught up in a stirrup. If he wasn't dead already, thought Mackay, he soon would be. Plug, the squatty renegade, seemed to have vanished. Then Mackay focused on another saddle horse running wild and a form botched on the ground. Two for the Preacher, he registered. The bearded evangelist was sure no slouch when it came to gunfighting.

The fracas was over in seconds. As suddenly as it had erupted, shooting cut off. Acrid powder smoke tainted the air. Except for the frantic bleating of goats, penned somewhere nearby, silence cloaked the scene.

Paul straightened and sauntered from behind his mule, nonchalantly plugging empties out of his cylinder. "The wicked cease from troubling," he intoned, then added matter-of-factly, "wal, it was hot while it lasted."

"Plenty hot!" agreed Mackay, and stepped out of leath-
er.

"Fr gosh sakes get these goddamned irons off me!" Both turned at sound of Jordan's irritated tones. The cattle buyer had raised to his knees and was making ineffectual efforts to regain his feet.

Mackay hurried toward him, saw that handcuffs secured his ankles and wrists. "Who packs the keys?" he asked Jordan.

"That bustard," grunted the prisoner, nodding toward Kelly's sprawled form. Mackay dropped down beside the dead outlaw, rolled the limp body over, exploring Kelly's pockets. He found two keys in the loose-hanging vest and quickly loosed the cattle buyer.

Jordan stood rubbing galled wrists, pale eyes dwelling on the Preacher's frock-coated form. "Who in heck might you be, mister?" he grated.

"I am Paul the Preacher, brother," intoned the

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bearded man, with a benevolent smile. "My mission is the saving of souls in this ungodly wilderness."

"Wal, you sure sent two to hell in a hurry."

"The wicked shall be smitten and righteousness shall triumph," returned the Preacher complacently.

"How come you're so doggone fast with a sixgun?"

The bearded man bared strong teeth in a smile. "Before I saw the Light, brother, I pursued evil ways, which involved some skill with a hog-leg."

"So you were a gunslick—before you punched a Bible," mused Jordan. "What was your moniker?"

"It is best forgotten, brother, since I am now reborn."

"I've got a notion our trails crossed, 'way back," persisted the cattle buyer, eyeing the Preacher with a puzzled frown.

"The past is dead!" Paul's voice held flat finality. "Let skeletons rest in their graves!"

Jordan hadn't spilled one word of thanks to them for aching him out of the jam, thought Mackay. Then the cattle buyer transferred attention to him. "You sure ran a sandy over the lobos," his voice held grudging admiration. "Who gave you the notion to hogswiggle the hairpins—Carol?"

"Guess I had no option," confessed Mackay.

Jordan eyed him, frowning. "No option?"

"Some horse thief made off with the stones—in Tucson."

SIXTEEN

JORDAN STIFFENED with shock. The incredulity stamped on his blunt features reminded Mackay of the expression of surprise into which Kelly's face had frozen when

he'd glimpsed buttons instead of diamonds. "You telling me," the cattle buyer demanded hoarsely, "that Carol lost the stones again?"

Mackay nodded. "Maybe I'd best explain."

"I'm listening!"

"When the sheriff handed the stones over, your niece cached them in the safe at the Ornadorff Hotel. They sat right in that safe 'til she took 'em out and the two of us hit for Nogales to ace you out of this tight—and found buttons."

"Some rattlesnake hogswiggled her!"

Mackay lifted his shoulders. "Seems that way. Guess its a job for the law."

"The law be damned!" exploded Jordan. "I'll handle this."

Paul, who had been listening to the exchange, broke in blandly, "I will depart, brethren. Our purpose has been accomplished and there are souls to be saved from perdition." His deep-set eyes dwelt on Jordan's angry features. "Mourn not the loss of a few baubles, brother. Rather seek everlasting treasure in Paradise."

The cattle buyer snorted, but Mackay put in, "Guess I owe you a million thanks, Preacher. You sure handle a sixgun like nobody's business."

"Give thanks to the Lord, from whom flow all blessings," advised the bearded man. With that, he strode to his mule and swung a long leg across the saddle. Both watched the animal amble away until both mule and rider faded into the night.

"You lamp that jasper around Tucson?" inquired Jordan abruptly.

"Not lately," said Mackay. "Right now the gent puts in his time saving souls around Nogales."

"The bustard's a gunshark. And I gamble he's dodging a warrant, back in Texas maybe."

Slow-rising anger stirred Mackay. He never had had much of a liking for the rough-hewn Jordan, he decided, and it wasn't growing now. With the help of the Preacher, he'd eased Jordan out of a tight and the cattle buyer hadn't spilled one word of thanks. Without the aid of Paul's gun they'd both likely now be buzzard bait, instead of the three outlaws whose bodies were now slowly stiffening in the brush around. Much less than expressing gratitude, the cattle buyer acted so sour it would pucker a pig's mouth. "If you figure the Preacher had a hand in switching the stones, forget it!" he advised curtly.

"I'm forgetting nothing!" barked Jordan. He bent over Kelly's prone form, unbuckled the dead outlaw's gunbelt, swung it around his own waist. "Ketch up a hoss for me," he said shortly, "and let's get outa here."

Dim in the starlight, several saddle horses were drifting aimlessly through the squat brush. Mackay stepped into the saddle, hazed the nearest pony into camp. It was Kelly's buckskin.

In glum silence, Jordan adjusted the stirrups and mounted.

They headed north, stirrup to stirrup, and, as they rode, Mackay recounted the events of the ride from Tucson, and the blonde's collapse.

At midmorning the following day the two reached the stage depot. The burly station keeper, forking hay, raised a hand in greeting. Carol Jordan was perched upon a bench set against the front of the adobe. As she sat, coolly surveying them when they rode up, it was hard to believe, considered Mackay, that this was the same

girl, hair disheveled and features convulsed, who had been shrieking in hysterics the day before.

"So you fooled those wolves!" she commented, with smiling satisfaction.

The cattle buyer's mood was anything but amiable. "Seems some sidewinder fooled you," he retorted acidly, "and it ain't the first time."

The girl's lips compressed.

"I'd say they got a goddamned crooked clerk at that flea trap in Tucson," continued Jordan. "Wal, I aim to collect his scalp."

"And you'd be wasting your time," she told him decisively. "I have a very good idea who took those diamonds."

"That Siwash of a psalm-singer?"

"Psalm singer?" The blonde looked puzzled. "The man I have in mind is not quite that type. His name is Lerou."

It was Jordan's turn to register perplexity. "Who in creation's Lerou?" he demanded.

"A crooked gambler, run out of Tombstone. He was always hanging around 'The Payoff' in Yuma. What's more, he rode the stage when it was held up, returned to Tucson and hung around the Ornadorff. When I brought the diamonds to the hotel, he was seated in the lobby, but," she added thoughtfully, "I don't remember seeing him when I drew them out."

"Sharp features, a dab of mustache, dark suit?" interjected Mackay, an interested listener.

"That's the man! He called himself Beecher."

Mackay eyed Jordan. "I figure that was the jasper who took a shot at you outside The Outpost."

"It seems obvious he was after the diamonds," said the girl. "Lerou's sharp as a ferret and slippery as a

snake." At a thought, she turned to Mackay. "I imagine this talk of Yuma puzzles you. I have another uncle, George, who owned a gambling house in Yuma. I spent considerable time with him and his wife."

It was a simple explanation, made with a bright smile, but somehow it seemed too pat and Mackay had a feeling it had been contrived on the spur of the moment. The longer he hung around with these two, the more cause they gave him for wonder.

Jordan's harsh tones broke into his cogitations. "Where you figure this Lerou's hiding out?"

The girl sat frowning, eyes closed against the sunlight. "I'd try Yuma first," she decided slowly.

"Then we'll hit for Tucson and grab a westbound stage," declared her uncle. He eyed Mackay. "You crave to string along?"

"I paid him \$500!" put in the girl quickly.

"Guess he earned that, across the border," said Jordan. "He packs a fast gun. You stick, mister and I'll drop another \$500 into the kitty."

"It's a deal!" threw back Mackay promptly. A few days back, he reflected, he had craved nothing more than to shuck the pair. Now he was conscious of a yen to see this thing through.

Sweating on the cushions of a jouncing Concord, the three endured the long, dreary ride—three hundred miles of dry, rocky terrain, specked with cactus, mesquite and ironwood—to Yuma. And when they arrived, Mackay decided there was little more to the blotch of adobes squatting beside the murky Colorado River than Nogales. One thing was sure, it was hotter than a burned boot.

The stage rattled to a stop outside an elongated rock-

and-adobe structure whose sign proclaimed it to be "The River House." No sooner had the foot brake jammed on when sweltering passengers spilled out and stampeded for a bar that fronted the hotel.

Mackay paused to look around through lengthening shadow. Bronzed Indians, greasy black hair banded by strips of colored rag; fat squaws enveloped in gaudy shawls; swarthy Mexicans; shabby prospectors; sober-clad businessmen thronged the covered plankwalks. Beyond the sprawl of adobes, the grim bulk of Yuma Penitentiary sat on a bluff, somber behind massive walls.

"Let's gargle!" invited Jordan, collecting the blonde's luggage. He smeared the grime from his hard features. "When hombres check out in Yuma they send back from hell for their blankets."

They downed a drink apiece at the bar, then stepped through a side door into the hotel lobby. Devoid of furnishings except for rawhide-laced chairs set against the rough adobe walls, it was a letdown after the upholstered rockers, carpets and fancy brass lamps of the Ornadorff. Carol Jordan, as usual a magnet for all eyes, sat straight-backed. The desk clerk, a fat man, coatless, with red galluses, wilted behind a showcase that served as desk. A pen was stuck in a withered potato by the tattered register and the liquid in a glass inkwell had evaporated to sludge.

Rooms booked, Jordan, toting the blonde's luggage, followed her down a passageway. Mackay tagged behind. Rooms, their numbers rudely painted on door panels, opened on either side. When Mackay entered his, he eyed the customary border accommodations—sagging bed, scratched bureau, rickety washstand and brass-bowled lamp. He stripped to the waist and was washing off when Jordan entered and dropped on the

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creaky bed. Mackay towed off, shrugged into his shirt. The cattle buyer reached and knuckled the clapboarded wall. In quick response, the blonde sauntered through the doorway, as cool and spruce as though she'd stepped out of an icebox.

"Now," announced Jordan, "we got to get busy."

"Doing what?" inquired the blonde coolly.

"Hell, comb the saloons."

"You will not!" asserted the girl crisply. "The moment Lerou sights either of you, he'll hightail."

"Heck, Carol," remonstrated the cattle buyer, "you can't circulate around the gin palaces."

"I don't intend to," she retorted, with amusement. "Tim Henessey, the town marshal, and I are like this." She held up two slender fingers, close together. "Tim and his deputies keep cases on men of Lerou's stripe. If he's around, I'll know within the hour."

Jordan raised his shoulders. "Handle it your own way!"

"Thank you—Uncle," she returned ironically. "I further suggest that neither of you leave this hotel."

When the door closed behind her, Mackay dropped onto the chair the girl had vacated. "Smart gall" he commented.

"They don't come smarter," Jordan assured him emphatically. "Carol's a real smooth operator. Ain't a woman in town can match her for looks, either."

He might have been talking of a wife, thought Mackay, not an orphaned niece fresh from a Sulphur Valley ranch. Again it struck him that there were undercurrents about the whole setup beyond his comprehension.

Jordan lit one of his long, thin cigars and wandered out. Mackay, glad of a chance to relax, yanked off his boots, draped his gunbelt on a bedpost and stretched

out. Daylight faded and he dozed. . . . A hard shake stirred him into wakefulness.

"Rattle your hocks!" He recognized Jordan's rasping tones and sat up. The cattle buyer's form made a vague blur against the gray outline of the window.

"Carol located this Lerou hairpin," grunted Jordan. "Right now the Siwash is tied up in a poker game down street."

Mackay swung his legs off the bed, padded to the bureau and lit the lamp. Yanking down the window shade, he inquired, "We go get him?"

"Nope," said Jordan, "Carol's got a better idea. The coyote's registered in this hotel, room 14. Maybe he cached the stones in his room. We take a looksee."

"The door open?" yawned Mackay, pulling on his boots.

"Nope. We go in through the window."

Outside, in the broad corridor, a lamp, bracketed on the wall, threw a pale gleam on unpainted doors and rough plaster. There was no sign of the girl. In the rear, the corridor terminated in a bolted door. Jordan headed for the door. Mackay, dogging him, noted that No. 14 was the last room on the right. As they passed, he tried the knob. As Jordan claimed, it was locked.

The cattle buyer eased the bolt on the rear exit and they moved out into the night. Picking their way through a litter of junk, the two rounded the angle of the building and found themselves in a narrow alley. To their left rose a blank wall, the flank of a store. To the right, windows were evenly spaced along the length of the hotel, the sills no more than chest high. Outside the first, Jordan paused. Lady Luck was smiling, registered Mackay. Light glowed through some windows, but No. 14

was darkened. Behind a metal fly screen, too, the window had been left wide open.

Jordan brought out a jackknife, quickly slit the screen, unhooked it and lifted it down. Grabbing the sill, he hoisted himself up, wriggled through. Mackay followed.

Striking a stinker, the cattle buyer glanced around, focused on a lamp on the bureau, touched fire to the wick. When light bloomed, Mackay quickly jerked down the window shade and stood eyeing the room. It was an exact replica of his own.

A broadcloth suit hung from a peg and a carpetbag had been dropped in a corner. On the washstand were set razor, shaving soap and brush, together with an uncapped jar, near full of thick, creamy grease, labeled "Pettman's Pomade."

"Get busy," grunted Jordan, and began stripping coverings off the bed. They turned over the lumpy mattress, searching for sign of a rent in the cover through which a packet of diamonds might have been thrust—and found nothing.

Jordan next gave attention to the bureau, pulling out drawers and scattering the contents—shirts, underclothes, cravats, sox—over the floor as he pawed through them. This Lerou was a Fancy Dan, reflected Mackay, most everything was silken. The bureau was emptied, but again they drew a blank.

Cursing under his breath, Jordan lifted down the dark suit, explored it and threw it aside, while Mackay shook the lamp, with the thought that the diamonds might have been dropped into the reservoir. There was no rattle! They investigated carpetbag, water jug, commode. Finally, they stood baffled.

"Guess the hombre's packing the stones," suggested Mackay.

Jordan glaring around with angry frustration, said nothing.

Both tautened at sound of a key being inserted in the door lock. Before they could move, the door swung open, and the hatchet-faced man Carol Jordan called Lerou stood in the threshold. Leveled, in his right hand, was an ugly, snub-nosed .41 derringer.

SEVENTEEN

"REACH!" snapped Lerou. Reluctantly, two pairs of hands lifted shoulder high. As the Preacher had pointed out, thought Mackay wryly, a pointed gun is a potent argument.

"Sneak thieves, eh?" commented the gambler. Anger glimmered in his sharp eyes as his glance flicked over the room. It looked as though a tornado had swept through it—the floor a disorder of shirts, sox, underwear; the bed stripped, the mattress awry; the dark broadcloth suit lying in a crumpled heap. His tone brittle, "I should plug you both."

"And bring in the law?" taunted Mackay.

"Why would I duck the law?"

"You forgot the diamonds?"

"Diamonds! You been chewing loco weed?"

"Quit side-stepping!" growled Jordan. "You stole a passel of stones from Carol's room in the Ornadorff Hotel. Right now, I gamble, you're packing 'em. Hand them over and we'll call it quits."

Lerou eyed him blandly. "Mister, it's more likely that I'll hand you a slug apiece." So the lobo didn't deny

the theft, thought Mackay, and their lives wouldn't weigh much against that pouch of diamonds. Both he and Jordan were strangers in town. Lerou could claim that he'd surprised them looting his room and fired in self-defense—and who could prove him a liar? What was more, he looked the type who could kill without turning a hair.

Playing for time, he threw back: "You'd never get away with a double killing."

"The stakes justify the gamble," said Lerou stonily. Mackay saw his slim fingers tighten on the stock of the stubby derringer and knew, with cold premonition, that the gambler had decided to blast them both. He had seen men brace to kill before. He laughed out loud. Lerou's eyes held him like twin gimlets.

"Is death so funny?" inquired the gambler, tone taut as a fiddlestring.

"Ask the marshal," grinned Mackay, "the gent's standing right behind you."

Impulsively, Lerou's head half-turned, checked. But Mackay was already leaping at him. The stubby gun spat fire as he grasped he had been tricked. Nicking the hurtling Mackay's left ear, the slug buried itself in the wooden partition behind him. Before the gambler could trigger again, the rider was atop of him, one hand latched onto his gun-wrist, the other fastened onto his throat. Lerou toppled backward. Both thudded down. Interlocked, they rolled over the floor, the gambler fighting desperately to wrench free and Mackay to wrest the gun out of his fist. Choking from the pressure of Mackay's fingers digging into his throat, Lerou clawed frantically for his opponent's eyes. Jordan hopped around the threshing forms, striving ineffectually to boot the gun out of Lerou's grasp. Both slammed against

the side wall, came to a stop. The heel of Jordan's boot hammered down on the gambler's gunhand. Lerou shrieked with agony. Crushed, his slackened fingers relinquished the .41. Jordan scooped up the gun, bent and smashed the steel barrel against the gambler's head, above an ear. Mackay felt the wiry form slacken, loosed his grip, levered to his feet, chest heaving.

Through the open doorway came the sound of men moving in the corridor, vibrant cursing and angry murmurs. Mackay remembered the shot, it had likely roused the whole hotel. Hastily, he booted the door shut.

"Wal?" he inquired, eyeing Jordan. "What next?"

"Search the bustard," growled the cattle buyer.

Both turned at a sharp rap on the door. "What's going on in there?" demanded a muffled voice.

"Act drunk!" directed Jordan quickly.

The knob turned and the door swung open. The fleshy desk clerk stood on the threshold, eyes sparking indignation. Behind him bunched a dozen or more men in various stages of undress, all plainly fuming at being aroused by the disturbance.

"What's the shenanigans?" the clerk wanted to know, his tone shrill with annoyance.

Jordan smiled, brought out a gold eagle and pressed it into the fat man's palm. "The boys had a few drinks," he explained. "Lerou got excited and loosed a shot. The jasper's calmed down now. Guess he's tanked."

The clerk's gaze wandered over the disordered room, took in Lerou, sprawled flat, apparently dead drunk; Mackay swaying and grasping a bedpost for support, an inane grin plastered on his face; the littered floor. "You hombres sure went hog-wild," he grumbled. "That damage will cost."

"Sure! Sure!" soothed Jordan. "Stick it on the bill." With no gentleness, he pushed the plump clerk back and firmly closed the door on him.

For a few moments he stood listening. The mutter of talk died, feet shuffled as guests dispersed and returned to their rooms. He moved quickly across the floor, dropped on his knees beside the stunned gambler. Rolling the limp form over, he began exploring Lerou's pockets. With a disgusted snort, he finally came to his feet.

"Maybe we've been barking up the wrong tree," suggested Mackay, with no conviction.

Baffled, Jordan stood glumly eyeing the unconscious man.

The door eased quietly open and the blonde slid in. "Did you have to raise the roof?" she inquired, with chilly disapproval.

"Lerou jumped us," Jordan told her gruffly, and nodded at the prone form.

"Did you find the diamonds?"

"Nopel"

"Well, you certainly tried!" Carol Jordan looked around with a faint smile.

"Took everything apart. I got a notion the clerk at the Ornadorff grabbed the stones."

"Lerou has them!" she insisted, and added, thoughtfully, "He's probably a very ingenious man."

While the two men watched, she wandered around the room, lips pursed, a speculative light in her brittle blue eyes. At a bedpost, she stopped, eyeing the brass knob.

"I checked," volunteered Mackay, "all four."

Again she paused, at the washstand, picked up a cake of soap, broke it in half. Then she slipped a slim finger

into the open jar of pomade, dug deep down, stirring the thick, creamy concoction. Mackay saw excitement stir in her eyes. She inserted another finger, withdrew both, hooking out a gooey mess of sticky grease, flopped it over the wooden top of the washstand, dug out more.

"I'll be jiggered!" ejaculated Mackay, staring at the greasy glob. Specking it, like raisins in soft dough, were diamonds. Jordan dropped an amazed oath, grabbed a white shirt off the floor, began picking the stones out and wiping them off.

"Jeeze, Carol," he breathed, "you're smart'n a bunk-house rat."

"Thanks for the comparison," she returned coolly. "Actually, that was the most obvious hiding place in the room."

Mackay watched as the cattle buyer carefully cleaned off sparkling stones and set them aside. "Thirty-seven!" announced Jordan finally. He ripped a broad strip off the shirt, wrapped the stones in it and stowed them in a pants pocket.

Lerou, lying by the far wall, was beginning to show signs of life. His legs jerked, he mumbled, his eyes blinked open. Still bemused, he struggled to a sitting position. Jordan stepped close and stood looking the gambler over. "I should kick your slats in, you lousy horsethief," he growled. "We located the stones."

"There's been trouble enough," put in the blonde sharply. "Let's get out of here!"

The cattle buyer turned away. Lerou's left hand reached behind his head, whipped a slim blade from a neck sheath. He cocked his wrist to hurl it at Jordan's broad back. The girl gasped. Mackay, in quick reaction, snatched out his .45, flung it. The gun smashed into the gambler's arm, almost as the blade left his fingers. De-

flected, the sliver of steel droned wild, pinged into a sidewall, remained quivering in the clapboard. Jordan spun around, grabbing for his own iron. The blonde threw herself on his gunarm, clinging with both hands. "No, Walt, no!" she begged. "Don't wreck everything, now!"

Jordan strove to shake her off. "Goddamnit!" he raged. "The rat tried to stick me."

"You shoot," she panted, "and we'll have the whole hotel about our ears again."

Lerou sat sagging against the wall, eyeing them defiantly, thin features twisted with pain from the crushed right hand. "You'll rot in the Big House," he mocked, "when I spread the story of those sparklers around."

Mackay read quick apprehension in the girl's eyes. Jordan threw her off. "You're through yapping," he choked, hoarse with rage. Taking a quick step forward, he aimed a kick at the gambler's pale features. Lerou ducked and the swinging boot cannoned into the wall. Crazy with anger, Jordan booted the dark-clad man again, hard, low down, in the belly. Lerou gasped with agony, curled up, shrunk into a knot. The boot swung a third time, took the balled-up gambler on the head. He slumped sideways. In a frenzy now, the cattle buyer hurled at him, heavy boot swinging, viciously pounding the insensible man's features into mash. The blonde clutched at Jordan, striving to haul him away from the quivering form. Murder in his pale eyes, he sent her staggering with the sweep of an arm.

Lerou lay unmoving now, mashed features still pounded by the flailing boot. Stiff with horror and mounting anger, Mackay watched. "Quit!" he yelled, whipped out his Colt, thumbed back the hammer. "Jordan!" he exploded, "Lay off that jasper or I'll plug you, so help me."

DESPERADO DOUBLECROSS

Rugged face twisted with passion, the cattle buyer pivoted to face him. For a moment Mackay thought he was about to jump the pointed gun. But, breathing hard, he strode to the doorway, flung the door back and stepped outside. With a frightened glance at the bloodied bundle that had been the dapper Lerou, the blonde hurried after him. Mackay leaned over the slack form, picked up a limp arm, but could detect no pulse beat. He lifted an eyelid—the eye was dull, fixed, staring. No sense hunting up a sawbones, he reflected, all Lerou could use now was an undertaker.

Slowly, he moved to the door. The key was still in the lock. He moved into the corridor, locked the door, pocketed the key. One thing he knew—he was through with Jordan. Gunfighting was one thing, booting a helpless man to death another. If Jordan offered him half of those stones, he couldn't side the hombre. Not any longer.

A bouncy drummer, hat awry and key in hand, was tottering at the door of a room adjoining Jordan's, making ineffectual stabs at the keyhole.

Mackay knuckled the cattle buyer's door, flung it open. Jordan was sitting on the bed, shoulders sagging, all the rage seemed to have burned out of him. The blonde, features pale and set as marble, stood blistering him with her tongue. She cut off abruptly at Mackay's entrance.

"Guess we split now, right now," Mackay told the big man, without preamble.

Jordan looked up with a touch of his former belligerence. "So your guts turned to fiddlestrings!" he mocked.

"There's one way to prove you a liar," bit back Mackay. "Jerk that gun!"

"There's been far too much violence already," interjected the girl frostily. "Pay him off, Walt!"

"Like hell I will!" he growled.

"I said—pay him off," she repeated, every word chilled with anger. "You promised five hundred." Her lips curled, "Or do you welsh on your debts, too?"

Wordlessly, Jordan reached into a hip pocket and brought out a roll of currency. Slowly, he peeled off greenbacks. Mackay watched them flutter onto the bedspread, gathered them up when the cattle buyer quit counting. Stuffing the currency into a pants pocket, he turned toward the door. The blonde's crisp tones brought him up short: "You'll forget—everything—that occurred in that room?"

"I'd sure like to," he returned, turned the door knob and stepped outside.

EIGHTEEN

BACK IN HIS own room, Mackay made a smoke. Striving to organize his thoughts, he paced between bed and washstand. It was a relief to be shut of Jordan but there was a dead man lying in No. 14. The hotel clerk would testify that there'd been a wild party and the killing would likely be chalked up to a drunken fracas. There'd be an inquest and odds were both he and Jordan would be called to testify. Unless he lied under oath, he'd have to accuse Jordan. But more likely the cattle buyer and his niece were liable to gang up and accuse him. His denials would mean nothing against their joint testimony . . . which meant he'd face a manslaughter charge—and

a penitentiary term. Yuma Territorial Prison looked plenty grim from the outside, he'd hate to sample the interior. Seemed the sensible thing to do would be to hightail-fast. Chances were that the body wouldn't be found before the maid went around fixing the rooms, which should give him time to jump an early stage—if there was one.

At sunup he was down in the lobby. A schedule, affixed to the wall by the desk, showed an eastbound stage was due at 7:10 A.M. That, he considered would give him time to eat.

At a Chinese eating house down street he tucked a stack of flapjacks beneath his belt, washed them down with a mug of black coffee. Then he checked out of the hotel and sat in the lobby, nerves on edge, chewing a cold cigarette to mash, with no option but to stick around until the stage pulled in. There was no sign of either Jordan or his niece.

With vast relief he heard the jingle of harness, the yell of a driver, the grinding of locked wheels outside. A drummer, two army officers and a ranch woman, all heavy-eyed and bearing marks of travel, eyed him incuriously when he sank onto the cushions. Several hundred miles of dust-choked jouncing across desert and mountain lay ahead, he considered resignedly, but every mile took him farther away from that battered corpse in No. 14.

It was midmorning of the following day when the Concord rolled into Tucson, wheeled into the familiar adobe-walled courtyard of the Ornadorff and ground to a stop.

Tired, dirty, weary from the long drag, he piled out and elbowed through the usual gathering of loungers. A brisk tap on the back brought him up short. He

wheeled around—to face the heavy-shouldered Deputy Jackman. “Wal?” he inquired curtly.

“Sheriff craves a word with you.”

“What’s Wakely got on his mind now?” he asked, with a touch of panic.

“I wouldn’t know,” the deputy told him stolidly.

“Don’t I get a chance to clean up?”

“Nopel” said Jackman.

Realizing the futility of argument, Mackay shrugged. Side by side, they legged down street.

When they plugged up the courthouse steps he remembered the dreary days he had spent in the gloomy basement cell and battled numbing fear. The sheriff couldn’t tag him for the fracas below the border, that was outside U.S. jurisdiction, but Yuma was a different story. Too late he remembered that the Army telegraph linked most Arizona towns. Lerou’s body must have long been discovered. Maybe Jordan and his niece had concocted a story that laid the killing on his shoulders. If so, the Yuma marshal would have issued a warrant for his arrest and flashed a “Hold” through the Territory. When it came to a showdown, he didn’t have a shred of evidence to prove his innocence. Shirt clammy against his back, he continued to climb the steps.

The sheriff hunched at his desk, resembling nothing more than a balding old buzzard. On a chair nearby sat a short, blocky man garbed in a shiny serge suit, nursing a bowler hat on his knees. “Easterner” was stamped all over him. His squarish features were scraped razor-smooth, and impassive except for a grimness about the mouth and a quick alertness in his eyes.

“So you corralled the maverick.” grated Wakely. “Search him—search him good.”

Tight-lipped, Mackay stood while the deputy emptied his pockets, dropping the contents onto the desk.

"His boots!" prompted the sheriff.

Mackay plunked down on a chair, pulled off his high boots and tossed them to Jackman.

"Your lid?"

Disgustedly, Mackay handed his hat to the sheriff.

Wakely ran fingers around the sweatband, peered inside the crown, threw it back.

"What in creation you hunting?" demanded Mackay irately.

"You'd be surprised," grunted the sheriff. To the deputy, he said, "Guess he's clean."

"Gather up your dofunnies and rest your legs," he told Mackay. And added, probing him with deep-set eyes, "Wherever we find you we find trouble, at Yuma finstance."

Sweat trickled cold down Mackay's spine.

Wakely picked a telegraph flimsy off the desk. "According to this, you, a gambler named Lerou and a hairpin who calls himself Jordan staged a fracas in Lerou's hotel room. Next morning Lerou is found stomped to death and you've hightailed. Give me one good reason why you shouldn't stand trial."

"Sure, I didn't stomp Lerou."

"So Jordan was the gent who used his boots!" There was faint irony on the sheriff's tone.

"Yep!"

Wakely raised his shoulders. "Suppose we let a jury decide. You crave to make a statement before I jug you?"

"Guess not," returned Mackay wearily. "Who'd be interested? My word ain't worth a damn around here."

"I'm interested!" put in the Easterner, with a nasal twang.

"This gent is Charlie Jennings," said the sheriff. "Pinkerton man, out of New York."

Mackay hesitated. "It's a long story," he demurred.

"We've got all day," Jennings told him blandly. His tone sharpened, "Start talking!"

"It all began when a gent named Jordan offered me \$100 to escort his niece, Carol, back to St. Louis," began Mackay. Continuing, he related the sequence of events—from the stage holdup to the fracas in Lerou's room.

When he was through, Jennings glanced at the sheriff. "It tallies!" he said. "That's not the first time Dutch has stomped a man."

"All we got is this maverick's say-so," objected Wake-ly.

"He's clean!"

"What makes you so doggone sure?"

The Pinkerton man brought out a short, black stogie, lit it and settled back in his chair. "Maybe I should spread my hand." He eyed Mackay. "Your Mister Jordan, cattle buyer, is 'Dutch' Dedrich. Dutch is a curly wolf, rodded a renegade gang in Texas, heisting banks and stages. The bunch held up a Butterfield stage—westbound—outside Amarillo, and lifted a package of diamonds worth a cool quarter-million a Tiffany messenger was packing to 'Frisco. Dutch 'crossed his gang, lit out with the stones, headed West. His wife Carol joined him in Yuma."

"Not the blondel?" ejaculated Mackay, slack-jawed.

"A blonde," said Jennings. "She dealt blackjack. Well, they took over 'The Big Payoff,' a gambling joint. The blonde ran it, Dutch got into the cattle business. But

he couldn't shake the gang. They dogged him to Yuma. The pair hit for Tucson. Dutch, figuring to fool the pack, loads his wife on the St. Louis stage, with the stones. Hired your gun," he nodded at Mackay, "to protect her. But the gang fooled him—she lost out. How this Lerou got into the act I wouldn't know. Guess one of the gang spilled too much when he was liquored up. Anyway, Lerou takes a hand. Likely, as you claim, he lifted the rocks from the blonde's room in the Ornadorff—and he found Dutch is a mighty tough hombre to tangle with." He blew the ash from his cigar. "We could have picked up Dutch most any time, but we wanted the diamonds. We lost track of the stones until that holdup was reported in *The Citizen*. I telegraphed our agent in 'Frisco and headed West. Our boys picked up Dutch's trail right here in Tucson. We had a man aboard the stage when he headed back to Yuma with his wife. In Yuma, our man kept cases on him in the hotel, bedded down in the next room, watching through a knothole." Mackay remembered the "tipsy" drummer. That hombre had been on the stage, too.

"What he overheard," resumed Jennings, "corroborates this young feller's story. Dutch stomped Lerou after his wife located the diamonds, and she sure blistered his hide for going on the rampage."

"Your man grab the lobo?" inquired Mackay eagerly.

"Nope, he telegraphed me for orders. Seems Dutch's wife is cozy with the town marshal. They laid the killing to you and he swore out a warrant. Right now, they're on a stage, heading this way and figuring they're in the clear." He chuckled. "The pair sure got a surprise due when that stage rolls in."

Mackay sat digesting the Pinkerton operative's revelations. Everything was plain enough now. And he'd been

a prime knothead, he considered ruefully. The pair had sure played him for a sucker.

The sheriff eyed Jennings with quizzical amusement. "If you'd rung me in," he pointed out, "you'd have cracked this case weeks back. I was holding those stones right in this office."

"Just where do I stand?" interjected Mackay.

"Cleared, I guess," admitted Wakely. Amusement glimmered in his sunken eyes. "And for gawd's sake steer clear of blondes."

"You telling me!" grinned the chunky rider.

NINETEEN

OUTSIDE THE courthouse, Mackay paused, his mind still in a whirl. His first impulse was to head for The Outpost, but he checked the urge with the thought that he'd likely run up against Dolores. That meant more explaining and the admission that the Jordans had suckered him. What he needed was a quiet spot where he could mull things over. So he angled across street, heading for Larsen's Livery. Close-mouthed Ole Larsen never poked his nose into other men's business.

A high board fence bounded the wagon yard beside the livery. Mackay stepped through the gateway, hunting a shady spot to squat. Several wagons and Larsen's "For Hire" rig stood around. There was a water trough in the rear and a feed rack, at which a shaggy mule drowsed hipshot, on one side. A dilapidated buggy had been hauled to a far corner and left to rot.

The shabby cushions of the buggy were set on the

ground between vehicle and fence, over them stretched a sagging tarp, from fence top to buggy top. Beneath it, outstretched on the cushions, was the bearded Preacher, sunk in siesta.

Mackay sauntered across the yard. Sound of his footsteps awakened the Preacher. He jerked to a sitting position, a quick alertness in his eyes. Sighting Mackay, he relaxed, his sun-blasted features creasing into a smile.

"You're fixed up slicker'n a bug in a rug," commented the rider, hunkering against the fence.

"My needs are few, brother," intoned Paul benevolently. "I call this home when I spread the Good Word hereabouts. Do you and your friends still pursue elusive diamonds?"

Mackay sobered. "Guess I was hogswiggled," he admitted glumly.

Paul brought out the makin's. "Confession is good for the soul, brother. I am all ears."

Wryly, Mackay told of the events that had transpired since they had last met, the Pinkerton man's revelation of Jordan's real identity and the source of the diamonds.

"Love of money is the root of all evil," commented the Preacher sorrowfully. "Where now are these baubles for which men have died?"

"Guess Jordan, Dutch that is, will be packing 'em when he steps off the stage."

"And into the hands of the law," murmured Paul. "A meet reward, brother. Sinners shall be chastened with whips of scorpions. Then this Jennings will take possession of these chips of carbon upon which worldly men place such value?"

"Guess he'll take 'em on to 'Frisco."

"So be it!" murmured Paul, and stroked his beard complacently.

Mackay wouldn't have missed the arrival of the Yuma stage for a fistful of diamonds. He noted that the usual sprinkling of idlers who usually gathered to greet the stage had swelled to a fair-sized crowd, about which there was a taut air of expectancy. Somehow, he guessed, news that trouble was due to erupt had percolated around. He picked out the lank sheriff and bowler-hatted Jennings among the throng and noted deputy stars glinting on several shirt fronts. Tied to rings embedded in the south wall of the courtyard, a row of saddlehorses switched tails.

Right on time, the stage swerved into the courtyard, the four-horse team stretched out at a dead run. Some drivers liked to enter Tucson in style. Sliding wheels and prancing hooves kicked up a dust haze as the whiskered Jehu on the box hauled on the lines and jammed on the foot brake, skidding the coach to a triumphal stop slambang in front of the hotel entrance.

Mackay tensed, watching as the porter began unlacing the boot. The blonde stepped down, regally disdainful as always. Brittle silence clothed the expectant crowd pressing around the stage, and Mackay guessed that the girl sensed their tension. She paused, sweeping the spectators with alert blue eyes, then turned abruptly, throwing words back into the coach.

Mackay heard a door bang on the farther side of the stage. Startled shouting hit his ears. High on the hotel steps, he had a clear view as Dutch, running hard, emerged from behind the stage, scuffing dust as he raced for the tied saddle horses. Men began streaming after him. The fugitive wheeled, snatched out a gun and loosed a shot. His pursuers scattered like startled quail.

Dutch had reached the tied ponies now. Mackay saw

Wakely and the Pinkerton man shouldering through the press of men, who seemed to cover the courtyard like scurrying ants, striving to get a bead on the fugitive.

Dutch had loosed a saddle horse now. Quickly, he hauled into leather, whirled the animal. Mackay saw that the lawmen couldn't shoot because of excited citizens surging around them. The pony leaped forward as Dutch drummed its flanks. Mackay remembered his gun. Absorbed, he had forgotten he packed it. He whipped out the .45, thumbing as it arced down. Flame tipped the muzzle. The madly galloping pony crashed in a flurry of dust. Catapulted out of the saddle, Dutch somersaulted, bounced up like a rubber ball, darted for the gateway.

Sheriff Wakely was clear of the press now. Mackay saw his gun spit lead. The running man staggered, fell headlong. Dust-smothered, he squirmed around. Belled down, he returned the fire, his gun booming and bucking. Several deputies were in action now. Lances of flame bit through floating dust, and droning lead hammered Dutch down. He rolled over, writhing, then lay still, very still, a gray blotch on the dusty courtyard.

Quickly, a press of men bunched around the sprawled form. Mackay saw the blonde, all composure evaporated now, clawing through them. When he elbowed his way to the body, the girl lay across it, face pressed against the slack features, shaking with bitter sobs.

With no great gentleness, Wakely hauled her off. Jennings dropped on his knees and began questing through the dead outlaw's pockets. He dug out a small package, enveloped in a strip of sheeting, unwrapped it. The press of curious spectators gaped as diamonds scintillated in the sunlight.

"Guess that's it!" commented the Pinkerton man, com-

ing to his feet. He rewrapped the stones, stowed them in a pocket and began beating the dust off his pant legs.

The blonde stood quietly crying, the sheriff still gripping an arm. "You crave I should jug the skirt?" he inquired.

"Nopel" threw back Jennings, patting his pocket. "We got what we want."

That evening the lobby of the Ornadorff was jammed with boisterous citizens, all rehashing the killing of Dutch Dedrich and recovery of the Tiffany diamonds. It seemed to Mackay that half the town circulated in and out. He glimpsed the smooth-shaven Jennings sitting inconspicuously in a corner, Deputy Jackman bulking on a chair beside him. A carpetbag sat between the Pinkerton man's feet and Mackay didn't have to guess what he was packing.

Every head swiveled as a voice boomed above the drone of talk like a brass drum. "Hear this, sinners! The wages of sin is death. A sinner died today. Wise men will make peace with their Creator before their souls shrivel with his in the flames of hell." The Preacher's gaunt form stood framed in the doorway, denunciation flashing in his dark eyes.

Someone hooted, derisive laughter erupted, and the buzz of talk broke out again.

The bearded evangelist raised his shoulders with a gesture of resignation and began easing through the press toward the two lawmen in the corner. Curiosity drew Mackay in his wake. Pausing in front of Jennings, Paul boomed: "Fools tell me that you have recovered great treasure, brother. Know now there is no treasure but in heaven."

"Crazy as a bedbug," Jackman told the Pinkerton

man. "That jasper's been spouting hell and hallelujah all over town." Maybe so, thought Mackay, but the bearded man sure seemed interested in that carpetbag.

Voice of the desk clerk, raised to a shout to make himself heard, diverted Mackay's attention: "Passengers for San Francisco and way points get ready to board!"

Jennings grabbed the handle of his bag and straightened, plainly eager to go. Sided by the deputy, he became immersed in a surge of men toward the doorway.

Outside a segment of moon laid a sheen on the waiting Concord and the glossy coats of a new-hitched team. Men swirled around the coach. Mackay glimpsed the Preacher as he moved through the light of one of the brass side lamps.

The driver's whip cracked like a pistol shot, the restive team threw its weight on the traces and the lumbering vehicle began to move. Jackman joined Mackay on the hotel steps. Together, they watched the shadowy bulk of the Concord as it rolled away.

The team swerved through the gateway. As it swung, the stage gave a great lurch. Dumbfounded, the two saw it topple over, capsize with a thunderous crash. In the forefront of the rush of men toward the wrecked vehicle, Mackay headed for the snorting, wild-plunging team. In the dim light he saw that the Preacher had already levered the door topside of the overturned stage open and was hauling out bruised and bewildered passengers. The last was Jennings. Dazed, the Pinkerton man reeled unsteadily. Men were leading battered passengers back to the hotel.

Paul was now inside the coach, passing out hats, coats, other oddments, among them the Pinkerton man's carpetbag. Jackman grabbed it and began steering Jennings away.

Quickly, confusion died. The team had been unhitched and led back to the livery. With other men, Mackay and the Preacher stood eyeing the wrecked coach. The whiskered driver, who appeared to have suffered no injury except to his feelings, poked around. Suddenly, he ejaculated wrathily: "Some cow-hocked, flea-infested buzzard pulled the lynch pin on that off rear wheel—that's what toppled her."

"Why would any man be guilty of such an evil deed, brother?" inquired Paul sonorously.

"From pure cussedness, I guess," growled the other. "Wal, he sure ruined my running time."

"Man's lot is one of trial and tribulation," soothed Paul. "Turn to the Lord, brother, he rewardeth the deserving, upon such he bestows treasure of great price."

The driver expectorated. "He hath ears but he heareth not," remarked Paul sorrowfully to Mackay. "Well, I must seek my humble bed, for tomorrow I journey afar." He turned away and stalked into the night.

Mackay was heading back to the lobby when the Pinkerton man, Deputy Jackman at his heels, burst through the doorway. At a run, they dashed past. Mackay sprinted after them. "What in thunder's got into you hombres?" he wanted to know.

"Jennings been robbed," panted Jackman.

They rushed up to the stage. The door of the upper side still gaped open. The Pinkerton man jumped inside. Mackay could hear him ferreting around. His head and shoulders protruded. "They're gone!" he groaned. "Some thieving Siwash grabbed the diamonds."

TWENTY

TUCSON WAS stirring sluggishly at the onset of a new day when Mackay stepped briskly into the sheriff's office. Wakely hunched at his desk, bearing a marked resemblance, decided the visitor, to a turkey buzzard that had lost its tail feathers. Jennings, the stocky Pinkerton man, hunched somberly on a chair beside it. An aura of gloom enveloped both.

The sheriff nodded briefly. "What you acting so dog-gone chipper about?" he inquired morosely.

"Just had a hunch that paid off," grinned Mackay. "I feel like I grabbed the jackpot with a low pair backed by a wagonload of gall. You keep any old Texas dodgers around?"

Resignedly, Wakely slid open a drawer of his desk, lifted out a wad of yellowing "Wanted" notices and dropped them on a chair seat. Mackay scooped up the pack, began thumbing through the crackling sheets.

He paused, asked cheerily: "You got a pencil handy, Sheriff?"

Wakely scowled, dug a stub of pencil out of a vest pocket, threw it. "I got a boot, too," he announced irately, "which same I'm likely to apply to your back-side if you don't button up."

Mackay didn't answer, he was too busy sketching a beard upon the smooth-shaven features of a youngish-looking man, with high forehead and piercing eyes. Beneath the blurred head and shoulder picture was printed:

DESPERADO DOUBLECROSS

\$1,000 REWARD Wanted—For Bank Robbery

Samuel Gomper, alias Scripture Sam. Height 6'2"; weight 220 lbs.; hair, black; eyes, dark. Wanted for robbery with violence—Wechester County Bank; Culver City Bank and Lodie National Bank. Dangerous character. Fast with gun. Well educated, trained for Holy Orders. Operates alone. The above reward will be paid for information leading to his apprehension.

John Miller, Sheriff,
Wheeler County, Texas.

"Take a gander at this," invited Mackay, extending the sheet. Wakely glanced at it carelessly, then his interest quickened. "Jehosophat!" he exclaimed. "If that ain't that loco Preacher."

"That's the gent who grabbed the stones!"

"You funnin'?" growled the sheriff.

"Stake my saddle on it," declared Mackay.

Wakely straightened, reached for his gunbelt hanging from a peg. "If you're stringing me," he promised ominously, "I'll just naturally flay you alive." To Jennings he said crisply, "Let's go grab the hairpin, he beds down in Larsen's wagon yard."

"Not no more," put in Mackay sorrowfully. "I lamped the hombre pulling out of town before sunup, straddling that mangy mule."

"And you let the bustard get away!" Disgust wreathed Wakely's weathered features. "Damnit, I've a mind to jug you as an accessory."

In no way abashed, Mackay rolled a smoke. "Heck,"

he protested, "all I had was a hunch, and I *like* the Preacher. He aced me out of a tight—twice."

Wakely stood chewing the ends of his drooping mustache, glaring with mingled anger and frustration.

"Just supposing a feller could get his grubhooks on them stones, what would it be worth?" Mackay asked the Pinkerton man, who seemed too sunk in depression to join the exchange.

"Twenty percent," returned Jennings tonelessly.

"Twenty percent of a quarter-million," breathed Mackay. "Gee willikers—fifty thousand smackers!" With that, he hauled a package, wrapped in shirting, from a pants pocket, opened it up and emptied a scintillating cascade of diamonds onto the desk.

For moments, the two lawmen eyed the sparkling stones mutely, features frozen with surprise, then Wakely swung toward the amused Mackay. "Just what sort of a shenanigans you pulling?" he rasped.

"Like I said," explained Mackay patiently, "I played a hunch. Down in Nogales the Preacher admitted he had a record afore he saw the Light. And he was mighty curious about them stones. Last night he was skulking around the stage afore it pulled out—that's when he jerked the lynch pin. It was dark, remember? Wal, it was a good guess that the wheel would roll off when the team swung, at the gateway. He was right there, ready to jump in when the stage rolled over. Your pard was in no shape to realize that the hombre went through his pockets, afore he boosted him out." Mackay paused to crush his butt. "Paul pulled one boner," he continued, "grabbed a slug of shuteye in the wagon yard afore he made tracks. He was too doggone sure he was in the clear. Guess he woke up with a sore head—sure hated to conk him."

DESPERADO DOUBLECROSS

"Jeez!" murmured Jennings. He reached, stirred the diamonds with a finger, almost with reverence. "You earned that twenty percent, mister," he said fervently. "I'll see you get it. \$50,000!" muttered Wakely. "And I handed 'em over to that highfalutin' blonde!"

Mackay pushed through the batwings of The Outpost and stood looking around. The saloon was empty except for Baldy, washing glasses behind the bar.

"Dolores around?" sang out Mackay.

"She ducked out for a mug of dip, down at The Imperial," said Baldy. He cradled his elbows on the mahogany, in a talkative mood: "Ain't seen you around lately and Dolores been techy as a tarantula. Guess you know the law beefed some outlaw yesterday outside the Ornadorff. They claim he was packing a million in diamonds."

"I did hear a whisper," admitted Mackay, dropping down at his old table by the window.

Raven hair streaming down her back, high-boned features innocent of make-up, the girl entered. Her dark eyes widened with surprise and pleasure at sight of Mackay. Eagerly, she threaded between tables toward him.

"Hello, stranger!" she greeted, dropping onto a chair across the table.

"Howdy!" he threw back.

Then both were silent. Nervously, the girl toyed with her solitary bracelet—a circlet of colored stones, vividly colored, large as marbles.

"How come you're wearing that geegaw?" Mackay inquired gruffly. "You know what Hansen named it—junk!"

"I am not interested in Hans Hansen's opinions." Dolores caressed the gaudy bracelet. "I like it!"

"It ain't such-a-much."

"You gave it to me," she replied softly, then burst out: "They're talking of nothing but this Dutch Dedrich around town. Did you know that the uppity blonde was his wife?"

"Sure!" he said carelessly.

"So you knew it!" she accused, fire flashing in her eyes. "You played around with that blonde figuring to make me jealous."

"Right now I'm figuring it's time we were hitched."

Dolores sniffed. "Hitched to a tumbleweed who drifts over all creation!"

"Wal, I got a notion to stick around town."

"Doing what?" she inquired suspiciously.

"What's wrong with the freighting business?"

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