



## NEVER CORRAL A CORNERED COUGAR

He called himself Tucson and he had one killing behind him. Now he was tired of holing up in a dusty Mexican border town, and tired of running . . . so when he spotted a chance to get back to Texas under the safety of another man's monicker, he grabbed it.

But trouble was brewing in Buffalo Fork, and Tucson was riding right into it. The blood feud between the redheaded McCarthys and the powerful Jensen spread was on again, and somehow, Tucson was smack in the middle. The atmosphere was getting plainly unhealthy for an *hombre* trying to dodge both the law and a rustler's bullet.

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# DOMIT GROSS LINE TOM WEST

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CONTRACT IN CARTRIDGES
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T

He called himself Tucson. The desert sun had scorched his features to a coppery hue and hard riding had slimmed his blocky frame down to bone and sinew. He was garbed in stained corduroys, high-heeled riding boots and a plaid shirt. Shoved back from his forehead was a Stetson that had once been light gray. There was an obstinate angle to his jaw and lurking humor mingled with the recklessness in his gray eyes. He gave the impression of being as tough as a hickory switch, an impression strengthened by the butt of a .45 protruding from a battered holster, thonged down, and flared to facilitate a fast draw, on his left side.

He was hunkered against the front of the cantina El Toro, a yellowed adobe simmering in the torrid heat of Nogales,

a young young man, scarcely in his twenties, on the wrong side of the Border, on the wrong side of the law.

From the cantina behind him flowed the drone of liquid Spanish voices, the musical tinkle of glasses, the lingering melody of a guitar. The music, soft and melancholy, was attuned to the rider's mood as he gazed across flat roofs at hills that rolled in even waves, sun-soaked and patched with desert grass; rolled down to the slab shanties and squat dobes of the town. As far as he was concerned, those hills might have been a thousand miles away.

One step across the invisible line that divided the sleepy Border town-delineating Mexican and United States territory—was a step through the penitentiary doors. He had always been a mite too fast on the draw, he mused, considering the reward dodger that was decorated with his features. Even so, it was plain hell to be a pariah, just be-

cause he had let daylight into a crooked gambler.

He eyed the hills of home as a thirsty traveler might eye the mirage of a pleasant, flowing stream, with just about as much hope of ever reaching it. Right then, he would have felt free to confess, he felt lower than a snake's belly. Not only was he lonely, but flat broke. Sitting in a game of stud the previous evening with Tom Rogers, a Cattlemen's Protective Association detective endeavoring to trace a passel of rustled two-year-old steers, and an alkalied old cattle buyer, he had been taken to the cleaners. Not only had he lost his own stake, but the proceeds from the sale of the steers.

Dust fogged as a bunch of vaqueros, gay in scarlet sashes, cantered down the crooked street and piled off their gouged

and whip-marked ponies in front of the brooding rider.

Smoldering dark eyes regarded the forlorn Yanqui with no friendliness as the vaqueros jingled into the cantina. Gringos were not popular south of the Border, and these wild riders from some distant hacienda took no pains to veil their dislike.

The fugitive grinned with faint derision and rolled a smoke. . . . A shot slammed out in the cantina and a scream of mortal agony cut through the brooding heat like the thrust of a jagged knife. In a flash, Tucson was on his feet, gun gripped in a fist, charging for the curtained doorway. Head on, he collided with a flood of panicky patrons, spouting from the cantina like a torrent of fear-crazed steers. A press of bodies engulfed him. Forced back, he tripped, went down. A sharp-toed riding boot took him beside the jaw, another made its impress upon his ribs, a third kicked the gun out of his hand.

When he scrambled to his feet, slightly battered, and stood fingering his damaged jaw, the vaqueros were streaking out of sight down street, rapidly disappearing behind rolling dust, urging their wild-eyed ponies as though El Diablo were at their heels.

With a wry grin, Tucson gathered up his gun and trampled Stetson. Punching the hat into shape, he pushed aside the grimy fly-curtain and stepped into the cantina. Carlos, the portly proprietor, palpitated behind the bar, panic in his eyes. Except for him, the place had emptied, and emptied fast, judging from overturned tables, scattered bottles and upset chairs. Then the rider glimpsed a limp form, stretched beside a table, gun gripped in a slackened fist. Blood soaked its gray shirt and pants, fast spreading in an ever-widening stain. Around it, the flies were already black.

Tucson crossed the floor, dropped on his knees beside the remains of Rogers, the Cattlemen's Protective detective. The body was still warm but there was no life in it. "Ripped from belly to brisket," muttered the rider. "The yellow sidewinders!"

Straightening, he eyed Carlos' quivering form. "Who did this?" he demanded in fluent Spanish.

The Mexican's plump hands fluttered like the wings of an

agitated hen. "I do not know, señor," he quavered. "The rurales, they weel come. Four times now has there been a

killing in El Toro." He moaned, engulfed in self-pity.

Brow furrowed, Tucson eyed the dead man. The detective was little more than a stranger, met across a poker table. But this was Mexico. If he left the cantina, he knew well that the panicky Carlos would strip the body of everything of value and destroy all identification. Maybe this hombre had a wife, kids. Again he droppped down and, conquering his distaste, emptied the victim's pockets—a fat silver watch, engraved "T.R.", a jackknife, a roll of bills, the inevitable makin's, a metal badge, stamped "T. Rogers, #61, Arizona Cattlemen's Protective." But nothing to show where he made his home or whom he had left behind.

Paper crackled beneath the pressure of the rider's searching fingers. Flopping aside a bloody vest, he pulled an envelope from a shirt pocket. Extracting a folded sheet, he smoothed it out. It bore the heading of the Cattlemen's Association. Curiously, he read:

Tom Rogers,

General Delivery, Nogales, Arizona. Dear Rogers:

Drop your present assignment and proceed to Buffalo Fork, Cottonwood Valley, Arizona T. Jake Jensen (Lazy J) reports an outbreak of rustling and states his losses are heavy. This is apparently the work of an organized gang. One "Brazos" (Slash B iron) north-west of Jensen's spread, has a bad rep. Served term in Yuma for rustling. Suggest you contact Brazos in guise of grubline rider.

He may need a good "cowhand." Report after investigation. Mail will be sent to Buffalo Fork.

Yours very truly,
Thomas Story, Secretary.

For moments Tucson stared at the letter, lost in thought. Then his pulse raced as an idea struck him with the impact of a .45 slug. His glance strayed down to the badge, the watch, the pitiful little heap on the dirty floor beside the body. It was a loco idea, he told himself, he'd be as crazy as a coon to try it, but its very audacity was fascinating . . . and it would get him across the Border. Who in thunder around Buffalo Fork would know Tom Rogers from Adam?

He rose at a sudden decision. "Carlos, you crave to keep this killing quiet?"

"Si, si, señor!"

"Can you cache this gent's body, bury him decent?"

"Si, sil" The fat Mexican panted around the end of the bar, eager to grasp this unexpected solution to the problem of explaining away another killing to the hard-eyed rurales.

### II

Windows were patched yellow against the gloom when Tucson jogged into Buffalo Fork. It was little different from a score of other cowtowns—a broad main street, hock-deep with powdery dust, flanked by gnawed hitch rails and square-facaded store buildings, mainly of adobe, their canopied fronts forming an almost continuous awning over splintery wooden plankwalks. Off Main Street, a few crossroads, unpaved and abounding with chuckholes, gave access to frame houses and clapboard cabins, scattered beneath gaunt cottonwoods. Beyond placid Cottonwood Creek lay the Mexican section, a

clutter of adobes nestling in squat brush, the only relief to their drabness strings of red peppers dangling from the vigas.

Tucson neck-reined his roan gelding to a hitch rail that fronted a low brick-and-adobe building, on the facade of which a crudely lettered sign read "The Ace."

Inside the batwings, he paused in quick survey. A long wooden bar spanned the saloon to his left, lined by spurred riders and shirt-sleeved townsmen. More patrons grouped around small tables scattered over the butt-littered floor. By the right-hand wall, punchers were bunched thick around a table. He blinked as he glimpsed a red-headed girl dealing cards.

He sauntered up to the bar, ordered a slug of bourbon. Behind the bar at the rear end, a small, plump man, dressed in somber black was perched on a high stool. A huge diamond sparkled on his cravat like a locomotive headlight. Smoking a thin cigar, he alertly watched the house, a smooth smile of amiability wreathing his features, red and rosy as a ripe apple. But Tucson noted that his small, shrewd eyes were cold as a rattlesnake's and a bulge beneath his neatly buttoned coat probably indicated a hideaway.

"The boss?" he inquired casually of the barkeep.

"Yep!" replied the apron, polishing the varnished bar top with a dingy towel, "Diamond Dorsey."

A brass beer token rattled on the bar beside Tucson and a mournful voice intoned, "Make mine hawgwash!"

In the backbar mirror he focussed a tall beanpole of a rider with long, dolorous features. A faded blue shirt lay loose upon his narrow shoulders, his wide mouth drooped dismally at the corners and a whimsical resignation was reflected in his rheumy eyes.

The beer check clinked into the cash drawer and a mug of beer was set before the beanpole. He sipped doubtfully, his features twisted with disgust. "Warm beer!" he ejaculated

hollowly, "I'd just as soon take a swig at the horse trough, but water always did rust my innards."

Tucson chuckled, pushed over the bottle of bourbon. "Have

a real drink, mister, on me," he invited.

With alacrity, the lanky rider grabbed the bottle and tilted it. His prominent Adam's apple bobbled. He set the bottle down with a deep sigh. "Ice water was never more welcome in hell," he commented solemnly. "I'm thanking you, mister. The handle is Gloomy."

"My tag reads Rogers, Tom Rogers," returned the blocky

rider.

Gloomy sighed again, carefully shook remnants of dust from a deflated tobacco sack into a paper, rolled it and ran his tongue along the cylinder. Match in hand, he half raised a scuffed riding boot, dropped it. "Nope," he commented ruefully, "can't scratch it on the sole, I'd burn my doggoned foot."

Tucson smiled. "You ride for a spread hereabouts?"

"Nope, I'm riding the grub line, pard, and I'm mighty saddlesore." He blinked at the blocky rider, "So the moniker's Rogers?"

"That's what I said." To forestall further questions, Tucson fired one of his own, "Ain't there no holes in spreads around

here?"

"They're always plugged when I ride in." Gloomy regarded the bottle of bourbon with longing intensity.

"Gargle!" invited Tucson. "Ain't the Slash B hiring?"

His tall companion choked on the drink. "Wal pard," he observed, when he recovered his breath, "it ain't considered exactly polite to ride for the Slash."

"How come?"

"Some claim Brazos, the hombre who rods it, is kinda promiscuous with his branding iron."

The blocky rider thought it expedient to change the sub-

ject. "Who's the good-looking gal?" he inquired idly, in-

dicating the crowded gambling table.

"That's Monte Marge, the punchers' pet. Deals blackjack, likes a little three-card monte and she sure ain't no floosie—most scratched the eyes out of one gent who offered to split his blankets." Gloomy flicked a match with his thumbnail and touched it to his smoke, continued, "The boys are sure loco over the filly. All they crave is to gaze into her baby-blue eyes and liquidate their pay checks. Me," he added morosely, "I ain't tempted; I don't have no pay check."

"Maybe I should ramble over for a look-see," commented

Tucson, with interest.

"Pard, when you're through," rejoined Gloomy mournfully, "remember I got a bunk reserved on the straw pile down at the livery, for free. She sure won't leave you with no room rent."

Tucson wandered across the room, joining punchers close-packed around the blackjack table. At close inspection, he decided that the flaming redhead who banked the game was as pretty as the Queen of Hearts. Banked high and secured by black combs studded with tiny brilliants, her hair accentuated the pale cream of her oval features. She sat straight-backed, shapely and full-breasted, her charms not hidden by a green silk dress, cut low. She wore no make-up and, considered Tucson, didn't need any.

With casual self-confidence, she dealt the cards, paid bets or swept in her winnings with sure, slender fingers. Her voice

had a soft Texas drawl.

Tucson was studying her features with unconscious intensity when, unexpectedly, her gaze came up from the table. For an instant, her clear blue eyes locked with his, then her glance dropped quickly.

He fell to watching the play and noted that the girl wonfar too often. Either she was uncommonly lucky, he decided,

or she was dealing crooked cards.

An older, desert-eroded rider, with hatchet features, jingled across the floor. He was wiry and whipcord thin. Foreman of the big Lazy J spread, Dan Harper's eyes were deceptively mild and his voice held a tired weariness, belied by a peppery temper and a gunspeed reputed to have lightning shaded.

"I reckon, boys," he told the players, "it's high time we drifted." Then he turned and his penetrating gaze dwelt full

on Tucson. Levelly, the rider returned it.

"Hell, Dan," grumbled a freckled puncher, "let me lose this last dollar."

"As well as your good sense?" drawled the foreman. He transferred his attention to the girl, "You keep the Lazy J broke, ma'am."

Tucson started involuntarily at sight of the blazing hatred that suddenly flared in the girl's eyes, to be instantly veiled by her downcast lids. When she looked up again her gaze was friendly and untroubled. "Bye, bye, boys!" Her voice was low, tantalizing. "It's time you were tucked in. Come again!"

The Lazy J contingent trooped across to the bar for a final drink before pulling out. Briefly, Tucson stood by empty chairs.

Monte Marge riffled the cards, eying him with cool speculation.

"I'd say," he said offhand, "that you hated that gent's guts."

"And I'd say," she returned icily, "that you would be well advised to mind your own business. Want to sit in?"

He extended a hand, "After I lamp the deck."

Quick anger sparked in the redhead's eyes. She hesitated, then contemptuously dropped the pack of cards on the table. He swept them up, ran his fingers over their edges, reversed the deck and fanned it, examining the backs. With a

slight lift of his broad shoulders he threw the cards back. "No soap!" he said, with a tight smile.

"What do you mean by that?"

"You ain't content with using a stamped deck, you trim the edges, too." His voice dripped contempt. "Hell, ma'am, you don't give the suckers any kind of a show."

The girl's chair crashed as she sprang to her feet, lips a tight red slash against the pallor of her features. "If I were a

man I'd shoot you for that!" she choked.

"If you were a man you'd have been shot-after the first deal you made," he mocked.

She snatched the pack and threw it full into his face. Quick silence held the saloon. Every eye swiveled toward the green-clad form of Monte Marge and the slow-smiling rider facing her, cards splattering around his feet.

Kicking chairs aside in their eagerness to reach the girl, the Lazy J bunch charged across the saloon. In a trice they

ringed the pair.

"What's the trouble, Marge?" demanded the freckled puncher.

"That cheap skate insulted me!" she panted.

The puncher swung around to face Tucson, his belligerence plain. Gray eyes wary, close pressed by the pack of
punchers, Tucson fingered his gun butt. Before he could jerk
the iron, a hand latched onto his wrist from behind. The
freckled rider came in swinging. Tucson checked him with
a vicious jab in the ribs with his free arm. Then punchers
swarmed all over him. Hopelessly, he fought back, overwhelmed by the rush of men. Kicking and struggling, he was
hoisted off his feet and hustled in the midst of sweating,
swearing punchers to the batwings. Like a projectile, they
hurled him through the swinging doors. Instinctively protecting his head with bent arms, he hit the plankwalk face
down. The breath knocked out of his body, he lay motionless, every joint jarred by the shock of impact. Then, nose

streaming red, he slowly levered to his feet and weaved to the hitch rail.

A lanky rider pushed out and stood silhouetted against the light of the oil lamps inside. He focussed Tucson's slack form propped against the hitch rail and moved forward. In one hand he held the victim's gun, in the other a scuffed Stetson. "I guess, pard," he observed solicitously, "you left these behind. I recollect you departed kind of sudden. You always check out of saloons thataway?"

The blocky rider grinned wryly, staunching his bloody nose. "I reckon it's getting to be kind of a habit." He dropped his gun back into leather and yanked on his hat. Together,

they moved down street, toward the livery barn.

"How would I reach the Slash B?" inquired Tucson, as

they spread their rolls on the straw pile.

"Follow the creek down stream for three-four miles and you'll hit West Fork. Tie to that for maybe another six miles and you'll ride plumb into the Slash." With this information, Gloomy doused the stable lamp hanging from a nearby peg. As he stretched out, his sleepy tones floated to Tucson's ears, "Maybe I'll side you when you brace Brazos for a job. I'd hate to decorate a tree, but dammit, a feller's got to eat and I've swallowed so much grass I'm ashamed to look a cow in the eye."

Wan light filtered into the barn when Tucson slipped out of his soogans, rolled them quietly and rigged his pony. Gloomy still slept. Cautiously leading the roan outside, for he didn't crave company, the blocky rider mounted and jogged down sleeping Main Street, past the dumpy railway depot and a network of cattle pens beyond, from which a single track snaked eastward.

The rising sun had not yet cleared distant mountains and the brisk morning air was fragrant with the scent of greasewood, spiced with the pungent odor of sage. The roan splashed across a wide, sandy ford.

Still shadowed, the flats ahead lapped to misty infinity, green-veined by chaparral and specked with grazing cows. Quail piped from the brush and cottontails bobbed across the trail.

From sheer exuberance of spirits, Tucson released a joyous yell and dug in the guthooks. The startled roan leaped forward, hooves drumming. . . . the gaunt skeleton of a windmill thrust above the chaparral that clothed the cutbanks of West Fork. Drawing close, the rider checked his pony and sat eying a scene of sooted desolation. The Slash B was a burnt-out shell. Twisted remnants of kitchen utensils, a battered bucket, a smashed stable lamp specked a blackened square that marked the site of the house. At one side, a rude rock-and-adobe chimney had survived the flames and thrust up like a discolored fang. Beyond, charred timbers and ashes marked the former location of a barn. Even the posts of the pasture were sagging and broken barbed wire twisted in ragged coils. Nothing moved, beyond a brace of blue jays fluttering and squawking around the stub of chimney.

He quickly swung around in the saddle as the drub of a pony's hooves on hard ground reached his ears. At a leisurely jog-trot, a rider angled out from the creek. With faint annoyance, Tucson recognized Gloomy's elongated form, straddling a buckskin as lean as himself. He'd thought he had rid himself of the saddlebum, and his business with Brazos

was strictly private.

Gloomy pulled up at his stirrup and eyed the gutted buildings imperturbably. "Ain't it hell what some gents will do to keep warm," he commented.

"Could be some firebug been around."

"The Lazy I!"

In response to Tucson's questioning glance, the beanpole added, "The way I heard it, Brazos's been pestering Jake Jensen, the Lazy J boss worse than a heel fly. Jake's a mighty short-tempered gent. Seems he took steps."

Tucson nodded, then inquired abruptly, "How come you dogged me?"

"Reckon I'm packing a piece of your property," drawled Gloomy. "Plumb overlooked it last night. A little do-funny the boys shook out of your jeans in the saloon. Gordamit Tucson, or is it Rogers, you shed like a fuzzytail in spring."

He jumbled in a pocket of his tobacco-crumbed vest and Tucson's frowning gaze grew suddenly more intent as the beanpole fished out a small metal badge and spun it through the air toward him.

He caught the badge. It was stamped, "T. Rogers, #61, Arizona Cattlemen's Protective." Mentally, he cursed his luck. Aloud, he asked sharply, "Any other jasper lamp this?"

"I guess not," drawled Gloomy.

"Can I bank on you to button up?"

Amusement gleamed in the beanpole's rheumy eyes. "Rest easy, pard, my paw always claimed I was as dumb as a cigar store Indian."

### III

His mind busy, Tucson sat his pony, figuring his next move. Firing of the Slash B had upset his calculations. He could only play the part of Tom Rogers just so long. How long depended upon Lady Luck. Any day, the Cattlemen's Protective might send another man into the district. Then he would be through. There was always a chance, too, he might bump up against an observant lawman. Not only would he be held on the old warrant, for drilling the tinhorn, but they'd probably tack on an indictment for the knifing of Rogers. He was riding a narrow and tricky trail. One slip and he'd dance at the end of a rope. His only chance for survival was to tie up with the rustlers harrying the Lazy J. Brazos must be somewhere around.

He turned to Gloomy, who was slacked in the saddle, apparently half asleep. "I guess," he said, "I'll look the country over, now I'm out here."

"Seeing that I've got nothing to do but kill time," decided

the beanpole, "it'll be a pleasure to side you."

Tucson repressed a twinge of impatience. He'd have liked nothing better than to shuck the gangling grubline rider, but Gloomy seemed to stick like a saddle burr, and he couldn't afford to antagonize his unwelcome sidekick.

"It'll sure be nice to have you along," he returned indifferently, mentally resolving to rid himself of this incubus at

the first opportunity.

They rode south through waves of smooth-topped hills. Westward, the terrain broke up, merging into a barren malpais, a chaos of canyons and upended rock, riven by bouldery dry washes.

Riding the ridges, they circled.

"Guess we're on Lazy J range," interjected Gloomy sud-

denly, "though Brazos claims it, likewise Sweetwater."

"Sweetwater?" queried Tucson. He drew rein and wiped sweat and grime from his features with his bandana. The heat was oven-like in the bald, baking hills.

"A spring," explained Gloomy. "A right nice spring. Guess

Take Tensen's troubles started right there."

Tucson remembered the Cattlemen's Protective letter. Jensen's trouble was apparently rustlers.

"How come?" he inquired.

"The Lazy J been using this range for years. Guess they got no legal right, outside of usage. Wal, a gent named Mike McCarthy rode in from Texas with his son, both redheads. They file on Sweetwater and proceed to fence." Gloomy paused, lifted his limp tobacco sack from a vest pocket, glanced at it and sighed. Tucson tossed him the makin's.

Building a smoke, the beanpole continued, "Dan Harper, the Lazy J foreman, who kin outclaw a wildcat, requests the

McCarthys to get the hell out. Mike tells him to go dig a hole and crawl in. One thing leads to another and when the gunsmoke clears Mike is cold meat. His son, Brick, rides away bleeding like a stuck pig. That started a feud. Brick sparks the rustlers. They sure never let up."

"This Brick gent," observed Tucson thoughtfully, "must be

tough."

"He ain't a patch on Jake Jensen," declared Gloomy.

"Jake's tougher'n a basket of snakes."

They dropped down from the hills and jogged across dun flats, patched with greasewood. Dust curled lazily ahead, moving obliquely toward them. Gradually, a rider and three laden burros became plain.

"Lamped that jasper in town," declared Gloomy, squinting across the sun-drenched terrain. "He spread word he was a prospector working a claim in the malpais with his pards. Them agents must have appetites like elephants, seeing that's

the second load he packed out in a month."

At their approach, the packer drew rein, cocked a leg across the saddlehorn and leisurely built a smoke. He was a thickset, work-calloused fellow. Coarse black hair curled from beneath his shapeless sombrero and an untrimmed beard straggled down his front. His eyes held the eternal alertness Tucson had come to know too well-a slit-eyed edginess peculiar to those beyond the law.

The cigarette made, he hooked his right thumb in a

sagging gunbelt, an inch or so above the butt of a .45.

"Howdy mister!" greeted Gloomy politely. "Cophering

much gold out of them there hills?"

"You'd be surprised," came back the other, his tone noncommittal.

"I sure hope you had more luck hunting gold than we've had hunting jobs."

The packer studied them with unmoved features, but the close-watching Tucson could have sworn that ironic amuse-

ment glimmered in his eyes. "I've heard it said," he rejoined, "that a gent makes his own luck."

He swung his brush-scarred chap clear of the horn, kneed

his pony into motion, with a careless "So long!"

Tucson followed the bobbing progress of the burros with thoughtful eyes. It added up: a hardcase in prospector's guise, packing supplies for a dozen men twice a month—a gang of rustlers. This was the lead he had been seeking.

Gloomy's drawl broke into his thoughts, "You thinking

what I'm thinking?"

"Maybe," admitted Tucson. "I'm trailing that hombre."

"You'll likely bump into a hornets' nest."

"That's what I'm paid for . . . and I don't crave company."

The beanpole raised his shoulders. "Suits me, pard. I got trouble enough without butting into more. Reckon I'll head back to town. Would you have any last words?"

Tucson grinned and raised his reins.

He cut the trail of the packer and followed it at an easy pace. The sharp hoof-prints of the small-footed burros were plain on the sandy soil. The tracks wound through the hills. Beyond, they bored into a somber wasteland, heat-hardened and wind-scoured, an arid region of twisting canyons and dry washes.

Shadows lengthened as the sun sank. Again and again the trail petered out upon rock. Finally, he lost it entirely.

Baffled, he pulled rein on a sharp rise. Ahead stretched a vast, darkening vista of butte and pinnacle. As his eyes searched it with sinking spirits he focussed a tiny red glow, pricking through the gloom below. "Campfirel" he murmured, and headed down the slope, past littered rock, through the gloomy portals of a canyon.

"Reach!" The curt challenge brought him up short. He checked his mount and raised his arms shoulder high, staring

around.

A bronzed rider stepped out from behind a huge fragment

of rock, Winchester slanted. "Ain't you off your range, mister?" he growled.

"I'm on the lam," said Tucson, "and hunting Brick Mc-

Carthy."

"Wal, you found him," grunted the other. He stepped close, lifted the blocky rider's .45 from its holster, gestured with

the gun barrel. "Step down, mister!" he directed.

The lookout plodding behind him, leading his mount, Tucson dropped down a winding track, eroding walls frowning on either side. They dropped away and a canyon gaped, thin-clothed with scrub oak. Close by, riders hunkered around a fire, saddled ponies tied beyond them. Poker-faced, they eyed his approach. A tough, hardcase bunch, he resistered.

A big slouch of a man in dirt-crusted range garb came to his feet. A gun was thonged down to each leg and a sheathed knife hung from his belt. His chin was stubbled with sprouting beard and a chaw of tobacco bulged one cheek. An amiable grin played about his loose lips, but it did not hide their savage twist. There was nothing about him that Tucson liked, particularly his eyes, too sharp and somehow furtive. "That ain't Brick!" he ejaculated.

"Nope," returned his guide, "thet's Brazos."

The big man moved toward them with an easy swagger.

"This hombre claims he's hunting Brick," said the lookout, and tossed Tucson's .45 to Brazos. He dropped the roan's reins and turned back.

The burly rustler ejected a brown stream of tobacco juice and demanded harshly, "How come you're on Brick's trail?"

"Figured maybe he could use a hand."

Tight silence draped the men around the fire.

"Doing what?" inquired Brazos, with amusement.

Tucson shrugged, "I ain't particular."

Brazos exploded into a roar of laughter, then sobered,

squinting suspiciously. "Where you from?" he wanted to know.

"Nogales. The Mexican side, dodging a warrant."

"Wal," grinned the big man, "maybe we can do business."

A tall, angular rider stepped into the circle of firelight. He was clad in corduroys and gray plaid shirt. Shoved back from his forehead, his Stetson revealed a mop of flaming red hair.

His features were bony, almost gaunt, his jaw square and deep. Hard as bottle glass, his blue eyes appraised Tucson

and there was no friendliness in them.

"This hombre's too slick with his answers," he said sharply. "The Protective's sending men into the Valley."

"Would they hire me?" threw back the chunky rider. "I

decorate a dodger for a Paso killing."

Frowning, the redhead eyed him. "Search him, and

search him good," he barked.

Brazos stepped close. Cold sweat bathed Tucson as he remembered the brass badge. He'd slipped it under the sweatband of his hat. Bulking in front of him, Brazos yanked off the Stetson with a big, gnarled hand. As though he had read Tucson's thoughts, he ran his fingers around the sweatband. His broad features creased into a grin as he held up a metal badge. Holding it to the firelight, he read aloud, "T. Rogers, #61, Arizona Cattlemen's Protective." Eying Tucson's taut features, he snarled, "A louzy sheepherdin' dick!"

Then he swung around to face the redhead, flicking the

badge toward him, "Do we string up the bustard, Brick?"

The other caught the badge, glanced at it and tossed it

aside. "Guess we've got no option," he said.

"Listen!" protested Tucson, "I can explain." He rocked back on his heels as Brazos' bunched fist slammed into his jaw. "The badge done all the talking," growled the rustler.

### IV

"THAT AIN'T Tom Rogers!"

Both Brick and Brazos spun around as the bearded packer whose trail Tucson had followed came to his feet by the camp fire. No man ever looked more like an angel to Tucson than the hard-featured renegade. He moved toward them on bowed legs, stood carefully surveying the prisoner, and spat. "Hell," he said, "Rogers' is twice his age, dark-haired and half his right ear was lopped off by a knife. I rode with Tom for the Currycomb afore he pinned on an Association badge."

Silence greeted his pronouncement. Brazos stood scowling. The redheaded Brick's forehead creased. The ring of sunscorched rustlers hunkered around the fire watched, expectant.

"Maybe I can make it plain," offered Tucson.

"I'm listening!" snapped Brick.

The chunky rider told of Rogers' knifing in Nogales, his switch of identities to get back across the Border. As he spoke he pulled out a worn wallet, from which he extracted a folded "Wanted" dodger, frayed and yellowed. But the print was still plain, particularly the block letters "WANTED—FOR MURDER" and the features pictured were clearly his own.

Brick eyed it without speaking, handed it to Brazos.

"I'll be doggoned!" muttered the burly rustler, his glance shifting doubtfully from the dodger to the prisoner.

"Give Tucson his gun!" directed Brick shortly.

Hesitantly, Brazos slid the .45 from beneath his waistband and threw it to the prisoner.

"And give me back that dodger!" put in Tucson. He grinned wryly, "Guess that's my life insurance." He picked up

the gun and dropped it into his holster, then reached forward and twitched the yellowed dodger out of Brazos' hand.

"Meet the bunch!" invited Brick and turned toward the fire. Tucson followed. He was in now, he reflected, with a sigh of relief. No more masquerading under Rogers' name, no more uneasy foreboding that a lawman's hand might drop on his shoulder at any moment, no more dodging arrest. Here, every man was in the same boat with him, sink or swim. It would sure be a pleasure to lend a hand running off Lazy J stock.

When he dropped down beside the fire at Brick's elbow no one paid him attention. Chewing their quirlies, the hunkered rustlers gazed poker-faced at the leaping flames. Only Brazos seemed uneasy. Again and again his shifty eyes focused the newcomer, and slid away.

Abruptly, the redheaded leader spoke, "So you want in?"

"I sure dol" Tucson assured him, with feeling.

"Maybe you should stay out!"

Brick's features crinkled into a tight smile at the rider's startled look of protest. "Figure it out, Tucson," he said tolerantly. "You duck and the Association will send another man into the Valley. Stick and you can wise us up when trouble brews."

"First lawman to read my brand puts a rope around my neck," expostulated the chunky rider. "Could be they'll send another man in anyway; then I won't last longer than a snowball in hell."

Brick's voice hardened. "Guess we all take chances! You ride out. Keep in touch through Monte Marge in The Ace."

"Say Brick, you ain't banking on this hombre?" rumbled Brazos.

"What else am I doing?" inquired the redhead blandly.

"Hell, maybe he's a fourflusher."

"You lamped the dodger," snapped Brick.

"Yep, but-"

"Sometimes," mocked the leader, "you act as scared as a rabbit in a wolf's mouth."

Tucson expected that the burly rustler's hackles would rise at the insult, but Brazos avoided the redhead's eyes. Muttering under his breath, he stared at the fire. Silent, woodenfaced, the others watched.

Tucson broke the tension. "So I ride?" he queried.

Brick nodded. Hiding his disappointment, Tucson came to his feet. He didn't relish his role but there just didn't seem to be anything he could do about it. He'd gambled when he assumed Rogers' identity. He'd just have to play his cards close to his vest; maybe he could bluff through. From sheer devilment he decided to prod the fuming Brazos. "Wal," he said, eying the burly rustler with amusement, "when I hit town, the first thing I do is tip the law off you're skulking in this hideaway."

"You lousy bustard!" roared Brazos, jumping to his feet.

"That'll put me in solid," explained Tucson, his lips twitching. "When I lamped your camp fire a grubline rider sided me. The hombre hit for town and I gamble the deputy's wise by now. He'll ask questions."

Brick nodded approval. "Do just that," he said. "We'll hightail." He eyed the disgusted Brazos with amusement,

"Some gents lack the brains of a canary."

It was plain to Tucson that there was no love lost between the redheaded Texan and his blustering lieutenant.

There were no more protests when he left the flickering patch of firelight, sauntered over to where the saddle horses were bunched and straddled the roan.

Walking the pony out of the canyon between the towering rock walls, a wedge of star-sprinkled sky pinched between the rimrock overhead, he headed eastward through rocklittered terrain.

A long form silently materialized out of a nest of rock. He jerked his pony to a stop. "Gloomy!" he ejaculated.

"You named it!" came the beanpole's resigned tones. "If it ain't saddlesores, it's rock sores. I been setting around so long the buzzards got notions." His shadowy form faded into the night. Tucson heard the click of shod hooves upon rock and the grub liner reappeared, forking his buckskin.

"Wal," he commented, dropping in beside Tucson, "you rode out! Figured I'd have to injun in and pack your

carcase out."

"It was right nice of you to stick around," said Tucson. At the same time, he reflected, it was mighty embarrassing. This Gloomy gent was a bigger pest than a saddle burr. Aloud, he added, "I hit the jackpot. Rode right into a rustlers' hideaway, and talked my way out."

"I gamble you could argue a gopher into climbing a tree,"

murmured Gloomy.

"Next, we brace the deputy in Buffalo Fork," continued Tucson, playing up to his role of cattle detective. "He can

swear in a posse, ride out and corral the whole gang."

"You Association boys are sure chain lightning!" There was a quality to the beanpole's tone that brought a quick glance from Tucson, but Gloomy's dolorous features were

blandly expressionless.

It was near midnight when their leg-weary ponies jogged down the darkened main street of Buffalo Fork, deserted except for a row of ponies outside The Ace. The window of the tin-roofed shack that served as Deputy Sheriff "Vinegar" Carney's office glowed yellow.

"Don't let Vinegar get your goat," cautioned Gloomy. "He's a cantankerous old lobo, got a stiff leg. Claims he busted the kneecap bronco busting when he was young and spry. Reckon

it kinda soured his disposition."

When Tucson tied his pony and entered the office, Gloomy tailing him, the lawman at first sight reminded him of nothing so much as a balding old buzzard. Carney was sunk in a blanket-padded chair, his boots elevated on a rough

plank table that served as desk. Sucking the stem of a blackened corncob pipe, he was leafing through a tattered magazine.

The desert had dehydrated the deputy until he was little more than skin and bone. His cavernous features were as brown and wrinkled as old saddle leather. Wispy strands of graying hair curled from beneath a shapeless Stetson, while a discouraged sun-bleached mustache straggled over his tight lips.

A dented metal star was pinned to his loose-hanging vest and his gunbelt hung from a peg nearby. When he looked up, Tucson saw that his eyes, deep-sunk below bony ridges,

were needle-sharp.

"Howdy Vinegarl" greeted Gloomy. "Why in thunder don't you straddle that flea-bitten bronk eating its head off in the livery and shuck some of that fat."

"Maybe I should round up a few useless saddlebums," growled the deputy. He eyed their trail-stained garb. "Don't

tell me a job got hot on your trail."

Cloomy turned to Tucson. "Didn't I warn you he was a rambunctous old catamount?" He hunkered against the wall, "Meet Tom Rogers of the Cattlemen's Protective!"

Tucson nodded and dropped onto a straightback chair.

Vinegar's gimlet eyes probed the chunky rider. "Maybe I should take a gander at your badge, mister," he said.

"I threw it away," replied Tucson shortly. He told of trailing the packer, locating the hideaway and being searched. "I swore I was riding the grub line," he concluded. "If they'd found that badge, I'd have swung."

"And now," said the deputy, with chill humor, "you crave I should swear in a posse, at midnight, and hightail for this hideaway?"

"That's the general idea," put in Gloomy.

Vinegar tossed his magazine aside, knocked the dottle out

of his pipe. With grim humor, he eyed the beanpole. "You're deputized, I need a guide."

"Me!" howled Gloomy. "Ain't you gathering a posse?"

"Posse!" echoed Vinegar, with contempt. "Why waste county money? What would we do with a posse? Two can comb an empty canyon; that gang sure won't stick around after a stranger rode out." His attention switched to Tucson, "How long you been with the Protective?"

"Two, three years."

"First time in Cottonwood County?"

"Sure. I rode up from Nogales."

Vinegar frowned, studying the blocky rider. "I coulda' sworn I'd lamped you somewheres afore." Apparently satisfied, he reached to turn down the lamp, swinging overhead, but Tucson was conscious of uneasy qualms. He took a swift glance in the direction of a medley of "Wanted" dodgers, pinned on the side wall. The deputy probably had stacks more, he thought, stowed away. If Vinegar ever had an itch to thumb through them odds were the jig was up.

Following the others outside, he waited until they had mounted and headed out of town, then he angled across

street. He felt that he had earned a drink, two drinks.

When he pushed through the batwings the saloon was empty except for a pack of punchers crowding Monte Marge's blackjack table. Diamond Dorsey perched on his stool at the far end of the bar.

Tucson bought a bottle of beer and carried it to a table, setting his chair so that he could watch Monte Marge. Fine looking girl, he mused, high spirited, too. As much akin to the painted, harsh-voiced floosies he had met in dance halls along the Border as a diamond was to chips of broken glass. Sure a pity she ran a crooked card game. Seemed as though her shoulders drooped a mite. Maybe she was tired, and no wonder, harried by a bunch of hard-drinking, wise-cracking saddle pounders. How had she drifted into this gambling

racket? Curious, too, that she had flaming red hair, just like Brick.

Three riders banged in, dust thick on their shirts and Stetsons. The first was a burly, swaggering fellow, beard sprouting black, a gun thonged down to each leg—Brazos. Siding him was a swarthy rider, with narrow, pock-marked features, and a squatty fellow, saddleworn. A hunch struck him that they had racked to town, hunting him, when he caught a glance from Brazos' restless eyes, in the backbar mirror, saw the burly rustler speak quickly to his pards.

Then, Brazos packing a bottle, they headed straight for his table. He glanced toward the batwings. There was still time to slide out, but some ingrained streak of obstinacy made

him keep his seat.

Brazos' lips curled with an unpleasant grin as he banged the bottle on the table, hooked up a chair and plunked himself down opposite the tensed form of Tucson. His companions seated themselves on either side of the chunky rider.

Gray eyes wary, hand inching toward his gun butt, Tucson eased back his chair. "What brought you smoking into

town?" he inquired, for want of something better to say.

The rustler raised his bottle, took a long drink, and passed it to the swarthy rider. Wiping off his lips with the back of a beefy hand, he regarded Tucson malevolently with close-set eyes. "You!" he said. "You hogswiggled Brick, Rogers, but by Gawd, you ain't hogswiggling me."

### V

HE WAS IN a tight spot, reflected Tucson. If Lady Luck didn't line up beside him, chances were he'd leave that saloon feet first. It was plain that Brazos and his pards were out to gun him. They had him cornered. Their play now was to pick a quarrel, cut him down and plead self-defense.

Gloomy and the deputy, the only two likely to side him, were deep in the malpais, heading for the rustlers' hideaway. In a showdown he might get Brazos, but it was a sure thing that the hard-eyed hombres penning him on either side would get him. Well, he'd check out fighting.

These thoughts whirled through his mind as he met Brazos' scowl across the liquor-stained table. In a play for time, he threw back, sharply, "Snap out of it, Brazos! I'm hog-

swiggling no one. You figure that dodger lies?"

"I figure there's a double-cross somewheres," blustered the big man, "and I'll sure feel better when you're planted." He launched a vicious kick beneath the table. His sharp-toed riding boot took Tucson on a kneecap and it hurt plenty.

With a surge of anger, the chunky rider grabbed the table and pushed hard. The edge took Brazos above the belt line and rammed him back into his chair. Uncoiling as fast as a steel spring, Tucson jumped to his feet and grabbed for his gun butt. A hard hand latched onto his wrist. He twisted free and spun to face the pock-marked rider, in time to glimpse a gun barrel blurring down upon his head. He ducked, winced as the steel barrel smashed into his shoulder.

"Quit the shenanigans!" grated a voice behind him. As abruptly as it had begun, the fracas cut off. The pock-faced rustler dropped his gun into leather. Brazos pushed back

from the table.

Tucson swung around and, to his amazement, focused the wiry form of Dan Harper, Lazy J foreman. Harper held a leveled gun in his right hand.

The hombre sure packed plenty weight, thought Tucson. The three rustlers acted as though a tarantula had crawled down their backs.

Harper spun to face Brazos. His voice dropped. It was soft, soft but sibilent as a snake's hiss, "You straddle that blazed bay outside?"

"What's it to you?" blustered the beefy Brazos.

"That hoss was on Lazy J range last night and it carried a brand-blotching coyote."

"You tangled your spurs," protested Brazos. "I ain't been

near your spread and I got witnesses to prove it."

Tucson was beginning to enjoy himself. He stepped over

to the side of the foreman.

"You're a yellow-livered liar!" snapped the foreman, and dropped his gun into leather. Right arm crooked over the holster, pale eyes gleaming, he stood balanced for a quick draw as he flung the fighting words. Brazos' eyes slid from right to left, like those of a trapped animal. His two pards stood tensed, braced for gunplay.

"This is Brazos' fight," put in Tucson. He jerked his .45.

"I'll plug the first bustard who butts in."

Belligerency was oozing out of the beefy Brazos faster than grain from a torn sack. "Wal," barked the Lazy J foreman, "your guts turned to fiddlestrings?"

"Hell," complained the rustler, with the trace of a whine,

"mine ain't the only blazed bay in Buffalo Valley."

"If it was," Harper told him tightly, "I'd feed you a slug

and I gamble you'd bleed yellow."

Brazos' bull neck reddened at the insult but he kept his hands on the table. A trace of the old bluster flowed into his voice, "You talk big, Harper, with a passel of Lazy J punchers to back your play." He jerked his head toward the blackjack table.

The foreman smiled frostily. "Any time, Brazos!" He backed away from the table, Tucson beside him. The three rustlers hastily jingled toward the batwings.

For the first time, Harper paid attention to the blocky rider. "I owe you a drink," he commented, "for siding me."

Tucson chuckled. "Mister, you don't know how much I owe you!"

They bellied up to the bar.

"Warn't you the hombre who had a run-in with the fe-

male gambler?" inquired Harper.

"I was," grinned Tucson, "and your boys threw me out."

"That skirt got them talking in their sleep," said the foreman morosely. Offhand, he added, "We could use another hand out at the Lazy J."

"Not interested!" came back Tucson shortly.

Harper's sharp eyes focused him, "How come?"

"You should know Jake Jensen's rep."

The wiry foreman shrugged. "Jake pays good and feeds good!"

"Maybe so," returned Tucson indifferently.

Harper slowly sipped his drink, pondering. Everyone in the Valley, outside the Lazy J crew, hated Jake Jensen's guts. His reputation was that of a tough, overbearing tyrant, with a chunk of lava for a heart and ice water in his veins. Maybe they spoke the truth, he thought, when they called him the worst son of a bitch in Arizona T. Jake had fought his way to the top with tooth and nail, sparing no one. He gave no quarter and asked none. He was brutal, intolerant, merciless; the McCarthys were not the only interlopers he'd burnt out, kicked out, blasted out. But he had guts!

At a thought, the foreman pivoted, eying his companion.

"Where you from?" he inquired.

"Nogales!"

"Raised around there?"

The blocky rider shrugged. "Kinda. I've been drifting up and down the Border since I was knee high."

Harper emptied his glass and banged it on the bar. "Guess I've got to wean the boys away from the redhead," he said

resignedly, and headed for the blackjack table.

That night, Tucson spread his roll in the livery barn. From habit, he rose early. When the first rays of the rising sun flooded Main Street, fiery promise of burning hours ahead, he had shaved and was hunkered against the front of the barn.

Two riders ambled down street, weary and dust-powdered, their ponies gaunted. Tucson rose and followed Gloomy and the deputy into the livery. "Locate the rustlers?" he inquired affably.

"Can you find hair on a frog?" Gloomy swung out of leather and beat the dust off his pants. "That canyon was

as empty as my pockets."

"You should have stayed in town," grinned Tucson, and told of the ruckus in The Ace.

"Hear that, Vinegar?" Gloomy turned to the deputy, disgust mirrored on his long features. "We get saddlesores and the brand blotchers swill liquor in town."

The lawman grunted and loosed a latigo.

Tucson staked the beanpole to breakfast in the hash house. While they were downing a stack of flapjacks apiece, the blocky rider remembered Dan Harper's offer and inspiration came. Here was a chance to rid himself of the lanky saddlebum who was fast becoming as inseparable as a shadow, but a heap more pesky.

"The Lazy J's hiring," he said.

"Ain't that nice!" returned Gloomy, and spilled more syrup onto his flapjacks.

"You sure act interested, for a gent whose roll wouldn't

choke a chickadee," growled Tucson.

"I ain't interested; I got a job! Leastways, Vinegar's speaking for me."

"What kind of a job?" inquired Tucson suspiciously.

"This and that," returned the beanpole and waved his fork casually. "Monte Marge is hiring."

"Monte Marge!" Tucson was so surprised that he choked

on his coffee.

"Ain't it hell," returned Gloomy lugubriously, "choreman to a redheaded female gambler!" His long features crinkled at the blocky rider's perplexed stare. "I'll give you the straight. Trading talk on the trail, Vinegar let out Marge bought

Brazos' Slash B-what's left of it. She aims to rebuild the house and barn, fence a pasture, and run stock. Trouble is, no one around here will hire out-scairt of bucking Jensen-specially as she aims to fence Sweetwater."

"Fence Sweetwater! She's crazy as a coot," declared Tucson, forcefully. "Doesn't the Lazy J claim the spring? Didn't Jensen beef Mike McCarthy for corraling it? Don't tell me

the girl's bucking the Lazy J!"

"Why ask the hired hand?" returned Gloomy plaintively. "Brace the boss." He ordered more flapjacks. Mouth full, he mumbled, "The gal can use more help."

"She may be loco," returned Tucson, "but I just can't see her paying me wages. 'Member the night I called her hand

and took a dive through the batwings?"

"I did mention it to Vinegar," admitted the beanpole, "but he claims Marge would overlook most anything to get the

Slash operating."

It all began to add up, reflected Tucson. The Lazy J had buried Mike McCarthy. His son Brick, surviving, had declared war. He'd stake his saddle the redheaded girl was a McCarthy, too. Brick rustled Lazy J stock; Marge fleeced Lazy J hands. The pair were sure prodding Jake Jensen aplenty. But if the girl fenced Sweetwater the prod would sink too deep. Jensen would strike back, just as savagely as he had before. Monte Marge should be curbed, before she went too far. But why, he asked himself, should he give a damn? The fiery redhead was nothing to him.

Even so, the girl had plenty of sand in her craw. It took guts to buck the Lazy J. And the longer he mulled over a job on the Slash, the more attractive it seemed. It would take him out of town, where there was always the chance of a lawman, passing through, reading his brand. And it would give him a chance to prod Jensen. He sure had no use for the cowman. The fact that Jensen had appealed to the

Cattlemen's Protective for help proved Brick was stinging

him good; it would sure be a pleasure to lend a hand.

Around sundown he pushed through the batwings of The Ace, before business grew brisk and kept the girl busy. There were no punchers in the saloon, just a scattering of townsmen, cooling off after the heat of the day. Monte Marge was sitting at the green baize corner table, setting up her layout.

Groping for a suitable approach after their previous explosive meeting, he ordered a drink at the bar. But nothing he could think up seemed to fit. Finally, he drained his glass

and strode determinedly across the saloon.

At his jingling approach the girl looked up, glanced quickly away and became engrossed shuffling a deck of cards. He reached the table and stood gazing down at her bent head.

"You get word from Brick?" he inquired gruffly. "I'm in!"

"I heard," she returned briefly, not looking up.

He paused, shuffled his feet, then burst out, "You fencing Sweetwater?"

The girl's head raised and her defiant eyes met his, blue as a mountain lake, he thought. "Is it any of your business?" she asked coldly.

"You're loco, bucking Jensen. He'll crush you flat as a wet

leaf."

"When I need your advice, I'll ask for it!" Her tone was icy. "Now vamoose, unless," she smiled tightly, "you wish to play."

Stubborn as a mule, he thought angrily, and said aloud,

"I got something else in mind-a job."

"So Gloomy told me. You must have sunk real low, to hire out to a crooked gambler." Her words were edged.

"Depends on why she's crooked," he drawled. "There's

ways of feuding."

"Feuding?"

"Sure, Brick on the range, you in the saloon."

"So you guessed!" Antagonism had left the girl's tone.

"Sure I'll hire you." She smiled. "Who are you officially, Rogers or Tucson?"

"Tucson to you."

"Well, Tucson, the pay's \$50 and found. Report out at the Slash . . . and pack your gun."

His trail twisted worse than that of a tortured snake, reflected the chunky rider as he left the saloon. A week back he was a renegade, dodging a warrant. From that he jumped into the role of Association detective. He joined up with Brick's rustlers, then sided the Lazy J foreman against three of the said rustlers. Now he was linked up with Monte Marge and liable to trade lead with the Lazy J. It made an hombre real dizzy when he was saddled with two handles.

### VI

OUTSIDE THE SALOON, Tucson paused beneath the wooden canopy, eying the shadowed street. Might just as well mosey out to the Slash, he decided; there was nothing to keep him in town.

Deepening mantles of purple erased the mountains when his pony splashed through the ford, south of town. Into gathering darkness, the roan jogged west.

Dust boiled from the looping trail ahead and a spring wagon pulled toward him, heading for town. As it bumped past behind four mules, he saw that it was empty. A paunchy, blue-shirted fellow held the lines. Tucson placed him at first glance. It was the swamper from The Ace.

When he rode into the burnt-out remnants of The Slash a fire was blazing in the rock-and-adobe fireplace, above which the rude chimney thrust like a monument above the ruins. Gloomy hunkered before the fire, peacefully smoking. Around were dumped rolls of barbed wire, bundles of fence

posts, cases of airtights, picks, shovels, a medley of supplies. "Whenever I lamp you," commented Tucson, dismounting,

"you're resting."

Gloomy indicated the litter of equipment with the wave of a long arm. "When I figure the work we've got ahead of us," he replied sorrowfully, "I need a rest."

"The Ace swamper freight this stuff?" inquired Tucson.

Gloomy nodded.

"I'll gamble Diamond's backing Marge."

"Mebbe. Guess the tinhorn's got no use for Jensen."

"You acquainted with anyone who has?"

The beanpole raised his shoulders.

While the rising sun still silhouetted distant mountains, they went to work, digging postholes. Lumber for the house was due to be freighted out of Cottonwood, the county seat.

Toward noon, Tucson, stripped to the waist and sweatsmeared, straightened his aching back at a doleful exclama-

tion from his elongated pard, "Here comes trouble!"

A knot of riders had emerged from the willows screening the creek. At a canter they approached. Foremost was the

wiry Lazy J foreman.

Spreading as they approached, the newcomers threw a cordon around the two perspiring men. Sitting their mounts, sharp-visaged, sunburnt men, the butts of Winchesters protruding from their saddle boots and .45's buckled around their waists, they looked as though they expected trouble and were capable of handling it.

"So you found yourself a job!" barked Harper, eying

Tucson.

"A lapaloozer!" returned the blocky rider wryly. "I ain't sweat so much in a month of Sundays."

"Who pays your wages?"

"I don't figure that's any of your business."

"Seeing the Lazy J claims this range, I'm making it my business," snapped Harper.

"I gamble the Lazy J has staked out a section in hell,"

threw back Tucson derisively.

Gloomy glanced apprehensively at the hard faces that ringed them. "Monte Marge is hiring," he volunteered plain-

tively.

"Wal," bit back the foreman, "you go tell Monte Marge if she don't move them fence posts and rolls of wire she dumped at Sweetwater there'll be hell to pay." With that, he raised his reins and wheeled away.

The two stood watching the string of riders until chapar-

ral screened them from view.

Tucson swung toward the lanky rider. "So Marge figures to fence the spring!" he commented.

"Guess that's her plain intention."

"You figure Jensen will stand still? The gal's playing with dynamite."

"I ain't paid to figure, just to sweat," returned Gloomy

mournfully, "but I sure don't crave to spit in Jake's eye."

"Fence that spring and he'll run us off and put the torch to everything we've got around here," declared Tucson. He threw his posthole digger aside with disgust. "I've got a notion to ride in and lay it on the line with that fool female."

Gloomy fished out his sack of makin's. "Right now it's hotter than election day in a hornets' nest," he pointed out. "Stick around 'til sundown and we'll both ride in. I got a feeling them Lazy J waddies are out for blood and I sure don't crave they should spill mine."

It was a quiet night in The Ace. When the pair entered, Monte Marge dealt listlessly, a smattering of townsmen sat around the tables and a knot of punchers loudly argued the merits of a certain quarter horse.

Gloomy ordered a drink and draped his long form over the

bar. Tucson made a beeline for the blackjack table. In response to his curt gesture, the girl rose and came toward him. He held his voice low, "The Lazy J served notice—keep away from Sweetwater."

"Ignore them," she replied indifferently.

"You talk like you should be playing with spools," he retorted angrily, "You can't buck Jensen!"

"Are you shying away from his shadow, too?" Her voice

was contemptuous.

"Nope!" he fumed, "But only a knothead would buck against a rock wall. Act sensible! Stick to the Slash and forget

the spring."

"Now you listen!" The girl's voice was hard, tight. "I hold a grant deed to the Slash. It's my land! Sweetwater is located on that land. Jensen is a trespasser. Haven't I a right to fence my own land?"

"Legally, yes," Tucson agreed tiredly, "but Jensen's got right of usage. Lazy J stock been using that water for a

coon's age."

"Then they're due to quit!"

"Quit!" He laughed. "Jensen's got guns enough to blast

you and anyone you hire right out of the Valley."

"If you're scared, draw your time!" she told him shortly.
"I'm fencing Sweetwater." She whirled away and resumed her seat at the blackjack table. Tucson raised his shoulders in a gesture of futility and joined Gloomy at the bar.

"She see the light?" inquired the beanpole hopefully.

"Blind as a bat, stubborn as a jackass," growled Tucson.

"But pretty as a painted wagon," rejoined Gloomy. "This just ain't our night, pard."

Every head in the saloon swiveled as the batwings boomed

like a bass drum before the impact of a boot.

"Jehosophat!" groaned Gloomy, "Here's Jake hisself!"

Massive as a bull, square features weathered to the hue of mahogany, a graying cowman strode into the saloon. A harsh

intolerance was stamped upon his face, which might have been carved out of rimrock, and there was not a weak spot on it. His slate-gray eyes held a frowning stare and rage simmered in them.

The Lazy J boss was not tall, but broad, solid in the shoulders. He wore plain black, a dark fifty-dollar Stetson and expensive hand-made riding boots. Even the butt of the gun protruding from his holster was ebony. The whole effect was that of somber, savage force.

Behind him trailed Dan Harper, like a bull terrier dogging

a mastiff.

Midway across the saloon, Jake Jensen stopped. Hard as twin bullets, his cold eyes probed around, finally fastened on Diamond Dorsey, perched on his stool.

"You got a notion to fence Sweetwater, Dorsey?" he

challenged.

"Why would I fence Sweetwater?" came back the saloon man blandly.

"Because you're a cowhocked cross between a snake and a

coyote!"

Diamond slipped off his stool and advanced to meet the cowman. "You got no right to tonguelash me, Jake," he retorted, and his right hand slipped inside his coat.

The Lazy J foreman didn't miss the move. Fire flickered in his pale eyes. "Sneak a draw, Diamond," he warned softly, right hand clamping on his gun butt, "and you're cold meat."

At arm's length from Jensen, the saloon man stopped. His jet-black eyes gleamed defiance as they met the cowman's frowning stare, but Tucson could see tiny beads of sweat glistening on his white forehead.

"The posts and wire were packed in your wagon," accused

Jensen.

"Guess I can hire out my own wagon!"

"Your swamper, too!" rumbled Jensen. "Sure you can, you little weasel!" His rope-calloused fist clamped upon Diamond's

neatly tailored shoulder. The saloon man's round features twisted with rage as he strove to wriggle free. Again his right hand dabbed beneath the coat, came out gripping a squat derringer.

Before the weapon cleared his coat, Jensen's free hand closed over the gun and the gambler's small, white-knuckled fist. The cowman's grip tightened. He squeezed—harder, harder—until the cords knotted upon his brawny forearm. Diamond screamed in agony. The cowman's blunt fingers slackened and the derringer thudded to the floor. Diamond's arm dropped, hung limp. From where Tucson stood, it looked as though the hand had been under a wagon wheel, crushed out of shape.

Unemotionally, as though he were throwing sacked oats into a wagon, Jensen lifted the half-sobbing Diamond with both hands, and flung him, arms and legs jerking like a frog's, clean across the bar. His hurtling form hit the close-stacked shelves beneath the backbar mirror. Bottles crashed in cascading

chorus as his body dropped heavily to the floor.

Tight silence held the saloon, a silence broken only by the hollow gurgle of liquor from broken bottles. No sound came from Diamond, whose body was hidden by the bar. Maybe, thought Tucson, Jensen had killed him. If so, he had a hunch it would bother the granite-faced cowman no more than if he had crushed a fly.

"Lamp the gal!" murmured Gloomy, who lounged across the bar, lazily taking in the show.

Tucson's head slewed around. An angry splotch of color burning on each pale cheek, blue eyes blazing, Monte Marge charged across the saloon.

"You bully! You murderer!" She glared into Jensen's indifferent eyes, her voice thick, almost strangled with emotion. "I hired that wagon. I intend to fence Sweetwater. I own Sweetwater and the law will back my claim. You think you

can smash whatever you choose, you and your hired hands. But your day will come. Dead men will be avenged!"

Unmoved, the cowman listened to the girl's tirade, eying her with more curiosity than anger. Without deigning to reply, he turned and strode to the batwings, Harper dogging him, as indifferent to the gaping patrons as a charging bull.

Talk released in a torrent when the batwings closed behind the two. The barkeep waded gingerly through broken bottles to get to his boss. Marge ran behind the bar. Between them, they hoisted Diamond out of a pool of whisky. Dark suit dripping, smooth face white as a fish's belly, still dazed from the impact of his fall, they led him through a doorway into his living quarters in the rear of the saloon.

"I wonder," murmured Gloomy, with deep longing, "if a feller would be allowed to lap up some of that good licker Diamond spilled?" The laziness strained out of his voice. "Some day, Tucson, some gent u'll lay for Jensen, sure as

shooting."

The girl emerged from Diamond's living quarters. Features taut, she slowly walked toward her blackjack table. Tucson, who had not spoken a word from the moment Jensen entered, moved away from the bar and intercepted her. "Ma'am," he said, "at sun-up I aim to get busy and fence that spring."

"Fence it good!" she returned tautly, "And may that devil

Jensen trip over it and drop into deepest hell!"

She moved on to her deserted blackjack table. The barkeep began to clean up the litter of broken glass. Tucson and

Gloomy headed for the street.

"Wal, look who's here!" chuckled the beanpole, as Vinegar Carney pushed through the batwings and limped into the saloon. "I gamble the old tarantula watched the whole fracas through a window. You can bet your boots he'd never have the gall to brace Jake Jensen."

### . VII

THE SPECTER OF a warrant, charging him with murder, haunted Tucson. True, the tinhorn he had shot in El Paso had gigged him out of every dollar he owned. True, too, he had killed in the heat of anger when he discovered he had been slickered with marked cards. But those facts detracted not one whit from the efficacy of the warrant. They didn't fool around with killers in Paso. Only a quick skip into Mexico across the shallow Rio Grande had saved his neck.

He had assumed Rogers' identity on impulse, tiring of the life of a pariah. Now, he considered cheerlessly, if he were identified, odds were they'd chalk up the cattle association

detective's knifing up against him, too.

Common sense told him he couldn't get away with the impersonation for long. The first Cattlemen's Protective man who crossed his trail, or the first alert lawman to thumb through his Wanted dodgers, would call his bluff. Plain horse sense urged him to duck back over onto the safe side of the Border while the ducking was good. A stubborn streak, allied to a strain of recklessness, led him to linger. Maybe redheaded Monte Marge was a factor, though he wouldn't have admitted it for a million dollars.

Now the exhibition of savagery he had witnessed in The Ace banished all doubt. He'd stick around and side Brick and Marge in their hopeless battle against the range tyrant.

Jogging back to the Slash beneath the stars, stirrup to stirrup with Gloomy, he commented casually, "I figure on drifting over to Sweetwater at sun-up and string wire."

The beanpole sighed. "You switch ideas faster'n a hoss

thief switches saddles. Guess it's them baby-blue eyes!"

"It's just that I've got an urge to sting Jensen," averred Tucson.

"I just hate to think what Jensen will do to you," replied Gloomy mournfully.

At dawn, however, when Tucson rode for Sweetwater, the

lanky cowpoke sided him.

The spring lay about four miles south of the Slash, amid

smooth-rolling, sun-scorched hills.

At first sight of Sweetwater, Tucson reined up and sat feasting his eyes. It made, he mused, the prettiest picture

he had ever seen, a picture of peace and tranquility.

Set between precipitous cliffs in a narrow draw, the water hole was a soothing vision to sun-seared eyes. The spreading branches of willows drooped over a succession of pools, fed by a spring that purled down the hillside between mossy boulders. The draw was green with verdant chaparral, against which a blossoming palo verde showed brilliant yellow; plumed Spanish Bayonet tossed white manes and cactus flowers were splotched scarlet. Quail piped from the brush and birds flitted around the quiet pools.

Steers, tails lazily flicking, stood hock-deep in water, shaded by the drooping willows. It was hard to believe that powdersmoke had fogged this peaceful sanctuary and the

blood of dying men had tinged its placid pools.

Approaching closer, the blocky rider saw that, beyond the spring, the eroding walls pinched in. Between the pools and the mouth of the draw the ground was hoof-chopped and the grass trampled. A pyramid of rock stood out like a sore thumb. It carried no marking, but he guessed it marked the last resting place of Mike McCarthy.

By the first pool two spools of wire and a dozen or more fence posts had been dumped. Dismounting, the two watered

their ponies.

Gloomy stretched out his long form in the shade while Tucson stood making a cigarette and eying his surroundings. His glance ran over the steep slopes on either side, then the narrow approach to the draw. Fencing Sweetwater, he de-

cided, would be a cinch. There was but one way of reaching it, down the draw. String wire across the mouth of the draw and not a cow could reach water.

"We should be through by noon," he commented.

"If the Lazy J wises up we'll be through-complete," grunted Gloomy. He came to his feet. "Let's get busy and

get out of here. I swear I can hear harps astrummin'."

The sun was high when they completed the fence, leaving a narrow gap at one end through which Gloomy choused the steers splashing in the pools. The gap they closed with a rude gate.

"Let's ride!" urged the tall cowpoke, eying the confining

walls with plain unease.

Tucson grinned. "You act like you got ants in your pants."

In no haste, he began gathering their tools.

Gloomy nodded mournfully at the rock cairn. "That gent lingered and he's here permanent. They claim there's others."

"Figured I'd take a dip and rest awhile," said Tucson.

"Sure is a nice spot."

"Me, I'm splitting the breeze pronto," declared his pard, and hit for his pony with long strides. "Jensen's boys corral us behind that wire fence and we'll sprout wings." He reached his buckskin, hastily tightened cinches and swung into leather. Leading Tucson's mount, he rode back to the fence.

The blocky rider was sweaty and his muscles ached. The prospect of leaving the cool draw and riding through the

burning hills was not inviting.

"Stick around!" he urged. "I gamble the Lazy J don't

check this spring more'n once a week."

"Stick around and you're due to shake hands with St. Peter," returned Gloomy ominously. "Me, I'm hightailing!"

With that he dropped the reins of Tucson's roan, levered

the gate open and rode through.

"See you later, at the Slash," said the blocky rider and waved a careless hand.

"The only place you'll likely see me next is in hell," threw back the beanpole dolorously, and jogged away.

Tucson tied his pony in the shade, stripped and splashed in a pool, delighting in the cool caress of the water. Then he stretched out, relaxed under a willow. Half-dozing, he dreamily listened to the tinkle of falling water. This beat swallowing trail dust, he reflected. Jensen's bunch sure had the Indian sign on Gloomy. The Lazy J was seven, eight miles distant across the swales. They'd checked the spring yesterday, they sure wouldn't be back today. With this comforting thought he slept.

The bellowing of steers awoke him. He sat up, blinking. A dust cloud, sparkling in the sunlight as though specked with a myriad diamonds, hung over the mouth of the draw. Outside the taut, three-strand barbed wire fence milled a protesting herd of thirsty steers, swathed in dust churned up by their restless hooves. Their anguished bawling filled the air as they surged to and fro, horns clacking, striving to reach the familiar water.

Tucson shrugged into his shirt and pants, yanked on his boots and buckled his gunbelt. Pulling his hat over his eyes, he stood watching the frenzied steers. Remembrance of Gloomy hightailing back to the Slash in the heat brought a chuckle. He'd pull out at sundown and drift back in the cool of the evening. . . . Something whined close by like an angry hornet. Instinctively, he ducked, and the sharp crack of a Winchester hit his ears. In a flash he threw himself flat. Bellied to the ground, he peered through the dust that fogged the mouth of the draw, and glimpsed two punchers sitting their ponies beyond the mob of cattle. One held a Winchester. As he watched, the puncher fired again—three spaced shots into the air—a call for help.

The trapped rider jumped up, darted to his mount and ran it into the cover of the chaparral. Hidden from view, he eyed the walls on either side, hunting an avenue of escape.

But it was plain that no man could scramble up those crumbling slopes. The mouth of the draw afforded the only exit and the two Lazy J punchers had it covered. Soon there would be more. He was trapped. The vision of a noose and a short drop was uncomfortably distinct.

Soberly, he slid his Winchester out of the boot. Crouching, he broke from the brush, raced toward the rock cairn and flung himself down behind it. From here his rifle could cover the mouth of the draw. Levering a cartridge into the breech, he waited, peering around the base of the pile. He'd tag a

few of Jensen's riders before they tagged him.

Suddenly, he tautened. Indistinct through the dust fog, he glimpsed a string of riders rounding the shoulder of a hill, beyond the two punchers standing guard. Two-three-four-five-six, he counted, as they cantered into view. To his amazement, the Lazy J punchers abruptly whirled their ponies and hightailed.

Understanding dawned as the sun glinted on the red hair

of the leading rider.

"Brick!" he yelled, jumped to his feet and raced toward the gate. Hazing the steers aside, the six rustlers rode through.

"You sure eased me out of a tight," Tucson told the tall,

unsmiling Texan.

"You're still in one," returned Brick dryly. "We beat a bunch of Jensen's boys to the spring by a short head." His eyes searched the draw, "Where's Marge?"

"In town I guess."

"Figured the hothead would be right here," confessed

Brick, plainly relieved. "Wal, we've got to fort up, fast."

He fired orders and the rustlers standing around jumped to obey. The Texan, considered Tucson, ran his gang on a tight rein. One rider led the ponies into the chaparral, out of sight, while the others busied themselves rolling and packing the boulders from all over.

Gradually, a barricade across the draw began to take shape. When the rock wall was waist high the toiling men quit. Hunkered and sprawled behind it, they rolled cigarettes and traded talk. Tucson stood beside Brick, eying the milling steers beyond the wire.

"Stringing that wire was a fool play," commented the redhead testily. "What in thunder did Marge figure to gain?"

Tucson told him of the affair in the saloon and the girl's anger. "She claims she got the law on her side, too," he added.

Brick laughed with no humor. "Law! There's no law in Buffalo Valley but gun law, and Jake Jensen rods the guns. The bones of men molder in this draw to prove it, and there's a McCarthy among them."

"What you figure on doing?" inquired Tucson, more interested in survival than the rustler's resentment.

"Sliding away!" replied Brick promptly.

They had just about as much chance of sliding away, reflected the chunky rider, as a wax cat had of scrambling out of hell. And he'd tolled them into the jackpot!

"Sure sorry you boys got in this tight," he said apolo-

getically. "I'm thanking you for siding me."

"Siding you?" Brick looked surprised. "Marge sent word

she was stringing wire. I figured to find her here."

The appearance of a solid block of riders beyond the bawling cows claimed their attention. There must have been a dozen or more, figured Tucson. A big bay pulled away from the bunch, the wiry Harper in the saddle. The foreman eased his mount through the milling cattle, peering into the draw. He wheeled and raised his right hand in a sweeping motion.

The punchers fanned out and came in at a gallop, pushing the mass of beef. Dust fogged thick as they choused the steers, yelling and flailing with their ropes.

Rifles began to spang along the barricade as rustlers threw

lead blindly into the melee. Hard hit, one puncher dropped his rope and grabbed the horn. Another's pony went down, hooves flailing in a smother of dust. But they swept the steers away in a wild stampede. Of a sudden, the space beyond the fence was clear, except for a dead pony and several crippled steers.

Time dragged, but there was no further sign of their opponents. Lizards skittered over the rocks; a flock of birds swooped down and perched along the top wire of the fence;

buzzards began to circle sluggishly.

Crouched behind the rock wall, men on either side of Tucson began to fidget restlessly.

"I don't like it!" Brick told the blocky rider tersely. "Har-

per is full of tricks. The bustard is cooking up something."

As though in confirmation, a bullet zipped out of the blue. While the rustlers stared around in perplexity, a ragged fusilade rattled high above their heads, from the cliff rims towering on either side.

Before, the men forted up behind the barricade, rifles covering the mouth of the draw, held the advantage. Now, in a flash, the position was reversed. Hidden among the rimrock high above them, the attackers were able to scourge them with lead at little risk to themselves. Suddenly, the barricade was useless. Now the defenders were sitting ducks.

Bored cleanly through the skull, a rustler flopped, his limbs jerking spasmodically. Another dropped his rifle and grabbed a bloody forearm. A third rolled in gasping agony, a bullet through the back. Pitilessly, lead droned down.

## VIII

"HIT THE BRUSH!" yelled Brick. He jumped up, grabbed the rustler with the shattered forearm, who was slumped against the barricade, and rushed him toward the chaparral that

fringed the base of the nearer cliff. Leaving two dead, Tucson and the remaining rustlers pounded in the redhead's wake, while bullets pecked the ground around them.

Without further loss, they gained the shelter of the brush. Shielded from sight of the punchers throwing lead from the rims above, the harried knot of men lay around in the thick greenery, grateful for the respite.

With growing darkness the gunfire slackened, although random bullets still snicked through the branches interlaced

above them.

Hunkered against the base of the cliff, Tucson eyed the ragged contour of the opposite rim, fast fading as the light died. From it gun flashes blossomed like pale night flowers. With shuddering impact a huge boulder crashed down. The ground quivered as it smashed through chaparral, disintergrating into fragments as it hit with stunning force. He threw himself flat to escape the hail of debris that hurtled in all directions. Above his prone form rock splinters splattered against the cliff.

"Get back against the wall!" yelled Brick, as another rocky projectile slammed down. The earth trembled before the force of its impact and Tucson winced unconsciously as a man's

shriek of agony rasped his nerves like a jagged knife.

This was sheer hell, he thought, waiting to be mashed by falling rock. Just one Giant cartridge would bring down an avalanche and bury them all. Dan Harper wouldn't overlook that bet; odds were he had already sent back to the

ranch for powder.

Huddled against the cliff in the brooding darkness, the survivors waited for more boulders to plunge down from the rim above. But none came. Rifle fire, too, had cut off. With vast relief, Tucson heard Brick's voice, "Head for the ponies, we're making a break." That sure was better than sticking around, waiting to be buried alive.

Vague forms moved past him, stumbling over broken rock,

groping through threshing branches. He followed. A segment of moon floated from behind fleecy clouds and bathed the draw with pale light. The brush was beaten down, smashed and broken, as though a cyclone had whirled through. Where the saddle stock had been left, several dark, bloody patches stained the ground and with a sickening feeling he realized that they had once been ponies. The surviving mounts had scattered in terror.

Expecting every moment to be blasted with lead from the heights above, Tucson joined the rustlers as they quested around the draw in the faint light, rounding up ponies. When a shadowy file of horsemen finally strung behind Brick, moving toward the fence, Tucson saw that there were only three beside himself. Three had been added to the toll of Sweetwater.

At the tail end of the string, he braced for trouble as they neared the gate. It was a sure thing that Harper wouldn't leave the mouth of the draw unguarded. Brick, however, merely increased the pace. Expecting every moment that the lash of gunfire would cut the shadows, Tucson rowelled the roan to keep up.

Ahead, bathed in silver radiance, the squat row of fence posts were spaced across the mouth of the draw like sentries, but the fence had disappeared. Each post was festooned with uneven coils of wire.

Not slackening pace, Brick led them out of the draw, swung left, breasted the slope of a hill. Dropping to a labored walk, heads nodding and shod hooves slipping on loose shale, the ponies angled upward.

When they gained the crest, the leader halted and the other rustlers bunched around him, resting their hard-breathing mounts.

Brick dismounted and stood staring eastward, across the bowl of the valley. Tucson followed the direction of his gaze. Across the darkened swales, distant low-lying clouds re-

flected a dull red glow. As the blocky rider watched, it rose and fell. Then understanding came-a prairie fire! While the Lazy I crew was busy at Sweetwater, someone had fired the grass, probably in the vicinity of Jensen's ranch. Harper had been compelled to abandon his murderous attack, pull his men off and hightail for home to save the ranch. And Brick had been expecting the diversion! That was why he had led them so casually out of the draw.

Tucson moved over beside the redhead. "Your idea?" he

inquired, jerking his head toward the distant glow.

The redhead nodded. "I learned the hard way," he returned bleakly. "That draw proved a death trap for the McCarthys-once. But I had to ride in, figuring Marge was in a tight. So I had Brazos and some of the boys circle and fire the grass. I gamble Jensen's in a sweat right now, with flames licking around his feet. I hope he fries-the bustard!" Brick changed the subject abruptly, "You riding with us?"

The chunky rider rasped his chin, considering. He and Gloomy were setting cozy out at the Slash. If he rode with the gang, he'd sure clash with Brazos. He couldn't stomach the burly rustler and it was a sure thing that Brazos had no use for him. "I guess not," he decided slowly. "Jensen's boys wouldn't know I had a hand stringing that wire. Reckon I'll stick with Marge."

"Suits me!" The renegade's tone was indifferent. Then his voice sharpened, "You tell Marge to check with me before she pulls any more damnfool plays. A jackass would know

better than to string wire at Sweetwater."

"Sure will!" Tucson assured him, pulled away and headed back to the Slash.

When he stripped off the roan's gear and loosed the pony in a makeshift corral, there was no sign of Gloomy. Chances were, he thought, the beanpole had ridden to town to seek a little balm in the saloon for his frazzled nerves. It was near dawn and a far off coyote pack howled with hysterical chorus.

Gratefully, he yanked off his boots and slid between his soogans.

The sun was high when he awoke. The spread seemed strangely silent. When he glanced over at Gloomy's customary sleep spot, neither the lanky puncher nor his bedroll was there. With vague disquiet, the chunky rider pulled on his boots, dipped a bucket of water from the horse trough and splashed sleep out of his eyes.

There was no sign of Gloomy. Could be, considered Tucson, he was shying away from the posthole digger and bucksaw.

He had never taken kindly to hard work.

As the day wore on, the blocky rider discovered that he missed the beanpole. Gloomy seemed to be the type who grew on a fellow. With sundown, loneliness drove him to town. When he pushed through the batwings of The Ace he saw that Diamond was back behind the bar, apparently none the worse for wear, except that his right hand was swathed in bandages. Monte Marge dealt blackjack to a crowded table.

He sauntered over and stood watching the play, caught the girl's eye. She promptly shut down the game, pleading

she needed a break and a breath of fresh air.

The girl did look peaked, thought the blocky rider. The atmosphere of the saloon, fouled with drifting clouds of tobacco smoke and tainted with the stench of spilled whisky and stale sweat, was not exactly salubrious.

Flashing him a meaning glance, Marge picked up her handbag and stepped out through a side door. Tucson casually drifted out front through the batwings, then ducked

into the alley beside the saloon.

The girl's form was a vague outline in the gloom.

"Wal," he said shortly, "guess you heard?"

"About the Spring? I suppose Brick was furious."

"The gent was in a sod-pawing, horn-tossing mood." Tucson's voice hardened, "Who could blame him? He put his neck in a noose figuring he was acing you out of a jam."

"And lost three men killed and one crippled," she returned wearily. Her tone became vehement, "There is a curse on that spring!"

"What in thunder did you figure to gain by fencing it?"

"I wished to establish proof of ownership."

"I'd say you just had a yen to spit in Jake's eye."

"I hate the brute!" she threw back. "You saw him manhandle Diamond. His crew killed my father. Brick is all I have left." Her tone shrilled under stress of emotion, "Jensen is a murderer, a monster!"

"So you're a McCarthy," he commented. "I figured that

way."

"What if I am!" she challenged. "We were not always renegades and gamblers. If it weren't for Jensen I'd never have entered a stinking saloon and Brick would never have become a cow thief."

"So?"

"I'm not quitting! I hold a deed to the land on which Sweetwater stands and I intend to press my claim, through the courts if necessary."

"You keep horning into Sweetwater and Jake will likely set a torch to the Slash again."

"He wouldn't dare, with two men around."

"One!" corrected Tucson. "I guess Gloomy pulled out; seems he quit."

"Quit! Then why didn't he pick up his back wages when he was in town today?"

"It don't make sense," agreed the chunky rider. "You dead sure?"

"He was drinking in The Ace around noon, according to the barkeep-with Dan Harper."

Bemused, the blocky rider stood silent. Facts began to line up in his mind: Gloomy's reluctance to do battle with the

Lazy J; his anxiety to ride away from the spring before trouble brewed. It seemed the beanpole had no stomach for powdersmoke. Chances were Harper had braced him and scared him away.

Resignedly, he raised his shoulders. "You sending another

man out?"

"If I can locate one; everyone around Buffalo Fork is afraid to buck Jensen. You know, Tucson, you're the only man I feel I can really trust, besides Brick." With this low-voiced confession, she turned and reached for the knob of the door behind her.

"There's no rush!" he urged, pulse speeding at her confession. Beneath the mask of brittle indifference, he was beginning to suspect the redhead was a warm-hearted, impulsive girl.

"You think I want to get back into that filthy saloon?" she flung back. "Diamond pays me to run his games. Right now

he's watching this door-checking."

From beyond the door came the maudlin yelling of a drunk, sound of a scuffle, the crash of breaking glass. He saw the girl shrink back. "Say," he inquired, uneasy, "don't drunks give you trouble?"

She laughed shortly. "What do you think? I have sharp nails, and a derringer in this handbag. I'm not defenseless!"

Yellow light from the saloon flooded the alley as she opened the door. It slammed behind her, leaving Tucson standing alone in the darkened alley.

After Gloomy's abrupt departure, he found it lonesome on the burnt-out spread, set amid waves of seared hills on the Valley's rim, with a harsh backdrop of upended terrain blocking out the horizon. The vista of eroding buttes, twisting canyons, arid plateaus, quivering through the heat haze, grew wearisome. He was listessly lining up a site for the new barn

when a dust plume, smoking across the flats to the east, provided welcome diversion.

It was a big-bodied, gray-shirted rider whose pony jogged into the ranch. A stiff-brimmed Stetson slanted down over his eyes and a thick mustache, grayed from the trail, drooped over his mouth. Tucson's heart flip-flopped at sight of a silver badge, engraved "Sheriff" pinned to his loose-hanging vest.

But the lawman was too close now to permit retreat, not with his pony drifting around the corral and his gunbelt lying slack on his soogans. He had sure been caught with his pants down, thought the fugitive, with disgust. Determined to brazen it out, he raised a careless hand in salutation as the sheriff swung stiffly out of leather.

"Howdy!" grunted the lawman, and fished out the makin's.

Nerves tight, Tucson studied him covertly. Bill Farmer, sheriff of Cottonwood Gounty, had the amiable voice and easy smile common to those whose emoluments depend upon votes. He was running to fat, which the flesh bulging around his broad leather belt plainly indicated. But his jowls were not too fleshy to conceal the strength of his jaw and his bland stare had a disconcerting quality.

He stood abstractedly rolling a cigarette and looking over the fire-blackened remnants of the spread. His pony dropped

its head and began cropping behind him.

At last, the blocky rider's tight nerves would permit silence no longer. "What's on your mind, sheriff," he prompted, "or did you ride out just to say 'Howdy'?"

"Jake Jensen's dead!" replied the lawman laconically.

Tucson stiffened, "The hell you say?"
"Bushwhacked!" The sheriff scratched a match on a nearby post and touched it to his cigarette.

### IX

"It so happened," continued the sheriff, "that I was in town overnight. And so I guess was Jake. The saddlehorse drifted into The Lazy J around sun-up. Dan Harper set the crew searching. They found Jake's body in the brush, by the ford, south of town." He took a long pull at his smoke. "Jake got it up close, between the shoulder blades. His shirt was scorched. The slug bored right through him. Guess the coyote who cut him down dragged the body into the brush."

"How come you brace me?"

"Vinegar tipped me off that you were a Protective man. Figured maybe you'd lend a hand."

Vast relief flooded Tucson. "Jensen," he said thoughtfully, "was the most hated man in Buffalo Valley."

"So?"

"A fistful of hombres itched to plug him."

"But lacked the guts," put in Farmer. "I know Jake's rep. He was a grizzly bear; he clawed everyone regardless." Turning toward his pony, the lawman unstrapped a saddlebag and brought out a snub-nosed, .41 derringer. "Recognize

this gun?" he inquired.

The blocky rider's thoughts flew to the scene in The Ace—Diamond jerking his hideaway, Jensen grabbing his gunhand and crushing it. The gun falling to the floor. That was the only derringer he had ever seen in Buffalo Fork. Then with a cold chill he remembered Monte Marge's declaration, "I have a derringer in this handbag. I'm not defenseless." Marge had a hair-trigger temper. She hated the cowman. Could she be the killer?

Aloud he said, "Diamond Dorsey, runs The Ace, packs one mighty like it. That iron blast Jensen?"

The sheriff nodded. "Seems so. A Lazy J rider picked it

up, near the body. There's an empty shell in the chamber. They tell me Dorsey had a run-in with Jake, recent. Maybe we should brace him."

"Sure!" agreed Tucson. "I'll throw the kak on my pony."

Stirrup to stirrup, the two jogged across the glaring flats, heading for town. Beneath the brim of his Stetson the sheriff's eyes were half-closed and he rode slack in the saddle, as though drowsing. Only the movement of his lips as he unconsciously chewed the ends of his drooping mustache betrayed the activity of his mind. Unexpectedly, he spoke, "Jake never squawked about rustling. He always claimed he killed his own skunks. How come he called in the Protective?"

"Guess the brand-blotching got too big for him," said the blocky rider. He told of the killing of Mike McCarthy at Sweetwater, the vendetta waged by Brick, the survivor, sided by Brazos and a gang of renegades. "Brazos rodded the Slash," he concluded, "before Jensen burned him out."

"So the female gambler in The Ace took the spread off Brazos' hands and hired you and a saddlebum by the name

of Gloomy to rebuild," mused Farmer.

"You said it," admitted Tucson. "I work under cover-a grubliner hunting a hole in a spread."

"And the McCarthys are redheaded," added the sheriff,

for no reason.

"So folks claim!" Tucson's voice was noncommittal. But how much did this beefy sheriff really know, he wondered. To switch the talk from the subject of redheads, he commented, "If Diamond springs an alibi, you'll have more suspects than you could shake a stick at. Jensen wasn't particular who he pushed around. Cowmen, cowhands, townsmen, he gored them all—regardless."

"You ever hear of a cowman or cowhand packing a der-

ringer?" countered Farmer. "It's a gambler's gun."

Again a cold chill of premonition ran down Tucson's backbone. The sheriff was right; it was a gambler's gun.

It was still early afternoon when they tied their ponies outside The Ace. There was no-one in the dim, low-ceilinged saloon except a barkeep, polishing dusty glasses with bored thoroughness. When they inquired for Diamond, he nodded at a rear door.

The sheriff knuckled loudly, knuckled again. The door inched open and the saloon man peered out. His hair was disheveled, his eyes heavy and he was stripped to vest and pants. It was plain he had been sleeping.

"We crave a few words, Dorsey." Farmer slid a boot

between door and jamb.

The saloon man's sleepiness sloughed off. His shrewd eyes swiveled from one to the other. The door swung open. "Sure!" he agreed, chubby features creasing into the set smile he could don like a mask. "Step right in!"

They followed him into a long, leanto room, carpeted the width of the saloon. Windows gave light on three sides and a door, bolted, provided access to the rear. At the far end of the room were set a brass bedspread, with rumpled coverings, a bureau and chairs, all screened by a draped curtain, now partially drawn back.

On the near side of the curtain, a roll-top desk stood by a window and a massive steel safe occupied one corner. Clothes hung from pegs in the other, covered by a white dust sheet. Sporting prints decorated the walls and leather-upholstered rockers were set around, flanked by shining brass spittoons. Diamond, considered Tucson, did himself handsome.

The saloon man indicated a couple of rockers with his bandaged hand, crossed to the desk and returned with a box of cigars. Flipping up the lid with his chin, he tendered the box to his visitors. Both declined.

Smiling unabashed, he sank onto a rocker, set the cigar box on the carpet. Tucson noticed a tremor in his pudgy, carefully manicured fingers as he picked out a smoke with his left

hand and bit off the tip. The blocky rider plucked a match from his hatband, struck it, reached and held it to the cigar. Diamond nodded thanks and sat straightbacked, his sloebutton eyes wary as his glance flicked from one to the other. Scared, registered Tucson. Maybe the sheriff had hit the bullseve.

"Well, sheriff," inquired Diamond, expelling a cloud of

blue smoke, "what's on your mind?"

"A killing!"

"Jake Jensen. It's all over town." The saloon man's cherubic features straightened. "Too bad!"

"Friend of yourn?"

Diamond glanced at his bandaged hand. "Just . . . a customer. Jake wasn't a friendly type."

"You pack a gun?"

"I did."

"A .41 derringer?"

"Sure."

"A .41 slug took Jake."

Tucson read fear in the saloon man's eyes. Diamond laughed uneasily, "You ain't saying-"

"Your gun around?" cut in Farmer.

Diamond gulped, "I . . . I lost it!"

"We found it!" replied Farmer laconically. He pulled out the .41 and held it toward the saloon man, lying on the flat of his palm. "It was lying beside Jake's body."

Diamond sat staring at the squat gun as though it were a rattlesnake, poised to strike. "Listen!" he croaked. "You're

barking up the wrong tree. I-"

"Quit sidestepping," broke in Farmer wearily. "Jensen busted your mitt and roughed you up. You hated his guts. Last night there was a pay-off, at the ford. Come clean!"

The pudgy saloon man dropped his partially smoked cigar, unheeded, on the carpet, jumped up and began nervously pacing, the set smile wiped off his features. Farmer rolled a

cigarette, watching him. Tucson picked up the glowing cigar and dropped it in a spittoon.

Suddenly, Diamond spun toward Farmer. "Sheriff," he averred hoarsely, "as God's my judge, I never killed Jensen."

"It was your gun," replied the lawman impassively.

"Tucson there will vouch I dropped that gun when Jake crushed my mitt," averred the saloon man earnestly. "Then he threw me over the bar. I was knocked out cold. Next day, I hunted that gun, but it was nowhere around. I figured the swamper had picked it up and peddled it. He swore by all the saints that he never even lamped it. It disappeared, complete. The bustard that drilled Jensen got hold of that hideaway. Now he's framed me!"

"All we've got is your word," barked Farmer, "and it don't

mean a damn thing. You found the gun-later."

Diamond paced, features taut, desperately thinking. Again he checked, "What time was Jensen plugged?"

"You should know!" threw back the sheriff.

"Gordamit, I don't know!" asserted the saloon man vehemently. For the first time, doubt as to his guilt crept into Tucson's mind. This was not playacting.

"Jensen was seen in town around midnight," said Farmer thoughtfully. "His hoss drifted into the ranch about five a.m. Let's say he was beefed between midnight and three a.m."

"Keeno!" relief was plain in Diamond's strained voice. "I was banking a poker game 'til three—there's four witnesses to prove it! The ford's a mile distant, if it's a foot. How in hell could I have laid for Jake?"

"That's easy!" Farmer drew on his smoke. "You had a saddlehorse staked out back. You lamped Jensen when he left

town. You hightailed for the ford and drilled him."

"My saddlehorse been eating its head off in the livery for a week. Could I saddle up with this mitt?" Diamond held up his bandaged hand. "Brace Tom Heeney down at the barn; he'll tell you my pony never left its stall."

The sheriff said nothing, but Tucson had a feeling he was impressed. "What's more," continued Diamond, "there's an outhouse out back. Gents use it continual. Wouldn't they lamp a tied pony? Ask around!" He slumped into his rocker, limp as a wet bar rag. "Gawd!" he muttered, "I've been branded card sharp, crook, chiseler, but never a lousy bush-whacker!"

"Your swamper around?" inquired Farmer evenly.

Diamond came quickly to his feet, hope dawning in his eyes, walked to the door and opened it. "Tom!" he shouted to the barkeep. "Get hold of Weasel-fast!"

Leaving the door ajar, he returned to his seat. In silence, the three waited, Farmer and Tucson chewing cigarettes, the

saloon man staring gloomily at the carpet.

A furtive rat of a man with a mop of uncut hair, needing a shave, eased the door open and peered uneasily around the jamb.

"Come in!" snapped Diamond.

The swamper shuffled into the room and stood fidgeting, bleary eyes focused on the sheriff's badge. His pants were thick with grease and his stained flannel shirt, loose on his narrow shoulders, was plainly a handdown from a bigger man. Abruptly, he whirled to face Diamond. "You got no right to sic the law on me," he shrilled. "I didn't peddle the gun; there warn't no gun!"

"Button up!" said the saloon man sharply. He turned to the sheriff, "I figured Weasel picked up my gun when he cleaned up, the morning after the fracas, and peddled it. I still

figure he peddled it!"

"Now listen!" Farmer eyed the indignant roustabout. "Give me this straight! Did Diamond accuse you of peddling his gun?"

Words came in a rush. "He sure did and he got no right! Plenty hombres lamped that gun. I never even did see it! It warn't around when I swamped up."

Diamond fumbled in a pants pocket and brought out a gleaming twenty-dollar gold piece. "Name the gent who bought that gun and you pocket this double-eagle," he said, "and nothing further said. No trouble, nothing!" He looked at the sheriff, "Right?"

Farmer nodded emphatically.

"I never peddled no gun," persisted the swamper surlily, and refused to budge from the assertion. Finally, disgusted, Diamond sent him away. "Find the jasper who bought that hideaway," he told the sheriff wearily, "and you've got your killer."

"Maybe sol" returned Farmer. He lifted out of the rocker, "Stick around town, Dorsey!"

"I never leave town," returned the saloon man.

Outside, in the bar, the sheriff ordered two beers. They carried them to a side table.

"Who in thunder did grab that doggone gun?" growled Farmer, in no good humor.

Tucson shrugged, "Your guess is as good as mine. I'd say some slick hombre standing around saw a chance and scooped it up."

"Who f'instance?"

Tucson smiled wryly, "There were half a dozen townsmen

and a fistful of punchers in the bar."

"That sure helps," grunted the sheriff and took a long drink. The distant screech of an engine whistle vibrated through the air. "That reminds me," said Farmer. "I telegraphed to Cottonwood for Cheyenne Charlie, a tracker. Could be he hopped that freight." His glance fell on the deserted green baize blackjack table. "Say, how about the redheaded gal—your boss?"

### X

MEETING THE sheriff's bland stare, Tucson again felt chilly foreboding. Marge was headstrong, she packed a derringer and there was no doubt as to her hatred for Jensen. The girl sure had motive and opportunity. Could she be guilty?

He forced a grin and, with desperate hope that Farmer was blindly casting around for another suspect, replied coolly,

"What about Monte Marge?"

"She among those present?"

"Sure, running the usual blackjack game."

"Flaming red hair," murmured Farmer. He looked up, "Curious, the McCarthys got red hair. She irks Jake by buying The Slash and prods him further by fencing Sweetwater. Now why would she do that?" His voice strengthened with conviction. "It adds up! I'd stake my saddle she's kin to the McCarthys. They've been feuding with Jake. Mike McCarthy was killed at Sweetwater. There's your motive!"

"Diamond had motive, so did a dozen others," protested

Tucson. "We need proof."

"We sure do," agreed Farmer. He pushed back his chair. "Let's start digging! First, we'll brace Vinegar. I gamble that old catamount can give us the lowdown on the gal."

The dehydrated old deputy was hunched at the plank table in the law shack, gloomily puffing his corncob pipe,

when the two jingled in.

"You raise anything, outside of saddlesores, cavorting

around?" he inquired acridly.

"Yep!" Farmer dropped the derringer on the table. "The gun that killed Jensen. Dan Harper passed it to me. A cowhand found it near the body."

Vinegar picked up the .41, looked it over. "Diamond

Dorsey's hideaway," he announced promptly. "Kinda puts the finger on Diamond."

"How come you're dead sure it's Diamond's gun?" queried

Tucson.

Vinegar eyed him with visible disgust. "I make it my business to know who packs what around Buffalo Fork," he growled. Then, to the sheriff, "You making an arrest?" "Nopel" Farmer gingerly deposited his bulk onto a de-

"Nopel" Farmer gingerly deposited his bulk onto a decrepit straightbacked chair. "Could be Diamond is clean.

What you got on Monte Marge?"

Vinegar looked up sharply and, for an instant, Tucson could have sworn that apprehension flickered in his deepset eyes. "Marge?" he grated. "Nothing! The gal deals blackjack in Diamond's place. She never made any trouble."

"I'd say she stirred up plenty," grunted the sheriff. "Where's

she from?"

The deputy raised his shoulders. "Who knows? These gamblers drift around."

"What hour she close up her game?"

"Depends on business; midnight I'd say."

"Opportunity," murmured Farmer. "Chew on this! Jensen's boys beefed a nester, Mike McCarthy, at Sweetwater a year or so back. He was a redhead. The gal's got red hair. She claims Sweetwater, fences it. Another redhead, this Brick hombre, and a McCarthy, forts up there with a bunch of renegades. You telling me the gal ain't tied in?"

"Not Marge!" replied Vinegar emphatically.

"That's just what I claim!" put in Tucson, eager to side

this new ally.

The sheriff snorted with disgust. "All the gal's got to do is bat her baby-blue eyes . . . you lunkheads pin wings on her. You bring Marge in, Vinegar!"

It was plain to Tucson that the old deputy was bothered. His bony fingers fiddled restlessly with the .41, while he stared at the gun with wrinkled forehead. "See here, Bill,"

he burst out, "I got proof Marge had no hand in Jensen's killing."

"Wal, convince me!" challenged the sheriff, heavy jaw

outthrust.

Vinegar glanced uncertainly at Tucson and came as close to amiability as the blocky rider had ever seen him. "Maybe you could take a pasear, Rogers," he suggested. "I reckon this is between the sheriff and me."

"Surel" agreed Tucson readily, happy that the acrid old deputy was steering the pugnacious Farmer away from

Marge.

Both lawmen sat silent as he stepped outside. He headed for the town restaurant. A coppery-faced fellow, with high cheekbones and the dark, unfathomable gaze of the Indian, padded past on mocassins with long, silent strides. He wore corduroys and a red shirt, while a battered Stetson sat on lank black hair that curled below his ears. That would be Cheyenne Charlie, thought the blocky rider, and pushed aside the musty fly curtain that screened the doorway of Ah Low's "Good Eats."

Nursing a mug of coffee, he saw three riders drift past the steamy restaurant window, Sheriff Farmer, Vinegar and the 'breed. Riding out to give the ford a onceover, he reflected. Plenty punchers had used that ford since sun-up. It was a sure thing any sign would be rubbed out.

A wiry rider jingled in, slapped his hat on a peg and slid onto a stool beside Tucson. It was Dan Harper, the Lazy J foreman. With a swift sideways glance at the blocky rider he ordered a slab of pie and coffee.

Tucson warily rolled a smoke. He wasn't quite sure how he stood with Harper. If the foreman knew he had been involved in the Sweetwater fracas trouble was likely to erupt.

Harper turned, eyed him. "Inquest's at two," he observed. "Should I be interested?" countered Tucson.

The foreman's sharp eyes weighed him, "Maybe so. Jake was the biggest man this valley ever bred."

"Big enough to tromp everyone and everything," retorted

the blocky rider, "including the McCarthys."

"And I gamble a McCarthy tagged him-on the back!"

"You couldn't prove it by me," replied Tucson, and slid off his stool. This could develop into gunplay and he had no desire to tangle with the techy foreman.

Hollow-cheeked Doc Mather served as Buffalo Fork's undertaker, doctor and deputy coroner. A dozen years before he had drifted down into the desert to die, but he'd been too busy ever since to get around to it.

Chewing and smoking, a coroner's jury of shirt-sleeved citizens perched like crows upon a stack of unpainted coffins in a barn at the rear of the Mercantile Store. A corner of the barn had been planked off to serve as mortuary. Here inquests were held. A handful of Lazy J riders loitered around the entrance, while Doc Mather sat in a straightback chair, close by the jury. Two coffins, one atop the other, served as his desk.

Mather eyed the lethargic jury and announced that the purpose of the inquest was to determine how one Jake

Jensen, owner of The Lazy J ranch, had met his death.

First called was a bow-legged Lazy J puncher, who tesified that he and Dakota, another puncher, had found the distinctive hoof marks of Jensen's bay on the east bank of the ford. Signs showed that a heavy body had been dragged into the brush. There they had found Jensen's remains and a .41 derringer dropped near by. Dakota had hightailed for the spread, while he watched the body. Dan Harper rode back with Dakota and sent him for the deputy.

"Any questions?" inquired the doctor, eying the jury.

The jurymen responded with blank faces. They knew all about the bushwhacking already, for the story had been

hashed and rehashed around town. It was hot and a trifle whiffy in the old barn, and their thoughts were on The Ace and a cooling drink. This was a tiresome chore but it paid three dollars, cash, when the warrants went through. They wanted out and didn't intend to delay proceedings with unnecessary talk.

Dan Harper stepped up next. His pale eyes brittled when he described the wound, "Plumb between Jake's shoulder blades and so close the powder flash most set him afire."

Vinegar made his contribution. Asked if he had a clue to

the killer, he responded with a morose, "Nope!"

So the formalities droned on, with the final anticipated verdict, "Murder by person or persons unknown." No one, beyond the Lazy J crew, was particularly interested. Jake Jensen had no close friends, no friends at all, with the possible exception of his wiry foreman. He had ruthlessly enforced what he termed his rights through gunsmoke, and he had died wreathed in gunsmoke, which, in the minds of the jurymen, just about evened things up. Immediately the verdict was pronounced, the barn cleared and The Ace enjoyed an unusual mid-afternoon spurt of business.

Tucson lingered and stepped behind the plank partition where the body lay on a bench, covered by a tarp. He peeled the tarp back and stood gazing at the slack features of the murdered man. Death had erased the frowning belligerency from Jake Jensen's rugged features and smoothed their harsh contours, leaving the mask of an old, weary man.

The blocky rider wandered back to the law shack and hunkered against its shaded front. Shortly after, the sheriff and the 'breed rode up. With a brief nod, Farmer ducked into the office, while the 'breed dropped down beside Tucson.

"Any luck?" inquired the blocky rider, tendering his sack

of makin's.

The 'breed's grunt might have meant anything. He ignored the proffered tobacco sack. Opaque eyes focused across the

street; he pulled out his own sack and a book of brown papers.

Sociable as an ulcerated tooth, reflected Tucson. Glumly

smoking, he maintained a hostile silence.

For no real reason, as the minutes passed, unease began to seep through him. How come, he mused, he wasn't asked inside? And the sheriff hadn't acted overly friendly. Restlessly, he rose and drifted down to The Ace. When he emerged from the saloon, a stiff slug of bourbon beneath his belt, he felt better. Then vague fear gripped him again-Cheyenne Charlie was hunkered across street, hat slanted down over his eyes. Had he changed places to case the saloon?

Mentally, Tucson flogged himself for his nervousness. What had he to be scared of, he asked himself, fighting for reassurance. His only risk was that Vinegar or Farmer might have recognized him from that old dodger. They hadn't,

or they would have called his hand.

Aimlessly, he wandered down street. Glancing idly in the saddlemaker's window, he saw the form of Cheyenne Charlie, reflected by the dusty glass, drifting along the plankwalk across the street. There was no doubt in his mind now-the breed was shadowing him.

Perspiration damp upon his forehead, he stood mentally debating. There was only one way to play it, he decided swiftly: step into the law shack, brace the sheriff and learn the worst. Maybe there was no worst, maybe his jangled nerves were simply playing tricks.

Pace quickening with every stride, he angled across street, aware that the 'breed, standing motionless beneath a store

canopy, was watching stolidly.

The door of the law shack was closed. Its dry hinges squealed when he pushed it open and stepped inside. Both lawmen were seated at the plank table. Their heads slewed around.

"You want I should stick around town?" he asked the sheriff, forcing a grin.

"Sure," drawled Farmer, and indicated a chair set against

the rear wall. "Rest your legs!"

As though a taut wire had snapped inside him, tension eased. He dropped onto the chair. Among the litter of old newspapers, official forms, oddments of saddlery on the table he glimpsed a yellowed dodger. From where he sat, it was too indictinct for recognition.

Then the 'breed's form darkened the doorway.

Something in the lawmen's manner as they sat eying him telegraphed a warning. His nerves tightened up again. In the silence a drum began to beat in his ears and he knew it was the pulsing of his blood. He forced himself to speak, striving to break the spell, "Wal, do we go after the killer?"

"We got him!" There was a grim note in the sheriff's voice.

His questioning eyes sought Farmer.

The sheriff picked up the yellowed dodger and wordlessly held it toward him. His glance dropped and he stiffened with sudden shock. The El Paso dodger! He focused the block lettering—WANTED—\$500 REWARD, the faded imprint of his own features below.

"So you dug it out!" His voice was edged.

"Yep, you lousy bushwhacker," rasped Vinegar, "and

where did you cache Tom Rogers' body?"

Tucson's left hand had darted down to his .45. The deputy leapt at him like a wildcat and bony fingers latched around his gun arm. He braced himself to fight free, then saw that Cheyenne Charlie was holding a leveled gun, hip high.

#### XI

Reluctantly, Tucson's hands came up shoulder high. Vinegar lifted the prisoner's gun and dropped it on the table. The sheriff jerked out a pair of steel handcuffs, stepped forward and snapped them on the prisoner's wrists. "Nice work!" he told the deputy. Dropping back onto his seat, he eyed the chunky rider. "Vinegar claimed he'd seen your map somewheres," he volunteered, "and thumbed through his old dodgers. Sure enough, you were there—large as life."

"I never beefed Jensen!" Tucson glowered at his accusers.

"The sign says different."

"What sign?"

The sheriff slipped the metal badge out of a vest pocket which Tucson had last seen in Brick's hands. Aloud, he read the inscription, "T. Rogers, #61, Arizona Cattlemen's Protective.' Cheyenne lamped that badge in the grass, not a yard from where they found the body. It places you right on the spot."

Tucson eyed the shining disc resting in the sheriff's big

palm. It gleamed like an evil eye, mocking.

"I gamble some rustler picked up that badge," he insisted.

He looked at Vinegar. "'Member? I reported it lost."

Hostility glowed in the deputy's deepset eyes. "You claimed it lost when I craved proof you were Rogers," he rasped.

"Next you'll claim you didn't beef Rogers," commented

Farmer ironically.

"I sure didn't!" Unemotionally, hopelessly, the prisoner told of the cattle detective's death in the cantina El Toro, his switch of identity in order to return to the land from which he was a fugitive.

"And Jensen, he shot himself?" inquired the sheriff caustically. "Or maybe it was another greaser job?"

"I warn't around to see."

"This badge proves different!"

"Why would I beef Jake?" inquired the prisoner, with

weary contempt.

"I can answer that one, too," countered Farmer. "Because you're a killer. You plugged a gambler, you down Tom Rogers and you craved to tie in with Brick and his gang. First you had to prove you were the big casino. How? By curling up Jake." He dropped the badge back into his vest pocket and shed his anger as quickly as he would have peeled off a slicker. "Let's hash this over!" Affably, he motioned Cheyenne to a chair, and became engrossed in building a smoke.

Mentally, he was weighing and dissecting the evidence. In his own mind he was convinced that Tucson was guilty. The prisoner's rep was bad, he was a confessed killer. He had been in The Ace when Diamond dropped his derringer, had picked up the gun and waited his chance to ambush Jensen. But motive, strong motive, was lacking. This Tucson didn't have to kill to impress a bunch of renegades; he already was a killer. Farmer had handled murder cases before and cir-

cumstantial evidence was slippery stuff.

There was always a chance that this tough young gunslinger might hire a slick lawyer who would dig up some inconvenient facts. If so, and the prosecuting attorney failed to make the murder charge stick, cowmen throughout the county would be down on him like a load of rock next election. One gap in his chain of evidence yawned wider than a barn door; how could this Tucson hombre have known Jensen would cross the ford that night? The barkeep swore he hadn't been in The Ace that night, which meant he hadn't been in town. The derringer bothered the sheriff, too. They couldn't produce the bullet. There was a chance, slim

but still possible, that some puncher had picked up the gun in the saloon, tried it out and then decided it was too conspicuous to retain and tossed it into the brush. A surprise admission from such a gent would blow the prosecution's case sky high. Farmer had rueful recollections of other cases ruined by tiny flaws that had developed into yawning cracks. What he needed was a confession, which would neatly cinch the whole deal. True, if his case blew up he could return the prisoner to Texas under the old warrant, and the Cattlemen's Protective would likely demand an indictment for Rogers' death. But his job was to arrest and convict Jake Jensen's killer, and he couldn't afford to tangle his spurs.

These thoughts ran through his mind as he carefully shook the makin's together, shaped them into a cigarette and ran the tip of his tongue along the paper. He struck a match, lit

up and eyed the prisoner again.

"We've got enough on you, mister, to hang you three times over." He spoke slowly, without rancour. "If we bring up the old charge and ring in Tom Rogers' killing, you'll hang higher than a kite. Now, maybe you had good reason to beef Jensen. Jake was tough; he did plenty killing himself. You dictate a confession to Vinegar and we'll forget the tinhorn and Rogers. Maybe you had provocation. You could get off with eight, ten years. Maybe you'll walk out of the courthouse a free man, if you hire a good mouthpiece. A feller can never figure which way a jury will jump."

Leaning against the table, favoring his stiff leg, the old deputy followed Farmer's words, head perked forward on his shoulders like an aging buzzard, a grim satisfaction in his sharp eyes. At the sheriff's nod, he slid open a drawer and

produced writing pad and pencil.

"Now you tell Vinegar just how it happened," prompted

Farmer smoothly.

"I told you a straight story," came back the blocky rider, a rock-hard obstinacy in his gray eyes. "If I've got to swing,

I'll swing, but I ain't confessing to a killing I know nothing about."

"It's hunky-dory with me," came back the sheriff indifferently. "Put the pad away, Vinegar; maybe he'll think different at sun-up."

"I ain't confessing, now or no time," came back the

prisoner stoically.

"You got leg irons?" Farmer asked the deputy.

"Nope, just handcuffs."

"Hobble the maverick!" directed the sheriff shortly.

"How in heck can I walk?" protested the prisoner, as the cuffs clicked on his ankles.

"Hop!" grunted Farmer.

At the north end of town, beyond the plankwalks and set back from the road on a weedy flat, stood a decaying adobe, long abandoned by its owner. It had a stout door and thick walls, and it furnished a convenient overnight lock-up for overly exuberant punchers when they took on too much liquor.

Vinegar unlocked the door of the adobe and pushed the prisoner into the stale darkness. "I want a shotgun guard posted 'til we take him out on the train," Tucson heard the sheriff say as he stumbled across the beaten earth floor.

"Figure he'll wriggle out of them 'cuffs?" queried the

deputy.

"Nope. I don't crave a lynching. The Lazy J bunch might

get notions."

Left alone in the gloom, Tucson edged forward until he came up against a wall. He sank wearily down against it, propping his back against the rough adobe. High up, a small square window framed a patch of sky. As his eyes adjusted to the dim light, the darkness thinned to a gray haze.

Glumly, he considered the future and found it as somber as his cell. Seemed Brick must have had a hand in the bush-

wacking, he cogitated. The badge proved that. After either he or Marge had shot Jensen, he must have stooped over, hauling the body, and it spilled from a pocket. Chances were Marge had grabbed the derringer the night Diamond was beaten up. Jensen's crew had wiped out the head of the McCarthy clan, so they had waited and grabbed a chance for revenge. Why they had left the derringer in an attempt to throw suspicion upon Diamond he couldn't figure. Maybe they had good reason. Personally, he wouldn't have been surprised to learn that the chubby-faced, ferret-eyed owner of the saloon was as crooked as a dog's hind leg.

As for himself, reflected the prisoner hopelessly, he had no more chance of beating the charge than he had of trimming the whiskers off the man in the moon. With Roger's death and an old murder warrant stacked up against him he was

as good as dead.

They'd left him the makin's. By dint of manipulating his manacled hands he made a cigarette. Drawing gratefully, he relaxed and philosophically watched the stars illuminate the

patch of sky.

Two days later, at sundown, he sat by a window on the faded velvet cushions of the day coach, with Cheyenne, by necessity, beside him, since the tracker's left hand was hand-cuffed to the prisoner's right. Sheriff Farmer occupied the opposite seat. There were no other passengers. In front of the day coach rolled five empty freight cars, behind it two laden cattle cars and an Express car. It was a typical make-up of the mixed train that rolled to and from Buffalo Fork twice weekly.

The engine bell tolled mournfully, axles squealed and the cowtown slid behind. The song of the wheels speeded into a clacking monotone, and the local settled into a steady thirty miles per hour clip across the darkening plain.

Up in the engine cab, a husky young fireman fed shovel-

fuls of coal into the firebox, while the alkalied old engineer sucked his pipe stem and watched the track ahead reel smoothly into the glare of the headlight, like two endless spools of shining wire. In the eight years he had piloted #745 nothing had ever disturbed the monotony of this run, except an occasional cow on the track, and he would have gambled his long-anticipated pension that nothing ever would. There were no gold shipments or bullion on the old Buffalo Fork hooker to tempt bandits. So, showering cinders from its huge mushroom stack, #745 chugged on, steadily eating up the miles.

Back in the day coach, the sheriff snored. The 'breed sat immobile, only his dark eyes showing life. The prisoner gazed unseeing into the shadowed night.

The fireman wiped sweaty grime off his face with a dirty red bandana, tucked it beneath his belt, bent and was about to slide his broad shovel into the heaped coal when the shriek of the engine whistle jerked him erect. He spun around, tottered across the swaying cab, grasping his empty shovel, while the engineer jerked the whistle cord, again and again.

"What's the trouble, Gus," he yelled, "cows?"

The screeching whistle drowned the answer. He swung head and shoulders outside the cab, peering ahead. Like a glowing spark, a red light swung slowly to and fro on the track ahead.

Brake blocks squealed down the train as it slowed, coasting ahead until a spurred rider stood bathed in the bright radiance of the headlight. His shout reached the intent men in the cab, "Hold it; the track's out!"

"It's a stall!" The fireman gulped with excitement. "This ain't the rainy season."

"Reach, gents!" A drawling voice from behind swung them around with startled surprise, to face another rider with a leveled gun. His eyes glowed like hot coals through two

holes cut in a gunny sack, pulled down over his head. Another masked man was clambering up to the cab.

In the day coach, the sheriff came awake, blinking, at the first blast of the whistle. The conductor hurried through the coach.

"Anything wrong?" shouted Farmer.

"Cow on the track, I guess," flung back the conductor.

Tucson looked out of the window. The oil lamps of the coach, reflecting on the glass, made vision difficult, but he fancied he could distinguish shadowy forms moving beside the track. While the hoarse shricking of the whistle continued to tear the air, the train slowed, stopped.

Farmer slid along the seat cushion, pressing his nose against the window. "You got your gun handy, Charlie?" he asked, with sudden uneasiness, and fingered for his own.

The 'breed grunted, threw back his unbuttoned vest with his free right hand and exposed a holstered .45; with a snarl he grabbed the butt of the weapon. The sheriff jumped to his feet, jerking his own gun. Hooded with gunnysacks, men burst in at each end of the coach. A gun roared and the window beside Tucson tinkled into fragments. He slid off the seat and dropped onto the floor, dragging on the 'breed's arm. The thunder of gunfire reverberated in his ears.

A slug took the sheriff in the right shoulder. The impact whirled him around. He tripped, fell heavily upon the prisoner's recumbent form and lay jammed between the two seats. His weight almost crushed the breath out of Tucson and held him like a vise. Meanwhile, the 'breed's gun was belching flame and thunder. Black smoke filled the coach like drifting fog. Tucson, wedged helplessly beneath the sheriff's bulk and wet with the sheriff's blood, listened to the mingling roar of .45's. He felt the 'breed's pull upon his handcuffed wrist slacken. The gunfire cut off. Someone heaved Farmer's dead weight off him. He scrambled to his feet, still handcuffed to the 'breed, who sprawled slack on the seat, mouth

agape, staring with unseeing eyes. The sheriff stood swaying like a drunken man, right arm dangling helplessly, the fingers dripping blood. Around them, riders jammed the aisle, their eyes, hot with excitement, smoldering through roughly cut holes in gunnysack masks.

"Gimme the keys, sheriff!" drawled a masked man.

"Get 'em yourself, damn you!" retorted Farmer thickly.

"Sure will!" came back the other. He dipped into the reeling lawman's pockets, came out with a ring of keys. A snap and the perplexed Tucson was free.

"Light a shuck!" directed the raider, nodding down the

aisle.

The released prisoner moved toward the exit at the end of the coach. Masked men began to drain out behind him.

With his good hand, Farmer gripped the back of a seat for support. "You'll hang for this," he declared, hoarse with anger, "every son of a bitch."

A muffled laugh came from the rearmost man, "Who all

will you hang, sheriff?"

The last of the raiders left the smoke-shrouded coach. Farmer collapsed upon the cushions opposite the dead tracker. Pain twisted the sheriff's features as the numbness began to leave his smashed shoulder.

The conductor's scared face popped around the angle of the vestibule. Cautiously, he eased into the coach and moved down the aisle. He stared at the dead 'breed, handcuffs still dangling from a hairy wrist, at the sheriff's slumped form, at the bloodied cushions.

"A getaway?" He spoke jerkily, his tone high and uncertain.

"A lynching, the way I read it," came back the sheriff tiredly. "Crowd on steam, I got to get to a telegraph office."

#### XII

JOSTLED BY THE masked riders and with a leaden premonition that he would shortly be gurgling on a rope, Tucson dropped down the steps of the day coach. He breathed deep, filling his lungs with the night air, cool and sweet after the stench of blood and powdersmoke inside. Around him, men yanked gunnysacks off their heads and traded talk, plainly elated at the success of the raid. Tucson glimpsed a mop of flaming red hair. Relief flooded him at the realization that this was no lynching bee. Brick had levered him out of the clutches of the law.

A flash, like forked lightning, split the darkness down track and the thunder of a detonation hit his ears. Close upon it, another explosion followed in the rear of the stalled train. Nearby, horseholders strove to quiet stamping, snorting brones.

The raiders streamed toward their mounts. Tucson drifted along with them and worked his way to Brick's side. "You sure eased me out of a tight," he told the rustler leader fervently. "I could sure feel a noose tightening around my neck."

"Forget it!" came back Brick carelessly. "You saved me a

chore, blowing out Jensen's lamp."

"I never beefed Jensen!" declared the chunky rider vigorously. "I had you branded the killer."

The redhead stiffened. "I'm no lousy bushwhacker," he

retorted curtly.

"You dropped Rogers' badge, by the body!"

"I tossed that badge away, the night we grabbed you in the canyon." Brick's voice rose in quick query, "Say, who in hell did wipe out Jensen?"

"Your guess is as good as mine." Tucson eyed the black

bulk of the train, hopelessly stalled between two wrecked sections of track. "Let's get out of here. They've got me tagged for two more killings."

Brick chuckled. "We'll be back in the barrens before they

get that hooker rolling; Brazos' been blasting the track."

Men were mounting and milling around now. Two riders pounded from the direction of the last explosion. Tucson

recognized Brazos, spurring ahead.

"Hey, Brick!" yelled the burly rustler. "There's a flask of that blasting powder left. I'm gonna set a charge under the coach and blow that sheepherdin' sheriff sky high." He wheeled toward the train.

"Like hell you are!" snapped the redhead and pulled out of the press of riders. Tucson, astride a spare pony, was conscious of sudden tension in the men around him, and sensed that the spare flask of powder was not the only explosive in the bunch.

Brazos brought his pony to a sliding halt as Brick cut across his front. "What's itching you?" he demanded irritably.

"We're riding-right now!"

"Scairt?"

"Jerk your gun and find out!"

So Brick and Brazos didn't hit it off, reflected Tucson. He kneed his pony closer to the disputants, dim-blotched in the starlight. Quick quiet clothed the riders around him. This was fight talk, with all the elements of a showdown.

"Do we have to trade lead over a gordamned lawman?"

The truculence had faded out of Brazos' voice.

"You call the play!" flung back Brick.

These McCarthys were fighting fools, thought Tucson; they backed away from no man.

Grumbling, Brazos wheeled his mount and cantered back to the bunch.

In a compact block, the rustlers jogged westward, toward the mountains. Behind them, the engine whistle screeched-

three times. When the sound died silence dwelt on the flats, except for the subdued creaking of saddle leather and the muffled thud of hooves upon the heat-hardened ground. Barely a minute passed before the harsh signal of distress cut through the night a second time, like the cry of a tortured monster hamstrung upon the lonely expanse. Again and again, slow-dying with distance, it wailed across the flats.

A solitary figure, Dan Harper gloomed over a bottle of bourbon at a table in The Ace, as techy as a tomcat. There had been a close bond between Jensen and his foreman, forged through many a smoking affray. For twenty years, Harper pondered, he had backed Jake's hand, since the two had first ridden into Buffalo Valley chousing a bunch of wild Texas steers. For twenty years they'd battled Apaches, rustlers, renegades. They'd poured out sweat, blood and powdersmoke, but they'd built up the Lazy J from a sod house to the biggest spread in the Valley.

Now that Jake was gone, the ownership of the great ranch in doubt, and his own future uncertain, the foreman was a lonely and baffled man. He had been Jake's watchdog through the long years and he felt that somehow he had failed in the end.

A tall, gangling form oozed through the batwings and stood surveying the patrons with a weary eye. When his glance fell upon the glooming foreman he drifted across the floor and spread himself over a chair at Harper's table. The foreman looked up and regarded the beanpole with no friendliness. "What in hell you want?" he demanded irately.

Gloomy gazed at the half-empty bottle with longing. "A duck on the desert got nothing on me."

"Lubricate," snapped Harper, "and beat it!" He banged the bottle in front of the saddlebum.

Disdaining a glass, the beanpole tilted it. His Adam's ap-

ple bobbed in a scrawny throat. With a deep sigh of satisfaction, he set the bottle down and fished out the makin's.

"Too bad about Jake," he commented.

"Wal, they claim they got the rattlesnake who downed him," barked Harper. He shook his head in slow disbelief, "The hombre sure had me fooled—three killings!"

"They got the wrong man."

"What in hell would you know about it?"

Unperturbed by the bristling challenge in the waspy foreman's voice, Gloomy carefully shaped a smoke, lit it and inhaled with obvious pleasure. "I been trading talk with Vinegar," he drawled. "They got no case."

"The lobo did everything but sign his name; you forgot

Rogers' badge and Diamond's derringer?"

"Planted!" returned the lanky cowpoke patiently.

"I'd like to believe it," growled Harper.

"The rustlers grabbed that badge, way back. As for Diamond's short gun, I was siding Tucson in the saloon the night Jake worked the gent over, lamped some jasper kicking that gun under a table, figured right then he was framing to get away with it, and it sure warn't Tucson!"

Harper straightened, interest sparking in his pale eyes. "You know," he said, "I had one of that damn McCarthy clan tagged with Jake's killing. Seems I could be right. You

straighten out Vinegar?"

Gloomy sighed. "You ever try straightening a horsehose with your grubhooks? That's gordamned easier than straight-

ening out that old pelican's ideas."

The foreman sat fingering his chin. "You know," he said thoughtfully, "I had different ideas about Tucson afore this came up. There could be some truth in his story about Rogers being knifed by greasers in Nogales. Maybe we should dig a mite deeper." He weighed the beanpole, mentally debating, "You tied down?"

"Like a tumbleweed!"

"Acquainted with Nogales?"

"Guess I could find my way around."

"Wal, you make tracks for the Border," directed Harper. "Locate this El Toro joint and get the straight on Rogers' death." He pulled a roll from a hip pocket, peeled off several greenbacks, pushed them across the liquor-stained table.

"Me, I got a notion Tucson wouldn't shoot no man he couldn't look in the eye," declared Gloomy, pocketing the

currency.

"Prove it!" came back the foreman dryly. "And for gosh sakes get a wiggle on. Don't fall asleep in Mañanaland and forget you've got a back trail."

"I'm on my way," the beanpole assured him tiredly and

dragged to his feet.

Doubtfully, the foreman watched the gangling rider cross the floor and vanish through the batwings. Could be the saddlebum had conned him out of a stake, he reflected; could be he was on the up-and-up. It was a gamble. But for no good reason he felt better. Mentally, he'd had the McCarthys pegged with Jake's killing. It might be a good idea to brace Vinegar and tell the old wart hog he'd likely tangled his rope.

When he pushed into the law shack, as belligerent as a bull terrier, the deputy was comfortably seated in his padded chair, feet on the plank table, puffing his corncob pipe.

"How come you gathered in Tucson for Jake's killing?" de-

manded the foreman.

Vinegar eyed his visitor with ill-concealed annoyance. "That doggoned saddlebum been giving you ideas?" he snorted.

"They make sense to me!"

Their wrangle terminated almost before it had a chance to begin. Boots drummed on the plankwalk outside. Sanders, the station agent and telegrapher, tornadoed through the doorway. His eye-shade was cocked at an angle, like a misplaced halo, and a vast excitement gleamed in his eyes. He stood

gasping for breath, a telegraph flimsy in one hand. The deputy reached, grabbed the message and scanned it swiftly. "Holy Moses!" he ejaculated, and shot a quick glance at Harper. "Get a load of this!" Aloud, he read:

TRAIN HELD UP BY MASKED BAND. CHEYENNE CHARLIE KILLED. PRISONER SEIZED. RAISE POSSE AND INVESTIGATE LAZY J FOR POSSIBLE LYNCHERS.

FARMER, SHERIFF.

"The Lazy J had no part in it!" asserted the foreman emphatically.

"Can you swear to that?"

"On a stack of bibles."

"Who else would grab Tucson?" demanded Vinegar suspiciously.

The foreman shook his head, plainly perplexed.

"I got to check," decided the old lawman, and reached for his hat. "Not that I'm blaming the boys, stringing up a three-time killer."

The hold-up of #745, killing of the tracker and wounding of the sheriff, coupled with the disappearance of the man accused of bushwhacking Jake Jensen, was the biggest sensation to stir Buffalo Valley since Cochise and his Chiricahua Apaches had swept through on a raid five years before. Posses scoured the country. The affair furnished the principal topic of talk from the county seat to the loneliest hill ranch, from the Border to the Dragoons. Spurred by a thousand-dollar reward, deputies combed every dive, watched water-holes and searched stages. Tucson's square features stared down from the walls of every sheriff's office in the west, but physically he had vanished as completely as though he had

shrivelled up and blown away. It was generally agreed that he had been lynched and his body buried on the desert.

Public interest seldom focuses upon one object for long. When the posses dragged back, jaded and saddlesore, and days drifted with no further news of the missing man, the affray faded into the background. The railway track between Buffalo Fork and the county seat was repaired. #745 again rumbled back and forth without incident. Grass sprouted on Cheyenne Charlie's grave.

Then, like a flash fire, the affair blazed into life again.

#### XIII

Pat Mahoney, the husky whose chief occupation in life was shoveling coal into the roaring maw of the engine that hauled #745, had one prized possession. On the wall of the room he rented in Mrs. Whirtle's Boarding House on second street in Cottonwood, a gunnysack, in which two small holes were cut, dropped from a nail. Mahoney would lie abed and eye it dreamily, thrilling to memories of that fateful night when #745 had been held up by hooded lynchers and he had stared into the black muzzle of a gun.

One evening, Joe Hansen, who set type in the "Courier" office and also read proof, dropped in for a hand of crib. For the twentieth time, Mahoney proudly told the story and exhibited the gunnysack. Hansen possessed an inquisitive mind and eyes like question marks. He fingered the trophy, examining it as closely as he would a six-point proof. Turned the gunnysack inside out. "Acquainted with a redheaded hombre?" he inquired casually.

"Why?" asked the fireman.

"Well, he left a mighty nice sample in this gunnysack." The printer held a long, waving red hair up to the light of the glass-bowled lamp set on the bureau.

"Christopher Columbus!" yelled the fireman, as the significance of the find sank in. "Don't lose that hair-it's a clue!"

So it came that another reward dodger, for one "Brick" McCarthy, wanted for murder, with train hold-up and felonious assault among the incidental charges, joined Tucson's on the bulletin boards. And the hunt was on anew.

Back in Buffalo Fork normalcy had apparently returned. In The Ace Monte Marge still ran her blackjack game, interspersed with a little three-card monte. Diamond squatted on his stool behind the bar, like a cherubic monkey. Patrons banged in and out of the batwings.

But a close observer would have noted several indications that things were not as they should be in the saloon. The redheaded girl lacked her usual composure, her dealing was apt to be erratic and every time the swinging doors squealed back to admit a patron her eyes strayed from the table. As a result, she paid out with more than usual frequency.

Diamond chewed hard upon his cigar as he eyed the poorly patronized bar. The big Lazy J crew, which formerly furnished a far slice of business, now confined its patronage to a

few quick and necessary drinks.

Such was the state of affairs when a smooth-featured man approaching middle age sauntered in early one evening. He was immaculately dressed in sober black. His eyes were somber, steel-hard, his lips thin, clean-cut and tight, his cheeks as flat and smooth as an axe. With the instinct of a homing pigeon, he headed straight for the blackjack table and, for a space, stood watching the game in silence. When a chair was vacated he sat down, hauled out a fat pouch from which he removed a silver dollar. No one would have guessed that the remaining contents were well assorted nuts and bolts. "Ace" Stoddart was verily down to his last dollar.

When he fingered his cards with slim, well-tended fingers his lips twisted slightly. He bade the dollar "good-bye" with no change of expression, rose, and approached the bar.

"Wal, if it ain't Ace!" exclaimed Diamond, with manifest delight, thrusting forward an eager hand. "It's sure a long time! Ain't set eyes on you since they ran you out of Dodge."

The cold-faced man ignored the proffered hand. "If I staked a gambler," he commented, with thinly-veiled disgust, "I would pick one who could win, and without the use of a shaved deck."

Diamond chuckled and slid off his stool. "Come out back,"

he invited, "we've got to talk."

Splitting a bottle between them, they relaxed in upholstered rockers, puffing cigars. Diamond's demeanor chilled when he learned that his old sidekick's luck had turned sour, real sour. In fact Ace intimated he would welcome a chance to replace that fumbling redheaded female at the blackjack table.

Gazing absently at the current issue of the "Cottonwood Courier" the saloon man mentally reviewed ways and means of gracefully shucking a gambler tainted by bad luck. An an-

nouncement met his eyes:

\$100 reward will be paid for information leading to the discovery of heir or heirs to the estate of Jake Jensen, The Lazy J ranch, Buffalo Valley, recently deceased.

Thornton Thatcher,
Attorney-at-law
Cottonwood, Arizona T.

It was then that inspiration hit the plump saloon man in the form of an idea so stupendous that, for several seconds, he could do no more than stare in fascination at the newspaper. This was opportunity, decked in diamonds. And sitting opposite was the man with the gall to bring it to realization.

His small black eyes came up and dwelt on his visitor's smooth-planed features. "Forget that penny-ante game," he urged, with ill-concealed excitement, "I got something big, real big, for you and me." He passed the paper and indicated the announcement.

Impassively, Ace eyed it. "You're not crazy enough," he inquired, with cold cynicism, "to suggest that I pass myself off as the heir?"

"Quit kidding!" beamed Diamond and held out the box of cigars. "I gamble you could find that heir, if I put you wise. First, let me give you the lowdown. Jake Jensen's wife quit him fourteen, fifteen years back. Jake was as mean as a centipede with chilblains and as tough as cactus. They claim his wife had spirit and the two fought like wildcats. One night, Dan Harper, Jake's foreman, brought the woman to town, seeking the doc. Her back was cut up and she was near death from a quirting. That wasn't the only time Jake worked her over. She beat it with their boy, when he was buying cattle across the Border. Jake most went crazy. He didn't give a damn about the woman; he craved the kid-figured he wanted to pass the Lazy J on to the button. So he hires the Burns Detective Agency to trace the pair." Diamond paused, to light a fresh cigar. "They follow the trail to a Mexican pueblo-San Mario. Smallpox epidemics used to clean out those pueblos regular. Well, San Mario was a pest house when the Burns man reached it. The rurales had thrown a cordon around the town to try and stop contagion. When the dick gets through there ain't more than a score of greasers left alive. The dead had been dumped in pits and burned. The woman and kid were among them."

"They're dead; so what?"

Diamond chuckled and leaned closer. "Sure they're dead, but get this, there was no real proof . . . and there's a hundred thousand dollar ranch going begging, waiting for an heir."

Stoddart drew on his cigar, unmoved. "So we resurrect the heir!"

"We locate the heir," corrected Diamond. "That's your job, this saloon ties me down."

"How old was the button?" inquired Stoddart, thoughtfully.

Diamond raised his shoulders, "Five, six years old, I'd say."

"That would make him twenty, or thereabouts, if he'd lived." Considering, the smooth-faced gambler sat smoking, no expression in his cold eyes. "Anyone around who knew the kid?" he inquired, at length.

"Harper, the foreman, maybe, no more. And how would anyone guess what the button looked like, full grown? You line up some tough young saddle-pounder, with square fea-

tures and blond hair, and it's a cinch."

"What's the deal?"

"One-third apiece. He signs over two-thirds of the ranch to us. We split fifty-fifty."

"Not on your tintype," returned Stoddart flatly. "I do the

work, you pocket the loot. Find your own damned heir!"

"You're flat broke and you throw thirty-three thousand silver dollars down the drain!" Diamond smiled sadly, "I always figured you smart, Ace."

They eyed each other, bland, expressionless-two poker

players maneuvering around a fat jackpot.

"Deal me inl" declared Stoddart abruptly, and reached for another cigar.

Diamond rose and stepped toward the rolltop desk. "I'll get

it down on paper," he said, "and we'll sign."

"We understand each other," returned the gambler, with a touch of irritation. "Aren't we old pards?"

"We sure are!" Diamond smiled blandly, "That's why I

want it real plain, in black and white."

Buried deep in the welter of canyon and gulch that was

the barrens, Brick and his rustlers laid low. Peaks and pinnacles of overshadowing mountains fingered stark around them. Beyond an occasional ragged prospector seeking phantom gold it was a land devoid of human life.

No one left the gulch in which they were holed up, except the whiskered Pecos and his burros. In the guise of prospector he packed in water and necessary supplies. Here the gang idled away the days, sleeping, drinking, card-playing, while the manhunt was on.

Finally Brick decided that they'd wasted time enough. At

sun-up, he and Brazos were gone.

A bond of something approaching friendship had grown between Tucson and Pecos. Both were dodging murder warrants and the calloused old renegade maybe felt that the fact linked them. Or it may have been a reluctant admiration for the young colt who, as he believed, had the gall to kill and impersonate a Protective Association detective and also blast the biggest cattleman in the county.

After the two leaders pulled out, the gang scattered, as usual, to seek shade among the great boulders that littered the gulch, there to sleep, deal dogeared pasteboards or engage

in endless "augurin' matches."

Tucson hunkered near the bearded oldtimer as Pecos scoured pots.

"I'd say," commented the blocky rider idly, "that Brick and Brazos took a long chance riding into Buffalo Fork."

"Not after sundown," countered Pecos, pausing to light a cigarette. "They got to get orders."

"Don't Brick rod this outfit?" came back Tucson quickly. Conscious that he had been careless with his tongue, the cook suddenly became engrossed with his job.

"So Diamond gives the orders!" said Tucson thoughtfully.

"Brick don't take orders from nobody," snapped Pecos.

"Diamond markets the beef. He's got connections."

It was after midnight and the bar in The Ace was deserted, but activity was not dead. In Diamond's living quarters the saloon man was handling another phase of his devious interests. Not a glimmer of light showed through the blankets draped over the windows. Inside, the air was thick with tobacco smoke, but that did not bother the three men relaxed in rockers, drawn close together, a bottle within easy reach.

"The boys are getting itchy," said Brick. "They crave

action."

Diamond puffed vigorously on his cigar, a sign that he was not at ease. "Jensen's dead," he returned pacifically, "so you're even. I got word that the lawyers located an heir, they claim he's a spitting image of Jake. Lay off 'till he takes over."

"Why?" demanded the rustler leader, his tone tinged with antagonism. "I figure the time's ripe to get busy again. Don't you feel that way, Brazos?"

The burly rustler rasped his bristly chin, close-set eyes flicking from Brick's challenging gaze to the saloon man's round features. "I reckon Diamond's the boss," he rumbled.

"Diamond don't boss me!" flung back the redhead.

"No one claims I boss you," put in the saloon man smoothly. "You run your end and I run mine. That's the deal. Haven't I lived up to it?"

"If you hadn't, you wouldn't be around," threw back Brick brusquely.

"Do we have to wrangle?" The saloon man's voice was as brittle as thin ice. "Lay off the Lazy J for awhile. I got to make arrangements for delivery across the Border. I want this young fellow to take over and settle down before we start prodding."

"I'm collecting for a blood debt," flashed the redhead, "and I crave action."

"Just hold your horses for awhile," urged Diamond. "I don't want trouble right now."

"You're gonna get it!" came back Brick truculantly.

"Act ornery and I'll clip your horns." The saloon man's smile took the edge off the threat, but there was no amusement in his eyes.

"Yeah!" Brick came to his feet and stood grinning down derisively at the plump, apple-cheeked Diamond. "Maybe

it's time I cut vou down to size."

Diamond said nothing, just rose and turned the lamp low. Brick eased open the rear door, glanced around and stepped outside. Behind him, Brazos bulked. The redhead stepped briskly toward two saddlehorses, tied among piled stacks of empty cases. Diamond touched Brazos' arm as he was about to follow, whispered quickly, mouth to ear.

#### XIV

THE TWO RENEGADES walked their ponies through an alley and emerged upon an empty Main Street, silent and shadowed. A cat slunk across the ruts.

"Black cat!" grunted Brazos. "Bad luck."

"Sure," returned Brick carelessly, "for Diamond's bankroll if he don't change his ideas." He pulled rein, eying a notice, patched white against a post. Aloud, he read, "\$1,000 Reward. Wanted-dead or alive. Brick McCarthy." He reached, ripped the dodger off the post. "Big money, Brazos, for a no-good son of a gun like me!"

"Let's drift!" growled his burly lieutenant. Brazos glanced around uneasily. "It's fifteen years, maybe the rope, if they

put the finger on us for that train fracas."

"Hell," mocked Brick, "I'm going visiting."

"And I'm gonna beat it!" announced Brazos. He raised his reins. The redhead sat watching horse and rider drift down

street, until a curtain of rising dust veiled them. Then he walked his own mount down a side lane that gaped black between the buildings on Main Street.

He didn't see Brazos whirl his pony on the outskirts of town, angle away from the trail and cautiously circle back

to the rear of The Ace.

Brick dismounted in the rear of a small cabin. Around, white frame houses showed dim, shaded by gaunt cotton-woods. He knuckled the back door. When it brought no

response, he knuckled again, with quick impatience.

The door flung open and Monte Marge, fiery hair streaming down her back and a wrap flung around her, greeted him with outstretched arms. "Oh, Brick," she whispered, hugging his dusty form. "I'm so glad to see you, but you shouldn't have come to town."

"Wal, I'm here!" The rustler shrugged free of her arms. "Just dropped in to say 'Howdy' before I pulled out."

"You know . . . about the warrant?"

He grinned. "Ripped one down not five minutes back."

"Let's go back to Texas!" she pleaded. "Jensen's dead. You've had your revenge."

"Not while Jake's got a son."

"A son?"

"Diamond claims the lawyers dug him up."

"But he'd know nothing of the feud!"

"Heck, he'll sure wise up."

"Listen, Brick," she begged. "Nothing good can come of this feuding. If we don't go now I've a feeling we'll never go. Every time a stranger enters The Ace I'm scared to death, for fear he's an officer." Her voice deepened with entreaty.

"Forget it, sis!" snapped the rustler, his voice laced with

impatience. "I'm not quitting!"

Supper was over in the rustler hideaway and laggards were dropping their tin plates and mugs into the wreck pan when

Brazos rode in, grayed with the dust of the barrens. He piled out of leather, ground-hitched his gaunted pony and strode up to the camp fire. "Gimme a mug of dip," he growled, "I been spitting dust for hours."

Pecos spilled coffee from a sooted pot. Handing a steaming mug to the beefy renegade, he commented casually, "Don't

lamp Brick around!"

"You won't," grunted Brazos. "Brick's dead."

Talk among renegades lounging around the camp fire abruptly cut off when Brazos dropped the bombshell. In taut inquiry, every eye focused him. Tucson was hunkered against a boulder. As amazed as any man present at Brazos' cryptic announcement, he straightened with slow disbelief.

The burly renegade glanced nonchalantly around at the circle of staring men. "Shot in the back," he explained com-

placently, "at the ford."

"Same as Jensen got his'n," muttered Pecos.

Brazos nodded and sipped the scalding coffee. "I'd say the Lazy J kicked back."

Men pressed around him now, firing questions. Brazos tossed his empty mug aside and grinned. "If you jaspers will button up," he boomed, "I'll give you the lowdown."

He rolled a cigarette. His fleshy features straightened as silence held the bunch. "Ain't much to tell, boys. Me and Brick was riding out of Buffalo Fork around midnight when he turns back to make a call. It warn't exactly healthy, hanging around, so I vamoosed. Wal, I cross the ford and head over the flats. There's a shot. I punch the breeze back to the ford and most ride over Brick. He's lying, part in the water, deader'n a can of corned beef. A slug took him square in the back. Some hombres start throwing lead at me, bellied down in the brush. One's enough, I figure, and dig in my pothooks."

Bewildered silence greeted this recital, broken by Pecos,

"So you got the Lazy J tagged?"

Brazos raised his heavy shoulders, "Who else?"

Standing among the men who circled the beefy rustler, Tucson heard the story with puckered brow. It was too pat. It just didn't ring true. Deep anger began to build up within him. He knew Brick and he knew Brazos. Brick may have been raw-tempered and reckless, but he was a square shooter. Brazos he had pegged as being crooked as a corkscrew, with a streak of yellow a yard wide. A dozen times he'd seen the redhead call the burly rustler's bluff, and Brazos had crawfished, every time. So this was the payoff!

"That yarn is as full of holes as a sievel" His curt, dis-

gusted comment brought heads around.

"Yeah?" Brazos' right hand slid down to his gun butt.

"You were too cold-footed to side Brick in town," accused Tucson, "yet you claim you rode back when you heard a shot. Like hell you did!"

"Quit dribbling, you gordamned bushwhacker," rasped the beefy renegade, "or we're liable to turn you in and collect a

thousand cartwheels."

"Dead?" taunted Tucson. "I reckon a slug in the back would be just your style."

This was fight talk. Men surged back, leaving a wide lane

clear between the two.

Less than six paces apart, the massive Brazos and blocky Tucson bristled like two hounds about to fly at each other's

throats. Brazos' right hand tightened on his gun butt.

"Jerk that iron," promised Tucson thinly, "and I'll blast a hole through your big belly. Your yarn stinks! I'm riding to town to get the rights of Brick's killing. If it points to you, I'll be back—smoking." He paused, one hand crooked above his gun. "Or," he offered brittlely, "we can find out right now who stutters."

He watched the big renegade's close-set eyes intently, waiting for them to telegraph the draw a split second ahead of muscular action. But Brazos lacked the cold nerve of his

blocky opponent. He knew that Tucscon had killed before and he shrank from pitting his own gun-speed against that of the chunky, granite-eyed rider, with the certainty that if he was shaded, death would surely tap him on the shoulder a slow, agonizing death.

"I left Brick in town, like I said," he averred, his voice

hoarse with strain.

Tucson smiled bleakly, "I'll check!" he promised.

Relief was plain upon Brazos' beard-stubbled features. He swung away and strode to his pony, began to strip off its gear. Tension let down with a rumble of muttered talk.

Heading north, out of Nogales, Gloomy made camp on the bank of Cottonwood Creek. He was tempted to push on into town, but the buckskin was dragging after a long day's ride and he hated to punish a good horse. After the heat of the desert, the soothing greenery and coolness of the tranquil stream were enticing, too. So the lanky rider spread his soogans about ten miles south of town.

At dawn he was in the saddle again, without pausing to prepare breakfast. He felt empty, but he solaced himself by visioning the sumptuous spread he would enjoy in Ah Low's hashhouse.

He forgot breakfast when the buckskin's ears suddenly pricked up. His languid droop stiffened into cat-eyed alertness. He kneed his mount sharply, angling off into the brush. Screened by the chaparral, he pulled rein and sat tensed, listening.

The clack of hooves became plain. Satisfied that only one pony was approaching and that no rider with hostile intentions would so telegraph his approach, Gloomy pulled back onto the river trail.

A saddlehorse drifted toward him, stirrups dangling, one rein tangled around the horn, the other dragging. Nickering, it stopped.

Cloomy grabbed the dragging rein, dismounted and looked the runaway over carefully. It was a dun, clean-limbed, with a small, intelligent head. Fast, he registered, and a stayer. He examined the animal's knees. They were not damaged, as they would have been if the dun had tripped and fallen, throwing its rider. Neither had it been tied and pulled away, unless some unlucky chance had twisted one rein around the horn.

Then a brown spot on a saddle skirt caught Gloomy's frowning scrutiny. Blood! With growing intentness, he conned

the cantle, and found more splotches.

Leading the dun, he resumed his ride to town . . . Face down, head and shoulders lapped by the gentle current, Brick's remains lay on the edge of the ford. His long red

hair undulated gently in the smooth-flowing stream.

Gloomy dismounted a dozen paces distant and approached the corpse cautiously, careful to obliterate no sign. The cause of death was plain—the back of Brick's sleeveless vest was burned by the powder blast and ripped by the passage of a heavy slug. Gloomy touched the dead man's neck and found it cold. His thoughts flashed to Jake Jensen, murdered at the same spot and in the same manner. Had the Lazy J evened the score? Then he began to examine the soft, sandy ground.

Vinegar Carney slept on a bunk in the law shack. Normally he would have awakened abruptly at the rap on the outside door, but he had pulled too long at the bottle that now lay empty on the floor beside the bunk. Ghosts rose oftentimes out of Vinegar's chequered past and gibbered from the darkness, ghastly apparitions that capered and mocked until the liquor obliterated their grimacing features and they dropped back into their graves.

When his rap failed to achieve results, the lanky cowpoke picked up a rock and hammered on a panel. The door finally creaked open and Vinegar, bleary-eyed, blinked into

the growing light.

"When the last trump sounds, it sure won't faze you none," commented Gloomy. "They could shoot up this town and you wouldn't quit snoring."

"If you yanked me out without good reason," snapped the

deputy, "there sure will be shooting. What's itching you?"

"Brick's dead!"

"Dead!" echoed Vinegar, and stared blankly, shocked into wide-eved wakefulness.

"Twanging a harp right now," returned Gloomy. "His carcass is down at the ford and there's a thousand cartwheels out for him, dead or alive. This is where I collect dinero enough to burn a wet mule. Rattle your hocks, oldtimer, afore some other jasper deals himself in on this!"

The placid waters of the creek gleamed like molten silver when the two piled out of leather at the ford. Vinegar grabbed the beanpole's arm as Gloomy moved toward the body. "You crave to muss up the sign?" he demanded irately.

"I done read the sign," threw back the tall cowpoke.

They hauled the stiffening form out of the water and laid it beneath the willows.

"Now gimme the picture!" barked Vinegar, whose own eyes had not been idle.

"Sure!" drawled Gloomy. "One hombre rode out from town at a canter and pulled up under them willows. He hung around awhile, jumpy as a grasshopper. Look at them half-smoked quirlies! Then Brick follows at a jogtrot. The first jasper wheels out beside Brick, pulls back a mite and gives it to him. Then the hombre hits the ford and takes off like a bat out of hell."

"All I crave," said the deputy, softly, bitterly, "is the gent's moniker."

"I wouldn't know the jasper from Adam," confessed Gloomy, "but I sure could pick out his hoss, any place, any time."

#### XV

THE LIGHTS OF Buffalo Fork stared at Tucson with square eyes when his pony splashed across the ford. Of a sudden, realization struck him that it would be no easy task getting the lowdown on Brick's death. There was a price on his head. He had to keep out of sight, for recognition would mean arrest. He left the wagon road, circling around outlying shacks, finally reined up in the rear of the livery barn.

Tying his pony to a rail, he injuned along the rear of buildings that fronted Main Street. Crouched in the darkened mouth of an alley across from the saloon, he considered his next move. By now, the story of Brick's killing was probably all over town. How could he get that story without

revealing his identity?

Pondering, he gazed across the wide sandy street at the brightly lit saloon front. Lady Luck smiled. Gloomy's long form was silhouetted above the batwings. The cowpoke stepped out, wandered aimlessly to the hitch rail, stood idly building a smoke.

Tucson whistled, a long, low note he used to call his pony. Gloomy should recognize that, he reflected. The beanpole's head came up. Again Tucson whistled. Gloomy leisurely

straddled the rail and ambled across street.

"Howdy!" called Tucson, low-voiced, from the gloom of the alley. The tall cowpoke ducked into the darkened lane, blundered into Tucson's crouched form. "Kin I play hide-go-seek, too?" he inquired gravely.

"Yep!" The chunky rider straightened. "Tag me, and grab

a thousand cartwheels." His voice held grim humor.

"Sorry, pard, but I just put in my bid for a hunk of reward money."

"So you blasted Brick!"

"Nope!" The beanpole told of finding the redhead's body at the ford."

"Any notion who plugged him?"

"Nope. But his hoss has a turned-in heel."

"Brazos!"

"What's that you say?"

"Brazos bushwhacked Brick and laid it to the Lazy J," returned Tucson tautly. "His pony has a turned-in heel."

"So you threw in with the gang?" commented Gloomy, with

studied indifference.

"What else could I do?" demanded Tucson starkly. "Brick staged the train hold-up and aced me out of the sheriff's hands. I've got three strikes against me—a tinhorn I plugged in El Paso, Tom Rogers and Jake Jensen. I plead guilty to downing the tinhorn, but Mexicans got Rogers and I sure didn't salivate Jake." His voice hardened, "But I'm sure as hell going to get Brazos, the yellow coyote, for Brick's killing." He eyed the saloon across street longingly, it had been a long, dry ride to town. "Gosh, I'm as thirsty as a mud hen on a tin roof."

"That ain't hard to cure," drawled Gloomy. He stepped out of the alley.

It so chanced that Vinegar was questing along Main Street. The deputy saw the tall rider emerge from the alley, cross the street and enter the saloon, and gave the incident little thought. But when the beanpole shortly stepped out again, a bottle cradled under one arm, the lawman paused, unobserved in the gloom. His puzzled glance followed Gloomy as the saddlebum moved with unwonted speed across street and dabbed into the alley again.

Gloomy was packing liquor to someone and that someone wished to remain out of sight, considered Vinegar. Why would he wish to remain out of sight? The deputy determined to find out. Quickly, he moved down another alley, ghosted along the rear of black-bulked business buildings.

At the far end of the alley into which Gloomy had vanished, the deputy dropped low and peered around the angle of the building that sided it. Plainly outlined against the saloon lights were two men—one tall, the other shorter and blockily built. The blocky man was tilting a bottle and his identity hit Vinegar with the impact of a bullet—it must be Tucson, the escaped prisoner, long thought dead. Drawing his gun, the deputy slid toward the two men.

Tucson took a long, long drink, paused to regain his breath.

"Monte Marge still going strong?" he inquired.

"She's out," replied Gloomy mournfully, "guess the gal's riding the grub line. Ace's got a frozen-faced tinhorn running his games."

The blocky rider's forehead creased. "How come Ace

ditched her? She brought plenty business."

The beanpole shrugged. "I wouldn't know, but I got a hunch this tinhorn and Ace are closer'n two mustard plasters."

Silence fell between them as Tucson digested these oddments of information, a silence that was abruptly broken by a metallic clamor from the gloom of the alley behind them, the sound of a falling body and a sulphurous string of oaths.

"Git!" snapped Gloomy, "That's Vinegar."

Tucson dropped the bottle, darted out upon the plank-

walk and dashed up street.

Gloomy sauntered down the alley, checked in the vicinity of the cursing and struck a match. The feeble light revealed Vinegar on his knees, pawing around amid a mess of garbage close by an overturned can.

"You praying?" inquired the beanpole solicitously.

"Nope, you big camel, I'm hunting my doggoned gun," yapped the deputy. "That was a hell of a spot to set a dog-blasted garbage can."

"You picked a hell of a time to go cat-toeing down dark

alleys," drawled the cowpoke.

Vinegar glimpsed his sixgun. With a yelp of triumph he

scooped it up and jumped to his feet. "Where's that cowhocked, bushwhacking rattlesnake?" he barked. "Which way he head?"

"Down street!" returned Gloomy promptly.

"Which means up street," threw back the deputy. "Heading for the livery, I'll stake my saddle." At a trot, he hit for Main Street, swung around the corner of the building and was gone.

Gloomy sighed, then mournfully meandered toward the

saloon.

Scarcely had he settled himself at the table where Dan Harper and a bunch of Lazy J riders were engaged in a game of freeze-out when the deputy banged in. His glance flashed around, settled on the Lazy J contingent. "I need a posse, pronto," he rasped. "You hombres are deputized!"

"Me, too?" inquired Gloomy.

"Nope!" barked Vinegar. "If it warn't for you, you longlegged giraffe, I wouldn't need no posse."

"Did I set the garbage can in the alley?" inquired Gloomy

plaintively.

"I wouldn't put it beyond you," snapped the deputy.

"Who's on the lam?" inquired Harper, as the knot of punchers jingled down the plankwalk behind Vinegar's hurrying form.

"Jasper calls hisself Tucson," flung back the deputy. "Wanted for three killings."

The foreman whistled softly.

When the crash of the deputy's fall flushed him out of the alley, Tucson ducked into the first doorway up street and stood motionless in shadow. Vinegar almost brushed against him as the deputy rushed past. The fugitive waited until Gloomy moved slowly across street, then slipped back into the alley he had just left. Quickly, he traversed it and emerged onto the waste ground in the rear. At a run, he headed for his pony, tied behind the livery.

Breathing hard, he reached the roan without incident, loosed it and mounted.

Rounding the barn at a canter, he almost ran down Vinegar and the hostler, bunched in conflab. Both jumped aside. Before they could recover from their surprise, he had raised his mount to a gallop and had pounded into the darkness of Main Street.

All was quiet behind him when he crossed the ford, but he knew that a posse would hit his trail just as soon as the deputy could gather his men. Heading across the night-veiled plain, he pulled the roan down to a trot. A blown pony

would be of little use when the real chase began.

Dawn found him still jogging westward. Through the night, alternately walking and riding, he had kept moving, ears always attune for sound of pursuit. The wide bowl of the valley had dropped behind. Westward, stark and bare, the pinnacles of the Dragoons lanced skyward. The barrens flowed around him now, a tortured waste of eroding rock, amid which the bright scarlet flowers of the thorny ocatillo were smudged like splotches of blood.

Jaded and footsore, the pony plodded through a narrow defile, a long, winding "V" gouged out of the desolation. On either side, the terrain sloped gently up to the base of escarpments that frowned like battlements, stark precipices of ragged, eroding rock. Fragments that had split off through

the ages, peppered the defile.

Only a few miles now, considered the fugitive, and he'd reach the rustlers' hideaway . . . and a showdown. Brazos

would never bushwhack another man, good or bad.

Head nodding, the pony threaded between boulders. . . . In screaming ricochet, a slug rebounded from a rock almost at Tucson's shoulder. The pony snorted and leapt sideways, almost unseating its weary rider. Tucson whirled the roan and spurred it to a gallop along the back trail. Hooves striking sparks, it raced down the defile. Droning lead chased

after it, the echoes of the reports muttering from cliff face to cliff face.

Then, abruptly, a gun opened up, ahead, followed by a second. Lead whined and whip-cracked against scattered rock.

Caught between two fires, Tucson yanked the pony back on its haunches. Angling up the slope toward the nearer wall, he pulled up between two boulders, slid his Winchester out of the boot and swung to the ground. In swift appraisal, he surveyed his surroundings. On each side the terrain slanted up to precipitous walls. With hidden guns before and behind, he was trapped. But, he considered grimly, as long as he had shells in his gunbelt he packed a sting.

He ground-hitched the roan and, bent low, panted up the slope toward a nest of broken rock. Screaming lead followed him, but the range was too long for accurate shooting. He reached the cover of the boulders, flung himself down among them and squirmed around, hunting the most likely position for defense. He picked a spot where five huge chunks of sand-stone formed a rude circular barricade. Bellying down in their midst, he levered a shell into the breach of the Winchester and awaited his unseen attackers' next move. If, and he considered ruefully, it was a long "if," he could hold them off until nightfall there was a slim chance he might be able

Flattened against the ground, he fell to considering his dilemma. Either Vinegar's posse had in some way headed him off or Brazos, fearing the showdown when he returned, had gathered some of his henchmen and set a trap. Either way, he stood as much chance of leaving the defile alive as a

to make a break. But nightfall was a long way ahead.

steer had of horning out of a slaughterhouse.

The sun began to climb. Deflected by the confining walls, its heat beat down, licking the rocks with a fiery tongue. The cornered rider, eyes slitted against the sun glare, licked his salty, dust-encrusted lips. He would have given his right arm

for the bottle he had dropped in the alley, back in Buffalo Fork.

After the first sharp fusilade that had greeted his break for the rocks, gunfire petered out, but he had no illusions as to the reason for the respite. He knew that his assailants were worming like rattlesnakes through the clutter of rocks, steal-

thily tightening the cordon around him.

Suddenly the lash of gunfire again filled the defile with a crashing clamor. Body jammed against the base of a boulder, peering through a narrow gap, the fugitive held his fire, seeking to locate the positions of his attackers. But nothing moved. The defile might have been empty except for an occasional smudge of powder smoke drifting over the gray spread of sundered rock. It was evident that the marksmen were plunking lead into the nest of rock blindly, either with the hope of winging him with a ricochet, or stirring him into action and thus revealing his position.

Time dragged in a heat-ridden monotony of waiting. Satisfied that he was secure until the ring of stalking men crept close, Tucson lay sweltering and half-drowsing. A shot from high on the slope above jerked him into wakefulness. The slug slapped into the rock not a foot above his head and screeched off at a tangent. Body pressed low, he wormed around to meet this new threat. Another shot from the same direction flattened against the boulder against which he pressed. Chips of rock sprayed his face. This hornet was dangerous, he thought tautly, a little lower and either of those bullets would have taken him. Eyes squinting, he searched the terrain above for sign of his assailant.

He focused a faint cloud of powdersmoke floating lazily from the base of a rock fang that protruded like a jagged tooth. Aligning his Winchester, he waited, attention riveted to the spot. . . . a smashing blow almost wrenched the rifle out of his grasp. The shell in the breach exploded and lead whined skyward. The butt slammed against his head with

paralyzing force. Half-stunned, head ringing from the blow, he rolled sideways. Bewildered, he sought the cause of his sudden mishap. A glance at the Winchester enlightened him. A bullet had struck the barrel at an angle, plowed down its length, splintering the stock, carrying away the trigger guard and smashing the trigger. By a miracle, the scourging lead had been deflected and had missed him. Somberly, he eyed the wrecked rifle. Now he was practically defenseless, while relentless killers stalked him from the slopes around. His sixgun was useless except for short range. His assailants could keep their distance and riddle him at leisure. Vanished was the forlorn hope of holding them at bay until nightfall. He would be lucky to survive an hour.

He thrust aside the useless rifle, crawled between two boulders and drew his Colt .45. All he could do now was await the end.

A shadow drifted over him. He squinted upward. Two black buzzards were circling on sluggish wings. The sun was directly overhead now, its torrid rays searing like branding irons. Strangely, his thoughts were not of death, but of water—cold, clear water. His tongue was thick and leathery and seemed to fill his cindery mouth.

Again, the raw spang of Winchesters built up to a rapid drumfire. This, reflected the cornered man, was the payoff. They thought him dead, but were raking his refuge before they came in. A bullet tore at a boot heel, almost rolled him over. Debris dribbled down as bullets chipped the sandstone. Tucson's grip tightened on the butt of his sixgun as he braced for a flaming finish.

Omens of death, the buzzards hovered.

#### XVI

ABRUPTLY, GUNFIRE cut off. Perplexed, Tucson wormed forward until he could scan the slope below. To his amazement he saw four or five riders, scattered amid the boulders, racing downhill like startled jackrabbits. Quickly, the cause of their panic became plain. A file of horsemen was threading up the defile. At a glance, Tucson recognized the deputy's spare figure, behind him Harper's wiry form. Others twisted through the boulders in their rear. The posse! Thought of escape leapt into his mind. He glanced quickly toward his pony below, then remembered that his Winchester was smashed, his late assailants blocked the up trail, and the posse effectively bottled the defile in the other direction.

There just was no place he could go, he thought dejectedly and made his way down the slope. Vinegar rode up just as he reached the roan.

"Stretch!" rasped the lawman.

Tucson's hands tiredly went shoulder high. Vinegar stepped down, unbuckled his prisoner's gunbelt and looped it across his own saddlehorn. "What's the ruckus?" he demanded.

The prisoner's lips framed words, but his thickened tongue and parched throat produced no more than a croak. The Lazy J bunch surrounded him now. Harper peeled out of leather, extended his canteen. Tucson grabbed it eagerly. The moisture loosened up his throat. Hoarsely, he told of the ambush.

"Most saved the law a chore," commented Vinegar acridly.

A thought struck him, "Who d'ye figure the hombres were who corralled you?"

"Brick's gang!"

"You salivated Brick maybe?"

"I'm no bushwhacker!"

"The record says different," returned the deputy brittlely.

"The sign don't," put in Harper. "Lamp his hoss, you old gopher. Gloomy claimed the killer's pony had a crooked heel."

"There's still three killings chalked up against the hombre,"

bit back Vinegar. "Let's ride!"

Jogging through the arid waste beside the deputy, the posse stringing behind, Tucson considered the attack. He was willing to stake his saddle that Brazos was behind it. That being so, it furnished further proof of the burly renegade's guilt. Not that it mattered a damn now, he thought wearily. With Brick gone, there would be no more rescue attempts. Brazos was boss now and the big rustler would be only too happy if he swung.

For a second time he breathed the stale stench of the adobe lockup and heard Vinegar snap the lock on the creaking door.

Day died. Awkwardly, wrists manacled, the prisoner shook the last crumbs of tobacco out of his sack and built a flabby cigarette. Hunkered against the wall of the darkened cell, he listened to the slow pacing of the guard outside and considered the future. That future, he reflected somberly, was likely to be brief. He was wanted for three killings and he'd hang for any one of them. Then he thought of Brazos, the slovenly, shifty-eyed two-gun man, plainly guilty of Brick's murder, and maybe Jensen's, escaping scot-free. His gray eyes hardened and his fists clenched in impotent anger. Irked by frustration, he came to his feet and paced the darkened lock-up, tripped over an obstacle and almost fell headlong. Bending, he fingered and discovered he had stumbled on a soggy mattress, tossed into the jail some time and forgotten. The rotting cover ripped beneath his fingers; he could feel the stuffing spilling out, like dry dust. An idea sparked in his mind. It was a crazy notion, he reflected, but what had he to lose, his life was forfeit, anyway.

With his shackled hands, he dragged the mattress over to

the wall opposite the door. Kneeling, he struck a match and touched it to a torn edge of the cover. The material flared up, then the flame died and went out, but the dusty stuffing began to smolder, emitting heavy smoke that gripped his throat and set him coughing. He blundered over to the door, hammered it with the steel 'cuffs, gasping and yelling "Fire!"

The smoke was fast filling the adobe. Choking and coughing, he continued to hammer desperately. Very soon, he knew, he'd suffocate. Swaying, gasping for breath, his senses reeling,

he heard the rattle of a key in the padlock outside.

Smoke poured out as the door swung back. Dimly, he glimpsed the outline of the guard, standing on the threshold, head thrust forward, peering. Raising his manacled hands, he brought the 'cuffs down with what little strength he had left upon the back of the guard's head, collapsed upon the fellow's body as the man went down.

Lying prone, he drew deep breaths of the sweet night air into his heaving lungs, struggled to his feet. The guard lay slack, face downward.

He dropped on his knees, rolled the limp body over. The man's heart was beating strongly. Stunned, decided the prisoner, and began searching the other's pockets for a handcuff key.

There was none!

Baffled, the prisoner finally came erect, eying his shackled hands ruefully. Then he began to leg briskly toward the law shack.

His boots drummed hollow on the plankwalk as he moved down the darkened, deserted length of Main Street. Reaching the law shack, he knuckled the door gently, stepped aside and raised his manacled hands high, ready to strike again. But his knock brought no response. At a venture, he turned the knob. The door opened.

Tense as a cornered cougar, he slid inside. Peering around

in the faint light, he glimpsed the outline of a form sprawled on the bunk. The stench of whisky was heavy on the air. As he crept close to the bunk, he kicked over a bottle set on the floor. It fell with a clatter that sounded as loud as a thunderclap. But the form on the bed never stirred. Vinegar Carney was dead to the world-drunk.

Nerves tight as fiddle strings, Tucson almost whooped from sheer relief. In no haste, he began to search for a handcuff key.

The hills were cloaked in quivering heat waves and the rattlesnakes sought the deepest crevices when Tucson rode into the rustlers' hideaway. At his appearance, the listlessness of lounging renegades dropped away, replaced by taut expectancy. But the blocky rider forgot them as he focused a slim rider in checked shirt and corduroys with flaming red hair, busy at the cooking fire. Men began to bunch around him. Only Brazos and four others remained apart, draped in bleak silence.

"Wal," demanded Pecos, "you get the lowdown?"

"Yes!" replied Tucson. He raised his voice, "Hey, Brazos, I got the straight on Brick's killing. Ain't you interested?"

"Not in your windies!" yelled the burly rustler.

Tucson smiled thinly, then told of Gloomy finding the body, the sign that pointed to Brazos as the killer, the trap into which he had ridden returning the previous day.

No one spoke when he was through, but the heads of the half dozen men around him slewed toward Brazos and his

party, and there was cold condemnation in their eyes.

Pecos broke a taut silence, his voice bitter, "So that was why the big buffalo rode out with his boys yesterday! Claimed they was raiding the Lazy J."

Boots scraped on rock as the rustlers spread, half-circling Brazos' party. Marge stood by the fire, staring at the burly renegade with incredulous eyes.

Tucson's voice raised, "Hold your horses, gents! This is strictly between me and Brazos."

The four renegades bunched with Brazos began to ease

away, leaving him standing alone.

"Brazos, you yellow killer, go for your gun," said Tucson

softly. As he spoke, his left hand dabbed down.

The renegade's right-hand gun had already cleared leather. Too hastily, it thundered in hip-low aim, and the bullet gouged the rock at Tucson's feet. Brazos thumbed the hammer again, but Tucson's forty-five was spitting, as fast as a snake strikes. The first slug took Brazos in his hairy chest. He staggered backward, rocking from the impact. Another pitiless slug smashed his gun arm, and a third whipped clean through his bare throat. He crashed down in a flurry of dust. Every eye focused the sprawled form. For a brief space his limbs jerked convulsively, then slackened in death.

Pecos' voice broke the tension, "Gawd! That was fast!"

The dead man's four cohorts walked silently toward their ponies. The remainder of the gang watched as they saddled up, mounted and rode away.

Marge approached Tucson. "Why would he . . . kill Brick?" she asked, voice shaken. "They were friends; they

fought side by side."

"Why does a rattler strike?" returned the blocky rider grimly. "I guess Brazos craved to rod the gang and Brick stood in his way."

"It was a sad day," she said somberly, "that brought the

McCarthys to Arizona."

"How come you folks headed west?" he inquired curiously.

"Years back dad's half-brother was crippled in a gun fight. He came to Buffalo Valley. When ma died, dad and Brick followed. I came later."

"And the McCarthys declared war on the Lazy J!"

"Jake Jensen murdered dad!"

"For grabbing Lazy J range!"

"Free Covernment range!"

"You forgot King Colt put in a prior claim," he returned dryly.

The remnant of the gang had bunched, Pecos in their midst. Now the old renegade broke away and approached the pair. "We done elected you leader, Tucson," he announced.

The blocky rider thought fast. He was a fugitive, shadowed by a noose. Whatever future he had would be spent eluding the law. How better could he avoid arrest than by tying in with Brick's old bunch?

"Suits me!" he told Pecos. He rasped his chin, considering, "Maybe I should check with Diamond and see just where we stand."

"Brick used to ride in nights," supplied the girl, "tie his pony back of The Ace and rap the back door, three times."

Once again Tucson crossed the ford by night and followed the wagon road into Buffalo Fork. As his pony jogged along, his thoughts dwelt on Jake Jensen's killing. Mentally, he reviewed the meager clues-Diamond's derringer, Tom Rogers' Protective Association badge. The killer was probably in town that night, to know that Jensen would cross the ford, homeward bound. And it must have been someone who'd had a chance to acquire both gun and badge and use them to throw suspicion first upon Diamond, then upon himself. Brazos appeared to be a logical suspect, but somehow the cogitating rider wasn't convinced of his guilt. The beefy renegade hadn't been in The Ace the night Diamond was beaten up and he had nothing tangible to gain from the cowman's death. No, mused Tucson, he'd have to rule Brazos out. Then, as though the sun had burst through black clouds, the possible identity of the killer leapt into his mind. The longer he pondered, the more convinced he became. But, he thought wryly, he had no proof-nothing but a hunch.

The windows of Diamond's living quarters were darkened

when Tucson dismounted behind the saloon. He knuckled the rear door, three times. He heard the complaint of a withdrawn bolt, the door inched open and the saloon man stood regarding him with unfriendly eyes.

"I took over the gang," explained Tucson shortly, "and I figure we should powwow."

"Where's Brazos?"

"Dead!"

"Not . . . you?"

"Yep, me!" Tucson smiled coldly. "I gave him three pills, the kind that don't digest."

"Well, what do you want with me?"

"You and Brick worked in cahoots. Maybe we should get together."

"You've got the wrong idea, mister," asserted Diamond forcefully. "Vamoose, before I call the deputy, and collect a thousand-dollar bounty."

Before he could close the door, Tucson's boot blocked it. "Open up!" the blocky rider directed curtly, "Or I'm liable to talk with lead."

Reluctantly, the chubby-faced Diamond gave way and Tucson followed him into the darkened room. He heard the tinkle of glass as the saloon man lifted the funnel off a lamp. A match scratched and as the yellow light bloomed, Tucson's glance lit upon a yellow telegraph form lying on the desk beside him. The word "Jensen" caught his eye. Diamond's back was toward him. He grabbed the flimsy and crushed it into a pants pocket.

The saloon man turned. "Now tell me," he demanded, in outraged tones, "why you, an admitted killer, dare to break into the home of an honest man and make senseless accusations. What Brick did is none of my business, or your

business."

Tucson smiled. "You're lying, Diamond! You know it; I know it. Brick rustled Lazy J stock, you sold it. You want

'out'-hunky-dory. So long!" With a mocking grin, he backed to the door.

Outside of town again, he checked the roan and pulled the crumpled telegram from his pocket. By the light of a match he read:

DORSEY, THE ACE SALOON BUFFALO FORK, ARIZONA T.

CONRAD JENSEN LEAVING FOR BUFFALO FORK.
AM INSTIGATING LEGAL PROCEEDINGS TO SUBSTANTIATE HIS CLAIM TO JENSEN ESTATE AS
SOLE SON AND HEIR. A MISS MAUD ROBERTSON,
DAUGHTER OF DECEDENT'S SISTER, ARRIVED
FROM BOSTON AND ALSO FILED CLAIM. SHE
DOUBTS CONRAD'S BONA FIDES AND IS FOLLOWING TO INTERROGATE HIM.

THORNTON THATCHER ATTORNEY, JENSEN ESTATE.

Tucson stared at the yellow form, forehead furrowed. Why would Jake Jensen's lawyer wire Diamond, a bitter enemy of the cowman, advising about claimants to the estate? And what was this malarky about a missing son being found? The whole thing just didn't make good sense.

#### XVII

THE USUAL reception committee greeted #745 when it rolled into Buffalo Fork—a row of poker-faced punchers hunkered like setting crows in the brief shade of the depot wall. Their eyes brightened perceptibly when a prim young lady alighted from the day coach. Her neat dark dress buttoned high in the neck, its flared sleeves gathered tightly at the wrists. A

sweeping skirt barely exposed the toes of high button shoes and a poke bonnet crowned her braided hair, the color of ripe wheat.

She stood on the track beside the coach, looking around with frank curiosity, unconcerned by the punchers' steady scrutiny. There was a directness in the glance of her cool gray eyes and a decisiveness about the set of her lips that plainly advertised she would brook no nonsense. Her jaw, with its tendency to squareness, was undoubtedly that of a Jensen. The young ladies who attended a select seminary in Boston knew her as Miss Maud Robertson, a strict disciplinarian and one with whom it was definitely not wise to trifle.

Carpetbag in one hand, duster draped over the other arm, she eyed a network of odorous cattle pens to her left, the dumpy little wooden depot ahead, blue-shadowed mountains crowding the horizon. She was about to address the silent, staring punchers when a small, plump man, impeccably dressed in black, a diamond sparkling in his cravat, wearing a stiff-brimmed Stetson that seemed oddly out of place, hastened around the depot. Round, chubby features wreathed in a smile, he hurried in the girl's direction.

"Miss Robertson, I believel" he exclaimed, bustling up with hand outstretched. "The moniker's Dorsey, Diamond

Dorsey. Welcome to Buffalo Fork!"

But Miss Robertson was in no hurry to grasp the outstretched hand. She eyed the little gambler quizzically, as though he were a new pupil. "And just who are you, Mr.

Dorsey?"

He chuckled, unabashed, and dropped his arm. "Of course, you wouldn't know. Old friend of Jake Jensen. We were like that." He held up a pudgy hand, two fingers close together. "Jake's lawyer sent word. Said nothing was too good for the old man's niece. I got a rig outside the depot. I'll run you down to the hotel."

Miss Robertson smiled; the pupil had earned the encour-

agement. "That is very kind of you." Her nostrils twitched.

"Anything to get away from those cattle pens."

Diamond handed her into the rented buggy, picked up the reins and whirled the few hundred yards to the Buffalo Hotel, Rooms \$1—a two-story clapboard building that bulked on Main Street like a misplaced packing case. Packing her carpet bag, he waited patiently while she signed the dogeared register, then began scanning former registrations with careful deliberation.

"I see you have a Mr. Conrad Jensen staying here," she commented, eying the clerk.

"Yes, ma'am, registered yesterday."

"Could I see him?"

"Wal, ma'am, right now he's liquidating . . . er . . . he's over at The Ace."

"A saloon!" she smiled. "Well, send me word immediately he returns."

"Sure will, ma'am, that will be one-"

"It's all taken care of," cut in Diamond expansively, and picked up the room key.

"I prefer to pay my own hotel bill, Mr. Dorsey," she re-

turned firmly, and opened her purse.

They mounted the stairs. Diamond opened the door and handed her the carpetbag. "May I step in . . . for one moment?" he smiled. "Strictly business!"

With a quick glance, the girl nodded.

The saloon man motioned her to a chair and plunked on the bed. "It's like this, ma'am," he began. "Jake left no will but I know he'd want to do the right thing. Jake's boy turned up, so he gets the jackp—the ranch. You get nothing."

"My mother," corrected the girl, "is the claimant. Mr.

Jensen was her brother. Unfortunately, she is bedridden."

"Wal," smiled Diamond, "I figure you got something coming. What say I stand your train fare both ways and sweeten the pot with a hundred dollars."

"Why?" she queried, with obvious surprise. "I am a complete stranger. You are under no obligation."

Diamond waved his unlit cigar. "Heck, that's the way

I am!"

Blandly, he met the scrutiny of two remarkably direct gray eyes. "Perhaps," she returned thoughtfully, "I should

have a talk with Mr. Conrad Jensen first."

Before Diamond could decide whether he should raise the ante or trust the alleged heir to bluff it through, there was a sharp rap on the door. When the girl opened it, a thickset young fellow in puncher's garb stood on the threshold. His close-cut hair was blond, above hard, square features. A gun was thonged down to his right leg.

"You craved to see me, ma'am?" he inquired, with a quick

grin that belied the bleakness in his eyes.

Miss Robertson recoiled slightly at the aroma of whisky.

"Indeed I do!" she assured him. "Please come in!"

"This is Miss Maud Robertson," cut in the saloon man, slowly and distinctly, as the rider entered. "She is the daughter of your late father's surviving sister, who lives in Boston."

"You remind me of my kindergarten teacher," said Miss Robertson brightly. Diamond's eyes narrowed, the "heir" eyed her guardedly.

"Glad to make your acquaintance," he replied, a taut

alertness enveloping his features. "Just call me Flash."

"Flash?"

He grinned and touched the thonged-down gun. "It fits!" Jerking the makin's from a shirt pocket, he dropped on the bed beside Diamond and became absorbed in building a smoke.

The girl sat stiffly in the straightback chair, eying his rugged features. He touched a match to the smoke and sat puffing, as watchful as a lobo on a strange trail.

"We all thought you dead . . . years back," observed the girl.

"You ain't the first!" There was grim amusement in Flash's

hard eyes.

She smiled back. "You probably remember when mother and I came to visit uncle. You must have been about five years old; I was four. Uncle met the stage with a buckboard—I believe that is the term. I was bumped out and I broke my leg."

"Sure do, ma'am," Flash assured her imperturbably. "The

sawbones rode out from Cottonwood."

"And we hurried back east because the milk upset our stomachs."

Flash chuckled, "Ten thousand cows and it still comes in cans."

They were all smiling now, but Diamond stiffened when the girl spoke again, "I see you carry that heavy gun on your right side. Do you write with your right hand, too?"

"Sure, but a gun makes my meaning plainer," returned Flash, with tolerant amusement. "Why wouldn't I use my

right paw?"

"Because, as a boy," she explained sweetly, "you were left-

handed, like all the Jensens."

"Heck, ma'am," the rugged rider was in no wise nonplussed, "that was afore I busted my left wing. A cayouse threw me, down on the Pecos."

Miss Robertson came to her feet, beaming. "Well, I won't detain you longer . . . Flash. It's so nice meeting you again, after all these years. Our talk was really . . . illuminating."

Now just what did she mean by that, wondered Diamond, as the "heir" jingled out of the room. He was not long in doubt. No sooner had the door closed, when the girl swung toward him. "That man is an imposter!" she announced flatly.

"Exactly what do you mean, Miss Robertson?" he asked,

blandly incredulous.

"Exactly what I say-he's not Conrad Jensen."

"But the attorney for the estate investigated his claim thoroughly," protested Diamond, masking his consternation. "And didn't he give proof that he lived on the ranch years back—your mother's visit, your broken leg?"

"He walked right into my trap," she returned calmly. "Neither mother nor I have ever traveled west of Chicago. I certainly have never broken a limb. He probably lied about

his arm."

"You must be mistaken!" insisted the saloon man, grimly

visualizing calamity.

"I am not!" she declared. "I shall telegraph the sheriff of the county immediately. I had an instinctive suspicion of that lawyer, Thornton Thatcher. Before long, they will both be in jail, where they belong." Her small chin was stubborn.

"Miss Robertson," Diamond spoke with the earnestness of desperation. "Your accusation shocks me. Possibly, Mr. Thatcher was deceived, as we all may have been. Actually, however, we have no more than your unsupported allegation that Flash is not Jake's son. Before we act, we need proof."

"Haven't I given proof?"

"Undoubtedly!" he agreed patiently. "But our case must stand up in court."

"What do you suggest?" she inquired.

The saloon man frantically fished in his mind for an excuse that would postpone the showdown. "Give me just one day, twenty-four hours," he begged. "Then I promise to present a satisfactory solution."

"If you wish," she agreed, with no enthusiasm.

Pausing as he walked for the corridor, Diamond opened the door of Flash's room. The "heir" was stretched full length on the bed.

"Rear door of the saloon, pronto!" snapped the gambler, promptly closed the door and moved on.

Ten minutes later three men gathered in Diamond's quarters. Flash sprawled in a rocker, chewing a quirley; Ace Stoddart sat straight-backed, flat features expressionless; Diamond moved restlessly around the room, chewing an unlit cigar.

"What's itching you?" demanded Flash. "You're as techy

as a tomeat."

"We're in a tight," returned the saloon man tersely. "The gal's got your number; she's wiring the sheriff, tomorrow."

"Wal," the "heir's" tone was philosophical, "It was a good

try!"

Stoddart sat still as a graven image, his guarded eyes flicking from one to the other. "Can she be bought?" he put in.

"Not out of a hundred-thousand dollar ranch."

"Would she scare?"

"There's too much of Jake in her make-up."

"Then I guess we're euchred."

"Like hell we are!" Diamond's feelings burst through the mask of his features with a snarl. "You ain't kidding yourself that I'd let that dumb skirt trump the sweetest hand I ever held. If she squawks, I go to the pen. Thatcher will ace out of it; he's got pull. Flash will hightail and so, I guess, will you, Ace. That leaves me—the fall guy."

"What's the answer?" inquired Stoddart, with unmoved

features.

"There's only one answer."

A sudden chill seemed to have fallen upon the room. Stoddart and Flash seemed to freeze wordlessly as the implication of Diamond's words sank home.

Flash broke a taut silence, "I don't stomach that kind of

killing."

"You don't have no choice," bit back Diamond. "I go to the pen, you go. You want to plait hair bridles, or collect thirty thousand cartwheels?"

Flash eyed him thoughtfully, but made no reply.

"You got a plan?" inquired Stoddart, reaching for a cigar.

"It's taking shape," said Diamond. He eyed the gunman, fingering his smooth chin, "The roof of this saloon is on a dead level with her hotel window. You couldn't miss!"

#### XVIII

THE FLATS WERE flecked with shadow as Tucson's pony jogged steadily westward, after his brief talk with Diamond. The moon floated with serene majesty through star-sprinkled heavens. Quiet draped the plain like a benediction, but the rider had no thought for the beauty of the night; he couldn't banish the telegram from mind. Finally, he checked the roan, turned, and hit back toward Buffalo Fork at a canter.

Gloomy, stretched on a hay pile in the livery, came awake when light blossomed down the barn. He sat up, fingering a gun beneath his soogans, when a form approached, its elongated shadow dancing over the stalls, stable lamp swinging from one hand.

"Jehosophat!" he groaned, as he recognized the blocky figure. "You in town again! You're sure off your mental reservation."

"Lamp that!" returned Tucson shortly, and thrust the telegram at the lanky cowpoke.

Gloomy perused the creased flimsy. "Wal," he commented, "what am I supposed to do, celebrate?"

"Nope. Save that gal's life!"

"You get too much sun?" inquired the beanpole, eying Tucson with real concern.

"Quit dribbling and listen," snapped the chunky rider. "Why would Jensen's lawyer wire Diamond about the Lazy J heir? And why warn that slicker another claimant popped up?

There's only one answer; they're working in cahoots. Conrad Jensen's a ringer."

"How would you know?" inquired Goomy doubtfully.

"Hell, it's common knowledge Jensen's kid died in Mexico years back. Diamond's set to grab The Lazy J."

"So?"

"What's his move when his gal horns in and spills the beans?"

"I wouldn't know; I never was in Diamond's confidence," replied Gloomy mournfully.

"Dump her!" said Tucson shortly.

"You sure been chewing loco weed," the beanpole's voice

was weary. "He'll pay her off."

"And if she's stubborn?" persisted Tucson. "Then he's got no choice—it's either put out her light or go to the pen. And if you figure Diamond wouldn't kill to sidestep Yuma, you're crazy."

"It's none of our doggoned business," protested Gloomy.

"I'm making it mine," came back the blocky rider. "Keep cases on this female. Come nightfall, I'll be around."

"Come nightfall I'll likely sprout wings, bucking Diamond,"

returned the beanpole moodily.

"If you're born to hang you sure won't check out no other way," Tucson assured him. "Perk up! And meet me behind The Ace, around midnight."

With no enthusiasm, Gloomy watched #745 arrive, saw the primly dressed girl leave with Diamond, eyed the plump gambler hurrying back to his saloon. When he glimpsed the tough young gunman the town knew as The Lazy J heir, slide down the alley and enter the saloon man's living quarters, interest awakened. It seemed the two were working in cahoots.

Maybe Tucson was right, he mused. If so, the girl was in real danger. The jackpot justified a killing. But he shrank

from bracing a strange woman and warning her. Likely, he thought, she'd figure him loco and yell bloody murder. Sight of Dan Harper, riding down street, suggested a solution. Eagerly, he stepped off the plankwalk and hailed the Lazy J foreman.

Window wide open in a vain attempt to dissipate the stale odor that permeated the sun-warped Buffalo Hotel, Maud Robertson sat in her room, scribbling a letter to her mother. Jingling spurs stopped outside her door. The panel was sharply knuckled.

"Who is it?" she cried.

In answer the knob turned and a wiry rider, with weathered features, stepped in. Behind him towered a lanky individual, with long, cavernous features and eyes as sad as a bloodhound's.

Too astonished to speak, she sat staring. The wiry rider focused her with pale eyes. When he spoke his voice held a surprising mildness, "You Miss Robertson?"

She nodded.

"My moniker's Harper, foreman of The Lazy J. This here's Gloomy." He bumped down on the bed and jerked out the makin's.

Perplexed, the girl glanced from one to the other. "Just

why are you here?" she wanted to know.

"We figure, ma'am," offered Gloomy, his long form jackknifing as he hunkered against the closed door, "that you're due to shake hands with St. Peter."

"Take the big jump," explained Harper shortly.

"What on earth are you talking about?" she exclaimed.

Gloomy sighed, "A gent's figuring to curl you up-plant you-but we've got different ideas."

"You mean I'm liable to be killed?" She laughed. "I suppose

this is a crude sample of western humor."

"Ma'am," said Harper, "you've never been closer to King-

dom Come. Chew on this: Diamond Dorsey, the two-bit tinhorn who brought you here, got a ringer who claims he's heir to Jake Jensen. You jumped in and spilled the beans. Diamond's just naturally got to put you out of business, or lose the jackpot."

"You mean that funny little man, Mr. Dorsey, would kill me?" The girl was plainly incredulous. "Why, he was absolutely astounded when I told him this Flash person was a faker. He's considering ways and means to expose the man."

"Right now, I gamble," came back Harper, "Diamond's

figuring ways and means of planting you-permanent."

"The idea is ridiculous!" The girl rose, touched a match to the lamp bracketed on the wall. Gloomy uncoiled like a steel spring and launched himself at her legs as orange light stabbed the gloom from a rooftop across street. She went down in a tangled flurry of skirts. A slug droned through the open window, perforated a panel of the door. The sharp spang of a Winchester followed.

Harper jumped and jerked down the shade.

"Sure beg your pardon, ma'am," mumbled Gloomy, picking himself off the floor. He lifted the disheveled girl to her feet. Startled and breathless, she stood staring at the splintered door panel.

"Someone . . . shot . . . at me!" she gasped numbly and sank onto the chair, bewilderment reflected in her eyes.

"It's not possible; it would be murder!"

"On the Border they'd beef you for your boots," growled Harper. "Diamond is playing for a hundred-thousand dollar jackpot."

"But the law!"

"Vinegar's the law and he's out of town."

The evening dragged on, but nothing further disturbed the quiet of darkened Main Street. Gloomy and Harper booked a room beside the girl's and finally left, with strict orders that she keep away from the window, prop the back of her chair

under the door knob and yell if anything or anyone disturbed her.

Moonlight silvered the saloon when Tucson drifted up and tied his pony behind the outhouse. A lanky form rose from amid stacks of empty cases and ghosted to his side.

"How's the gal?" inquired the chunky rider.

"Spry as a yearling when last seen," reported the beanpole, "and born lucky. Some gent almost tagged her from across street around sundown."

Tucson swore softly. "So I figured right! Diamond will try again. You lamped him around?"

"He slid out, just afore you rode up, packed two cans."

"Cans?"

"Coal oil cans they looked like."

Sudden apprehension chilled Tucson. He thought of the old Buffalo, wood throughout, its timbers tinder dry. "Let's

get over to the hotel, pronto," he said sharply.

They eased down the alley beside the saloon and crossed the street, heading for a wooden stairway that slanted down the side of the hotel. The stairway, Tucson knew, was designed as a fire escape and connected with a door at the end of the corridor upon which the second floor rooms opened.

Hand on the rail of the stairway, Gloomy checked, sniffed. Tucson smelled it, too, the odor of coal oil. He bent, eying the wooden treads. They were splotched with wet stains as though someone had carelessly sloshed water over them. But it was not water.

Its meaning leaped into both their minds at the same moment. Throwing caution aside, they raced up the stairway, burst into the narrow corridor and charged down it, banging on doorways and yelling "Fire!"

A motley of guests began to spill out. Half asleep, buttoning pants and slipping on shirts, they milled around in con-

fusion.

"Light a shuck!" yelled Tucson, "The joint's liable to go up in smoke."

There was a rush to the carpeted stairway that led down to the lobby. Then, like a herd of stampeding cattle, the halfdressed men came scuttling back, panic in their eyes. Smoke billowed thick behind them.

Tucson charged for the door at the end of the corridor, elbowing through milling guests. When he threw it open he quickly recoiled. The stairway that angled to the ground was well alight, tongues of flame leaping up the oil-soaked treads. In ten minutes he knew the entire sun-dried structure would be a raging furnace.

#### XIX

Tucson spun around and eyed the narrow corridor. It was rapidly filling with smoke. Men choused aimlessly around, coughing and cursing. A low, ever-mounting roar, as the flames greedily devoured the sun-warped clapboards, was plain. Through drifting smoke he glimpsed Gloomy and Harper riding close herd on the girl.

At a thought, he yelled to them and flung open the door of the nearest room that fronted Main Street. Hastening across the frayed carpet, he glanced out through the window. The wooden canopy that projected from the hotel front, shading the plankwalk, was dimly visible, stretching away on either side.

Gloomy and Harper, the girl between them, came hurriedly through the door, smoke swirling with them.

Tucson whirled, gesturing toward the window. "There's our out," he barked. "The canopy's not six feet below, from there it's an easy drop to the street. I'll take the gal. You jaspers start the bunch outside moving—there's plenty windows."

Without further preamble, he opened the window, grabbed the white-faced girl, lifted her and thrust her, feet first, outside. The muscles in his forearms knotted as he lowered her to arm's length, let her drop. She went down in a heap.

When he dropped beside her, she was on her feet.

The wooden canopy creaked ominously as he steered her across it. When they reached the fringe, he bellied over the edge, clutched it with both hands and lowered himself.

"Rattle your hocks!" he yelled from the darkness below,

"I'll catch you!"

Tight-lipped, the girl followed suit. Breathing hard, she stood beside him.

"You all right?" he inquired.

Maud Robertson wrapt her gown tighter and brushed a disorder of hair off her face. "Mother," she said, with slow wonderment, "will never, never believe this."

"Stick around!" directed the chunky rider crisply, "and latch on to Gloomy. I've got urgent business." With that, he

hurried away.

On the far-side of the street he swung around to eye the doomed hotel. Both ends were blazing fiercely, with a sullen roar. Sheets of flame wavered skyward and sparks showered. Along its front, the forms of men were plain, scrambling through windows and dropping down onto the canopy, some hurling bags and suitcases before them. A red glow, rising and falling, lit Main Street, through which half-clad men and hastily dressed women could be seen gathered in knots, watching the conflagration in awed silence. Scurrying like ants and toting buckets, other men were frantically wetting down the walls and roofs of adjacent buildings.

Diamond Dorsey, thought the rider savagely, hadn't hesitated to doom a score of men and a girl to flaming death in order to rake in a hundred-thousand dollar jackpot. The payoff was overdue. Speeding to a run, he darted down the

alley beside the saloon.

The door to Diamond's living quarters in the rear of The Ace was bolted, but light glowed behind drawn window shades. Tucson grabbed a wooden case of empty bottles from a nearby stack and hurled it through the nearest window, plunging through the gap in its wake.

As he plummeted into the room, sprawling full length onto soft carpet, Diamond whirled, standing in front of his open

safe.

Quick as a cat, the chunky rider regained his feet. The saloon man's cherubic smile was gone, succeeded by a tight mask of desperation.

"You did a slapbang job on the hotel," gritted Tucson,

"you yellow-gutted crook."

In reply, Diamond's right hand dabbed inside his coat, came out grasping a derringer.

Both fired at the same instant.

Tucson heard the whine of a slug; Diamond dropped the smoking derringer and doubled up, plump hands clutching his belly.

Tucson stood watching as the saloon man dropped on his

face, writhed on the carpet, groaning with agony.

The rider turned as Dan Harper clambered through the shattered window.

"So you tagged the skunk!" Harper eyed the writhing form with cold disgust. "Gloomy gave me the lowdown." He sniffed. "Hell, he soaked himself good spreading that coal oil. I've a mind to touch a match to the rattlesnake."

He dipped into a pants pocket and came out with a block of stinkers. Tucson grabbed his arm. "Let's go!" he urged. "He'll die, and die hard, with a slug in his guts."

Outside, Harper headed for the outhouse. "See you on

Main Street!" he threw over a shoulder.

Tucson walked slowly up the alley and stood on the plankwalk outside The Ace, bathed in a garish glare as the flames across street reached higher and higher. The entire structure

was ablaze now, an inferno of crashing timbers and roaring flames. Gnome-like in the flickering light, files of men were passing water buckets in futile efforts to check the blaze. They might just as well have spit at a redhot stove, reflected the rider.

Gloomy drifted up, with the girl.

"What an awful sight," she said, voice hushed, as she eyed the flaming hotel.

"Compliments of Diamond Dorsey," put in Gloomy. "Could

be Diamond figured it was the fourth of July."

"I just can't believe it," she protested. "That sweet little man!"

"Sweet as strychnine!" growled Tucson.

Heat blasted across street and sparks swirled as the roof of the Buffalo crashed down. The fire fighters scattered, while the three standing on the plankwalk backed into the alley behind them.

"Lamped the heir around?" inquired Tucson.

"Sure did," chuckled Gloomy. "He was heading out of town like the heel flies was after him, with that Stoddart gent a close second."

Dan Harper walked briskly up the alley, spur chains jingling, and joined them. He slapped at a spark. "You folks rooted?" he inquired. "It's hotter than hell's hind acre around here."

In a bunch, they moved up street.

An outburst of excited shouting from behind brought them to a halt. Townsfolk suddenly began to drain down street.

"What's fazing 'em now?" demanded Tucson.

"The Ace is afire," supplied Harper, poker-faced.

"You don't act surprised," snapped the chunky rider.

"Should I be?" came back the foreman. "I ducked back to take a gander at Diamond's safe. Must have dropped a match, careless-like."

"You doggoned Apache!" growled Tucson.

The tough Lazy J foreman grinned. "No gent makes a stab at roasting me alive and gets away with it. And you'd never guess what I found." He pulled out a folded sheet, opened it up and handed it to Tucson. By the light of the flames, the chunky rider read aloud:

"It is mutually agreed that in the matter of supplying an heir for The Lazy J, said ranch shall be sold as soon as feasible and proceeds divided as follows:

One-third—Diamond Dorsey
One-third—Ace Stoddart
One-third—Selected heir.

Any money paid to Thornton Thatcher or other persons to ease the deal along shall be deducted from said proceeds.

> (Signed) Diamond Dorsey Ace Stoddart."

"I guess that cinches it," said Tucson, passing the sheet back.

"Reckon the sheriff will agree there's no room for argument," commented Harper.

"That means the ranch will go to mother!" exclaimed the

girl.

"Wal, ma'am," returned Harper, amusement in his pale eyes, "you never know when another heir will pop up."

"There is no other legitimate heir!" she retorted decisively.

"When you folks are through whittle-whanging," put in Tucson, "maybe we should give thought to fixing Miss Robertson up with a place to stay."

"Monte Marge is back in town," said Gloomy. "She's got a

nice cabin and no company."

"Let's try Marge's!" decided Tucson.

Maud Robertson found a cordial welcome at Monte Marge's. The redheaded girl insisted upon brewing coffee for

the entire party. Dawn was close when the three men returned to Main Street. When the light strengthened a forlorn scene became plain: townsfolk, bleary-eyed from loss of sleep and limp from weariness, wandering aimlessly around; raw gaps showed on Main Street where the Buffalo Hotel and the saloon had formerly stood. All that remained of the Buffalo was a sooted patch, littered with charred timbers and blackened bedsprings, from which smoke still coiled. Opposite, another smoking skeleton marked The Ace.

The only cheerful spot in sight was Ah Low's "Good Eats," whose steamy windows glowed with mellow light. The canny Chinese had opened up before dawn and had been doing a land office business. Every stool was occupied when the trio sauntered up and joined the throng clustered at the door,

waiting for seats.

Gloomy glanced around uneasily. It was full daylight now. "You figure it's healthy to stick around?" he whispered hoarsely in Tucson's ear. "Member that thousand-dollar bounty!"

In the surge of events, the chunky rider had forgotten that he was the subject of a Wanted dodger. He shrugged and returned carelessly, "Folks got nothing on their minds but the fires. My tapeworm's bellowing. I'll vamoose after breakfast."

They finally slid onto stools at Ah Low's counter. Tucson was busy demolishing a stack of flapjacks when his sixgun was suddenly jerked out of its holster from behind. He spun around to face Vinegar's sour features. The deputy toted a sawed-off shotgun. "You got more gall than an elephant, gallivanting around town," rasped the lawman. "Wal, you ain't skipping this time. I got leg irons down at the hoosegow."

Tucson's head swiveled as he sought means of escape. Before he could move, two men siding Vinegar grabbed his arms. Handcuffs clicked onto his wrists. It was then he saw

the sheriff standing in the doorway.

### XX

SMOKE-GRIMED TOWNSMEN stared at the procession that dragged up street-the manacled Tucson between two guards, Vinegar and the sheriff at their heels. Dogging the lawmen,

Harper and Gloomy.

The parade wheeled into the law shack. The deputies stood their defiant prisoner against the rear wall. Vinegar banged the shotgun on the table and dropped onto his chair. Sheriff Farmer took a seat beside him. Harper and Gloomy crowded the doorway; there just wasn't room for them inside.

"Wal," demanded the prisoner curtly, "what's the charge?" "You know dang well what the charge is," snapped Vine-

gar, "premeditated murder of Jake Jensen."

Dan Harper spat. "Would he beef his own paw?" he barked. Five pairs of amazed eyes focused the wiry foreman. Only the prisoner seemed unconcerned.

"Are you loco?" demanded Vinegar. "The Lazy J heir-

Jensen's son-is in town right now."

"The fourflusher's hightailing for the Border so fast his

axles smoke," retorted the foreman derisively.

Without speaking, the sheriff brought a folded sheet from a shirt pocket and handed it to the acrid deputy. Tucson recognized the agreement Harper had taken from Diamond's safe.

Vinegar perused the sheet carefully. With no change of

expression he handed it back to Farmer.

"I read his brand 'way back," continued Harper. "It's as plain as the ears on a mule. Jake foaled Tucson! The colt's got Jake's eyes, Jake's jaw, Jake's hair, and he's a southpaw. What more do you want-a birth certificate?"

"I've got that," put in the prisoner coolly. "It's sewn into

my belt."

"Are you telling us that you're Jake Jensen's son and heir to the Lazy J?" inquired the sheriff evenly.

"Sure am!" replied Tucson. "Ma quit Jake when I was a button, fifteen, sixteen years back. She hit for Mexico. The pox took her in San Mario. The rurales quarantined the pueblo. I slipped out, latched onto a goat herder. He fed me, I herded goats. Wal, I became a tumbleweed, took the moniker 'Tucson'." His voice brittled, "Jake Jensen's name stank! He most beat ma to death. Then I plug this tinhorn in Paso for dealing marked cards and go on the dodge. Guess I always had a yen to get back to Buffalo Valley, like a steer always strays back to its old bedding ground. This Rogers gent is knifed in Nogales. I grab his papers, take his name and head north."

He paused and tight silence held the crowded law shack. Vinegar broke the spell, "Windies, windies," His voice was virulent, "You knifed Rogers!"

"Like hell he did!" challenged Gloomy. "A bunch of

vaqueros curled up Rogers in the Cantina El Toro, Nogales.

I located two witnesses, took sworn statements."

"Maybe sol" grated Vinegar. "They's two more killings chalked up against the hombre." His sharp eyes glittered as he addressed the prisoner, "If you didn't bushwhack Jake Jensen, how come the badge you stole from Rogers was found by the body? And how come the slug came from Diamond's derringer, which you picked up in The Ace?"

Tucson's gray eyes mocked the deputy, "You tell 'em,

Vinegar; you should know."

"I know there's plain proof you beefed Jake-he mistreated your maw, you admit you hated his guts, you aimed

to grab the ranch. Ain't that motive aplenty?"

"You know a heap more," threw back the prisoner. "You know the coyote who bushwhacked my paw picked up Rogers' badge in the rustlers' hideout, where Brick threw it aside. You know that same hombre lamped Diamond's derringer, kicked under a table in The Ace, the night Jake worked him over, and grabbed it. Name him!"

Amid a silence as brittle as thin glass, every eye dwelt on the prisoner. Tucson's glance locked with Vinegar's, one derisive, the other venomous.

"There's been enough talk!" put in the sheriff impatiently. He measured the prisoner with puzzled eyes, "Can you

identify this man?"

"Sure," said Tucson carelessly, "Vinegar Carney!"

As one, heads swiveled toward the deputy.

Eyes blazing, bony fists clenched with anger, Vinegar choked through his rage, "Me! Why in hell would I beef Jake Jensen?"

"Because," said the prisoner calmly, "you're half-brother to Mike McCarthy, who died at Sweetwater. Like Brick, his

son, you nursed your hate like an Indian."

"You're crazier than a loon!" snarled the deputy.

"How come Mike McCarthy and his son headed for Buffalo Valley and located at Sweetwater, knowing the Lazy J claimed it? Because they followed you west and figured you—the law in Buffalo Valley—would back their hand. How come you never brought in a rustler? Because Brick, your nephew, was their leader. How come you framed me? Because I was a stranger and a tumbleweed. No one would give a damn if I was strung up."

"You're crazy with the heat!" snapped the deputy.

"Mike McCarthy's half-brother was crippled by a bullet wound. You claim you busted your leg in a fall from a horse. Yank up your pant leg and prove it!"

Tight silence followed the prisoner's challenge. Vinegar

crouched in his chair, glaring like a cornered lobo.

"Wal?" queried the sheriff, eying his deputy.

"You ain't taking no stock of that hombre's raving, Bill?"

"Let me see your leg!"

Vinegar's right hand dropped onto the shotgun. Its twin barrels blurred in a flashing arc as he whipped it up and around. . . . The roar of a Colt thundered through the shack.

The shotgun clattered to the floor. Blood dribbled from a neat round hole in the deputy's forehead. His lifeless body slid slowly down, spilled off the chair.

No one moved a muscle; all were petrified by the lightning gunplay. No one except Gloomy, who was holstering his gun.

"I had the rattlesnake covered," he explained apologetically. "Only two hombres could'a picked up both Rogers' badge

and Diamond's derringer. I was one!"

Sheriff Farmer sat staring at the deputy's body, slack at his feet. "If this don't beat all creation," he muttered; then his glance sought the prisoner. "Guess you're cleared," he said, rose, fished out a key and unlocked the handcuffs.

Tucson flexed his freed wrists and smiled without humor.

"You forgot the tinhorn I plugged back in Texas."

"Nope," returned Farmer offhand. "I've been in touch. The sheriff who issued that warrant is dead. His successor's not interested. There's nothing against you Tu-Jensen."

Still shocked by the blazing termination of Tucson's ar-

rest, men spilled out of the law shack.

Outside, Dan Harper turned to the newly-freed prisoner, "Guess we could all do with a drink."

"Where?" inquired the chunky rider.

"There's a horse trough!" suggested Gloomy helpfully.

The foreman eyed them both with a wry grin.

"You best get out of town," suggested Tucson gravely, "or they're liable to hang you." His regretful glance dwelt on the sooted square that was once a saloon, "And I'm damned if I'd blame them!"

"Ain't no one sitting on my shirttail," said Harper, and

jingled toward his pony.

"Reckon that applies to this tumbleweed, too." Gloomy extended a long arm. "So long, Tucson, it's sure been nice knowing you."

"Hold your horses!" ejaculated the heir. "You got a job on

the Lazy J as long as you can sit a horse, or you can just set and smoke."

"I got a job!"

"Yeah?" countered Tucson suspiciously.

The beanpole turned his extended hand. A small metal badge glinted in its palm. It bore the inscription, "John Gleason, #21, Arizona Cattlemen's Protective."

Later, Tucson tapped on the door of a cabin off Main Street. A redheaded girl opened it. He eyed her with appreciation. Marge sure looked mighty nice, he reflected, in her neat cotton house dress, but her eyes seemed misty.

"Come in," she invited, with a wan smile.

He stepped through the doorway, fidgeted around the room. For no good reason, he felt nervous. "Maud Robertson still in town?" he inquired, for something to say.

"She's shopping; she lost almost everything."

"I guess you heard, about Vinegar?"

The girl nodded and he saw she was close to tears. "I suspected nothing . . . nothing!" Her voice was little more than a whisper.

"Wal," commented the rider dryly, "I guess he figured he

had to pay a blood debt."

"Blood debt!" Her voice was bitter. "What has this senseless feud brought but hatred and suffering and death?"

"You wouldn't . . . hate me?"

"Hate you!" she repeated softly. "No, Tucson, far from it."
"I'm a Jensen."

"Does it matter?"

"Wal," he rasped his chin, "I was wondering if you'd consider a partnership."

"A partnership?"

"This kind." His arms went around her and he held her tightly, burying his face in her hair. Unresisting, she snuggled against his shoulder, the glory of the sunrise in her eyes.