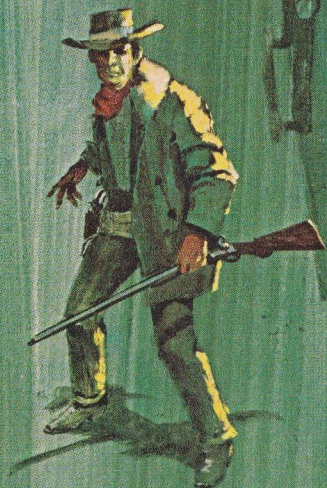


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SHOWDOWN AT SERANO

"Give a dog a bad name—
then
shoot him!" **TOM WEST**



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Bill Lake was regarded as the likable but no-good son of the biggest cowman in the county until the day he was nabbed redhanded robbing the bank. After that, he was looked on as just plain no-good, especially after he'd been packed off to Yuma Prison.

But redhanded or not, Bill claimed he was framed and if there was anything he learned at Yuma it was patience, determination, and the grit to see a thing through. So when he finally rode back to his home range, he had learned a few things.

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**SHOWDOWN
AT
SERANO**

by

TOM WEST

**ACE BOOKS, INC.
1120 Avenue of the Americas
New York, N.Y. 10036**

SHOWDOWN AT SERANO

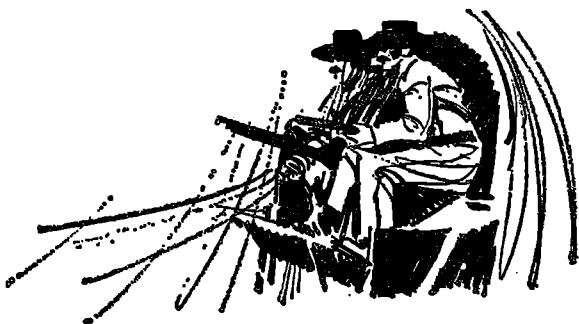
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THE PAXMAN FEUD

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I

SERANO HADN'T KNOWN such excitement since Geronimo's Chiricahua Apaches jumped the reservation six years before and hightailed for Mexico. Young Bill Lake, only son of Craig Lake, biggest cowman in the county, had been caught redhanded looting the Gresham County Bank.

Not that Bill's reputation was lily-white. In fact, the scion of the Diamond L was generally regarded as a good-for-nothing scrub. When he wasn't bellied up to a bar, he could be found sitting in at a poker game. And when neither diversion claimed him, he was likely sleeping off a drunk.

Yet Bill was a likeable cuss, and folks treated him with resigned toleration. He was just a burly, indolent soak, soft as a sack of chaff and a set-up for every deadbeat in town. He was always good for a handout and he'd share his last dollar with a down-at-the-heels saddlebum. If he hadn't been heir to the Diamond, which grazed more steers than any other outfit in San Simeon Valley, he'd likely have spent more time in the cooler than outside. But when he tettered out of a saloon, moving like a horse with the staggers, one of Sheriff Conover's deputies usually loaded him onto his dun

and slapped the pony's rump. The gelding knew the way home, which was more than Bill did. The consensus of opinion was that the dun had a heap more sense than its master.

Everyone knew that rock-faced Craig Lake had only one weakness—his good-for-nothing son. The old man's wife had died foaling the colt and, from the first, Lake spoiled the kid rotten. The boy was all he had. He could never bring himself to say "no" to Bill, could never bring himself to apply the curb. So he cashed the I.O.U.s his son handed out so lavishly at the poker tables and ladled out the dinero Bill spread around freely in the process of raising the finest crop of wild oats that ever sprouted in Gresham County.

Citizens accounted Bill harmless as a chambermaid and couldn't have been more surprised at his sudden lawless streak than if the old burro that hauled the water cask from which Sancho Perez refilled the town barrels had abruptly turned mankiller. That was until someone remembered that Craig finally had a bellyful of paying his son's gambling debts and had circulated word around the saloons that hereafter creditors collected their I.O.U.s from Bill in person.

It was plain that the young reprobate, desperate for dinero, had decided to acquire the needful by the most direct method. Since most townsfolk squirreled their savings in the bank, there was very little sympathy wasted on the prisoner, particularly when \$42,600 was reported missing.

Next morning a run on the bank started and a line had formed a block long before the first "extra" the *Serano Sentinel* had ever printed hit the street announcing that Craig Lake had signed a note to cover the missing funds. The run dissolved as quickly as a snowball on the desert.

But the fact that his father had covered the loss, pointed out the editor of the *Sentinel*, didn't lessen young Lake's guilt any. Everyone should receive equal justice under the law. Maybe a spell behind bars might change the prisoner's ideas about the sanctity of other folks' hard-earned savings.

Meanwhile, the subject of all the discussion, amiably chewing a cigarette, hunkered in a steel-barred cell. The county

jail was a long, low adobe, connected by a roofed runway to the rear of the red-bricked courthouse.

Bill Lake was a big-framed young fellow, scarcely in his twenties. Despite his incarceration, the prisoner's features still held a brazen cockiness. They were well-formed, blue eyes friendly as a puppy's, wide mouth quirked into an habitual grin, forehead unwrinkled—the easy-going, unlined face of one to whom life was a pleasant blur, surveyed through an alcoholic haze; a colt who frolicked in lush pasture; a spoiled brat whose father's pocketbook solved every problem.

It would have been a handsome face, with its strong curve of jaw and straight nose, topped by tousled hair the color of burnt brick, but for the brand dissipation had already burned upon it—bloodshot eyes bedded in drooping bags of flesh; lines that petulance had etched around the mouth; folds of fat beneath the jowls. A thirty-and-four puncher could look workmanlike in a faded flannel shirt, waist levis and cracked boots, but Bill Lake looked like a bum in glove-fitting forty-dollar boots, silk shirt and fancy calfskin vest.

Bleary-eyed, he looked up eagerly as a door at the end of the row of cells opened and a blocky man came into view, a law badge pinned to his dark shirt. In appearance, Sheriff Conover reflected the solidarity and neutrality of the law, from the blank impartiality reflected in his gray eyes, as hard as weathered quartz, to the soles of his neatly-shod feet. He sported a neat spade beard and waxed mustache and when he spoke his voice held the crisp accent of authority. A few years before, he had ridden into Serano and bought a run-down saloon, which promptly became the best managed in town. Came election, and he bucked an aging sheriff for the office. Townsman's votes swept him in, although the cattlemen pumped for the oldtimer. Conover had promised a new deal, and the county got it—he fired most every deputy on the payroll and put in his own men; pushed through a "No handguns in town" ordinance and made it stick, to the annoyance of visiting punchers; terminated such shenanigans as shooting out store windows and splintering signs.

The ranchers didn't stomach the new sheriff—and still didn't, but townfolk welcomed a lawman who rode herd on carousing cowhands. Out on the range, men claimed he paid too much attention to town and neglected the county, pointing to ever-rising losses from rustlers.

The new sheriff retorted that the county treasurer only allowed him enough dinero to pay a limited number of deputies and they were needed in town. Where he hailed from, he indicated, cattlemen kept their own range clean. So a latent antagonism had arisen. But the voting strength was in Serano, and Conover was secure in his job.

The sheriff stepped briskly down the corridor between the two rows of cells, checked at the cage in which Lake was confined.

"Anything I can do for you?" he inquired, in a metallic tone that held the proper quality of restraint and impartiality.

"Yep, give me a drink."

Conover stroked his beard, eying the prisoner between the bars. "It's against the law," he said thoughtfully, "but just supposing I stretched the law a mite, would you make a statement?"

"Sure!" Lake assured him carelessly.

The sheriff dipped into a hip pocket and brought out a flat pint bottle, removed the cork. "Just one sip!" he cautioned.

The prisoner scrambled eagerly to his feet, hurried across the cell, reached and snatched the bottle from Conover's hand. Tilting it, he drank long and gratefully. The sheriff made a dab to retrieve the flask. Lake backed away, grinning. "Hell," he taunted, "it ain't half full," took another long swig and handed the empty bottle back.

"I've jailed plenty soaks," commented Conover brittlely, "but never one with your capacity."

"Practice!" the prisoner told him, offhand. "When do I get out of this stinking joint?"

"Mister," returned Conover tightly, as he slipped the empty bottle out of sight, "you don't get out."

"Quit hurrahin' me! Paw u'll put up bail." Lake's tone had a belligerent itch.

"Your paw says he's through putting up for you, through for keeps—bank robbery's a felony," snapped the sheriff. "You could draw a ten-year stretch in Yuma. Now about that statement. Come clean and maybe we can kinda—ease things."

"Not guilty!" threw back the prisoner negligently. He turned his back, slouched across the cell and flopped on a bench which held a straw-stuffed mattress with soiled ticking.

Conover raised his heavy shoulders. "If that's the way you figure playing it," he said indifferently, "suits me. The jury will laugh out loud." Without a further glance, he strode off.

Lake drifted into a doze. There was nothing quite so comforting, he thought hazily, as a hair of the dog that bit you. But the warming effect of the whisky soon began to wear off. Irrked by a rising frustration, the prisoner swung his feet to the packed earth floor and began pacing to and fro. He was still pacing when a deputy ushered in another visitor.

Archer Boothby, attorney-at-law, was a rolly-polly little man, with chubby features and mild brown eyes blinking behind the lens of steel-framed spectacles. He'd handled Craig Lake's legal affairs since he'd first nailed up his shingle eighteen years before, and opposing lawyers had long learned that his deceptively innocent appearance veiled a shrewd brain in which a vast amount of legal lore had accumulated. Boothby handled the statutes like a magician, they claimed, and could most persuade a jury black was white. Which was an undoubted exaggeration, with a solid streak of truth.

The deputy, a grizzled, hard-bitten man, stood by the outside door while Boothby bounced down the corridor, a shabby leather case dangling from one hand. At the cell gate he stopped and turned. "The key, please!"

"All interviews through the bars; sheriff's orders," rasped the deputy.

The lawyer smiled gently. "You go tell your sheriff that under the Territorial Criminal Code, Section #41, paragraph #16, an attorney is entitled to confer with his client under reasonable conditions of comfort and privacy. I am not comfortable—this passageway is damnably drafty. Further, my feet ache. If necessary I will obtain an order from Judge Newbarth."

The deputy hesitated, then clumped down to the cell, inserted a key in the lock and threw the gate open. Boothby nodded brisk thanks and popped inside. The gate slammed viciously behind him.

He turned and eyed the scowling deputy benignly. "You may retire," he said, "out of earshot. Section #39."

When the jailor's heavy footsteps faded, Boothby plunked down on the bench and motioned to the prisoner. Bill Lake carelessly deposited his rangy form on the mattress. The lawyer sniffed. "Drinking again?"

"Sheriff's a pard of mine," grinned Lake.

"You'll need all the pards you can round up to beat this charge," commented Boothby dryly. "What on earth led you to ransack the bank?"

"Hell, I was framed," snorted the prisoner. "Guess some of the boys were cutting a shine." Petulantly, he added, "Why in thunder don't Paw ace me out?"

Boothby eyed the dissipated young rider quizzically. "William," he said, "you'd better wise up and grow up—fast. This is not a drunken scrape but a felony, punishable by a long prison term. Your father is heartbroken and disgusted. Beyond providing counsel to ensure that you receive a fair trial he will do nothing to help."

"So the Old Man turned sour on me!" The prisoner's voice was sharp with resentment.

"If he'd turned sour on you ten, fifteen years back you wouldn't be here," barked Boothby. He opened his briefcase, withdrew a sheet of paper. "Now let us review the

evidence." He cleared his throat and continued. "Sheriff Conover testifies that he was taking a hand in a quiet game of poker in The Applejack on Tuesday, June 14, which was yesterday. The other players were Tom Bullock, manager of the bank; Fred Morris, the district attorney; Jack Rayner, cattle buyer, and Dr. Haughton. As was customary, they had hung their coats upon pegs on the wall behind the table. Bullock testifies that he always carried the bank keys in the right-hand inside pocket of his coat.

"At 11 P.M. or thereabouts, you entered the saloon in an intoxicated condition, which Conover asserts was faked. You approached the poker table and demanded that you be allowed to participate in the game. When rebuffed, you became violent, upset the poker table and caused considerable confusion. You were ejected from the saloon, the table was righted and play resumed."

Boothby paused and eyed the prisoner. "Correct so far?"

"Guess so," admitted Lake, with a yawn. "Except I was packing a load and sure warn't faking."

"Perhaps thirty minutes after play recommenced," continued Boothby, reading from the sheet, "a shot was heard from the direction of the bank. Conover immediately withdrew from the game to investigate. He found a knot of men gathered around a prone form, to wit, yourself, lying on the road, in front of the bank. You were apparently stunned. Packets of greenbacks were spilling from your pockets and the bank door was ajar. Dr. Haughton was summoned and he decided that you had been knocked unconscious by a blow on the head, above the left ear. Later, your saddlehorse was found, wandering out of town, the saddle dangling beneath its barrel. It then became evident that the saddle had slipped, throwing you when you'd hastily mounted, at which time you struck your head, presumably upon a rock.

"Actually, the alert citizen who gave the alarm, fired at another man he glimpsed darting out of the bank. However, this man mounted and dashed away in the darkness. Presumably your accomplice, he escaped with the bulk of the

loot, estimated at \$42,000. Some \$600 in twenty-dollar greenbacks were removed from your pockets."

The lawyer paused to again clear his throat, then resumed. "Later, the bank manager, Thomas Bullock, discovered that the bank keys—street door, vault and strong box—were missing from his coat pocket. The theory is that during the confusion you created in The Applejack, you stole those keys."

He carefully replaced the sheet in his brief case and eyed the prisoner. "True—or false?"

"Hogwash!" declared Lake shortly.

Boothby removed his glasses and carefully polished the lens with a white handkerchief. "That is scarcely a defense, William, that will convince a jury."

"Do you swallow them windies?"

"I have no option," returned the lawyer mildly, "until I have heard your version of the episode."

"It's kinda blurred," admitted the prisoner, with a wry grin. He pressed both hands to his head, striving to marshal his thoughts, winced when he touched a lump over his left ear.

"Doggonit," he complained, "I feel worse'n a steer pestered by heel flies. Wal, the apron over at The Gray Mule cut my rope. 'No more booze' he says. 'You're freighting too big a load.' I drift outside. Some hombre braces me, asks how I fancy getting into a high stake game. I said, 'Lead me to it!'

"He tells me to mosey over to The Applejack, which I did. Sure enough, there's a bunch gathered around a poker table in the corner. I step over and ask, polite like, if I can take a hand. Guess I was a mite top-heavy, so I set both hands on the table to steady up. Then some rattlesnake kicks my legs from under me, beneath the table. I go down, dragging the table atop of me. There's quite a ruckus—gents cussing, pasteboards showering, chips scattering. Next thing they're giving me the bum's rush through the batwings."

He paused, fingering his forehead, trying to concentrate. "Then, somewhere out on the street, the sky falls on me, or I

got too familiar with a kicking mule. Something slams against my conk. When I wake up I'm sprawled on the floor of this lousy cell, facing a loco robbery charge."

Boothby sighed, and rose. "I am afraid, William," he said, "our best course would be to plead guilty and throw ourselves on the mercy of the Court." He crossed to the steel gate, rattled it.

"Gawdamighty!" yelled Lake. "I'm not guilty!"

"How would you know?" retorted the lawyer sorrowfully. "By your own admission you were drunk as a fiddler's clerk."

II

BEFORE NIGHTFALL, the prisoner had two more visitors. The jailor admitted them together. One was Diane Hagstrom, whose father rodded the Box H; the other was Mark Wagner, their foreman. Wagner was one of the few men who raised Lake's hackles. A lean, dark-featured man in his thirties, the foreman had an air of authority, a bleak appraising stare and a sharp-honed voice that could harden and snap like a bullwhacker's whip. He was coldly efficient, had a one-drink habit and never touched the pasteboards. Added to which was unconcealed contempt for easy-going, hard-drinking Bill Lake, and restrained admiration for his boss's daughter.

Diane made a picture that would attract most any man's eyes. A statuesque beauty, with clear-skinned Nordic features, full red lips and a wealth of rich blond hair that lay like a golden halo upon her head, she was the belle of San Simeon Valley. She was less popular, however, with members of her own sex. Her admirers laid it to jealousy, but it could have been a hardness in her green eyes, a brittleness that sharpened her tones when she was crossed. It was a certainty that she had only to crook a finger to have any man come arunning. Envious rivals whispered that the only reason she stuck to the irresponsible Diamond heir was the

extent of his father's holdings. Since Bill always escorted her to hoedowns, the assumption was that marriage would follow.

"Ten minutes, folks," grunted the deputy, and took up position from where he could watch proceedings. Bill Lake was now labeled "dangerous" and the sheriff craved no guns passed.

The two paused in front of his cell. Diane's disapproving glance ran over the prisoner's unshaven features, his puffy eyes, liquor-stained silk shirt, tangled hair.

"Well," she commented, with wry disgust, "now you're not only a filthy drunk but a bank robber. How low can you stoop, Bill?" Her voice was clear, rich, vibrant with feeling.

"Quit prodding!" he growled, and shuffled across the cage. Latching onto a bar with each hand, he slacked, blinking down at her with bleary eyes. "You know I'm as innocent as a newborn calf."

"Innocent!" scoffed Wagner. "That's sure one for the book."

Ignoring the foreman, Lake eyed the girl. "Why can't I get out of here?" he demanded, a fretful note in his voice.

"Because no one will put up bail," she replied matter-of-factly. "Don't you realize that this is a very serious charge, Bill?"

"This bank malarky?" He snorted. "Don't tell me you swallow it."

"There seems little room for doubt," she retorted with a shrug. "You needed money."

His lips twisted. "Didn't I always need money?"

"And your father supplied it, until the well ran dry."

"So I tapped a gusher!" He grinned. "You know better than that, Diane."

She stamped a small foot with exasperation. "Be serious for once in your life, Bill. You were drunk. When liquor flows in, good sense flies out."

"If you dropped in to rawhide me, beat it," he threw back shortly.

"I came to beg you to make a clean breast of the whole affair." There was an edge on her tone now. "Don't you

realize that there are thousands of dollars missing—and they hold you responsible. Who was your accomplice?”

“Quit chewing loco weed,” he growled.

She stood eying his sulky features, dabbing at her eyes with a wisp of handkerchief. Wagner laid a consoling hand upon her back. “Let’s go, ma’am!” he said tightly.

Lake thrust a hand between the bars and awkwardly grasped one of the girl’s slim wrists.

“Listen, Diane,” his tone was urgent. “I’m real sorry! I’ve been a doggoned knothed and I’m in a jackpot. No one’s to blame, except me. But I’m no crook.”

“They found bank money in your pockets,” she accused. “The whole town believes you guilty. Whatever are you going to do?”

“What I crave to do right now,” he admitted humorously, “is to belly up to a bar and drown my sorrows. And quit fretting. They’ll never convict Craig Lake’s son, not on planted evidence. I’ll be stepping out again, high, wide and handsome.”

“A braying jackass would make better sense,” barked Wagner.

“Button up!” bit back the prisoner. “You got more lip than a muley cow.”

“Hush, both of you!” cut in the girl. She twisted her wrist free of Lake’s lingering grasp, moved back beyond his reach. “You’ll do your stepping out alone, Bill,” she announced tautly. “This is the last straw. Drinking I can tolerate, but not bank robbery.”

“Dammit, I’m no bank robber!”

She shrugged and turned away. The prisoner stood watching as she tip-tapped hurriedly down the corridor, the foreman at her heels. Then he rambled back to the bench and stretched out again. He’d known Diane since they were knee-high. They’d ridden their ponies to school together, rode the hills together, attended dances together. She’d get over her “mad.” His father would relent, old Boothby would ace him out of this tight. Diane would forgive and forget. He ran his

tongue over dry lips. Gawd, he'd give his right arm for two fingers of bourbon.

The verdict, as anticipated, was "Guilty" despite Archer Boothby's long and impassioned appeal to the jury. Would they convict a blind man, he demanded, for stumbling? The night of the bank robbery the defendent was blind—blind drunk—and clearly not responsible for his actions. Drunkenness was a sickness, a disease that clouded a man's brain, bemused his senses, rendered him incapable and irresponsible. If William Lake was involved in the bank robbery he did so while in a state of coma, his senses stupified. Should one drunken episode be allowed to blight his life? Be just, he begged, but be merciful. In this distressing case justice was mercy.

Boothby's oratory might have won the day if the prisoner had been less obdurate in refusing to reveal the identity of his accomplice. \$42,000 was still missing. The jury could never forget that the prisoner might step out of the courtroom to receive a cut of that \$42,000. Several had deposits in the Gresham County Bank. What would the situation have been if Craig Lake hadn't covered the loss?

Judge Newbarth, a slight, graying man with wintry eyes, told the courtroom that he was inclined to be lenient. There was some question as to whether or not the accused was wholly under the influence of liquor at the time the crime was committed, but there was no question regarding his guilt. Justice demanded that he be punished. The sentence would be three years at hard labor in Yuma penitentiary.

Three years hard labor!

The prisoner's slack features turned ashen. The sentence hit him with the impact of a .45 slug. They were caging him, Bill Lake, in Yuma, like a sneaking rustler or cheap desperado. And that for a crime of which he was innocent. It just couldn't be true. He'd wake up **and** discover that all this was a hideous dream.

A deputy led him away, features frozen with shock, eyes unseeing, walking stiffly, like an automaton.

Today, tourists wander around the moldering ruins of Yuma Territorial Prison, located on Prison Hill, on a bend of the Colorado River. They view the Dungeon Block, twenty cells carved out of the solid granite of which Prison Hill is composed; squeeze through a narrow passageway that bores into the bowels of the Hill and gape at the Snake Pen, with iron rings spaced across the floor to which those too stubborn to tame were shackled and left to exist in utter darkness; they look over the Main Cell Block, once a massive rock-and-adobe structure that housed over two hundred prisoners, six to a cell; they eye the remnants of the great adobe wall that surrounded the whole, 16' high and 8' thick at the base. Maybe they drop down a rocky path to look over the graveyard, to wander among the weathered redwood markers, still standing, row upon desolate row, and try to decipher names painted on the cross-pieces. Yuma had a high mortality rate!

Likely they'll hear stories of the ghosts that haunt the Hill, phantoms of prisoners whose bones have long crumbled into dust—men stricken by the merciless sun; shot while making a desperate break for freedom; smashed down by the ironwood clubs of tough guards for insolence, insubordination, well, most any excuse would serve. Or they'll be told of shrieks that issue from the gloomy Snake Pit, haunted by the shades of men who died in its darkness, helpless to escape the rattlesnakes that favored the hole as a refuge from the torrid sun.

Oldtimers will smile and tell them that swirling mists from the Colorado often take ghostly shapes, and the desert winds may howl like dervishes around the crumbling ramparts. But try and persuade them to spend a night amid the lonely desolation of Prison Hill!

Yuma was the Alcatraz of the Old West, although the modern Alcatraz was a palace by comparison. There went

the incorrigibles from many states, men whom other prisons could not hold or handle—the toughest of the tough. None were too tough for Yuma to tame!

The grim penitentiary was claimed to be escape-proof. North and east, the silty, yellow Colorado River swirled around Prison Hill, offering death to the strongest swimmer; south lay waterless desert, and east shifting sandhills. On the desert roamed bands of Conopah and Yuma Indians, eager for sight of an escaped convict. Dragged back, he was worth \$50—the standing reward. Yes, there was escape, desperate men will brave any odds to snatch at freedom, but few, very few, found it.

Unutterably weary, Bill Lake lay limp upon the straw pallet of his bunk, uppermost of a tier of three that lined each side of cell #26 in the Main Block. Every other bunk except one held its sprawled form. Five days had passed since a deputy from Sheriff Conover's office had delivered "one body" in the person of William Lake to the warden's office and taken his receipt.

For ten hours each day, less a thirty-minute break at noon, Lake had labored with pick and shovel beneath a blistering sun in a gang engaged in the excavation of additional cells. Every shovelful of rock had first to be broken and hacked out with picks. Every time a convict paused to straighten his back a club-toting guard drifted closer.

It was laborious work for hard-muscled men; for Bill Lake, going to fat, liquor-soaked, soft as a wet sponge, it was pure torture. He had collapsed—once. The agony of savage club blows brought him tettering to his feet, to blindly grab a shovel and set to work again. There were no soft snaps in the excavation gang, and no shirkers. Club-swinging guards, Winchesters slung across their backs, watched every move with wary eyes. Outbreaks were not infrequent in Yuma. Crazy men had run amuck; guards' skulls had been smashed with swinging shovels; many convicts were little more than animals, dangerous animals, pushed

to the limits of endurance. Yuma was a seething caldron of ferocity, frustration and fury.

Night brought little surcease to Lake. True, it gave relief from hard labor, but it brought time to ponder upon the hell in which he was doomed to spend three years, each day an eternity. Exhausted, he flopped on the straw pallet, staring dull-eyed at the rough texture of the ceiling pressing down overhead, mutely enduring the agonizing ache of soft muscles, the pain of cramped limbs, wondering how he had survived the punishment of that day, and if he could endure another.

Heat hung heavy on the crowded cells, reeking with the effluvia from slop buckets, the sour odor of sweat-soaked pallets, the stench of human emanations. Sound of the slow-plodding guards' heavy boots, pacing the rock corridor outside, back and forth, with the monotonous precision of a clock, rang in the prisoner's ears like strokes of doom, while the shrieking and maniacal laughter from the insane cells—caves dug on the crest of the Hill—lanced into his tired brain like jagged knives, breeding a horror of what might ultimately become his own fate. Better death than that, he thought numbly, then shuddered at the gruesome form slow death in this hellhole could assume.

Heads of several convicts lying slack on the bunks turned incuriously at sound of scuffling feet outside. Keys rattled, the steel-barred door was thrown open. Two guards appeared, swinging the limp form of a prisoner between them, one grabbing him by the armpits, the other the feet. Behind them, a third guard stood with leveled rifle. Adroitly, they flung the slack form into the cell. It hit the granite floor with a flat thud and lay unmoving.

Lake stared down at the rough-hewn features of the unconscious convict, clad in the striped coat and pants that garbed them all. He looked young, no older than himself. His nose was mashed flat in a blotch of dry blood. More blood rusted a tangle of dark hair and dribbled from between the swollen lips of a stubborn mouth. His hairy wrists

were raw from the irons, his knuckles skinned and bleeding. Unconsciously, Lake muttered aloud, "Gawd, they beefed the hambrel!"

"Quit sweating! Butch don't check out that easy." The dry tones came from the bunk below him. He leaned over the edge of his mattress, met the gaze of a convict stretched out on his back. The speaker was thin-faced, sparsely built, with graying hair, a long stubbly jaw, sharp black eyes set in leathery features.

"The moniker's Cheyenne," he volunteered. "Howdy!"

It was the first friendly voice Lake had heard in Yuma.

"Bill Lakel" he returned in a hoarse whisper. "They work him over?"

"Seems so," the man who called himself Cheyenne returned unconcernedly. "Butch drew thirty days in the Snake Pen. The maverick's a trouble-maker, jest won't quiet down. Drew the thirty for taking a swing at a guard." Offhand, he added, "The bustards will beef him for sure, if he don't mend his ways. Come sun-up, if he don't show for roll call, they'll likely book him for malingering."

Lake moved restlessly and flinched at the anguished complaint of sore muscles. "Sure wish they'd beef me," he groaned.

"What you draw?"

"Three years."

"And you're squawking!" mocked his cellmate. "I've peeled off six years, five months and fourteen days of a ten-year stretch. And I'll live to walk out!"

"You're different!" Lake told him wearily. "Likely you earned it, so you can take it. Me, I was framed."

Cheyenne's weathered features crinkled with silent laughter. "Warn't we all!"

With bitter venom, he added, "I gotta live because I got a payoff due. Ran with the Harmer gang. We histed a string of banks from the Panhandle south. Was making a getaway in Tieburg when a slug downs my buckskin. Harmer had our dinero cached, and there was aplenty."

Words poured from him in a harsh monotone. "The deal was that if anyone tripped, the gang aces him out, hires a mouthpiece, or busts him outa the hoosegow. Harmer had the say—and the bustard quit me cold. One less to cut in on the divvy! I sure got something to live for—a showdown with Gus Harmer."

"Me, too, I guess," commented Lake thoughtfully.

"Now you're talking!" approved Cheyenne. "What's three years to a young colt like you? Wise up! Act like you're broke to harness. Don't kick back, don't even think back. Take what they dish out—and like it. Me—I got a soft touch, in the Mattress Shop. Keep your nose clean and you'll likely land on your feet."

"If I live that long," returned Lake morosely.

"Like I said, you wanna live—cooperate. Don't act like that dogblasted knothead Butch," Cheyenne nodded at the form sprawled on the cell floor. "Here they break yuh—or beef yuh."

III

BATHED IN SWEAT, Lake lay slack in the darkness, pondering on his talk with Cheyenne. The sharp-eyed renegade was right, he mused. If a man was to survive Yuma he had to have a reason for living—a driving, compelling reason—and he sure had one. Somewhere around Serano an hombre, no—two hombres, the one who tripped him in The Applejack and the second who conked him, must be laughing all over their faces. What was more, they were riding high, wide and handsome with \$42,000 looted bank money in their jeans. They were wallowing in velvet while he sweated it out in Yuma. And there was just one man who could do anything about it—Bill Lake.

Cheyenne spoke gospel truth. If he kicked, he'd draw the Snake Pen, and he wanted none of that hellhole. If he didn't get a hold of himself he'd likely wind up jabbering in an in-

sane cell, and the very thought of that knotted his intestines. That's what they likely figured, those two—Yuma would either kill him or drive him crazy. Well, he'd fool the bastards. If a scrawny hombre like Cheyenne could sweat out a ten-year stretch, he sure could take three. And, right then, a determination to survive was born in Bill Lake.

Days passed, wearisome days, agonizing days, man-killing days, each with its quota of ten hours back-breaking labor, swinging a pick or pushing a shovel on the granite slopes of Prison Hill. Flayed by the scorching sun, herded by club-swinging guards, Lake gritted his teeth and held on. Every day it seemed that the next would be his last, that he would collapse and be beaten to pulp or the blinding sun would shrivel his very marrow.

But, to his amazement, his strength slowly grew. His big frame hardened, his muscles toughened and, incredibly, he became aware of a growing sense of physical wellbeing. What had formerly been a daily ten-hour stint of torture shrank to no more than a monotonous chore. He thrived on the mush, hardtack and rank coffee dished out in the mess hall. He absorbed the lukewarm water freely handed the work gang to offset dehydration by the bone-dry air and burning sun, as eagerly as he had once absorbed whisky.

One thing he learned—and never forgot. Once tagged a "bad actor" a convict was doomed. The blinking of an eyelid would loose a savage battering.

Don't kick back, don't even think back, the old lag Cheyenne had warned, and Lake mentally vowed that he wouldn't. Guards soon grasped that he was a hard worker—uncomplaining and docile—and never again did he feel the numbing impact of a club. He became impervious to the heat, his fat melted, his torso became as brown as an Indian's, his muscles swelled and hardened.

Oftimes at night, with the measured tread of the guard and the restless muttering of his sleeping cellmates on his ears, he would lay pondering on the life he had led in the dim past before Yuma. Now he could see himself as others

saw him—a hard-drinking, worthless young jackass. It was hard to believe that a girl so wonderful as Diane would have spared a glance for a drunken bum, but she had stuck, and she would stick—he didn't doubt that. They'd be married and he'd make it up to her, he silently vowed. He'd gamble she'd never again have cause for complaint. His father was getting old, too. He'd prove to the Old Man he had plenty of gravel in his gizzard. He'd buckle down and take the load of running a big ranch off his paw's shoulders.

But the foremost, the most urgent chore he'd tackle, was to pin the bank hist where it belonged. Boothby would have said that his swollen-headed young client had "wised up and grown up—fast."

In the dreary round of prison life it was hard for a convict to keep tab of time. A man's senses blurred as days, weeks, months flowed past in a turgid, unending stream of gray monotony. But Cheyenne kept a careful tally in the Mattress Shop. The convicted bank robber knew to a day where he stood. It was he who broke the news to Lake that discharge was less than a month ahead. "Me, I'll be loose in six months, less two days," he added, with grim satisfaction.

The two had traded plenty talk over the years, lying on their pallets while night enfolded the brooding pile on Prison Hill.

"That sure won't break my heart," responded Lake. He raised his arms, stretched, flexed bulging muscles. "Guess I'll find it a mite strange outside."

"Heading back to the home spread?" inquired Cheyenne.

"You bet your life! I got plenty to make up to Paw. Then there's a gal, a mighty fine gal, and some—unfinished business."

"So you still figure you was framed," chuckled the spare-built renegade.

"I know it!" There was tight conviction in Lake's tone. "I was drunk that night, but not too drunk to remember." At a thought, he added, "You ride into San Simeon Valley,

Arizona Territory, drop in and say 'Howdy!' Every hombre in Serano knows Craig Lake's Diamond L outfit."

The other nodded assent, but Lake had a hunch that their trails would not cross again. Texas was Cheyenne's stamping ground. "If it warn't for you," he continued, "I reckon I would have ended up in the Snake Pen, or joined Butch in boothill."

"Horsefeathers!" derided Cheyenne. "You got good sense and plenty sand in your craw. It was just that, like Butch, you'd been running hogwild. You took the bit, but Butch, the crazy bustard, fought it."

Serano drowsed in the blistering heat of noon. Nothing moved on sun-flooded Main Street but the tails of a scattering of saddlehorses standing droop-hipped at the hitchrails outside the two saloons. Beneath the wooden canopies that shaded the plankwalks a citizen or two drifted along, a dog hung around the doorway of the butcher shop.

From the south, the bi-weekly stage from Tucson rolled into town, its bright yellow body and the two men on the box thick-peppered with trail dust. With a rattle of harness, the six-horse team reined to a stop outside the Johnson House, Serano's two-story clapboard hotel.

A broad-shouldered young man swung down from beside the driver, carpetbag dangling from one hand. He wore conventional puncher's garb—checked shirt, a sleeveless vest, dark pants stuffed into high-topped riding boots. A red bandana was loose-knotted around his neck and the wide brim of a stylish Stetson slanted down over his eyes. A gunbelt, the walnut butt of a Colt .45 protruding from the holster, circled his narrow waist.

Ducking under the rail, he stood surveying the length of Main Street, his glance shuttling over square-fronted stores, saloons, the bank squatting solid on a corner, the red-brick county courthouse, the gray-weathered A.I. Livery bulking beyond them all. Sleepy old Serano hadn't changed a mite,

he decided. He'd gamble that even the same mongrel bitch was hanging around Al Rokes' butcher shop.

Bill Lake had returned home a new Bill Lake, cast in a very different mold from the sloppy, silk-shirted spendthrift, lurching from saloon to saloon, that townsmen knew. There was not an ounce of fat on his big frame now. Bleak blue eyes reflected cold challenge from lean, sun-scorched features, ropy muscles bulged beneath the cotton shirt, his bristle of rusty-red hair advertised a prison crop. The amiable grin had long since been erased. Tight-set, his lips reflected the bitter frustrations of a three-year spell in Yuma.

He raised a hand in parting salutation to the bearded stage driver, crossed the plankwalk, pushed back the glass swing door of the hotel and stepped into a lobby lined with shabby rockers and shiny spittoons. It was empty except for a long-geared, bony-faced rider, slacked in a rocker, casually glancing over *The Serano Sentinel*. His eyes held a furtive cunning and a dull red birthmark that bore a vague resemblance to the outline of a frog botched his left cheek above the jaw.

The bony-faced rider's puzzled glance followed Lake's progress toward the desk, behind which a clerk yawned over a tattered magazine. In no haste, he folded the paper, rose and sauntered in the same direction, making a cigarette.

The clerk, a balding, shirt-sleeved man, fattish, dipped a pen into the musty inkwell and extended it to Lake.

While the newcomer signed the well-thumbed register, the clerk turned to the long-geared rider, who checked in behind Lake.

"Got a light, pard?" inquired the man. Without speaking, the clerk reached below the counter, brought out a block of stinkers and tossed them.

"That'll be a dollar," he said, addressing Lake, and spun the register around to read the signature. His head jerked up. "You wouldn't be Craig Lake's son, the hombre who loot—" he broke off at sight of the bleak question in the visitor's blue eyes.

"Yep, that's me," admitted Lake shortly. "Just out of Yuma. Any more questions?"

Very deliberately, the long-geared rider struck a match, touched it to his smoke and stood listening.

Lake's hard gaze held the clerk, who gulped and spluttered, "N-no, Mister Lake, except you—you've kinda changed." Anxious to avoid the other's scrutiny, he turned, fumbled at the key rack, lifted off a key and dropped it on the counter. "Number 17," he said hastily.

Lake picked up the key and spun a silver dollar toward the clerk. Picking up his bag, he headed for the worn treads of the stairway. The bony faced rider was heading for the street, his loping stride quickening with every step.

IV

LAKE DROPPED the carpetbag by a battered bureau in the hotel room, scaled his Stetson onto the bed and threw the window wide open to dispel the musty odor that permeated the stale air. He'd endured enough stench in Yuma to last him a lifetime. Stripping to the waist, he spilled water from a china pitcher into the washbowl and sluiced off head and torso. After drying off, he opened the carpetbag, brought out comb and brush, tried vainly to fix his hair. Might just as well try to brush the bristles on a hog, he finally decided, and quit.

Then he slipped on shirt and vest, clapped on his hat and dropped down the stairway, building a smoke.

For a decade, Archer Boothby's office had been located on the second floor of Johansen's Saddlery, opposite the courthouse. It was approached by a wooden stairway that slanted up the side of the rock-and-adobe building.

When Lake stepped across the threshold the lawyer was hunched at a tarnished roll-top desk, examining a legal document. He was coatless, black string tie loosened. Beyond him, weighty tomes, yellow covers faded, packed a

bookcase, above which hung a dusty framed diploma. An oak filing cabinet stood in one corner of the room, a formidable looking steel safe in another. These, with four straight-back chairs and a worn square of carpeting, comprised the furnishings. A felt hat and dark coat hung from a peg.

Boothby glanced up and his chubby features crinkled into a welcoming smile when he focused the visitor. "I was expecting you, William," he greeted warmly. "I must say you look remarkably well." He rose, extended a hand. "Rest your legs!"

Lake dropped onto a straightback chair beside the desk.

The lawyer's questioning eyes probed him. "Amazing," murmured Boothby. "I was expecting a human wreck. I have never seen you in such splendid physical shape."

"Hard work, sound sleep, no rotgut," returned Lake.

"But the associations! Horrible stories leak out of Yuma. Didn't the suffering, the degradation affect you?" inquired the lawyer curiously.

Lake lifted his shoulders. "Guess I'm case-hardened," he said offhand. "How's Paw?"

Boothby sobbered. "Your father has been dead for almost three years," he returned quietly. "A heart attack two months after you—left."

Lake flinched as though he had been struck across the face. "Dead—three years!" he repeated unbelievably.

"I withheld the news, feeling that you were already sufficiently burdened," explained the other.

Lake fingered his chin, brow furrowed. "I killed the Old Man," he asserted with quiet intensity. "Guess he just couldn't stand the disgrace."

"No recriminations, William!" threw back the lawyer crisply. "The past is dead—let it remain buried. As for the present, I am afraid I have more unpleasant news."

"Shoot!" invited Lake briefly.

"As executor for the estate, my report is not a happy one." He bounced to his feet, stepped briskly to the filing cabinet,

returned with a folder. From it he extracted several sheets, handed them to his visitor.

"A detailed account of my stewardship, William," he explained.

Lake folded the sheets, stuffed them into a hip pocket. "Gimme the high spots," he requested.

Boothby resumed his seat and perched like an aging cherub, finger tips together. "Well, upon your father's demise the bank called his note—a customary procedure. To raise \$42,000, plus interest, I was compelled to dispose of some 2,800 head of steers. According to the tally books, the Diamond was grazing 6,167 head—the last roundup revealed barely five hundred."

Lake whistled softly. "3,000 plus, short. The critters sprout wings and fly?"

"Rustlers!" replied the lawyer tersely. "Every rancher in the Valley is complaining. Cattle stealing in this county has assumed the proportions of organized looting."

"What's the sheriff doing about it?"

Boothby shrugged. "Conover claims a depleted deputy force. You will remember that town votes put him in—so he plays up to the townsmen. That's politics!"

"And cattlemen never had no more use for the jasper than for a skunk at a picnic," mused Lake.

"Which feeling is cordially reciprocated!"

The young rancher shrugged it off. "Wal, I got anything outside of five hundred steers—maybe?" he inquired.

"There is \$8,776 on deposit with the Gresham County Bank, in your name."

"Keenol" returned Lake and came to his feet. "Guess I'll ramble."

"Riding out to the ranch?"

"Not right now." Lake's lips twisted with a touch of the old whimsical smile, "I got other—unfinished—business."

"Unfinished business?" Boothby's eyebrows raised.

"The hist—I was framed."

The lawyer opened his mouth to speak, closed his lips

with a gesture of resignation. How many times, he wondered, had he heard a similar declaration. Why couldn't Bill Lake admit the fact of his guilt—and forget it?

The young rancher paused at the doorway, swung around and fired a parting question. "How's Diane?"

"Mrs. Wagner," corrected Boothby. "She married her father's foreman a year after you left."

Lake stiffened. "Not Mark Wagner!" he ejaculated.

The lawyer nodded.

"I'll-be-damned!" The words came in a shocked whisper. Tight-throated, Lake inquired, "She—happy?"

"I just wouldn't know, William," replied Boothby carefully, but somehow the other knew that he did.

Still shaken by the news that the girl he had always taken for granted had married the one man in the San Simeon Valley he detested, Lake headed back to the hotel. Now that he'd lost Diane he realized how deeply attachment for her was ingrained in his fiber. It just didn't seem possible she was another man's wife. Could she be blamed; he considered bitterly. Who would wait three years for a drunken bum?

He was crossing the lobby of The Johnson House when the clerk hailed, waving an envelope. He slit it open, unfolded a sheet of paper, torn from a writing pad. On it one word was crudely lettered: *Vamoose*. Beneath it, a picture of a dangling noose was drawn. He looked up and inquired sharply, "Who left this?"

"I wouldn't know," confessed the clerk. "Found it lying on the register."

"You telling me that an hombre can walk into this lobby and drop a letter on the counter without your lamping him?" barked Lake.

"It was noon," explained the clerk blandly. "I was taking a bite in the back room. There's a bell for callers to dingle." He reached and pressed a knob atop a circular metal bell sitting beside the register. It emitted a silvery tinkle.

"So the gent didn't use the bell?"

"Not so I heard it."

Lake's cold blue eyes weighed the clerk. Just what did **this** hairpin really know, he wondered. It would likely be **time** wasted trying to puncture his air of injured innocence. With a shrug, he thrust the sheet into a pocket and turned toward the street door. The anonymous note brought one satisfaction—it proved that his quarry was in Serano.

He was crossing the street when a buckboard, behind two brons, came bouncing over the potholes. He checked to allow it to pass, then tautened with surprise. Holding the lines was Diane. He jumped forward, one hand upraised. Dust fogged as the girl yanked the team to a stop.

"Howdy, Dianel" he greeted, stepping up to the front wheel.

"Hello, Bill!" she returned, voice as expressionless as her features.

They eyed each other. "You look—wonderfully fit, Bill," she said, breaking an awkward silence.

"Never felt better," he admitted, and forced a smile. "Guess I'm a mite late, but I sure wish you happiness."

"Thank you!" she said shortly. Then ejaculated: "You didn't expect me to wait?"

"I—guess—not," he told her slowly, thumbing his chin. "Things—hunky-dory?"

"Yes, thank you."

Diane seemed uneasy, he thought. She avoided his eyes and busied herself curbing the restless brons.

"You still hang out at the Box H?" he inquired, for want of something better to say.

"We have our own ranch in the foothills. Mark registered his own iron, the 'MW'."

"You don't say! Wal, I'd say Mark's got a good head for business." He smiled. "Guess he always had me shaded."

It was apparent to him that the girl was uncomfortable, eager to pull away. He stepped back. Her relief was obvious. She shook the lines. Dust flew as the brons' hooves dug in. The vehicle whirled away, leaving him standing amid slow-settling dust.

He gazed after it, brow furrowed. Something was wrong, he mused, something beyond the girl's embarrassment in meeting a former beau. He stiffened at a thought—maybe Wagner wasn't treating her right. Troubled, he began to trudge slowly toward the courthouse.

Climbing a broad flight of brick steps, he pushed through swinging doors and found himself in a broad corridor. Doors opened upon either side, each neatly lettered with the name of a county official. The sheriff's, he remembered, was the first to the right, opposite the courtroom, with its rows of wooden benches. He turned the handle, stepped inside.

A cigar between his lips, Sheriff Conover lumped at a roll-top desk at the far end of the room, by the high, narrow windows, engrossed with papers that littered the desk top. From his seat, Conover commanded a view of Main Street and the courthouse steps. Whenever anyone entered the courthouse whom he judged might be heading for his office he made it a point to appear busy—which helped convince voters that they had a dedicated, hardworking servant in the sheriff's office.

The room reflected the precision of a methodical man, reflected Lake, pausing inside the doorway. Wanted dodgers were neatly tacked in straight rows along one wall, each exactly beneath the one above. A gun rack held half a dozen shotguns, polished and dustless. Three straightback chairs were neatly lined against each side wall, and the varnished floor shone with polish. He had a feeling that if some unthinking visitor as much as dropped cigarette ash upon that spotless floor he would likely qualify for a warrant.

He moved across the room and stood eying the sheriff's broad back. Conover sat puffing his cigar and intently examining a printed form, apparently unaware he had company.

"Hey!" exclaimed Lake sharply.

The sheriff spun around in his swivel chair and his eyes, blunt as bullets, focused the visitor. "So you're back!" he

grunted, and his gaze rested on the gun nestling in Lake's holster.

"Dropped off the stage at noon."

"And breaking the law already!" commented Conover caustically.

The other stared at him, forehead creased.

"There's a city ordinance—no handguns to be worn in town," rasped Conover. "That applies to everyone, including ex-cons." He held out a hand, "I'll take the gun!"

"Do I get it back?" Lake's voice held rising irritation.

"When you leave town," grated the sheriff.

Lake lifted the .45 out of leather, passed it over. Conover slid open a drawer, brought out a luggage tag, wrote "Lake" neatly upon it with a stub of pencil, tied the tag to the trigger guard. Then he rose, crossed to a closet, opened the door.

Lake glimpsed shelves laden with tagged sixguns.

Carefully closing the closet door, the sheriff resumed his seat, relit his cigar. "Wal," he wanted to know, "what's on your mind?"

Lake scraped up a straightback chair. "Any objection to an excon sitting in your office?" he inquired acridly.

The sheriff grunted. Lake dropped onto the chair, stretched out his legs. "I still got that bank hist on my mind," he volunteered.

"You and me, too," barked Conover. "We're still looking for that \$42,000."

"So you never rounded up the thief," mused Lake.

"We got you—we'll get your pard."

"The hombre's no pard of mine, but he's in town."

Lake saw startled surprise register in the lawman's eyes. Conover's gaze bored into him. "You got proof?"

"Right here!" Lake fished out the warning note, opened up the sheet and extended it.

The sheriff glanced at the laconic message briefly, tossed the message back. "What's that supposed to prove?" he demanded.

"Someone's scared."

Conover snorted. "You're loco! Some crank don't stomach an excon in town."

Lake shrugged. It was plain he'd get no help here. "Guess it's a waste of time to tell you I was framed," he said.

"It sure is!" The sheriff's voice held weary patience. "Quit alibiing, Lake. You served your stretch. Get back to the ranch and forget it."

The young cowman came to his feet. "Listen, Conover," he said, his voice hardening, "one thing kept me alive in Yuma—hope of a showdown with the skunk, or skunks, who jobbed me. And there'll be a showdown with or without your help."

"Before I take a hand," the sheriff assured him, his voice hard, "I need more evidence than a crank letter. Me, I figure you're running a sandy. I never yet did jug a crook who didn't swear to high heaven he was framed." He swung back to his desk.

V

LAKE PAUSED on the steps of the courthouse, in full sun glare, his mind preoccupied. After sweltering Yuma he just didn't notice the heat. Main Street showed few signs of life. Before sundown, few townsmen stirred out of doors. It was plain he'd get no help from the law, he considered. Like everyone else, Conover figured him guilty as hell. Well, he'd go it alone. Just where would be the best place to start? One of the men seated around the poker table that night he had barged into The Applejack, he mused, had knocked his feet from under him, figuring to create a commotion. That hombre had likely fished the keys from Bullock's coat pocket. He needed to check up on those men.

At a hunch, he headed for the office of *The Serano Sentinel*.

The newspaper was housed in a rock-and-adobe store

building, next to the barber shop. Glancing through the dusty front window, he eyed a shirt-sleeved man busily scribbling at a table. Type cases bulked against a side wall and an overalled form was dimly visible, oiling the gears of a flatbed press that loomed massive against a wooden partition in the background.

When he entered, the scribbler looked up. Chet Rushby, editor and proud owner of *The Sentinel*, was a thin-featured man in his early thirties, hollow-cheeked, with quick, questioning eyes, and afflicted with an habitual dry cough. Rushby had been an ace reporter upon a Chicago daily before T.B. fastened upon his lungs and drove him west to seek the dry desert air. Drifting into Serano, he'd bought *The Sentinel* for \$100 cash and a note. Previously, the sheet had carried little beyond official notices, published according to law. Rushby had made a newspaper out of it, doubled the circulation and made enough to live and keep the payments up on his note.

"You folks keep old issues?" inquired Lake.

"We have files going back ten years or more," Rushby told him.

"You got a copy reporting the Lake trial three years ago?"

"Sure!" The editor pushed back his chair. His gaze, puzzled and intent, dwelt on the visitor. "Say, you wouldn't be Bill Lake?"

"You read the brand," smiled the rancher.

"You've changed plenty," commented Rushby. "I never knew Yuma was a health resort."

"It sure straightened me out," admitted Lake, with a quirk of the lips. The oiler, bent over the press, straightened. A chesty gent, thought Lake, then his eyes widened as he glimpsed chestnut hair straying beneath a cap, fashioned from paper.

"That—a girl?" he queried, startled.

Rushby followed the direction of his gaze, laughed. "Pat—my kid sister, and my mechanical staff. Hey, Pat!" he called out. "Meet Bill Lake."

The girl came forward, wiping her hands on a greasy rag. She was slim beneath the coveralls, and trim-figured, with a smiling mouth and impudent nose, smudged with blue-black ink. There was a sparkle in her eyes and a warm friendliness reflected on her features that took Lake's fancy. Even garbed in dirty overalls, he thought, she was a sight for sore eyes.

"Hello!" she smiled, then, prompted by his fixed scrutiny, dipped into a pocket and brought out a tiny square of mirror.

"Heavens!" she exclaimed. "Do I look a fright!" And made a swipe at her nose with the rag. The net result was a worse smudge and an additional smear across a rounded cheek.

"You look right good to me," Lake assured her fervently.

"Pat came out west two years ago to nurse me," explained Rushby. "Since I didn't need nursing and was plagued by a drunken pressman, I put her to work in the shop. She learns fast. Now she's a dandy comp and she runs that old press like a sewing machine."

"The only fly in the ointment," the girl told Lake, twinkling, "is that Chet's a slave driver. And you'd be surprised at what he considers an adequate wage."

"Quit kidding!" admonished her brother severely. "Remember the prestige. You're probably the only female pressman west of Chicago." He lifted a bound volume off a shelf.

Dust flew when he dumped it on a bench smothered with exchanges. He thumbed busily. "Here it is," he said, "a full report. That trial was a seven-day sensation. I really spread myself."

Lake leaned over the yellowing pages, reading carefully, paused when he came to Sheriff Conover's evidence. The sheriff testified that he had been seated at a poker table with Fred Morris, district attorney; Tom Bullock, bank manager, Dr. Haughton, and Jack Rayner, cattle buyer.

"Five men," reflected Lake, and one a crook. Which one? Mentally, he eliminated the sheriff, the district attorney, the banker, the doctor. That left one—Jack Rayner, cattle buyer.

Rushby had resumed his scribbling. Lake sauntered over, dropped onto a chair beside the table and rolled a smoke.

He noticed that the girl carried the volume he had been perusing back to the press, where she sank upon a low stool and became engrossed in the story.

"You acquainted with a cattle buyer, name of Rayner?" he asked Rushby.

The editor shook his head. "Cattle buyers and drummers drift in and out of town all the time," he pointed out. "They seldom make news. Howcome you're interested in this Rayner?"

"I don't expect you to believe this," said Lake, "since I've already failed to convince either my lawyer or the sheriff, but I was framed."

The girl had stepped up and stood listening. "I believe it!" she declared.

"Pipe down, squirt!" admonished Rushby, with brotherly candor. His deep-sunk eyes dwelt on the visitor. "Maybe I believe it, too," he decided slowly. "The whole set-up was too pat." His shrunken features crinkled into a smile. "If you weren't innocent you'd probably let the whole thing drop, split the missing \$42,000 with your accomplice and duck out of town. So you believe this Rayner was implicated?"

Lake told of the episode in the saloon. "Rayner was the only man at that poker table who was not beyond suspicion," he concluded. "Likely he was working with another hombre, and that gent's in town, right now." He brought out the anonymous note. Rushby studied it in silence. "Could be merely a crank note," he mused, and looked up. "Why two men?"

"Rayner downed me in the saloon and grabbed the keys. His pard conked me, busted into the bank and stuffed the greenbacks into my jeans. What I can't figure," he added, "is how Rayner passed the keys to his sidekick."

"In one of your pockets," returned the editor promptly.

Lake stared. "Heck," explained Rushby, "it was a cinch. In the melee a kid could have planted those keys."

"Where were you that night?" inquired Lake blandly.

Rushby chuckled. "Not in The Applejack. Well, Rayner's a logical suspect, what do you figure to do now?"

"Locate the hairpin. Beat the truth out of him, if need be."

The editor nodded. "Call on me if you figure I can help. Say," he exclaimed with the enthusiasm of a born news hound, "this may turn out to be a bigger story than the trial."

"I think proof of Bill's innocence is more important," put in the girl. She looked up into his eyes as he came to his feet. "I do hope you clear your name!"

"I will, ma'am," he declared emphatically.

Back at the hotel, Lake thumbed through the register. "Jack Rayner, Kansas City," appeared several times in bold, angular handwriting. The last entry was only a few months before.

Next he hit for the bank. Perched on a high stool behind the wicket, the cashier pushed up his green eyeshade and blinked with surprise when he crossed the floor. Likely, thought Lake, news of his return had percolated all over town by now. News traveled fast in Serano.

"Bullock around?" he inquired.

"Mr. Bullock is in his office, I believe," the cashier told him, features contorting into a forced smile. For all his misdeeds, the visitor was a substantial depositor. He slipped off his stool and scuttled through a side door like a startled rabbit.

Another door, set in a frosted glass partition, opened and a portly man, thinning iron-gray hair carefully brushed back over a balding dome, appeared on the threshold. He was garbed in a decorous dark gray store suit. A black string tie dangled over his white shirt. The bank manager wore a set smile of amiability, somewhat discounted by an habitual wariness that dwelt in his eyes. He was plump and looked prosperous, exuding an artificial geniality. The type, considered Lake, who could say "No" with the air of doing a favor.

"Well, Bill!" he boomed, advancing and extending a soft

hand. "Back again!" He chuckled. "No more youthful shenanigans, I hope!"

"That's what brought me here," confessed Lake, and followed Bullock into his private office. The manager plunked heavily down into a leather-upholstered chair behind his desk, laced pudgy fingers against the bulge of a protruding paunch, and beamed. "What can I do for you, Bill?" he inquired benignly.

"Check on Jack Rayner's deposits in Kansas City banks," returned Lake promptly.

Bullock looked startled. "Jack Rayner!" he repeated. "I've never heard of the man."

"You played poker with him!"

The manager seemed taken aback. "Oh," he said lamely, "that Rayner!"

Again, Lake repeated the story he had told the newspaper editor. "Believe it or not," he concluded, "I never grabbed your keys and I never robbed your bank. Rayner's nominated!"

Bullock cleared his throat. It was plain he was uncomfortable. "Isn't this a matter for the sheriff?" he objected.

"Conover figures the case is closed," returned Lake shortly. "Heck, you're the only man who can check. Bankers won't give information to outsiders. If Rayner made a big deposit after the hist—he's guilty."

"Now let's not jump to conclusions," protested the manager. "Such a deposit would be a matter for suspicion, no more. Rayner could have received a legacy, earned a bonus, made a big deal." He spread his hands. "Why not let sleeping dogs lie? You were intoxicated. You have paid, in full, for the indiscretion. The unfortunate affair is now water under the bridge. Why muddy it again?"

The moseyhorn had never lost a dollar, thought Lake. Every cent had been repaid—from his own inheritance. He had no interest in stirring up further trouble. And likely he thought he was listening to a cock-and-bull story.

"See here," he replied, an edge to his tone. "Either we do

this quietly, or I get *The Sentinel* to print my version. I've got a hunch Rushby will spread it over the front page."

Bullock sighed. "Very well, Bill," he agreed reluctantly, "I'll make the necessary inquiries. Some time will possibly elapse before they bear fruit."

"Sure obliged!" said Lake. He rose from his chair. "I'll be back."

When the door closed behind him, the bank manager picked up a pen and tapped it absently on the desk top, a worried frown upon his face. If he didn't cooperate, he cogitated, young Lake would likely resurrect the whole affair and every tongue in town would be wagging again. He had no wish to have that skeleton rattle its bones. Public confidence in a bank was fickle, and fragile as thin glass. At the time of the trial many uncomplimentary remarks had been made regarding his habit of playing poker in a saloon. His yen for the game was best forgotten.

Outside, Lake paused on the plankwalk, considering his next move. There wasn't much more he could do in town, he considered. He'd started the ball rolling and, seeing he'd been back for less than a day, progress in pinning down the coyotes who'd framed him was mighty pleasing. Seemed the finger pointed at Rayner, but who in heck had the cattle buyer teamed up with in Serano? He decided to have a bite to eat, then head for the ranch.

The Chuck Wagon—Serano eating house—was run by old Charlie Plummer, a former range cook who'd discovered he could make more money, with less discomfort, in town.

Most of the stools along the counter were occupied when Lake eased back the screen door and stepped inside. Hooking his Stetson on a peg, he slid onto a seat.

"Steak!" he told the waitress, "and all the fixins." At the sound of his voice, Plummer's head dabbed around the jamb of the kitchen doorway. He was a squat, greasy man. Rheumy-red eyes, lined features, shiny with sweat, and fleshy dewlaps gave him the appearance of a sorrowful bloodhound.

"Howdy, Bill!" he yelled. "Long time no see."

Lake remembered Charlie as a friendly cuss, always ready to provide a meal on the cuff in the old days, when he'd lacked the necessary. He grinned. "Howdy Charlie! I've been busy, breaking big rocks into little ones."

"And paid damn well for it!" rasped a patron at the far end of the counter. "A half cut of \$42,000."

Lake slewed around. His gaze ran down the row of diners, a look of studied unconcern was fixed upon each face. One man, he noted, wore a deputy badge. Then he met the belligerent stare of a burly man in range garb. The stranger's face was bony, the weathered skin deep-pocked. High cheekbones seemed to pinch his pale eyes and his thin lips curved with caustic amusement.

"I never saw hide nor hair of that \$42,000," said Lake coldly.

"Sez you!" sneered the other.

Lake slid off his stool, fists tight clenched. Tensed expectant silence held the patrons. At his approach the burly rider straightened and stood awaiting him, one hand grasping a heavy china mug.

The deputy, a tall slab of a man, galvanized into action, thrust between them. "Break it up!" he barked.

The rider who had baited Lake dropped the mug on the counter, brushed past the deputy, heading for the door. "See you later, punk," he threw over a shoulder toward Lake, "when you pack a gun."

Tension relaxed when he pushed outside. Lake resumed his seat. "Who was that hombre?" he asked Plummer, who stood nervously dabbing his sweated features with a stained towel.

"Moniker's Vickers," the cook told him. "He's tied up with Wagner out at the MW."

Mark Wagner, reflected Lake, was sure not fancy about who he hired. Vickers had all the earmarks of a real bad actor.

A good meal under his belt, he drifted over to the sheriff's office and retrieved his gun.

The sinking sun silhouetted the rugged outlines of the Mustang Hills against darkening scarlet, and shadow cloaked Main Street when he rode out of the livery on a hired pony. Punchers jogging into town flitted past like gray ghosts in the gloom. Three years out of the saddle gave it an unfamiliar feel, and the rented pony, a skewbald, fiddlefooted restlessly. When Lake gave the animal its head it broke into a canter, which lengthened into a gallop. Main Street dropped behind and outlying shacks blurred the growing darkness.

Lake curbed the racing pony down to a jog trot, but the skewbald fought the bit, began crowhopping and striving to "stick its bill into the ground."

Bouncing around the saddle, Lake strove to curb the bucking pony. Suddenly, the sharp spang of a Winchester cut through the shadows. A slug ricocheted from the saddle horn. Again, a lance of fire bit out of the night. With an agonized squeal the pony rose high, forefeet flailing, crashed down in a smother of dust. Striving to kick free of the stirrups, Lake went down with it. The hard ground slammed against him like a sledgehammer, jarring every joint. Pinned by the weight of the dead animal, he vainly struggled to wrench free a leg jammed beneath its barrel.

VI

PINNED DOWN like a beetle to a board, Lake braced against the impact of another slug. But no more lead splashed out of the night. Fading into distance, he heard the pound of a galloping pony's hooves, racing in the direction of town.

Likely its rider was the wouldbe bushwhacker, he reflected. Howcome the hombre hadn't lingered to finish his dirty job? Couldbe he was the hairpin who had been tied up with the bank hist and this was intended to be another, and more forcible reminder that it would be wise to va-moose.

Then he remembered Vickers, the hardcase who had

braced him in the eating house. *See you later*, Vickers had said, *when you pack a gun*. It could have been Vickers. It likely was Vickers.

Stubbornly tugging against the skewbald's dead weight, he finally wrenched his leg free. Numbed by the pressure, the limb felt like a chunk of rubber. He sat slapping it, until circulation began to prickle back. Then he cautiously levered to his feet, stripped saddle and bridle off the dead pony, shouldered the saddle and began legging back to town.

Main Street was a pool of darkness when he finally hit the plankwalks, sweat-soaked and sorefooted. That saddle weighed at least forty pounds. It wasn't the weight of the saddle that bothered him, but his feet. Encased in tight-fitting, high-heeled riding boots, they felt as though he had been walking on redhot cinders. And his temper was equally inflamed.

Hammering on the tackroom door at the livery, he aroused Swede Thorsen, the hostler. Swede emerged, surly and half asleep, a stable lamp swinging from one hand.

"What the hell you dragging me out for?" he growled.

"Another hoss," snapped Lake. "Some bustard laid for me outside town and downed the skewbald."

"That hoss was worth \$25, maybe \$30," demurred Swede.

Lake dumped the saddle and dropped the bridle atop of it, fished out three gold eagles and tilted them into the liveryman's ready palm. "That make it right?" he demanded.

"Sure does!" retorted Swede, brightening. "You crave another bronc?"

Lake nodded and turned away. "I'll be back!" he threw over a shoulder.

"You laying a complaint at the sheriff's office?"

"Nope," barked Lake, "this is one chore I handle myself."

He drummed upstreet along the darkened plankwalk. Ahead, on opposite sides of the stretch of street, light spilled from the windows of the two saloons, bathing ponies tied at the hitchrails outside with a wan yellow glow. Windows on

the second floor of the clapboard hotel gleamed like pale eyes.

He reached The Gray Mare and peered over the batwings. Two punchers slacked at a side table, drinking bottled beer. Knots of townsmen were gathered around other tables, fingering the pasteboards. Behind the bar, an apron idly polished glasses, yawning. A sign was pasted on the backbar mirror: "CHECK YOUR GUN—Mark Conover, Sheriff."

Then Lake's glance quickened as he saw the rider tagged Vickers, bellied against the far end of the bar, nursing a bottle of whisky. He pushed inside.

At the rasp of the batwings he saw Vickers' pale eyes raise to the backbar mirror. The pock-faced rider straightened when he glimpsed the newcomer. He swung around, eyes wary.

Lake jingled across the butt-littered floor and came to a pause an arm's length from the burly rider, right hand fondling the butt of his gun.

"Hey!" protested Vickers, in quick panic, "I'm plumb naked."

"I don't need a gun to handle a bushwhacking bustard like you," bit back Lake. He unbuckled his gunbelt, swung it onto the bar.

The two punchers at the side table suddenly came alive, eyes eager at the prospect of action; the townsmen scattered around the saloon forgot their cards and stared expectantly.

Without warning, Vickers' right leg swung as he launched a swift kick at Lake's groin. The young cowman jumped backward, then, while the big rider was off balance, bored in, both fists pumping like pistons. One took Vickers full on his thin-lipped mouth. Blood spurted. With an enraged growl, he flung at Lake, hurled him back against the bar and clabbed for a nearby chair.

Before Lake could get at him again, wood splintered as the MW rider wrenched a leg off the chair. The makeshift club whirled viciously down at Lake's head. The young cowman ducked and the club crashed down on the bar top with a

resounding boom. Bent low, Lake launched at the other, butted him in the belly and brought a knee up between his legs. There were no Marquis of Queensbury rules in a saloon fracas.

Features contorted with pain, Vickers dropped the club, latched onto his opponent's bent head by the ears and strove to throw him, as though he were bulldogging a steer. Driving sledgehammer blows into his opponent's belly, Lake tried vainly to shake off the clutching hands. Gasping for breath, Vickers broke free, backed, sucking in air, pale eyes venomous, blood trickling from a split lip down to his chin. Crouched, fists doubled, Lake stalked him like a panther ready to pounce. Chairs scraped as nearby patrons hastily left their seats and crowded against the wall.

Vickers backed against a table cluttered with empty bottles. They spilled with a clatter. Quickly reaching behind him, he grabbed a bottle by the neck, hurled it with desperate force at his opponent's head. Lake tried to dodge it, but the whizzing bottle glanced off his forehead. Dazed, he staggered back. Vickers hurled at him, slogging at his head.

Still in a haze, Lake rocked before the barrage of blows, instinctively covering his face with his arms. A sharp-toed riding boot took him on a knee. He thudded down. Triumph gleaming in his pale eyes, Vickers jumped him, boots pounding into his ribs. Lake rolled, frantically trying to escape the hammering. The throbbing pain inflicted by the flailing boots cleared his brain. He grabbed a swinging leg, twisted savagely. Vickers overbalanced, went down with an impact that seemed to shake the saloon, quickly scrambled to his feet again. But the brief respite gave Lake a chance to bound to his own feet.

Sore ribs aching, blue eyes hard as bottle glass, he stalked his opponent again. Breathing hard, the other back-stepped, came up against the bar. Lake bored in, fired by a consuming rage. Right, left—right, left—his fists slugged into Vickers' face and torso with silent ferocity. He felt the other's body quail beneath the onslaught. Vickers fought back,

mouth gaping, features distorted, but the enraged Lake was scarcely conscious of his blows. Muscles hardened by years of rock work in Yuma, he stood half-crouched, remorselessly slugging the man penned against the bar.

Vickers' big form began to sag, sucking air with sobbing gasps, but still Lake's bloodied fists continued to mash his battered features. The MW rider's knees jackknifed, his arms sagged. Slowly he slid down, collapsed in a muddled heap.

The apron slid a bottle of bourbon and a glass across the mahogany. "Have a snort, pard, on the house," he invited, "you sure earned it." Lake ignored the bottle, picked up his hat and leaned against the bar, mopping off sweated features with his bandana.

"Reckon you had a score to settle," commented the friendly barkeep. He jerked his head toward Vickers' sprawled form. "Wal, you sure settled it."

"The bustard tried to bushwhack me," said Lake, tenderly fingering bruised ribs, "not an hour back."

"An hour!" The apron looked puzzled. "Heck mister that hairpin's been swilling rotgut in this saloon for the last two hours, maybe longer."

Lake eyed him sharply. "You dead sure?"

"Take my oath on it."

"What does he fork?"

"A grulla."

Lake buckled on his gunbelt and moved swiftly to the batwings, followed by every eye in the saloon. Vickers still lay lumped by the brass footrail, blackened eyes closed, mouth slack, breath whistling between torn lips.

Outside, Lake looked over the ponies tied to the rail. There were three, two duns and a grulla. He ducked under the rail, slid a hand beneath the grulla's saddle blanket. The blanket was bone dry, as was the pony's coat. Couldbe it had cooled off, he considered, but odds were that pony hadn't been ridden for hours. Then who in thunder loosed those bushwhack bullets?

Forehead creased, he headed for the livery barn.

The Diamond buildings botched a flat expanse of plain, about twenty miles up valley from Serano. Far to the north, the Gila Mountains were blue-shadowed against the horizon; closer, to the west, rose the ugly, scarred Mustangs, dark-seamed by the canyon, squatting, bleak and forbidding, their faded hues telling of water-starved aridity.

At a distance, the Diamond might have been mistaken for a small settlement—a ghost town, for no one moved around its buildings, and the big wire-fenced pasture was empty.

A long, low-built house, fronted by a gallery with spaced uprights, faced a bunkhouse, almost as large, across a stretch of dusty yard. Spread around were barns, wagonshed, blacksmith shop, corral, all massively built of rock-and-adobe. Above the clutter of buildings, the blades of a windmill spun lazily. The only sign of life was furnished by a ribbon of smoke coiling from the stovepipe chimney of the cook shack and two men slacked in battered old rockers on the gallery, smoking cigarettes.

One was Bill Lake, the other Frosty Freeman. Frosty had ridden with Craig Lake when the Old Man hazed his first herd into the Valley, and he'd stuck like a burr through the years. He was lean as a lath, leathery featured, with sardonic eyes sunk beneath bony ridges. Beneath a straggling sun-faded mustache, his lips held a mocking grin. Frosty was prickly as a porcupine, but Luke knew that he could bank on the old cowhand's loyalty. Craig Lake had been his god, the Diamond was his shrine.

"So we own over three thousand head, on paper," mused the young cowman, "but you claim the count's down to maybe three hundred. Some hombres been swinging a mighty wide loop."

"Been using a broom," growled Frosty. "They swept our range clean."

"Box H and the other spreads suffered, too?"

"Every cowman in the Valley's squawking like a stuck pig," the puncher told him somberly, "but it don't faze Conover none."

"Conover's a town man," pointed out Lake. "Townsmen's votes put him in office and keep him in. Seems to me he never had no use for cowmen; figures we should kill our own skunks." At a thought, he inquired, "These brandblotchers cutting out Wagner's stuff, too?"

"I wouldn't know," confessed Frosty, and added, "he got enough left to spread 'em over Diamond range."

"Maybe I should have a word with Wagner."

"If the Old Man was around he wouldn't waste no time whittle-whanging," returned the cowhand sourly. "He'd run them MW steers off so fast their axles would smoke."

"And you figure I lack the sand to follow suit?"

"I just figure the Diamond's dead, dead as Santa Anna," protested Frosty.

"Wal, let's not bury it," suggested his young boss, with a faint smile. Frosty always did look on the dark side of things, but there was no more dependable man in a tight.

Both men lapsed into silence—Frosty ruminating on the glories of the past, Lake's thoughts dwelling on the sharp-featured Wagner. Seemed the hombre had pulled a fast one, reflected Lake. With Craig Lake dead and his son in Yuma, odds were he figured the Diamond would just naturally go out of business. He'd seen a chance and grabbed it. So he'd located on the fringe of Diamond range, back in the useless wind-scoured Mustangs, and ran his stock on Diamond grass. No cowman in the Valley had legal right to the range he used, beyond right of usage.

Way back, most had established their boundaries through gunsmoke. King Colt had a habit of spelling out the statutes of the West. Things were beginning to settle down now, but ultimately lead still laid down the law. If Wagner proved belligerent there might be trouble ahead. But he'd give Diane's husband fair warning.

Keeping his misgivings to himself, he said offhand, "Guess we can start stocking up again."

"As well try to fill a colander with water," snorted Frosty. "The more you pour in, the more spills out. I'd say it's loco

to spend good money to swell the take of these doggoned brand-blotchers. We gotta clean 'em out first. That would be easier than trimming the whiskers of the man in the moon. We got no crew, I reckon you ain't got too much dinero. These rustlers been rampaging in wolf packs." Moodily, he reiterated, "When the Old Man died, the Diamond died with him."

Lake rose and clapped the puncher on a shoulder. "Quit," he said humorously, "before you break my heart." He moved off, heading into the house. It seemed empty, tomb-like, as he wandered around, the furnishings thick with dust, crowded with the ghosts of old memories.

Pausing at a slit window carved in the thick adobe, he stared across the yard at the deserted bunkhouse, empty barns, weed-grown corral, remembering the day when the spread had pulsed with activity, the bunkhouse thronged with punchers. Now it was a corpse over which two aging cowhands had kept vigil while he sweated it out in Yuma. Maybe Frosty was right, all that lay ahead was final disintegration and burial. And he'd planned to bring Diane here as his wife!

Well, he had best forget that dream, he told himself. Diane had chosen another man, and he had only his own damn foolishness to thank for it.

But it was hard to keep the girl out of his mind. He recalled Boothby's careful reply when he inquired as to her happiness, her unease when he met her in town. Something told him that things were not as they should be over at the MW.

Impulsively, he decided to check for himself. If Frosty was right about Wagner running his stock on Diamond graze, the law had to be laid down to the ex-Box foreman. At the same time he could maybe get the lowdown on the domestic situation. He had failed Diane once, maybe he could make amends.

VII

THE RISING SUN painted the hogbacks of the Mustangs with pale gold when Lake rode out of the Diamond the following morning and headed westward. Around him stretched the great shallow bowl of the Valley, still obscured by the clinging mists of dawn. There was a bite to the air, tangy with the scent of sage and greasewood.

The sun crept higher as his roan jogged across the swales, flooding the flats with glaring light that glinted upon the tiny yellow blossoms that smothered the greasewood and silhouetted the grotesque, white-flowered yucca.

Now and again, he swerved to check the brands of grazing steers. Always they carried Wagner's neat "MW" stamp brand. Although this was Diamond range, considered the rider, he had yet to sight one Diamond beast.

As he worked westward, a gradual change swept over the terrain. The lush valley grass thinned to withered clumps and finally dried up entirely; the swales grew into rolling hills, ringed by cowpaths; boulders etched the slopes and fine gray-white dust began to boil up beneath the pony's hooves.

He hit the cutbanks of a creek, snaking through the hills. It was dry except for an occasional shrunken pool. This would be the headwaters of West Fork, he reflected, and likely Wagner had located somewhere along its course. Following the curves of the creek, he rounded the rocky shoulder of a hill, checked his mount as the buildings of a ranch bulged into view.

It had all the earmarks of a typical shirt-tail outfit—a squat adobe, which, he decided, was likely the house. Rock-walled corral. Another low-built adobe which could have been the bunkhouse. A wire-fenced pasture around which ponies drifted. The usual windmill thrusting high on spidery legs. The whole held a neglected and desolate look, as

though it had been built for utility by a man who had no pride in his possessions. It just didn't seem the type of place the ambitious and competent Wagner would own.

Pulling closer, he noted a litter of empty bottles and rusting cans strewn around the buildings, and his disgust grew. Diane, he thought, had never been the type of girl who would stomach a dump like this.

Riding into the dusty yard, he noted a row of riders—bronzed, hard-looking hombres—hunkered along the bunkhouse wall, apparently with nothing to do but kill time. From the corner of an eye he tallied them—seven—squatting in the shade, chewing quirlyies, somber as buzzards and with eyes as sharp. His puzzlement grew. Why would Wagner need seven punchers on this hard-scrabble spread? And how come they were lazing around like hounds in the sun instead of riding range? Something was wrong. He could feel it in his bones.

By the door of the adobe he swung out of leather and ground-hitched the roan, aware that the eyes of the riders across the yard silently followed every move. He rapped sharply on the door.

His pulse speeded when the door opened and Diane stood on the threshold, startled surprise reflected in her green eyes.

"Gawd, Diane!" he ejaculated. "What in thunder made you folks locate here?"

"What's wrong with starting small?" Her tone held taut challenge.

"Listen!" he urged. "You don't belong in this dump. Cut loose!"

"Have you forgotten that I'm married?"

"Nope, but maybe you married the wrong man. I'd say Wagner ain't treating you right."

"It's none of your damned business how I treat my wife." The sharp voice issued from the gloom of the room beyond the girl. She stepped hurriedly to one side as Mark Wagner came up beside her.

Mark Wagner hadn't changed a mite, thought Lake, ex-

cept he'd hardened into a tougher mold. His eyes seemed bleaker and his voice held the harsh whiplash of an intolerant man.

"We don't crave visitors at the MW," he told the young Diamond boss, scowling, "least of all drunken ex-cons." Grabbing the edge of the door, he strove to close it, but Lake blocked the door with the quick movement of a foot.

"It so happens," he retorted, "that they ban booze in Yuma. I've been on the wagon three years, and I like it there. What's more, I dropped in on business. Maybe we should have a little talk."

"We've got nothing to chew over," declared Wagner.

"I figure different! Howcome you're pushing your stuff onto Diamond grass?"

"The Diamond's busted-through!"

"You don't say!" Lake's tone was caustic. "That give you the right to use our graze?"

"I go by the law," returned Wagner shortly. "The law says it's open range. You go argue with the clerk in the Land Office." Again he made an attempt to slam the door shut.

It suddenly struck Lake that the "MW" boss was scared. Maybe, he thought, he was thinking of the working over he—Lake—had given Vickers, one of his hands.

"You're acting too gordamned uppety to suit me, Wagner," he said shortly. "And chew on this—the Diamond is alive and liable to kick." He made a quick dab and his hard hands clamped upon the other's shoulders, the fingers biting through the cowman's flannel shirt. The lighter-built man strove to wrench free, but the toil-toughened Lake held him as easily as though he were a delinquent child. Methodically, he shook the writhing cowman until Wagner sagged, limp as a rag doll.

Features frozen, Diane stood watching.

"Now listen, real careful," Lake told Wagner. "Clean your scrubs off my range. Next time you give me cause to complain I'll bring a quirt, and I'm liable to use it." He

loosed one shoulder, grabbed the butt of Wagner's .45, protruding from the holster, carelessly tossed it backward into the yard. Then he flung the former Box H foreman away from him, saw him trip over his spurs in the gloom of the room, topple and sprawl headlong across the beaten earth floor. Swinging upon a heel, he stepped back to his pony, gathered the reins and mounted. He darted a glance across the yard. The nine hardcases still hunkered against the base of the rough adobe wall, unmoving, but he guessed their watchful eyes had missed none of the play.

Threading through the hills again, heading back to the Diamond, he pondered on his visit. Seemed he'd done no good, he thought somberly. He had a hunch Diane was unhappy, but the girl had spunk; she kept it to herself. It was likely his treatment of Wagner wouldn't make it any easier for her. He just had to cut her husband down to size. Let him get away with grabbing a big chunk of Diamond range and the Swinging V to the north and the Lazy T to the south would be drifting their stock over the boundaries.

The Diamond always had had the best graze in the Valley and he'd gamble adjoining spreads were eying it like wolves watching a fat calf. His paw had built the Diamond through powder-smoke and the least he could do was back the Old Man's hand. Once he'd exposed the hombres who had histed the Gresham County Bank, he'd hire three or four good gunhands and start cleaning up in earnest—that included rustlers, too.

For the next few days he kept busy, with Frosty and Slim Sanders, another oldtime Diamond hand, gathering what stock he could locate and pushing it east, toward Turkey Creek. The hills to the west afforded a natural hideaway for rustlers and he craved to make their job as tough as possible.

Frosty eyed their pitifully small gather with disgust. "There were times," he growled, "when the Diamond tallied 6,000 head, now I doubt if the count tops three hundred. Reckon the Old Man's squirming in his grave."

"The day will come when he'll sit up and cheer," Lake told the old puncher.

The following day he hit for town. Bullock should have heard from the Kansas City bankers by this time, he reflected.

It was hard to banish the thought of Diane, trapped on that hard-scrabble holding in the hills, from mind. Maybe, he considered, if he wised up Karl Hagstrom, her father, as to the situation, the old buffalo might take some action.

Hagstrom's range bordered the Diamond's to the east. A crusty Nordic, slow-speaking and slow-moving, the Box H boss had never been ambitious and had never run more stock than three or four hands could handle. A bucking pony had thrown him, years back, and shattered his right leg. Dr. Haughton had amputated the limb at the knee. While Hagstrom could still fork a pony, riding became an awkward chore which had led to the hiring of Mark Wagner as foreman.

Wagner, a competent cowman, had always deferred to Hagstrom, and handled him as adroitly as a temperamental cowpony. Gradually he took over the reins of the ranch, until his crippled boss did little more than stump around the place. Hagstrom came to regard him more as a son than an employee and Lake guessed the cowman wasn't displeased when Diane married his protege. Seemed curious, thought Lake, that the young couple had moved out into the hills, instead of remaining at the Box H. Wagner could have carried out his plan to usurp Diamond graze just as easily from the east as from the west.

When he rode in, Hagstrom was setting on the gallery, puffing a yellow meerschaum, his wooden stump propped on a low bench. The Box H boss was an alkalied oldtimer, stocky-built, sturdy as seasoned oak, but going to flesh. His square features were seamed and sundried. He had a stubborn jaw and faded blue eyes.

"Howdy, Mister Hagstrom!" greeted Lake cheerfully, dismounting by the gallery. He hunkered against the rail, eying

the old cowman cautiously, uncertain of his reception. He knew the Box H boss had always regarded him as a wild young codd who needed to be broken to harness, preferably with a bull whip.

"Was over to Wagner's place," he began carefully, making a smoke. "Diane seemed—kinda peeked."

"My girl is back!" announced Hagstrom abruptly.

"Back—here?" Tobacco and papers spilled from Lake's fingers. "She left Wagner?" he inquired eagerly.

"There was trouble," a weariness hung on the cowman's voice. "A family squabble. I do not understand. Mark was always a good man; I never hired a better."

"Perhaps you had better teach him to respect his wife."

Lake's head swerved at sound of Diane's taut tones coming from the doorway. Sure made a pretty picture, he thought, in a crisp cotton dress, her blonde hair neatly combed and wound in long thick plaits around her head. Then he saw that her lips were cut and bruised.

"What happened?" he demanded, aghast.

"Mark beat me," she returned, an edge to her voice, "after you left. I have never seen him so enraged. Yesterday he rode to town—and I came home."

"You are a married woman," put in her father harshly. "Your place is with your husband."

"Not if he treats me like a dog," she challenged vehemently.

"Mark is a good man—he will explain," insisted the old man. "Now you will go into the house."

She spread her hands, eying Lake with mute resignation, turned and stepped through the doorway.

When the door closed behind her, Lake swung to face his host. "See here," he remonstrated, "Diane's your daughter. Wagner's got her living in a hole not fit for a hog."

"You will kindly not interfere with our affairs," the cowman told him stonily. "She is Mark's wife and she will respect her marriage vows."

Lake eyed him belligerently, at a loss for words. It was useless arguing with the old squarehead, he reflected. Hagstrom could be as stubborn as a mule when he had his mind set, and he'd always been sold on Mark Wagner. Raising his shoulders hopelessly, the Diamond boss rose and headed for his pony.

VIII

IT WAS approaching noon when Lake's pony stirred the dust of Main Street. He was jogging past the *Sentinel* office when a shout pulled his head around. Rushby, the newspaper man, stood in the doorway, beckoning. He neckreined the pony around, stepped down and tied to the rail.

"You still interested in Jack Rayner?" inquired Rushby.

"Sure am!" Lake told him emphatically.

"Step inside!"

Lake followed the editor into the print shop. A rich aroma of oil, printers' ink and musty paper greeted him. One legacy from Yuma was an antipathy for stench. Rushby glimpsed his wry expression. "A trifle nifty, eh?" he smiled. "I like it!"

"Where's Pat?" inquired Lake, peering around.

"On a picnic, down creek," the editor told him, offhand. "Young Baker, a shining light of our local bar, picked her up." He grinned ruefully. "I'd sure be in a tight if that gal took a notion to marry."

For no good reason, Lake was conscious of a stab of jealousy. The girl was nothing to him, he told himself, but he didn't fancy the thought of Pat, maybe in a dainty white dress, sitting in the shade of a spreading willow with this lawyer hombre. The rattlesnake was likely taking liberties, even kissing her.

Rushby had picked up a copy of *The Lordsburg Leader*, folded to an inside page. "One of my exchanges," he explained, "read the marked item."

Lake took the sheet and his eyes lit on a paragraph thickly outlined with a copy pencil. It was brief and to the point.

STAGE HOLD-UP

On Thursday night the Las Cruces-Tucson stage was held up west of town, near Byer's Cut. The road agents rifled the strong box and stripped five passengers of their valuables. One, Jack Rayner, a cattle buyer from Kansas City, inadvisedly pulled a gun. He was shot dead. Sheriff Powers led a posse in pursuit of the desperadoes, but they scattered and little hope is held of their apprehension. This is believed to be the same gang reported last week to be operating around Deming.

Without speaking, Lake dropped the sheet onto the table, features stiff with shock and disappointment. This, he thought, likely killed all hope of clearing his name of the Gresham County Bank hist.

"Dead men tell no tales," said Rushby. "Guess that shooting was a slice of bad luck."

"Yes!" agreed Lake drearily.

"Of course, his accomplice is still around town."

"Maybe," replied the young cowman, with no conviction. Then he remembered the attempted bushwhacking. "Could be you're right," he admitted.

"I'm danged sure I'm right," asserted the editor. "Someone's busy spreading rumors."

"Rumors?" Lake eyed him, brow creased.

"Thick as bees around honey. I've tried to locate the source." Rushby raised his shoulders. "No luck!"

"What kind of rumors?"

"Mostly knocking you. Tongues are wagging all over town—allegations that you're tied up with a gang of Yuma cons; that you're involved in the Valley rustling; that you've got the \$42,000 cached; that you beat up a puncher in The Gray Mule because his accusation came too close to the

truth." The editor smiled wryly. "Someone's busy feeding the fire."

"I'll be damned!" exclaimed Lake.

Rushby dropped down at the copy table. "Take the weight off your legs," he suggested. "I have a theory."

Lake pulled up a chair.

"It could be," continued the editor, "that this is bigger than you think, and that someone else is involved, outside the two-bit thug who downed you and looted the bank. A pillar of the community, for example."

"Such as?" prompted Lake.

The other shrugged. "Who knows? Morris, the district attorney; Bullock, the bank manager, even Doc Haughton."

"You been chewing loco weed?" inquired the young cowman, with mild derision.

Rushby held up a hand. "Hear me out! That bunch have been playing poker together for years and quite a lot of money changes hands at their quiet little games which, incidentally, were transferred to Doc Haughton's home after the hist. What easier way of easing a financial bind than dipping into the bank vault and making a patsy of a certain young wild colt—to wit, William Lake?"

"It still don't make sense," objected Lake, staring out into the sun-flooded street. Abruptly, he inquired, "Who's that jasper across street?"

The editor squinted through the dusty print shop window. Lounging against a store front was a gangling rider, garbed in gray shirt and shabby dark pants. A blue bandana circled his throat and a frog-like blotch scarred his left cheek.

"Some saddlebum, I guess," returned Rushby carelessly.

"I've lamped that hombre before, some place," said Lake, frowning, "but I just can't place the hairpin."

As they watched, the lounge drifted away.

"To resume our discussion," persisted the editor, "*Someone* feels uncomfortable now that you are back; *someone* is spreading these rumors; *someone* has a skeleton in his cupboard—and each of the men I mentioned could have knocked

your legs from under you that night and planted the keys on your person."

Lake came to his feet, plainly unconvinced. Rushby, he decided, was blessed, or cursed, by an over-vivid imagination. "I'm still gambling on Rayner," he declared, "although I guess we'll never be able to pin it on him now."

"Have it your own way," smiled the editor. "I have a hunch that when this thing breaks wide open—and it will—it will knock the town flat on its back."

Heading for the bank, Lake chewed over Rushby's words, but the editor's ideas seemed too far-fetched for serious thought. He would swear that every man at the poker table that night, outside of Jack Rayner, was beyond suspicion. But could he be barking up the wrong tree. Bullock, for instance, hadn't been too happy when he asked for a check into Rayner's bank deposits, but Bullock's reputation was as solid as the bank.

The bank manager was certainly quite composed when he waved his visitor to a chair in the private office.

"Anything from Kansas City?" inquired Lake.

"Not a word!" Bullock laced pudgy fingers across his ample middle and relaxed comfortably in his padded chair. "I warned you, it would take time." His features creased into a benevolent smile. "But I do have an interesting proposition to pass along. It was made only this morning."

"I'm listening!"

"Would you accept \$10,000 cash for the Diamond?"

Smothering his surprise, Lake sat appraising Bullock's fleshy features, the editor's warning words seething in his mind. Was the bank manager the joker in the deck, maneuvering to get rid of him?

"Who's interested?" he asked shortly.

"The bidder—uh—requested that his name be withheld," smiled Bullock. "I can assure you, however, that the offer is bona fide."

"A cattleman?"

"Naturally."

"Paw wouldn't have sold for \$100,000."

"Undoubtedly," agreed Bullock urbanely, "but we must be realistic. In his day the Diamond seldom tallied less than 6,000 head. Now!" He raised his heavy shoulders.

"Now, I got nothing beyond buildings."

"Plus an expanse of valuable range."

"I wouldn't sell—for \$50,000!" declared the young cowman emphatically.

"Think it over," suggested the bank manager with a bland smile. "The thought did occur to me that in view of your unfortunate—experience—you might be happier elsewhere."

"I was born in San Simeon Valley," bit back Lake, "and I die in San Simeon Valley."

"The decision is yours," returned the other smoothly.

Mind uneasy, Lake loosed his pony's reins from around the gnawed hitchrail outside the bank. Was Bullock the buyer, he wondered. Had his inquiries thrown a scare into the portly bank manager? He had claimed a cattleman was interested. Well, there were only three cowmen in the north end of the Valley big enough to handle the Diamond—Ole Johnson of the Swinging J; Charlie Vince, who rodded the Flying V and Jim Timmons of the Lazy T. If either had been in town that morning, odds were they'd dropped into a saloon to wash the trail dust out of their throats.

He mounted, jogged down to The Gray Mule, tied up again.

It was still early afternoon and the saloon was empty except for two oldtimers playing checkers by the cold pot-bellied stove. The bartender who had been on shift the night of his ruckus with Vickers was idling behind the bar. He was a moon-faced man, oozing easy affability, with a head bald as an ostrich egg. His round features creased at sight of Lake. "Howdy, champ!" he greeted, "What'll it be?"

"A little information," threw back Lake, and tossed a silver dollar on the bar. "Any cowman drop in this A.M.?"

"Business been kinda quiet," ruminated the apron, slip-

ping the coin into a pants pocket. "Three of Ole Johnson's boys dropped by just afore noon."

"Cowmen, I said."

"Nope," considered the barkeep, flicking a wet rag absently at a fly, "unless you count one-drink Wagner. Guess he qualifies as a cowman."

"So Wagner was in?"

"In and out. Seemed in a rush."

The dusty hinges of the batwings squealed. Lake's glance flicked to the back-bar mirror. The long-geared rider he had glimpsed lounging across the street from the *Sentinel* office slouched in, drifted up to the bar within arm's reach. His gaze locked with Lake's in the mirror, quickly slid away.

"Beer!" he told the barkeep in a husky undertone, and dropped a brass check on the counter.

Lake raised a hand in farewell. "Thanks," he told the apron. "Sure obliged."

He expended another dollar in The Applejack and drew a blank.

So Wagner likely made that \$10,000 offer, he pondered, heading out of town. He could understand Mark Wagner coveting the Diamond, but where in creation would he raise \$10,000 cash?

Brow knitted, the young Diamond boss considered the problem as his roan clip-clopped over the swales. Gradually the pattern became plain—the riders killing time at the hard-scrabble ranch; the reason for Wagner's location in the barren Mustangs; the former Box foreman's distaste for visitors. Those hardcases rode by night and idled by day; Wagner had located on the fringe of Diamond range for the express purpose of looting the ranch, figuring that eventually, drained of stock, it would fall into his hands like a ripe plum. To cover up, and maybe fatten the pot, he'd extended his operations to other Valley spreads. He hadn't built anything fancy in the hills because he figured on moving into the Diamond buildings later.

Had to hand it to Wagner, mused the rider, the lobo had

gall to spare. He'd always been an ambitious man and a nickel-squeezer. Finally, ambition had taken him beyond the law. He'd drained the life blood of the Diamond, in the shape of its stock. Now he proposed to buy the carcass from the proceeds.

It was one thing to harbor suspicions, reflected the lone rider, but quite another to prove them. But he sure would get busy.

Back at the ranch, he outlined his ideas about Wagner's activities to Frosty.

"Lamped the coyote, around noon," volunteered the puncher. "Kept cases on him through your paw's spyglass. He was heading west with his woman, tailed by a couple of hands. They was galivanting across our range like they owned it."

So Wagner had brought his wife home, thought Lake, if that pigsty in the hills could be called home. It was tough on Diane, but there wasn't anything he could do about it. When a man butted in between a man and his wife he was asking to be gored. The kindest thing he could do for the girl was to keep away from her.

He gave attention again to Frosty. "Have Slim throw some chuck in a gunnysack," he directed, "and fill a couple of waterbottles. At sundown I'm hitting for the hills. From now on we keep cases on that Wagner outfit night and day."

IX

FOR A SECOND time Lake followed the curves of West Fork, beating westward over the rim of the Valley into the hills. Stars began to prick through the purpling bowl overhead and oncoming night veiled the slopes. When he reached the twist in the creek where the MW had first burst into view darkness swallowed the ranch buildings, but their location was marked by two small square windows, glowing with lamplight, gleaming like yellow eyes, and it seemed to the rider that they held a mocking malignity.

He'd have to change his plans a mite, considered Lake. He had figured upon working up to a high spot, overlooking the ranch, and keeping cases on its activities with the aid of a spyglass. But the rugged, upended terrain killed that idea. By night it was impassable; a mounted man would break his neck, or the pony a leg, among the chaos of ravines and arroyos. He eyed the dry creek, its bed cluttered with boulders. That creek, he reflected, wound past the MW, almost within stone's throw of the buildings.

He raised his reins and drifted ahead, following the steep cutbanks. At a spot where the bank had collapsed he stepped out of leather, led the pony down a crumbling slope to the creek bed.

Knotting the reins around a projecting root, he shucked his spurs, began picking a path up creek, threading between slippery boulders and tramping through a profusion of skunkweed. On either side the high banks walled him in.

For awhile he plugged ahead, then sound of a shout brought him to a quick spot. He glanced upward. The edge of the bank was two feet or more above his head, stunted mesquite brush that fringed it outlined against the night sky. He reached up, his fingers latched onto the tough branches of the shrubs and hauled. Eyes above ground level, he saw that the dark bulk of the buildings were so close that they seemed atop of him. Men were moving around, vague shadows in the gloom. Seemed they were saddling up, he thought, and lowered to the creek bed. Fishing out his jack-knife, he snapped open the blade and began digging a hole for his feet in the bank. The earth was sandy, brittle, came out in chunks. Quickly, he chiseled a rude ledge, large enough to offer standing space, hauled up again and securely planted his feet.

Peering through the mesquite, he could discern the lumpy shapes of horses standing around the yard, the moving forms of men. The door of the adobe swung open and a broad band of lamplight lay across the yard, revealing half a dozen or more riders busily rigging their mounts. Muttered curses

as they adjusted bridles and tightened cinches on jittery ponies, reached his ears. Seemed the MW bunch was riding, he considered. Where?

He saw Wagner's wiry form outlined in the doorway. The door slammed shut. Hooves clattered as the riders moved out in a shadowy, compact body. They dissolved into darkness and the muted drum of shod hooves died on the night.

Heading southward, mused Lake. There was only one ranch to the south—Jim Timmons' Lazy T. Maybe they figured on cutting out a slice of Lazy T stock. He jumped down and began hastily legging back to the roan.

When he reached the pony, he hurriedly strapped on his spurs and led the roan out of the creek bed. Swinging into the saddle, he hit south.

For awhile, he jogged through the night, riding blindly, circling the shoulders of hills, traversing twisting ravines, crossing bouldery dry washes, watchful for sight or sound of the riders somewhere ahead.

As time passed, realization grew that he had less chance of locating Wagner's night riders in that spread of wild terrain than he had of finding a pin in a pile of hay. He drew rein on the brink of a bench. The moon, emerging from behind banked cloud masses, peopled the night with shadow, out of which emerged skeleton-like ocatillo and twisted yucca. Below, like a luminous ocean, lay the bowl of the Valley. And somewhere down there, he reflected, were the riders he figured he could follow.

Silence held the night, the utter silence of the solitudes, a stillness that seemed to blanket the hills like a pall. . . . He stiffened, every sense alert. A faint rumbling registered in his ears, more vibration than sound. It grew in volume. He pulled into deep shadow cast by clumped prickly pear. There, tensed, he sat the saddle listening, as the rumble of a moving herd grew louder in his ears—the protesting bellow of steers, the deep drumming of their hooves, the shrill "Hiya's" of drovers.

He stepped down and stood by the roan's head, ready to grab its muzzle and choke off a giveaway whinny.

Plain in the moonlight, a stream of steers, horns clacking, flowed over the bench, urged to a clumsy trot by the dark forms of riders, curveting and cursing, pushing them hard.

The unseen watcher made a mental tally as the stock wound past. Two hundred head, he figured, maybe more. Then night swallowed the drag and only slow-settling dust marked their passing.

He mounted and hit their trail, guided by dust and sound, as the herd bored ever deeper into the barren Mustangs.

The sky was lightening in the east and the stars dimming when, nodding from weariness, Lake suddenly became aware that there were no steers ahead. He pulled rein and sat staring around, perplexed. In the gray haze of dawn he could see nothing but a shadowy monotony of rocky terrain to one side; on the other, the base of an eroding wall, towering high, along which he had been riding.

Wide awake now, he reined around, hit the back trail. At a break in the wall, where some past cataclysm had split it apart, the growing light revealed droppings. He peeled out of leather, bent and fingered a dropping. It was warm. So the herd had turned here, he considered, driven thru the break in the wall. He would be loco to follow, with sun-up close.

Fingering his chin, he considered his next move. An arroyo angled down from the wall, snaking away into a tumble of rock. He headed down the slope, dismounted out of sight of the wall and looped his reins around the trunk of a gnarled old juniper. Legging back up the arroyo, he stood ankle-deep in talus dust, eying a spiderweb of cracks and crevices that split the face of the wall. Not more than twenty feet high, he decided. It shouldn't be hard to monkey to the top. Crouching ahead for handholds and digging in with his boot toes, he began working upward.

When he crawled over the rim, the first thing that met his gaze was a great butte, overshadowing him to the west.

Rising high above the wilderness of riven rock, it stood like a mighty sentinel, its eroding flanks ribbed with bands of strataed rock—rusty red, dull yellow, lampblack. Now he could locate himself. That was Apache Butte, set deep in the malpais of the Mustangs, but visible from every part of the Valley.

He appeared to be on a narrow bench, freckled with loose rock, abruptly chopped off on the far side. He began crawling across it. Reaching the drop-off, he bellied down, gazing into what seemed a deep chasm, in which the shadows of night still lingered. Gradually, the scene clarified as growing light dispersed the shadows. A canyon wound beneath him, dotted with stock, small as ants in the distance, and thick as fleas. The verdant green of chaparral told of water.

With rising exhilaration, he grasped that this must be the rustlers' hideaway. Here they bunched looted stock, likely held the critters until a sizable herd had been built up. Then they pushed their spoils south, across the Border. There were always buyers in Mananaland, blind to brands and willing to overlook the formality of a bill of sale if the price was right. Now he had evidence that would put Mark Wagner where he belonged.

Pulling back from the skyline, he came to his feet and stood debating his next move. This was a matter for the law. His plain course was to ride to Serano and enlist the aid of Sheriff Conover. That was a ride of forty miles or more, he pondered, and his pony was already near gaunted. He'd be lucky to reach town before sundown, if he reached it at all. Likely another day would pass before a posse could reach the hideaway. That meant two days wasted, during which the rustled stock might be moved. He hated to give the brand-blotchers a chance to slip through his fingers. Then he remembered Jim Timmons' Lazy T. Timmons' place was not half the distance. He could reach it before noon. With Timmons' crew they could hit before nightfall.

Beating back through the hills, Lake remembered that

Timmons and his paw had tangled aplenty. West Fork was the accepted boundary between the two spreads, but Timmons' stock had a habit of drifting across and straying over Diamond range. Once Craig Lake had run a bunch of Lazy T steers over the cutbank into the creek, converting them into buzzard bait, and the irate Timmons had threatened to shoot him on sight. He'd sure have to handle the Lazy T boss with kid gloves, considered the rider.

The sun was high when he rode into the ranch. Timmons' place was a boar's nest—a bachelor spread. There was no house, just an adobe bunkhouse with leanto cookshack, a few outbuildings and the usual corrals.

Lake had dismounted by the water trough when Timmons came to the door of the bunkhouse, stood eying his visitor as Lake gave a roan a short drink. The Lazy T boss was a grizzled old cowman, dried-up and irascible, dehydrated to leathery skin and bone. His coarse black hair and sun-blackened features made him seem part Indian, but his eyes were steely-gray.

"Howdy, Jim!" greeted Lake, jingling across the yard. "You been losing stock?"

The cowman expectorated. "Who hasn't?" he demanded.

"Rustlers ran off a big bunch of steers last night," volunteered Gates, "likely yours. Two hundred maybe."

"You don't say!" Timmons stood eying the young cowman, chewing the ends of his drooping mustache. "How would you know?" he inquired finally.

"I trailed 'em, into the Mustangs, hazed by six-seven riders."

"Ain't the first time a Lake keep tab on my cows," returned Timmons sourly.

"Quit whittle-whanging!" Bill Lake strove to strain the brittleness out of his voice. He was bone-tired, saddlesore and itching to get after the rustlers.

"Now listen!" he begged, and told of following Wagner's hands from the MW, crossing the trail of the rustlers' herd, dogging them to the hideaway in the shadow of Apache

Butte. "You gather your crew, and we'll hit for the hills," he concluded, "catch 'em with their pants down."

The cowman made no move. Thumbs hooked in his gun-belt, he thoughtfully weighed the other.

"Wal?" interjected Lake, impatiently.

"Take most to sundown to round up my boys," objected Timmons, "and I ain't got but four. You claim they's six-seven hombres in that canyon. This calls for a sheriff's posse."

"Time we get a posse out here the coyotes will likely have skeedaddled."

The cowman lifted a sack of tobacco from a shirt pocket and commenced to build a smoke. What he didn't say was that he harbored a long-held distrust of the Lake clan. Scars of old gorings he had received from Craig Lake still remained. Young Lake had just served a term in Yuma and queer stories were circulating—stories that Bill Lake had made connections in the penitentiary and was tied up with the ghost riders who were harrying Valley herds.

Couldbe, mused Timmons, the colt was trying to switch suspicion to Wagner, the hombre who'd grabbed his gal. Everyone knew that Wagner was a good cowman, a hard-working gent who never took more than one drink and never touched a playing card. This rustling spiel was hard to swallow.

"Since you got no stomach for a showdown, guess I'll ride to Serano and brace the sheriff," said Lake in disgust. "You got a fresh hoss, my roan's played out?"

"Sure I kin fix you up. Mebbe it's better handled that-away," returned Timmons. "Reckon I'll mosey along with you."

"Let's ride!" Lake's voice held weary resignation.

X

THE TWO MEN traded little talk on the ride to town. Lake was half-dead with fatigue and Timmons was by nature a taciturn man. When they entered the sheriff's office, Con-

over greeted them with the careful neutrality with which he handled all cowmen. In the sheriff's eyes, thought Lake, they were political enemies, on the other side of the fence. Conover had the townsmen's votes corralled, and that was all that counted.

Dust smothered and trailworn, the two looked like saddlebums, in contrast to the lawman's carefully pressed dark shirt, shining badge and polished boots. But appearances never fazed Timmons. The grizzled cowman yanked up a chair, planted himself upon it, legs astride the seat, forearms resting on the back, as though he were in the saddle. "Conover," he said shortly, "we got trouble."

The sheriff's eyebrows raised. Probing, his blunt gaze flicked from one to the other. "I'm listening!" he returned briskly.

"Lake here claims he trailed a bunch of night riders into the Mustangs, hazing maybe two hundred head of my beef. They're holding the critters in a canyon, foot of Apache Butte."

"Wagner's hands!" put in Lake.

The sheriff focused him. "Howcome you're tagging Wagner?" It sounded more like an accusation than a question.

"I kept cases on his spread," returned Lake. "He was making too much dinero—too fast."

The sheriff sat stroking his neatly-trimmed beard.

"This is a serious accusation," he said thoughtfully. "Mark Wagner's reputation is tops. Yours, Lake"—he broke off, resumed—"you got any supporting evidence, any witnesses?"

"Just me!"

Brusquely, Timmons interjected. "What you figure to do about it, except talk?"

"Right now," said the sheriff, rising, "I'm rounding up a deputy who's better acquainted with Wagner than I am." He strode briskly across the floor, his boots drumming on the varnished boards.

Lake dropped onto a chair, yawning. He'd been in the

saddle, he reflected, for most of twenty-four hours, and he sure felt like the frazzled end of a misspent night.

Both their heads turned at sound of footsteps. Conover entered, dogged by a rawboned hombre somberly garbed in faded blue shirt and dark pants, a battered black Stetson slanted over his eyes. His lean features held the stamp of grimness and there was a bitter twist to his lips.

Tough right through, registered Lake, and noted a deputy badge pinned to his shirt.

"Pecos!" said the sheriff, sinking onto his swivel chair. With the one-word introduction, he eyed Lake and requested crisply: "Now lay out your hand."

Again, the Diamond boss related the story of his night's misadventures. When he was thru, Timmons eyed his deputy, "What do you figure?" he inquired.

"This gent tangled his spurs," said Pecos. "It sure don't sound like Mark Wagner."

"Maybe," put in Timmons brittlely, "we'd know more if we headed for Apache Butte instead of squatting around dribbling."

From where he sat, Lake had a view of Main Street, now showing signs of activity as the shadows lengthened. His gaze followed a rider who hurricaned past the courthouse, scattering dust. It was the long-gearred saddlebum he had glimpsed across street from the *Sentinel* office, and again in The Gray Mare. His chief occupation had seemed to be killing time, now he seemed in one hell of a hurry. As Lake's thoughts dwelt on the gangling rider, remembrance flashed into his mind where he had first seen the hombre—the saddlebum had been sitting in the lobby of The Johnson House the day he dropped off the stage. Could be just chance, he pondered, but the hairpin always seemed to be around when he came to town. He snapped out of his abstraction at sound of the sheriff's precise tones.

"My policy," announced Conover weightily, "is to steer clear of cowmen's whittle-whanging. Cattlemen should be capable of policing their own range."

"What they elect you for?" inquired Timmons wrathily, "to polish the seat of your pants on a desk chair?"

Conover's firm lips creased with the ghost of a smile. "Howsoever," he continued, "where rustling gets beyond local control, my duty is to bring the malefactors to justice and enforce the law."

Timmons snorted.

"I intend to swear in a posse," went on the sheriff, unperturbed. "Maybe Lake here will guide us to the canyon."

"When you riding?" persisted the Lazy T boss.

"At sun-up," Conover told him blandly. "Lake looks dead on his feet. If we left now we'd likely have to lay over for the night at your place."

Lake opened his mouth to protest, closed it again. The sinking sun was almost hidden behind the hills now. Conover was right—it would be night before a posse could be sworn in. The chance for a quick slash at the cattle thieves had passed. The delay irked, but the rustlers had no reason to believe that their hideaway had been discovered. "It's okey by me," he said, and stretched.

Timmons headed homeward. Lake stabled the dun gelding he had ridden to town and booked a room at the Johnson House. Pulling off his boots, he threw open the window of the stuffy hotel room and gratefully flopped onto the bed. In minutes he was sound asleep and he didn't awaken until the rays of the rising sun speared across the room. His first thought was of the posse. Likely the methodical Conover had already sworn in his men and was ready to ride. Swinging his legs to the floor, he padded across a frayed square of carpet to the window, peered out.

It was early, but life had begun to stir on Main Street. A swamper was washing spittoons outside The Applejack; a clerk lackadassically wielded a broom on the front of Sieber's General Store; old Sancho Perez's ancient burro slowly hauled a cask mounted between two wheels down street as the Mexican topped off water barrels set along storefronts. But there was no sign of the posse.

He spilled water into the bowl on the washstand and eyed his sun-blasted features, bristled with two days growth of beard with distaste.

Thirty minutes later, a stack of flapjacks and molasses under his belt, he hit for the livery and rigged the dun. There still didn't seem to be any activity around the courthouse.

The hardcase deputy Pecos lounged in the sheriff's chair, a cigarette dangling from his lips.

"Conover around?" inquired Lake.

"He ain't showed yet," the deputy told him, with no interest.

"Where'll I locate him?"

"Conover don't hanker to be bothered when he's off duty," asserted the deputy, eying his visitor with distaste.

They looked each other over, bristling like two strange dogs disputing a bone.

"I asked a question," snapped Lake.

"Quit arching your back," growled the deputy. "Conover hangs out half a mile north of town. White house, on the creek."

Lake nodded and left. The sheriff was sure making it plain he didn't have much use for cowmen, he reflected. Conover couldn't refuse to trail a bunch of rustlers, but he made it plain he would tackle the chore at his own sweet time.

Mounting, he headed for the sheriff's home. Beyond the livery barn, the street shrank to a wagon road, looping beside Turkey Creek. A scattering of adobes and clapboard cabins nestled in the brush.

Lake pulled rein in front of a white-painted cabin, as well-tended as the sheriff's office. Beside it stood a shanty barn, whitewashed, the whole surrounded by a neat picket fence.

As he sat his pony looking the place over, the door opened and Conover stepped out. He checked at sight of Lake and eyed him sharply.

"Figured you'd overslept," sang out the rider. "Sun-up you said."

"I have other business besides rushing all over the Valley handling cowmen's chores," snapped the lawman.

"And cowmen's votes don't amount to a damn," threw back Lake. He wheeled his pony and headed back to Main Street.

It was mid-morning before a posse of eight citizens had been assembled, sworn in and mounted. Lake could do no more than fret around, mentally cursing Conover for a stiff-necked son who refused to be hurried.

Finally, the posse jingled out, Conover and Lake riding ahead, the possemen stringing behind. When they reached the Lazy T the sun had begun to drop westward and the sheriff decided to spend the night at the ranch. It would be loco, he patiently explained to Timmons, to take a chance of becoming lost in the maze of the Mustangs after nightfall. To Lake he said little. The Diamond boss had a hunch Conover regarded him as a pain in the neck. The possemen were in no hurry. Every day that passed saw another five dollars county money deposited in their jeans.

Reinforced by Timmons and three of his riders, the posse headed into the barrens soon after dawn. Ahead, Apache Butte thrust above the tangle of riven hills.

The sun was high when the posse, dust-grayed and heat-flayed, reached the break in the wall. Lake, in the lead, checked his mount, peering into the gloomy recesses of the narrow defile.

"This is it!" he told the riders bunching around him. "The canyon opens out beyond that cut—and we may head into hot lead."

Men eyed the rock-girded passage doubtfully. It was plain that no one fancied throwing his life away for five dollars a day.

"It's your party!" said Conover. There was no mistaking the implication of his words—Lake had led them into this jackpot, and this was no time for him to step aside and allow other men to face lead.

The young Diamond boss shrugged, pulled his sixgun,

raised his reins and walked his pony into the cut. Tailing him was Timmons, a Winchester slanted across his saddlehorn. The others filed behind.

Ponies' hooves padded soundlessly upon fine talus dust, hock deep, quickly stirred it into a choking fog. Snorting animals and coughing men emerged into blinding sunglare. Before them stretched a wide canyon, walled by beetling cliffs. Its floor was patched with greasewood and chaparral was green-ribboned along one side. There was not a cow or a rider in sight.

Lake headed for the chaparral, raising his roan to a canter, the others drumming in his wake. Everywhere he noticed droppings, plain proof that stock had been held there. And evidence, he thought bitterly, that he hadn't lied.

Crashing through brush, he reined up at the base of an eroding cliff, etched with rust-red stains and green with clinging moss. Water dripped from a score of crevices in the crumbling sandstone, draining down to pool below. Brush had been cut back around the pool. The ground was pocked with the imprints of hooves and specked with the ashes of long-dead campfires.

Sitting his pony, Lake watched the possemen crowd around the pool, drinking and watering their mounts. The rustlers had slipped through their fingers, and he wasn't surprised. The canyon was short on feed and likely was no more than a stopover. Odds were the looted stock was well on its way to the border by now.

Timmons reined up beside him. "So the bustards skeedaddled," he said.

"They had the best part of two days," retorted Lake. "You missed a bet—yesterday."

The Lazy T boss said nothing, just saw chewing the ends of his stringy mustache. Conover strode over. The sheriff didn't seem overly downcast about missing their quarry, reflected Lake, maybe he didn't fancy powdersmoke.

"Wal, we rode our rumps off and drew a blank," commented Conover, beating the dust off his pantslegs.

"You figure the coyotes would set around and wait 'til the law found it convenient to drop in?" Lake's tone was caustic.

"Chewing the cud don't help any," said the sheriff, eying the young Diamond boss tolerantly. "Guess I'll take my boys back to town."

"You forgot Wagner?"

Conover stiffened at Lake's sharp challenge.

"What about Wagner?" he demanded curtly. "Them night riders were MW hands. Wagner rods that gang."

The sheriff eyed him, frowning. "So you claim," he said slowly, "and folks claim you hate Wagner's guts. I got a notion you're jobbing the hombre. Where's your proof?"

"I trailed the brand-blotching hombres from his ranch."

"Guess we should brace Wagner," put in Timmons.

"Brace him!" fumed Lake. "Jug the sidewinder!"

"On your saysol" There was a derisive note in the sheriff's voice. It was already plain to Lake that his word didn't carry much weight with the lawman. To the sheriff, he reflected, he was an ex-con, making unsupported accusations against a man with a stainless record. Eying Conover belligerently, he locked his lips.

Unexpectedly, Timmons backed his hand. "You sidestep the chore, sheriff," put in the Lazy T boss with truculent challenge, "I'll call a cowmen's meet and we'll git after Wagner ourselves. If he's clean, let him prove it."

Conover stood stroking his spade beard, a habit, Lake had noticed, when he was undecided. "Hunky-dory!" he agreed abruptly. "We'll drop in on Wagner."

XI

WAGNER'S SHIRT-TAIL outfit drowsed in the sun when the posse rode in. The place seemed deserted, except for a puncher smearing some concoction from a can onto the forelegs of a wire-cut pony. He straightened, staring at the riders

crowding the yard. Lake recognized Vickers, the hombre with whom he had tangled in The Gray Mare.

"Wagner around?" inquired the sheriff.

Vickers nodded in the direction of the adobe. The door opened and the man they sought stepped out. Wagner checked at sight of the sheriff. His gaze traveled over the posse and perplexity was mirrored on his dark features.

"Lake here claims you're swinging a wide loop," barked the lawman without preamble. He fixed the ex-foreman with a frowning stare. "What you got to say about it?"

Wagner's thin lips twisted with amusement. "What could I say," he retorted, "except Bill Lake hates my guts." He laughed. "Heck, everyone in the Valley knows I'm clean as a hound's tooth."

"Two nights back a bunch of your hands pulled out, heading south," put in Lake. "They run off a slew of Lazy T steers. I dogged 'em."

Wagner shook his head. "Likely you lamped a bunch of riders pull out, but all I got is two hands." He eyed the Diamond boss with patient toleration. "What you saw was a posse heading south from the Gilas, on the trail of Mexican boss thieves. They stopped over to water their broncs."

The coyote was lying, thought Lake. Those same riders had been hunkered around when he rode in before. What was more, a posse doesn't strip the rigs off its ponies to water them. But it was his word against Wagner's. He had no proof, and it was plain the sheriff had soured on him.

"Quit bluffing!" he said wearily.

"You naming me a liar?" The MW boss's voice curdled. He made a stab for his gun. Conover raised his reins and thrust between the two.

"Simmer down!" he barked. "Then, to Wagner: "That all you got to say?"

"Nope," snapped the ex-foreman, glaring across the rump of the sheriff's pony at Lake. "That maverick been hounding me ever since they loosed him from Yuma. He beat up my hand Vickers in town. He rode out here and roughed me up.

He tried to get my wife to quit and vamoose with him. Now he's peddling this flimflam about rustling."

Deep down Lake knew that the fast-thinking Wagner had outslickered him. He hadn't made a statement that could be disproved and his vehement denunciation plainly impressed the sheriff and the possemen sitting their ponies around the yard.

In their eyes he was a hardworking cowman, striving to wrest a livelihood from the barren hills, while he—Lake—was a graduate of Yuma, convicted on a bank robbery charge and seething with animosity against the man who had married his girl.

Well, he considered, he still had an ace up his sleeve. Diane must be acquainted with her husband's shenanigans. She'd expose him as a lying hypocrite.

"Maybe," he challenged, "we should get your wife's angle."

"Sure!" agreed Wagner, unabashed. He swung around, yelled: "Diane!"

The girl emerged from the adobe. Lake saw she had primped up, likely glimpsing the press of visitors from a window. Her blonde hair was brushed and pinned around her head and she wore a crisp print dress. She held her head high, but Lake read stark fear in her green eyes.

"Ma'am," inquired the sheriff politely, "you acquainted with Bill Lake?"

"Yes," she replied hesitantly. "Before the bank robbery I suppose you'd say we were engaged."

"But you married Mark here?"

She nodded.

"Did Lake act sore?"

Her glance went to her husband, then flicked to the young boss of the Diamond. "Yes!" Her voice gained strength. "He rode in, begged me to leave and he handled Mark—very roughly."

"You lamp a bunch of riders—two nights back?"

"There was a posse here hunting horse thieves."

Every word she spoke backed her husband's testimony,

reflected Lake, raging inwardly. Wasn't it plain to the sheriff and the men sitting their ponies silently around that Wagner had broken this girl's spirit, that she was scared of him and was repeating words that he had put into her mouth like a parrot?

"Tell the truth, Diane!" he burst out. "Tell the sheriff that Wagner's a dirty rustler."

She eyed him unblinkingly, but her fingers, restlessly plucking at the fold of her skirt, told of jangled nerves.

"I guess we've got the truth," decided Conover. "Thank you, ma'am!"

"You through with me?" demanded Wagner.

"Guess so."

The ex-foreman took his wife's arm. Baffled, Lake watched them head back to the adobe together, disappear through the doorway. A cowed woman and an unscrupulous man, he thought. By backing Wagner's claim, Diane had erased his hopes of smashing the rustling set-up.

He became aware that the sheriff was talking, his tone dripping disgust. "So you didn't get away with it, Lake! I've never seen a dirtier try to frame a decent man. Dammit, I should jug you."

"Diane lied!" protested the young cowman. "Wagner's got her eating out of his hand."

Conover snorted, and whirled his pony away.

"There were cows in that canyon," persisted Timmons. "Who hazed 'em back there?"

"Maybe Lake can wise you up," barked the sheriff. "He made a monkey out of me, likely you got the same treatment."

The old cowman darted a puzzled glance at the tight-lipped Lake, raised his reins and pulled out, tailed by his three hands. The posse jogged off behind the sheriff. Lake followed, heading back to the Diamond.

"You get the goods on Wagner?" inquired Frosty, when he pulled into the yard.

"Nope," admitted his boss wryly, "but Wagner sure made

a horse's arse out of me." Funker on the gallery, he told of his misadventure—and Wagner's alibi.

"That hombre's sure slick as calves' slobbers," grunted the puncher.

"Wal, he hogswiggled the sheriff," admitted Lake.

"What you figure to do now?"

"What can I do?" Lake raised his shoulders with a hopeless gesture. "I rate lower than a snake's belly in Conover's eyes. Now they've likely got me pegged as a rustler, figure I tried to frame Wagner to pay off old scores. Hell, I've a mind to quit the Valley and shuck the whole mess."

"Quit?"

Lake, chewing a sodden cigarette in pulp, said nothing.

"I never figured you had a yellow streak," rasped Frosty, straightened and strode stiff-legged across the yard.

A sense of futility weighed the young Diamond boss like a wet shroud. It seemed, he mused gloomily, that the odds were too long to buck. The Valley had him pegged as a troublemaker and a useless ex-con. Wagner had him jiggerood.

He thought of the \$10,000 the bank manager was ready to hand over for a deed to the Diamond. Maybe Bullock was right, he pondered. A sane man would quit bucking a bad rap and move on. With that \$10,000, plus \$8,000 or so already on deposit, he would be in shape to make a fresh start—clean—in Texas maybe.

That, he thought humorlessly, *would sure make the Old Man turn in his grave*. His paw might have had his faults, but he was never a quitter. His thoughts went to Wagner. That sidewinder wanted nothing better than to get rid of him, he mused. With ownership of the Diamond, and the dinero he'd likely accumulated rustling Diamond stock, he'd be king-pin in San Simeon Valley. Hell, he just couldn't quit, and play into the ex-foreman's hands.

Next morning, still plagued by frustration and uncertainty, Lake fiddled around the ranch office. It held nothing

beyond an ancient desk, two chairs with seats of plaited rawhide, an old stock calendar gathering dust on a wall.

He thumbed through useless tally books, useless because they tallied non-existent Diamond stock. Tiring of this, he made a smoke and stood staring out of the slit window.

His attention quickened. Three dust streamers came into view, smoking above the sun-flooded flats. Riders, he registered, and watched as the dust plumes crept closer. Curious now, he left the office, moved out onto the gallery. His saddle was dumped by an upright. He unstrapped a saddlebag, lifted out his father's old spyglass, focused the approaching horsemen.

The leader was Sheriff Conover. Tailing him were the hard-faced Pecos and another deputy. Sunlight glinted upon their metal badges.

Sudden hope surged through the troubled young cowman. Maybe something had come up, he thought, something that gave the lie to Wagner's protestations of innocence. Maybe the sheriff was heading out to the MW for a showdown, and craved to take him along as a witness. Masking a growing excitement, he stood on the gallery, awaiting the three riders when they jogged into the yard.

They dismounted. Conover and Pecos strode toward him, while the remaining deputy held the ponies' heads.

"Howdy!" he called, and stepped forward eagerly to meet them. "You got Wagner down to rights?"

"Nope, but we sure got the goods on you." Conover whipped out his .45, held it hip-high, leveled on the amazed Lake.

"Stretch!" grated the lawman, "And no shenanigans!"

Flabbergasted, the young cowman slowly raised his arms shoulder high.

Pecos stepped around behind him, lifted his gun out of the holster. Lake lowered his arms as the sheriff dropped his own iron back into leather. "You loco?" he gulped.

"Just careful!" retorted Conover. "I'm packing a warrant for your arrest."

"On what charge?"

"Theft of 216 head of Lazy T steers. Guess you and your gang run off plenty more, but that's good enough for a five-year stretch."

"Now I know you're crazy." Lake's voice was strained with shock. He saw Frosty and Slim issue from the cook shack, legging hastily across the dusty yard. Pecos swung around to face them, fingering the butt of his gun. They came to a stop, plainly nonplused.

"You can quit bluffing," Conover told his prisoner stonily. "We've got a confession."

What devious trick had Wagner pulled now, wondered Lake, striving to straighten out his thoughts. "From who?" he challenged.

"One of your boys. He took on a load in The Gray Mare last night and spilled aplenty. Pecos brought him in and we sweated the whole story out of the hairpin. You're bogged down, Lake, to your neck."

The prisoner's brain was beginning to function now. *Another frame-up*, he thought wearily. They'd railroaded him to Yuma once, and now they were hellbent to do it again. It was useless arguing until he knew what false testimony had landed him in this jackpot.

"Just who pinned this rustling charge on me?" he demanded.

"Hombre calls himself Farley."

"Never heard of the jasper."

"You will," promised the sheriff starkly, "when he spills his guts to a jury. Wal, let's ride!"

Lake raised his voice. "Frosty!" he yelled. "Rig my roan. Then hightail for town and tell Boothby I'm in the hoose-gow and I need him—bad."

XII

ONCE AGAIN Bill Lake found himself in a cell. There was one other prisoner, the long-geared saddlebum who had so frequently crossed his trail since he had returned to San Simeon Valley. So this was Farley, considered Lake, eying his accuser hunkered in a cage at the far end of the row, gloomily playing solitaire with a greasy deck of cards.

Just what was the hombre's game, wondered the Diamond boss. Likely he was tied in with Wagner and the ex-foreman was paying plenty for his false testimony. Remembrance came of Farley dashing out of town the evening he and Timmons had ridden in to enlist the aid of the law. Couldbe, he cogitated, Farley was Wagner's lookout in Serano. Word of their mission must have seeped out, reached Farley's ears and he'd hightailed for the MW to alert his boss. That would have given Wagner most two days to clear the canyon and to concoct a story that would explain the presence of a bunch of strange riders at the ranch.

He must have been sweating when the posse rode in. To avert any lingering suspicion he'd persuaded this Farley to make a fake confession. The saddlebum would have to stand trial, too, since he'd owned up to the thievery. Somehow he didn't seem the type who'd take the rap to ease another man out of a tight. Lake shook his head wearily. Wagner seemed to hold all the aces.

He raised his voice. "Hey, Farley!"

He saw the other's head come up and his pale eyes focus through the bars.

"How much dinero you pocket for framing me?"

The other's head dropped and he returned to his solitaire.

The outside door rasped open. Archer Boothby, the lawyer, entered with his usual bouncing stride. Dogging him, the jailor unlocked the cell gate, slammed it behind the lawyer. Then he moved down to Farley's cage, opened that gate,

too. Lake saw Farley gather his cards, stuff them into a pants pocket, heave to his feet, and shamble out of the cell.

"Where's Farley heading for?" he asked the lawyer quickly.

"Bailed out, probably," Boothby returned.

"That's the hairpin who hogswiggled me into this jackpot. I gamble the hombre who puts up his bail backed him."

"Perhaps," suggested Boothby, "you should acquaint me with the nature of the jackpot. I learned from Frosty that you had been arrested. Conover tells me that the charge is rustling. Now for the whys and wherefores."

He seated himself on the bench and regarded the prisoner through steel-rimmed spectacles.

"It's a long story," said Lake, his tone taut. "Makes the second time I've been set up as a sucker. I'm still guessing as to who framed me the first time. I know who aced me into this tight—Mark Wagner."

"The facts, all the facts—and no theories," interposed Boothby crisply.

Hunched on the straw mattress, Lake told of trailing the rustlers from Wagner's place, locating their hideaway, bringing out a posse and finding the canyon empty, Wagner's alibi supported by his wife and his own arrest on a rustling charge based on the testimony of the prisoner who had just been taken away.

"And now your theory?" prompted the lawyer.

"Just this: Wagner's as crooked as a snake in a cactus patch. He figures I know too much, so he gets Farley to frame me. Likely the jasper's a member of his rustling gang. What I can't figure is how he conned Farley into taking the chance of a rap—just to get me."

"Will this Farley take a rap, as you term it?" inquired Boothby.

"He confessed. I reckon the sheriff's got a sworn statement."

"And now he's probably released on bail."

Lake nodded.

"He simply jumps bail," explained Boothby blandly. "The

sheriff explains to the Court that the man, fearing retribution at the hands of his fellow rustlers, has fled. His sworn statement is still good. Wagner, or whoever made Farley his tool, succeeds in discrediting you—at the price of a little bail money.”

“So if Farley vamooses, it’s plain proof of a put-up job?”

“To us, but not to the Court,” pointed out the lawyer. “However, I shall not fail to point out the implication to the jury.” He fingered his chin and murmured, “A pretty kettle of fish, and devilishly clever.”

“Wagner’s a slick hombre.”

“I wouldn’t have given Mark Wagner credit for that much ingenuity,” confessed Boothby. “However, a desperate man will go to great lengths. Well,” he added briskly, “our first step is to get you out, too, on bail.”

He came to his feet, crossed the cell and rattled the gate.

Boothby’s footsteps had scarcely died away before the jailor ushered in another visitor, and to the prisoner it was as though a bright ray of sunshine had suddenly illuminated the gloomy jail.

Pat Rushby tripped down the passageway, garbed in neat white shirtwaist, a dark skirt sweeping down to high button shoes. A poke bonnet sat saucily on her chestnut curls.

“Oh, Bill,” she exclaimed, peering between the bars, cheeks flushed from haste. “I just had to run down and assure you that Chet and I are for you—all the way. Chet’s busy, putting the paper to bed.”

“You backing a dirty rustler?” inquired Lake gravely.

“Fiddlesticks!” she retorted. “You’re no rustler. Chet is convinced that all this somehow ties up with the bank robbery.”

The prisoner stood, hands on hips, eying her with approval. He decided she looked prettier than a heart flush.

“I doubt it,” he said. “This is Wagner’s doing. I hit the jasper where it hurt and he just had to close my mouth.”

“He married your—girl—didn’t he, while you were in prison?”

"Just what has that got to do with it?" demanded Lake, frowning.

"Everything!" she declared. "Folks claim you were aching to be avenged."

"So I framed Wagner!" His features creased in a humorless smile. "You believe that?"

"No!" she assured him forcefully, "but others do."

"Diane got a dirty deal!"

"She made it!" The girl smiled. "I hurried down to cheer you up and all I've done is start an argument. Well, I have to run and get into overalls—if Serano is to read its newspaper tomorrow." With a quick wave of a hand she was gone.

Left alone, the prisoner paced his cell, fighting growing depression. Like the sheriff said, he reflected, he was bogged down—to the neck. Farley's fake confession nailed him down. Even if the saddlebum rolled his tail, that damning indictment would still be on record. Maybe if Boothby aced him out on bail he should gather what dinero he could and high-tail. Folks would figure him guilty but what did that weigh against the certainty of again being consigned to that hell on Prison Hill?

But somehow he couldn't stomach the idea of flight. Forever after the name of Lake would stink in the Valley. Men would name him a yellow-gutted coyote who lacked sand to stand up to the music. Nope, he pondered, he couldn't run. He just had to try and beat this charge somehow.

The jailor clumped down the passageway. "Your mouth-piece sprung you," he told Lake with harsh disinterest, and set a key in the lock.

With vast relief Lake descended the courthouse steps. A man never savored freedom until he lost it, he mused, and unless Lady Luck smiled a heap more than she had lately he was likely to lose his for a long long time.

Shadows veiled Main Street, through which riders drifted, stirring lazy dust. Windows of the two saloons glowed golden and ponies stood droop-hipped at the hitch rails. Debating whether to spend the night in town or ride out to

the Diamond, Lake paused at the foot of the steps. The steady clanking of a printing press pulsed down street. That would be *The Serano Sentinel* he thought. Tomorrow town-folk would learn of the unmasking of the leader of the San Simeon rustling gang. There'd be plenty of "I told you so's." Give a dog a bad name and you might just as well shoot the critter. He'd gamble Wagner would laugh himself silly. For no good reason, he drifted along the plankwalk in the direction of the printing office.

When he entered, Pat hovered over the noisy flatbed press, as attentive as a nurse with a patient, while it pounded out freshly-inked copies. Her brother, stripped down to vest and pants, busily stacked folded copies. The joint was as hot as a furnace and noisy as a boiler factory, decided Lake, returning the girl's friendly wave. Chet Rushby quit stacking, picked up a paper and stepped toward him, his face wet with perspiration. With a final clank and a wheeze, the press stopped.

"That's the count!" cried Pat, and strolled over, wiping off ink splattered over her slim arms.

"Well," commented the editor, handing the sheet to his visitor, "you're in the news again."

Lake glanced at the headlines:

RUSTLING RING SMASHED

COWMAN ARRESTED

"Following a sworn statement by Thomas Farley," he read, "Sheriff John Conover, assisted by Deputies Pecos Hardy and James High, arrested William Lake, owner of the Diamond L, at his ranch yesterday. Farley, a confessed rustler, was picked up in The Gray Mare saloon.

"The arrest followed a somewhat bewildering train of events. Two days previously, Lake and James Timmons, owner of the Lazy T, rode to town to request help of the sheriff in rounding up a gang of rustlers Lake stated he had

trailed into the fastnesses of the Mustang Hills"— Lake tossed the paper aside, he knew the rest by heart.

"Seems they got me hogtied," he admitted drearily. "Folks got me pegged as a no-good son."

"We haven't!" declared Pat, seating herself on the edge of the copy table.

"It looks bad," agreed her brother, dropping onto a chair and smearing the sweat off his hollow features. "I spent the day checking—interviewed the sheriff, read Farley's statement; talked to several possemen. Tried to question Farley himself, but the sheriff had him under wraps."

He eyed Lake quizzically. "So you accused Wagner and he very neatly turned the tables on you! An impartial observer would say that you're either running a monumental bluff or you're the victim of a damnable conspiracy."

"What's your guess?" inquired Lake gruffly.

"There's a bad apple in the barrel."

"Wagner!"

"I'm not so sure," said the editor thoughtfully. "A tool maybe, but not the kingpin, so to speak. There's more than rustling involved. I believe the whole thing ties in with the bank robbery. After that robbery, the person or persons involved thought you were safely tucked away. You reappear—not now an irresponsible, drunken bum, but a determined man, resolved to clear your name. So you become a distinct threat—to be eliminated. What is more effective than this rustling charge?"

"How plausible it all is," put in the girl. "A vengeful ex-convict, looting his fellow ranchers, and at the same time embroiling the innocent man who married his girl."

"Plausible enough to convince a jury," returned her brother soberly.

"There must be something we can do about it," insisted the girl.

"Well, what would you do?" challenged the editor.

"Wring the truth out of this Farley character."

"First catch your hare! Farley was released on bail and

promptly vanished. I'm told he was seen riding out of town."

"Heading for Wagner's place, I gamble," said Lake. He eyed the girl. "That was a mighty good idea, Pat. Maybe I will brace the bustard."

XIII

THE GIRL impetuously reached and grasped Lake's arm as he moved toward the door. "Don't do anything rash, Bill," she begged. "You are already facing a serious charge."

"And remember that dead men tell no tales—and retract no confessions," put in her brother.

"You figure I don't savvy that," growled Lake. "I need to keep the skunk alive."

Night cloaked the hills when he jogged along the cut-banks of West Fork. Clouds veiled the moon, and starlight laid faint silver on the slopes. In Farley lay his only chance of beating the rustling charge, mused the solitary rider. Prove that confession false and the case against him fell apart. If it stuck, he'd be caged in Yuma again as surely as night followed day, and likely for a term that would make his previous three-year stretch seem like a vacation. The only way to get the truth out of Farley was to beat it out of him. But first, as Rushby said, he had to catch his hare. He was gambling the hare had taken cover at the MW.

He had to find a vantage point from which he could keep cases on the MW and arouse no one's suspicions. If Farley figured he was being dogged, the hairpin would head for some other hideaway.

Pulling away from the creek, Lake walked his pony between huge boulders that strewed a ravine, reined up and dismounted. He slacked the roan's cinches, knotted its reins around the trunk of a stunted pine and shucked his spurs. Uncertainly, he eyed his Winchester sitting in the saddle boot, but decided it would prove a hindrance. Unstrapping

a saddlebag, he lifted out the spyglass. Then he began legging up the ravine.

The whole night lay before him, so he took his time working around to rugged hills that loomed above the ranch to the west. And he found that he needed time—scrambling through a tangle of terrain in semi-darkness, working across rocky outcrops, crossing rugged slopes. Finally he paused on a ledge. Below, almost within stone's throw, it seemed, bulked the blurred shapes of darkened buildings, the creek winding like a black thread around them. Beyond, hills billowed like waves in a stormy sea.

He busied himself heaping loose rock that cumbered the ledge for cover, fixed a loophole. Bellied behind the pile, he would have a full view of the ranch. Well satisfied, he stretched out and dozed off. He could see nothing, do nothing until sun-up.

The raw chill of dawn biting into his bones, he lay peering through the loophole. The stars were fading and brightening crimson stained the horizon to the east.

The red rim of the sun slid into view, its rays stabbing into his eyes. As it crept higher, the dumpty adobe and low length of the bunkhouse below emerged out of the haze. Beyond the buildings, he eyed the lumpy forms of four horses, standing and lying down, in a wire-fenced pasture. That could be saddlehorses for Wagner, his two hands and Farley, considered the watcher.

The door of the adobe opened and Wagner stepped out, toting a bucket. He crossed the yard, dipped the bucket into the water trough and plugged back to the house.

Next, Vickers' burly form appeared, outlined in the bunkhouse doorway. Yawning, he slouched outside. Lake's pulse speeded as the gawky length of Farley, the man he sought, shambled out behind Vickers. He leveled the spyglass, adjusting it carefully, as Farley slacked against the bunkhouse wall, pulled out a tobacco sack and papers, began making a smoke. Then, focusing the glass on Vickers, he saw that the

puncher had suddenly frozen and was staring up directly into the lens. Confident of his concealment, Lake read startled surprise on Vickers' features, saw his lips move. Farley jerked erect as abruptly as though a rattlesnake had struck him, dove for the bunkhouse doorway and tumbled out of sight. Vickers ducked in after him. Perplexed, Lake lay gazing through the spyglass at the empty yard. Something had frightened the pair.

Fire lanced through one of the small square windows cut in the bunkhouse wall. A slug slammed into rock beside the projecting end of the spyglass. Splintered chips rattled against the brass tube. A deep boom of a Sharp's buffalo gun rumbled in Lake's ears. Hastily, he pulled the glasses back. Again the gun spouted fire. A bullet slapped into the stacked rock.

What in thunder had given him away, pondered the surprised rider, peering cautiously around the flank of the pile. Light flashed in the yard as a discarded bottle reflected the sun's rays, and a solution to the mystery leapt into his mind—the spyglass had been pointing into the rising sun and its lens had flashed a warning to the men below.

Cursing his own carelessness, Lake began to ease backward, out of sight of the men below. Now he'd tipped his hand it was time wasted hanging around. The MW bunch were alerted. Unless he pulled out fast, there was a risk they'd cut him off from his mount. Anyway, he consoled himself, he'd located Farley. Now he had to dig the rattlesnake out.

When he reached the Diamond, Frosty and Slim were hunkered, as forlorn as a pair of wet hens, on the gallery. Tersely, he acquainted them with the "confession" that had led to his arrest.

"Farley's out at Wagner's place right now," he concluded. "Unless I can grab the coyote and make him talk, he's liable to vamoose. Then I'm tagged for Yuma."

"Them jaspers will tag you for boothill if you ride within rifle range," grunted Frosty.

"Maybe," agreed his boss, "but I've got a plan. There's

only four saddlehorses in Wagner's pasture. We number three. You game to brace the MW?"

"What I got to lose, except my life," growled Frosty. He straightened and hit for the barn where his pony was stabled. Slim, never a man to waste words, followed.

Lake was becoming familiar with the surroundings of the MW now. When the three reached the bend in the creek where a shoulder of a hill hid the ranch, he checked his mount and gestured for the two punchers to halt. Handing his reins to Frosty, he dropped down into the dry creek bed. Following its curves, he found a spot from which he could look the spread over. It seemed dead, yet somehow bristling with silent menace. He retraced his footsteps.

"Listen," he told the two punchers. "There's no one in sight. I'm betting that Wagner and Diane are in the house, while the two hands are forted up in the bunkhouse. Farley may be either place. You take your Winchesters and work along the creek and cover me."

"What fool play you figuring?" demanded Frosty.

"I'm riding in to grab Farley."

"You hunting a headstone?"

"It's a gamble," admitted Lake, then smiled with bleak humor. "You ever had a taste of Yuma, Frosty, you'd pick the headstone."

The two slid down into the creek bed, packing their rifles. They needed ten minutes to take up position, decided Lake. He hunkered against a boulder and built a smoke. When the cigarette had burned down to a butt, he rose, crushed the stub beneath his boot and gathered his reins.

Braced for the impact of a bullet, he jogged toward the silent ranch. The rear of the bunkhouse, he noted, was a blank wall, but the windows of the adobe were in full view.

He angled off until the bunkhouse blocked off the house.

Dismounting behind the bunkhouse, he trailed his reins. Right hand on his gun butt, he slid around the end of the building, stepped up to its closed door. Jerking his gun, he

threw the door open with his left hand, jumped inside, gun ready.

For a few moments, his eyes, dazed by the sunglare outside, registered nothing but a blur. Then the scene clarified. A double tier of bunks was built against the rear wall, enough to sleep a dozen men. A plank table, with benches on either side, stood in the center of the room. It was strewn with well-thumbed pasteboards, empty whisky bottles. His glance flicked over the row of bunks, checked at one where Vickers sprawled upon his soogans. Plainly newly awakened from sleep, he lay blinking at his visitor.

"Farley around?" inquired Lake curtly.

"The hairpin lit out hours back," declared Vickers. He sat up. "Howcome you're gunning for the jasper?"

"I got a score to settle."

"You the hombre with the spyglass?"

Lake ignored the question. "So Farley's in the house with the Wagners," he snapped.

"Before you name me a liar," growled Vickers, "go see for yourself."

"Sure will!" the young cowman assured him, and backed out of the bunkhouse. He crossed the yard, gun ready in his right fist, kicked the door of the adobe.

It opened, and Wagner faced him, fury in his bleak eyes. "You again!" he barked.

"I want Farley!"

Lake saw the other's gaze focus on something in his rear, as Wagner threw back: "What for?"

A Winchester spanged from the direction of the creek, quick followed by a sharp yelp of pain. Lake spun around. Vickers stood in the doorway of the bunkhouse. Blood seeped red between his fingers of his left hand, clutching his right forearm. His Colt lay on the ground at his feet.

"A prime pair!" taunted Lake, wheeling to face Wagner again. "You handle the framing and Vickers the bushwhacking. Now send Farley out, or do I come in and get him?"

The dark-featured Wagner seemed startled. His quick

gaze shuttled around, seeking source of the shot that had crippled his hand. Lake jammed the muzzle of his sixgun against the ex-foreman's belly. "Farley!" he gritted.

"I'll swear out a warrant for this unprovoked attack," promised Wagner thickly. "Farley's not here, and you got no right to bull into a man's home."

"I lamped the hombre, at sun-up," rasped Lake. "Back up, I'm coming in."

Wagner backed, the muzzle of the sixgun nuzzling his middle. Inside, Lake looked quickly around. This, he saw, was the living room of the two-room adobe. In its rear, a door opened upon a small leanto kitchen. Furnishings were meagre and shabby—two rockers set beside a small table. A broken-down horsehair sofa stood below one window. A mirror in a tarnished gilt frame hung on the wall beside the front door. The packed earth floor was bare.

"Where's Diane?" he snapped.

"In town, if it's any of your business," snarled Wagner.

Holding his gun on the glowering rancher, Lake side-stepped to the bedroom doorway. A quick inspection revealed a brass bed, sided by two straightback chairs; a woman's dressing table and an oak bureau upon which sat a glass-bowled lamp. Clothes hung from pegs on the walls. He ducked, glancing under the bed. There was no other place for Farley to hide.

"Satisfied?" demanded Wagner, his thin lips tight with anger.

Lake moved over to the kitchen door, glanced over a sheet-iron stove, table and bench. There was nothing more, beyond shelved supplies and dangling kitchen utensils.

"So the coyote skeedaddled!" he commented. His hard eyes weighed Wagner. "And you two are working in cahoots. Wal, you grabbed my gal, but don't gamble on grabbing my ranch, too."

He holstered his gun and swung toward the front door, his glance going to the mirror on the wall. He saw Wagner make a stab for his gun the moment his back was turned.

With a surge of anger, Lake whirled, launching a swift kick. The swinging boot took Wagner in the groin. Gasping with pain, he doubled up, clutching below his belt. Lake straightened him with a vicious uppercut, followed by a sledgehammer left that slammed his wouldbe killer back against the wall. Wagner's legs buckled. He slid down, blood dribbling from his lips. "I should beef you," gritted Lake. "You're more pesky than a gadfly, but maybe I need you alive."

With that, he backed to the doorway, stepped outside and yanked the door shut behind him. The wounded Vickers was no longer in sight.

Lake rounded the bunkhouse, mounted. Farley had slipped through his fingers, he mused, but at least neither Wagner nor Vickers would forget the visit.

He was waiting, with the three ponies, when Frosty and Slim came trudging down the creek bed.

Frosty looked around. "I don't lamp Farley," he said.

"Nope," Lake told him, "the sidewinder hightailed."

"Where does that leave us?"

"Out on a limb," admitted his boss with wry humor, "and it's about to be sawed off."

XIV

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, Lake hung around the house, not knowing what move to make next. Now that Farley had slipped through his fingers, there didn't seem anything more he could do about the rustling charge against him. He was shackled, as securely as though the irons were already weighing his wrists and ankles. And he could almost smell the stench and sweat of Prison Hill.

The gawky saddlebum, he reflected, was likely in Mexico by now. He'd played his part in the frame-up. Wagner had likely paid him off, and until his victim was safe behind bars, he'd stick to south of the border. His mouthpiece, full of apologies, would assure the Court that his client had fled

solely because he feared for his life. Wagner would testify that he—Lake—had searched the MW, hot on Farley's trail. That sure wouldn't help his case. He was trapped!

Around mid-morning, he decided to ride to town. Anything seemed better than inaction!

When he tied his pony outside The Chuck Wagon, and dropped into the eating house for a mug of coffee, the attitude of other patrons was plain. Chilly silence held them when he slid onto a stool. He was aware of stealthy side-glances and an atmosphere of hostility. Seemed the citizens of Serano harbored no doubts about his guilt.

Feeling as forlorn as a colt on strange range, he hastily swallowed his coffee, dropped a coin on the counter and wandered outside. Didn't seem anything to hold him in town, he reflected, then remembered he had yet to hear from Bullock, the bank manager, regarding Jack Rayner's deposits in Kansas City.

The bank hist didn't loom so important now, in light of the new trouble in which he was bogged down, but, for want of something better to do, he headed for the bank.

Whatever the bank manager might have personally felt about the rustling charge was hidden behind the bland smile with which he habitually greeted depositors.

"You hear from Kansas City yet?" inquired Lake, scraping up a chair.

"Indeed I have," Bullock told him. Plump fingers intertwined across his bulging middle, he slacked in his chair. "There is no record of any deposit in the name of Rayner."

"So that's that!" commented Lake with a strained smile.

"I am afraid it eliminates Rayner as a suspect in the robbery of the bank."

"And it throws it back into my lap," grunted the young cowman.

"As I remarked before, you have paid—in full," returned Bullock. He cleared his throat. "Now about the standing offer for your ranch. Ten thousand dollars, cash, you will remember."

"Wagner's offer," returned Lake absently.

The bank manager inclined his head with an affirmative nod, checked the movement and threw back sharply. "No name was mentioned."

"I know!" Lake told him briefly. "You ever try to figure how Wagner got his grubhooks on ten thousand cartwheels? Three years back he was a \$100 a month foreman, and he sure hasn't made it out of that spread back in the hills."

"I keep busy attending to my own business." Bullock's tone held stern reproof. "So busy indeed that I have no time to inquire into affairs that are strictly none of my business."

"In other words, you just don't give a damn where the dinero comes from, just as long as it's there!" Lake arose. "You tell Wagner he'll only get the Diamond over my dead body."

When he stepped out of the bank, Rushby came stalking along the plankwalk. The newspaper man walked with long, swinging strides, always in a hurry, in marked contrast to the dawdling progress of the average citizen.

He descended upon Lake like a hawk pouncing upon a pigeon.

"You find Farley?" he demanded.

"Yep," said the young cowman shortly, "out at Wagner's place where I figured he'd be, but he hightailed."

"Too bad!" soothed Rushby.

"I've got more bad news—Jack Rayner, the cattle buyer, never had a dollar banked in Kansas City. Guess that let's the jasper out as a suspect in the bank hist."

"And leaves us three!" The newspaper man checked them off on his fingers: "Fred Morris, Tom Bullock, our revered bank manager, and Doc Haughton."

"Suspects!" mocked Lake. "You're crazy as a coot."

"Simple logic," retorted Rushby. "One of the men seated at that poker table was an accomplice. There were four, if we include John Conover, our esteemed sheriff, which reminds me, I hear Conover pinned Wagner's ears back this

A.M. Wagner charged into his office, demanding you be taken into custody again, claiming assault and battery. Apparently the two exchanged hot words. Anyway, Wagner left the office as sulky as a sore-headed dog. Guess he's relating his troubles at the meeting."

"What meeting?"

"Cowmen's meet. They're holding a conflag at the Johnson Hotel right now, strictly confidential, no reporters allowed."

"First I heard of it," frowned Lake.

The editor grinned. "Remember, you're suspect." With that he darted away.

Lake stood chewing over Rushby's words. Like a bull in the ring, tormented by darts flung by elusive picadors, he was in a mood of angry frustration. The reason why he hadn't been invited to the cowmen's meet was plain, but the omission stuck in his craw. He was a cowman, maybe under a cloud, but nothing had been proven, he argued mentally. He had a right to be at that meeting. With sudden resolution, he headed for the Johnson Hotel.

The balding clerk looked uneasy when he approached the desk. "Cowman meet," he said brusquely, "which room?"

"Sorry, Mister Lake," the clerk fumbled, "but the meeting is strictly private. No inform—"

"No information given to outsiders," cut in Lake with a thin smile, "and I'm an outsider."

He headed for the stairway. Emerging into a passage at its head, with doors opening off on either side, he moved along, ears alert. From behind a closed door came the murmur of talk, punctuated by an occasional sharp-voiced oath. He turned the handle and stepped inside.

Talk chopped off as though severed by an ax. He stood just beyond the threshold, his gaze probing a blue haze of tobacco smoke. Every cowman in the northern portion of San Simeon Valley was seated in that room. Lake recognized grizzled Jim Timmons, Mark Wagner, his features creased in an outraged scowl, stocky Ole Johnson, ramrod of the

Swinging J, lanky Charlie Vince, the Flying V boss and Hagstrom from the Box H. A tough bunch, considered the Diamond boss, men who survived by virtue of their guts and guns, men who knew San Simeon Valley when the only law was King Colt, and men, when they decided the law had failed its purpose, were liable to take matters into their own hands.

Charlie Vince's deep voice broke a startled silence. "Beat it, Lake," he said harshly. "This is a cowmen's meet."

"I'm a cowman!"

"You got too many sidelines."

"Meaning?"

"Your rope's sticky," put in Johnson. "Doggonit, do we have to spell it out?"

"I was framed!"

Wagner laughed out loud. "Like you was framed for the bank hist?" he mocked.

"Couldbe by the same jasper," threw back Lake.

"Quit running off at the mouth!" Vince's tone was etched with irritation. "We've got business, Lake. You crave to spread your hand, spread it before a jury."

The Diamond boss stood unmoving, blue eyes blazing. "I aim to spread it right now," he bit back.

"I'll go get the sheriff," spoke up Wagner, and jumped to his feet. "That lobo makes nothing but trouble."

"Hold it!" barked Timmons, wintry eyes on Lake's stubborn form. "Brand blotchers was busy when Lake was in Yuma. Reckon his Diamond lost plenty steers. Let the young colt have his say."

Wagner appeared to be the only objector, but Timmons rammed a hard elbow into his middle and he abruptly collapsed upon his seat.

"First," began Lake, "I'm naming Wagner as the ramrod of the rustlers, else why has he got a dozen bunks in his bunkhouse—for a crew of two? And why the windy about a posse chasing Mexican hoss thieves? Likewise, why was Farley hanging out at the MW as late as yesterday?"

"Sure Farley was at my place," yelled Wagner, jumping to his feet again. "He's the only witness against you and he was scared you'd beef him. I aimed to keep him alive 'til he told his story to a jury."

"A dozen bunks!" taunted Lake.

"What's wrong with looking ahead? Maybe I'll need 'em."

Wagner's voice held hot indignation. He sure could put on a good imitation of an innocent man, thought Lake with a numb feeling that the sympathy of most, maybe all, the cowmen present was with the MW boss. It was plain they figured he had his knife out for Wagner.

"This whittle-whanging's getting us nowhere," broke in Vince impatiently.

"I've got a right to be heard," shouted Wagner. "This jailbird's been pestering me ever since he was loosed from Yuma. You know why—because I hitched up with his gal."

"Quiet!" roared Vince, then eyed the Diamond boss. "Chew on this, Lake," he said, his tone chilled. "You get a slick mouthpiece and hogswiggle the jury and we lose more stock, you sure won't miss the next party—a necktie party."

It was hopeless trying to convince these oldtimers that they were barking up the wrong tree, thought Lake with growing hopelessness. In their minds he was branded "troublemaker" and it seemed nothing would erase the brand. He shrugged and turned to the door. It slammed shut behind him. Somberly, he moved away, dropped down the stairs. Rushby was pacing the lobby. He looked eagerly up at the Diamond boss. "The clerk tells me you busted into the cowmen's meet," he said. "Any news?"

"Yes," Lake told the newspaper man shortly. "If the jury don't give me my comeupance, the cowmen will—with a rope."

He pushed past Rushby and headed for his pony, tied outside the eating house.

The day was dying when he jogged into the Diamond. With no interest he saw that a dun pony was tied by the water trough, a ragged bedroll lashed behind the cantle. He

watered his own mount, stripped off its gear and loosed it in the corral. When he stepped onto the gallery of the house, a gawky rider rose from a rocker. Immersed in his own troubles, Lake failed for a moment to recognize him in the fading light. Then he glimpsed a dull red blotch on the visitor's left cheek, and his eyes widened with amazement.

"Farley!" he ejaculated.

XV

LAKE'S SURPRISE was quickly followed by caution. Just what trick had Farley and Wagner concocted now?

"Wal," he inquired curtly, "what brought you here?"

"A deall" Farley stood grinning, thumbs hooked in his gunbelt.

"Just what kind of a deal?"

"You crave to kill that confession?"

"I'm liable to kill you!" Rising anger bristled Lake's voice. "You sure stretched the blanket when you peddled that rustling hogwash, you lying bustard."

Neither the threat nor the insult brought more than a grin to the gawky rider's features. "You beef me, you swing," he retorted. "You act reasonable, you got Mark Wagner by the short hairs."

"What's reasonable?"

"A thousand dollars—gold," threw back Farley.

So Farley was crossing his pard, thought Lake, just as he'd likely cross anyone—for a price. As the Diamond boss stood cogitating with creased brow, his visitor jerked a sack of Bull Durham from a shirt pocket. But Lake noticed that when he tapped tobacco into a paper he spilled plenty. Farley was nervous, and trying to cover up.

"The way I figure the set-up," said Lake slowly, "Wagner rods this rustling gang. You were his lookout in town. I spooked the lobo when I trailed his night riders from the MW. So, to close my yap for keeps, Wagner dropped a roll

in your jeans for a confession, tying me in. The idea was that he'd bail you out, you'd beat it across the border, and I'd be left holding the bag."

"Right!" admitted Farley. He scratched a match and touched it to his smoke.

"Howcome you stuck around?"

"A notion hit me to collect from you," admitted Farley. "Then I hightail."

"You sure are a prime example of a dirty, double-crosser," commented Lake, his tone edged.

"Maybe we should quit yapping and get down to business," growled Farley. "I pull out and leave that confession behind, you'll be plaiting hair bridles 'til Kingdom Come. You divvyng up that thousand smackers?"

Still bewildered by Farley's unexpected appearance, Lake stood trying to straighten out his thoughts. He'd have given his right arm to have had Archer Boothby, the lawyer, beside him. This lucky break had to be handled right.

"How you figure to wipe out the confession?" he inquired abruptly.

"It's a cinch," the other threw back, offhand. "You write something like 'I confess I was lying when I tied Bill Lake in with the brand-blotchers.' I stick my John Henry to it. You give me a day to get out of reach, then hand it to the sheriff."

"And Conover would laugh out loud," snapped Lake. "He'd swear I got that signature at gunpoint. You ride to town with me. We brace the sheriff, then I drop into the bank, draw a thousand dollars and pay you off."

"You loco?" snarled Farley. "Conover will add another count to my indictment—perjury—and jug me for sure. We do our business right here and I make tracks just as soon as I collect."

He just had to talk to Boothby, reflected Lake. The lawyer would know how to act. Aloud, he returned, "Have it your own way. Come sun-up, I'll ride to town and draw the thousand from the bank. You stick around and we'll fix up the deal tomorrow."

Farley hesitated, rasping a bristle of beard. It was plain to Lake that the saddlebum was spooky, greed battling with fear of falling into a trap. The gawky Farley plainly had no scruples. He'd perjured himself for a price; he'd double-cross Wagner to fatten his roll; he was scared of the sheriff because Conover represented the law.

"Hunky-dory," agreed Farley finally, "I'll be back."

"I said stick around!" barked Lake, and flicked out his .45. Thumbing the hammer, he lined it on the other. "You spread your soogans right here."

"You plug me," warned the other, uneasy eyes on the leveled gun, "and you're a gone goose."

"Act sensible," retorted the Diamond boss, "and we'll get along. Tote your roll to the bunkhouse." He motioned with the gun. "Rattle your hocks!"

Feet dragging, Farley headed for his pony. Dogging him, Lake fired a casual question as they crossed the yard. "When are Wagner's bunch heading back to the ranch again?"

"Any day now," Farley threw over a shoulder. "They been pushing a herd across the border."

"Rustled?"

The gawky rider's grunt was sufficient answer.

When his unsavory visitor, toting his bedroll, stepped into the bunkhouse, Lake hit for the cookshack.

By the light of a stable lamp, Frosty and Slim were playing crib.

"There's a hombre craves to see you, Bill," said Frosty, without looking up. "When last seen he was hunkered on the gallery."

"You know who that is?" Excitement pulsed in Lake's voice. "Farley!" He lingered by the door, watching the bunkhouse. The double-crossing saddlebum was his life insurance.

"I'll be double-damned!" ejaculated Frosty.

"The coyote is as crooked as a snake in a cactus patch. He craves to make a deal. Right now he's bedding down in the bunkhouse. I want him held 'til I get a chance to chew it over with Boothby, the lawyer."

"So we stand guard." Frosty dropped his cards. "Who takes first spell?"

"I do," Lake told him, "a two-hour shift. You follow, then Slim. Wing the bustard if he makes trouble, but for Gawd's sake don't kill him. Dead, he ain't worth a barrel of shucks."

Archer Boothby's first visitor the following morning was the young boss of the Diamond. Bill Lake had been hunkered in the shade of a storefront across the street for a full hour, waiting for the lawyer to open his office.

Without preamble, he told Boothby of the man he was holding at the ranch and Farley's proposition.

"Any visible contusions?" inquired the lawyer sarcastically.

"You got it all wrong," protested Lake. "He rode in and offered to sell out Wagner for \$1,000—gold. So now you fix up a statement for the coyote to sign, so its legal. Then I'll be in shape to shuck that rustling charge."

Boothby polished the lens of his glasses. "It won't do, William," he decreed finally.

"You mean another confession won't stand up in Court?"

"Exactly! Witnessed or not, the county prosecutor will contend the document was obtained under stress. Farley's absence will lend weight to the claim. A jury might even believe that you'd killed the man. The incentive is obvious—he is sole witness against you. Currently, everyone regards you as a desperate ex-convict."

"Hell!" burst out Lake. "This is my big chance to beat that lousy, scheming Wagner hombre. You say no one will swallow a confession. Why in thunder would they take Farley's first accusation as gospel and buck at a repudiation?"

"Because," pointed out the lawyer patiently, "the fact that he repudiates his first confession destroys his credulity. In other words, he will be regarded as an unmitigated liar, and no further statement will be taken seriously."

"So I go back to Yuma!" retorted Lake bitterly.

"Now if we could produce this Farley in Court," continued Boothby, "the picture would be very different. Indeed, our

friend Wagner would find himself in what is popularly described as a jackpot."

"That's out! Farley's deadset to grab the dinero—and vamoose."

"Does Farley merit consideration?" The lawyer smiled gently. "My advice is this—tell Sheriff Conover the whole story. Have him ride out and arrest Farley. Indeed, I shall demand such action. The man is self-convicted as a cattle thief and a perjurer. Then the sheriff would be quite justified in dropping charges against you."

"Farley will likely dumb up—or deny everything."

"And he may break under questioning. He will be questioned—ruthlessly—not only by the sheriff, but by me when I get him into Court."

Lake paced to and fro, considering the lawyer's words. "Guess you're right," he admitted finally. "I'll brace Conover."

"We'll both interview the sheriff," decided Boothby. "There may be legal questions involved."

With the lawyer's rolly-polly form bouncing ahead of him, Lake strode through the doorway of the sheriff's office.

Precisely garbed, and precisely mannered, as always, Conover swung around in his swivel chair and greeted them with unsmiling politeness.

"I am happy to inform you, sheriff," beamed Boothby, "that the trumped-up case against my client, William Lake, has collapsed—as was inevitable."

Without speaking, Conover carefully bit the tip off a cigar, stuck it between his lips, applied a match and drew with appreciation, blunt gaze traveling over his visitors.

"I'm listening!" he said.

Lake related the story of Farley's visit and his offer to retract his confession for a thousand dollars.

"Of course," put in Boothby smoothly, "I advised my client against any kind of a deal. I think you will know how to handle this man, sheriff. I now make a formal request that all charges against William Lake be withdrawn. I suggest

also that you arrest Farley immediately and also question Mark Wagner."

Conover sat stolidly puffing his cigar, but Lake read bewildered disbelief in his flinty eyes. Unconsciously, he began stroking his spade beard.

"Well, sheriff?" prompted the lawyer.

"First," decided Conover, "I've got to talk to Farley. It could be"—his cold gaze bored into Lake—"this client of yours extracted the retraction through physical violence. Seems I remember he worked over Mark Wagner."

"Farley spilled the beans of his own free will," protested Lake. "The hog craved a double pay-off—first Wagner, then me. You riding out?"

Conover nodded, and reached for his Stetson.

When three men—Lake, the sheriff and the deputy Pecos—jogged into the Diamond, Slim hunkered by the closed bunkhouse door, nursing a Winchester.

Lake led the way inside the bunkhouse. The long, low adobe, with its criss-cross of vigas overhead and tiers of empty bunks, seemed mammoth. Farley, fretting over the packed earth floor, advanced eagerly to meet him.

"You got my dinero"—he began, then his long jaw slackened. Eyes distended with fear, he backed at sight of the sheriff.

"You dirty double-crosser!" he shrilled at Lake and reached for his gun.

The Diamond boss's right hand blurred down. A .45 bellowed. The gawky rider squealed like a stuck pig. The impact of the slug spun him half around. Blood began staining his right-hand shoulder, seeping through the shirt. He staggered back against a bunk, stood glaring at the tight-lipped Lake.

"Quit squawking!" barked Conover. "Lake claims you and Wagner framed him, and now you offer to sell out for a thousand smackers."

"I never did! He beat it out of me," groaned Farley, clutching at his shattered shoulder.

The sheriff turned to Pecos. "Fix that shoulder," he said. "We'll take the maverick in."

"Say," appealed Lake, "sweat the truth out of the coyote now. I crave that indictment quashed."

"We'll sweat it out of him—in town," returned Conover, eying the shrinking Farley balefully.

Both stood watching as Pecos jerked off the prisoner's shirt, began tearing it into strips for bandages.

"You should have bored the yellowbelly dead center," rasped the sheriff.

"Dammit," protested Lake, "I need him, alive."

He watched the two lawmen ride away, the sagging form of Farley between them, with rankling disgust. Nothing had gone the way he'd planned. He might have figured the sheriff would have taken things into his own hands, he reflected. Still, he'd expected the lawman to grill Farley right in the bunkhouse and given him—Lake—an assurance that the rustling charges would be wiped out. Now he was clouded with uncertainty again. During the long ride to town, Farley would have time to concoct more lies, cook up more accusations. The rustler would likely claim that he was the victim of a desperate ex-convict.

For an hour or more he itched around. Then he spread his saddle blanket on the roan, adjusted the bridle and followed the lawman's trail to town.

When he jingled into Conover's office he found the sheriff at his desk, as impersonal as ever.

"Farley spill his guts?" he demanded.

"Farley's dead as a can of corned beef," returned Conover shortly.

"Dead?"

"Made a break halfway to town. Pecos fed the jasper a slug. Right now he's in the morgue."

Lake sank onto a chair, striving to grasp the implications of the saddlebum's demise. "The hombre talk any afore he checked out?" he asked, with no hope.

"Nopel" bit back Conover.

"How do I stand?"

The sheriff weighed him thoughtfully. "Wal," he decided, "just about where you always did."

"That indictment still good?"

"What right I got to squash it?"

"Hell, Farley spread his hand—it clears me."

Conover reached for a cigar. "All we've got, Lake," he pointed out reasonably, "is your say-so. No witnesses, no nothing. Couldbe you concocted the whole yarn."

As Lake's mouth opened to voice angry protest, the sheriff held up a hand. "Maybe you played out of luck, I wouldn't know. But that indictment stands. We'll let the Court decide."

"How about Wagner?"

Conover raised his broad shoulders. "My guess is that Wagner will name Farley a doggoned liar. And who's to prove he isn't?"

Lips locked, the young Diamond boss strode stiff-legged from the office. What value would a jury put on his assertion that Farley was ready to clear him, he considered, with bitter chagrin. Farley was dead, but his sworn statement was still good—a damning accusation. He was in a worse tight than he had been before.

XVI

WITH NO RAY of hope to lighten the gloom into which the sheriff's brusque pronouncement had plunged him, Lake hauled into the saddle and headed down street. When his roan jogged past the newspaper office, Rushby ran out, excitedly waving an arm. "Farley's dead—in the morgue!" he shouted.

Lake reined up. "Yep," he said cheerlessly, "and he was all set to split his guts."

Rushby looked puzzled. "But the man was brought in dead," he remonstrated.

"He was alive when he left my place, primed to make a deal."

"Step inside and give me the lowdown," begged the editor, scenting a story.

Lake tied up and followed the newspaper man into the print shop. Pat, clad in inkstained overalls, was distributing type. "Say," she smiled, at sight of Lake's sober features, "you do look low-spirited."

"Lower than a snake's belly," he admitted somberly.

Her forehead creased. "Surely you're not mourning that Farley person."

"He was about to ease me out of this rustling tight," returned Lake. "Now he's buzzard bait."

"Fill me in!" prompted Rushby.

The Diamond boss told of Farley's offer to double-cross Wagner and retract his confession for a thousand dollars, and the events that followed.

"So you stand trial?"

"And likely conviction. What jury would swallow my story. I sure can't convince the sheriff."

"At least we now know one thing," mused the editor. "Wagner's master-minding the rustlers. All we lack is the essential proof. You sure Farley said nothing more that would help?"

Lake shook his head. "Nope, except Wagner's gang's down south, hazing a rustled herd across the border, and likely to be back any day."

"Where do these renegades hide out when they operate in the Valley?" interposed the girl, who stood absorbing every word.

"At Wagner's place. I lamped his bunkhouse, fixed up with a dozen bunks."

"Well," she came back, "the solution seems simple. When these men return, take the sheriff out there and arrest them."

Mark Wagner may be slick, but how on earth could he explain them away?"

Lake and Rushby eyed each other. "The obvious," smiled the editor, "and so easily overlooked. However, there is one flaw in your plan, Pat. Bill has already led the sheriff on one wild goose chase. It may be difficult to persuade him to expend county money on another. Remember, eight possemen cost the taxpayers \$40 a day."

"And he has less use for me than a boil on the back of his neck," added Lake drearily.

"But this is the only chance you have of clearing your name," urged the girl. She eyed her brother. "Surely you can do something, Chet."

"I could talk with Jim Timmons, out at the Lazy T," ruminated Rushby. "Timmons is suspicious of most everyone, particularly Wagner. He found that story of the Mexican horse thieves hard to digest."

His tone sharpened. "You watch Wagner's place, Bill. In the meantime, I'll ride out and talk with Jim. Perhaps he'll come up with something worthwhile."

Faint hope born again, Lake rode back to the Diamond. After breaking the news of Farley's unexpected demise to his two hands, he laid out a plan for watching the MW.

"One of us rides into the hills after sundown," he explained, "locates a hideout and keeps cases on the spread through the next day. With nightfall, he beats it back and another goes out. And for gosh sakes don't point that spy-glass into the sun. It tipped my hand last time."

With sundown, Frosty rode westward.

Lake and Slim were hunkered on the gallery the following morning when a knot of riders, bedrolls bulking behind their cantles, jingled into the yard. Lake recognized Timmons and three of his punchers. Cloaking his surprise, the Diamond boss came to his feet as the grizzled Timmons dismounted and plugged toward him.

"You're either the biggest liar since Ananias, Lake," rasped

the crotchety cowman, "or Wagner's running the biggest sandy since Noah loaded the Ark. I aim to find out."

"Rushby give you the lowdown?"

"Spilled plenty of tongue oil; claims Wagner's rodding the rustlers." He peered at Lake. "What you got to back the claim outside of Farley's say-so?"

"Twelve bunks!" returned Lake promptly, "added to Wagner's offer for \$10,000 cash for this spread. How else could the jasper gather ten thousand?"

"Ten thousand *cash*!" reiterated Timmons incredulously.

Lake nodded. "You don't have to take my word for it. Ask Bullock, the bank manager."

Timmons stood chewing the ends of his drooping mustache, digesting this. Then he growled. "I swallowed that hoss thief story, but I most choked on it."

"Farley claimed the gang's due back most any time," continued Lake. "One of my boys is keeping cases on the MW."

The cowman squinted at him. "This valley," grunted Timmons, "is sure ripe for a lynching bee." He turned away.

If Farley had handed him a bum steer, thought Lake, with grim humor, he'd likely be the guest at that necktie party. Aggravated by growing losses, it was plain that the Lazy T boss had decided that either he or Wagner was the culprit and had determined to pin down the guilty man. If that bunch of rustlers failed to ride back, he'd have to talk plenty fast to save his neck.

The Lazy T hands toted their rolls into the bunkhouse and idled around, chewing cigarettes as the day dragged on.

It was dark when Frosty jogged in. Lake eagerly braced the puncher, but Frosty had nothing worthwhile to report. He'd seen Wagner, his woman, and Vickers moving around the hard-scrabble spread, he said, but the MW looked as quiet as boothill.

Slim saddled up and rode out under the stars. There was nothing more he could do that night, decided Lake. Seemed he'd have to sweat it out for another twenty-four hours. Slim couldn't start his watch until sun-up, and he'd be pinned

down in his hideout until the sun sank again. A few days like this and Timmons' temper was likely to snap.

It seemed he had scarcely dropped off to sleep when a hand, latched onto a shoulder, roughly shook him awake. He sat up, blinking into Frosty's leathery features.

"Slim's back!" grated Frosty.

"What in creation brought him back?" demanded Lake sleepily. "Heck, he ain't hardly got there."

"Slim injured down the creek bed to get a close-up of Wagner's place afore he took up post. The joint's crawling with men and hosses."

The Diamond boss snapped wide awake, swung his legs off the bed and fumbled for his boots. "This sure may be my lucky day," he exalted. "Gimme that stable lamp!"

Lake burst into the bunkhouse, moved from one sleeping man to another, hunting Timmons. At his touch, the cowman came awake as quickly and silently as an Indian.

"Wagner's gang is back," Lake told him tersely. "Figure I should hit for town and get the sheriff to swear in a posse?"

"Nope," growled Timmons, "this is our chore." He raised his voice, and his shout reverberated down the bunkhouse: "*Shake a leg!*"

Drowsy punchers began climbing out of their bunks.

"We handle it this-a-way," the cowman told Lake. "I send a man pronto to the Swinging J and Flying V, to wise 'em up. With luck, Johnson and Vince should be here with their boys by sun-up. Then we hit the MW."

"You forgot Hagstrom?"

"We'll leave Karl out of this," decided Timmons. "It's hell to hang your own son-in-law."

"Conover won't stand for lynch law," pointed out Lake doubtfully. "He's a stickler for the statutes."

"Conover be damned!" growled Timmons. "Did we elect the bustard?" He buckled on his gunbelt. "Now I got to talk to my boys."

Ole Johnson, with seven punchers, rode in first, just as

the rising sun had begun to stain the horizon. Their dust had scarcely settled when Vince, from the Flying V, cantered into the yard, six riders stringing behind him. Every man packed a Winchester in his saddle boot.

Slim, who handled the cooking chores, had to scrape the bottom of the barrel to feed them all, but he dished up plenty flapjacks, swimming in molasses, and all the black coffee they could swallow.

After breakfast, the three ranchers gathered on the gallery. Lake's spirits rose when they called him to join them. For the first time since he had returned from Yuma, he was treated as an equal. The ugly atmosphere of suspicion seemed to have evaporated. Timmons assumed leadership without any discussion. He quickly brought Johnson and Vince up to date on the situation.

"Seems Wagner's been pulling the wool over our eyes for quite a while," he wound up. "Now we got a chance to corral him and the whole coyote pack."

"Don't forget there's a woman on that ranch," put in Lake. "Diane had no hand in this."

"We won't hang the gal," said Vince dryly, "but I can't say the same for her old man."

"Give her a chance to get out," persisted Lake. "Surround the spread. Let them who will come out with their hands up; blast the rest."

"I saw, swing 'em all except the woman," contributed the stocky Johnson. He eyed Lake. "Your paw hung plenty rope-and-ring men up to dry."

"Any way you want it," agreed Lake, "but give the girl a break."

Twenty-two armed men rode out of the Diamond, heading toward the hills, while the beams of the rising sun crept down the flanks of Apache Butte, thrusting above a jumble of upended terrain to the south-west.

XVII

TIMMONS AND LAKE sprawled among the boulders of a hogback that swelled south of the MW. Below them lay Wagner's place. Timmons scanned the desolate spread through the spyglass, but even to Lake's naked eyes, squinting through the sunglare, signs of activity were plain.

Dwarfed by distance, men moved around the yard. Ponies dotted the meager wire-fenced pasture and stirred dust in the pole corral behind the water trough.

With a grunt, the Lazy T boss handed the glass over. Lake eagerly grabbed it. He tallied eight ponies in the pasture, three saddlehorses in the corral, and most as many men hanging around the buildings.

"Seems we drew aces," he commented.

"Reckon it's time to play 'em," growled Timmons, and began to wriggle backward off the skyline. They legged back to their ponies, ground-hitched on the lower slope of the hill, mounted and headed back to the main body, halted on West Fork.

The four cowmen bunched and Timmons outlined his plan. "We leave our broncs right here," he decided. "Lake's two hands can act as cavvymen." He eyed Vince. "You, Charlie, take your six boys, work around west of the joint and lay doggo. Better shuck your spurs.

"Ole, I'll need two of your hands to cut the pasture fence and run their ponies off. The rest of us will mosey along the creek bed and spread out. Nobody shoots 'til I signal."

He hauled out a fat, silver-cased watch. "You got an hour to get set, Charlie."

Packing Winchesters, Vince and his six hands threaded off through the tangle of ravines, while the two punchers detailed to run off the saddle stock mounted and pulled out, to circle the ranch and get into position to do their job with the first outburst of gunfire.

The rest of the attacking force fiddled around with an hour to kill. They busied themselves loading guns, checking the actions of their rifles, chewing cigarettes, trading low-voiced talk.

Timmons eyed his watch. "Dog me up creek, boys," he directed. "Keep it quiet!"

Lake followed the Lazy T boss down into the dry creek bed. They began to work up creek, picking a path among littered boulders, cutbanks walling them on either side. Behind them trailed a string of punchers.

Lake and Timmons were spacing the men out, and some were already busy hacking firing steps in the steep banks when a gunshot from the direction of the ranch shattered the brooding quiet. Almost instantly, it was answered by a scattering of shots from the slopes west of the creek. More guns joined in the clamor, the echoes reverberating through the hills.

Timmons dropped an angry expletive. They had lost the advantage of surprise. Likely, thought Lake, some sharp-eyed hombre in the yard had sighted Vince's hands working into position. There was no need for silence now. Feverishly, excited by the crush of gunfire, the men strung along the creek bed dug deep into the bank with jackknives and picket pins. "Keep your heads down!" cautioned Timmons, pacing up and down the spread of busy men.

When he finally scooped out a foothold, Lake dumped his Stetson and hoisted up. Levering a shell into the breech of his rifle, he peered through the shriveled brush that mottled the rim of the creek.

The sun-swept yard was empty except for one grayed form, lying face down, contorted in the throes of death. Guns spilled fire and thunder from the square windows of the bunkhouse and, across the yard, from the adobe. Behind and above him, rifle fire crackled from Vince's men bellied down on the hillside.

Guns began to bark on either side of him along the creek bank as Timmons' men went into action. A slug kicked dust

into his face and he instinctively ducked. To his left, a puncher fell backward with a choked cry, thudded down into the creek bed and lay unmoving, blood oozing from a neat hole drilled squarely between the eyes.

The mingling roar of Winchesters, punctuated by the bark of Spencers and the occasional boom of a .50 Sharps made a deafening clamor. Gradually the first crazed outburst of fire slackened, tapered away to a desultory exchange of shots. Lake guessed that neither side was overly well supplied with rifle cartridges. The loops of punchers' gunbelts were usually filled with .45 shells. Most of the attackers, he knew, packed no more than a handful of .44 cartridges for their rifles. Some had none, beyond maybe fifteen loads in the magazines. Odds were many were already running out of ammunition. Now that the defenders were fortified up behind thick adobe walls, this could prove serious. The siege could string out for days.

He dropped down to the creek bed. Timmons stood chewing the ends of his mustache and eying the stiffening corpse of the unlucky puncher.

"Too bad!" said Lake.

"They tagged another, up creek," snapped the Lazy T boss.

Stocky Ole Johnson, legs bowed from a lifetime in the saddle, waddled toward them. "Seems it's a standoff," he commented.

"We'll dig the lobos out," promised Timmons, "after sundown."

"How?" inquired Lake curiously.

"Smoke!" rasped the Lazy T boss. "We'll stack brush over the windows and doors, set it afire."

"We'll be out of shells long afore sundown."

"One of my boys hightailed for town," barked Timmons, "to stock up."

Had to hand it to the crusty Lazy T boss, thought Lake. He sure didn't overlook any bets.

As the sun rose higher and the heat built up, firing lan-

guished, died away entirely. The creek bed was an oven, made worse by the stench of the skunkweed that grew thick and was crushed beneath men's boots.

Lake mounted his ledge again and eyed the grayed adobe buildings. Now and again, fire spurted from a window, but he guessed the defenders were saving their lead, too. His thoughts drifted to Diane. It must be hell for a woman, he reflected, penned in that dumpy adobe, with bullets chipping the walls and the air fouled with powder smoke.

Suddenly he became aware that shouted talk was being exchanged between the defenders, across the yard. Wagner's harsh tones were plain, but he couldn't distinguish the words. With a hunch that something might be afoot, he cuddled his Winchester against his shoulder, alert for sign of action.

The door of the adobe opened abruptly. Diane stood on the threshold, arms raised, features pale, desperation in her eyes. From the hillside a rifle spanged and a slug ricocheted off the rough adobe wall.

"Hold it!" yelled Lake, eyes fixed on the girl.

Slowly, the girl moved out into the yard. The tensed Lake ripped out an oath as he saw that Wagner pressed behind her, the muzzle of a sixgun jabbed into the small of her back. A swollen gunnysack dangled from his left hand. He faced his wife toward the men lining the creek bank, only his taut features visible over her right shoulder. "You plug me," he yelled, "she gets it." With that, he began to back the girl with him.

Trust Wagner to figure out a trick like that to save his own skin, thought Lake wrathily. Who but a yellow skunk would use a woman to cover his getaway?

Helpless, he eyed the two as they slowly eased backward across the yard toward the pole corral. Firing had cut off. Impotently, he saw Mark Wagner, careful never to leave the cover of his wife's body, lower the bar of the corral. Indistinct now, as the saddlehorses inside began to mill restlessly raising a dust fog, he saw Wagner set the girl in a saddle, mount behind her, hook the gunnysack on the horn.

With a second saddlehorse on the lead, he rode out, swung abruptly behind the adobe and disappeared from view.

In a minute or two, the fugitives came into sight again, cantering along the fence line of the pasture, now empty.

A quick flash of hope entered Lake's mind that the two punchers who had cut the pasture fence were still lurking somewhere out there and would pick the MW boss off. But no slugs bit through the heat haze as the fleeing couple pulled further and further away, were blotted out entirely by the shoulder of the hill.

Lake jumped down, braced Timmons, who stood on another fire step staring after the fugitives.

"You lamp the getaway?" he demanded.

The cowman's weathered features twisted into a wry grin, he shook his head with wonderment. "That lobo sure grabs the jackpot for pure gall," he said.

"I'm taking after the hairpin."

"Need a man to side yuh?"

"Nopel!" Lake told him forcefully.

"Then hump your tail," threw back Timmons. "I'd sure hate for the jasper to miss our necktie party."

Lake hurried away, his mind on the fleeing Wagner. Although the ex-foreman had headed east, through the only hole the attackers had left, Lake didn't doubt but that he'd swing south as soon as opportunity offered. Safety from United States' warrants lay beyond the border, and that lay southward. It was a full day's ride—a long day's ride.

Barking his shins on cluttered rock in his preoccupation, the Diamond boss hastened down the creek bed, picturing the terrain in his mind over which Wagner would likely ride. South of San Simeon Valley, it smoothed out into desert, harsh and waterless, crusted by thorny growth. There was one waterhole, he considered—Tortilla Wells, forty miles or more as the crow flies, and fifteen miles north of the border. Odds were the fleeing man wouldn't reach it until after sundown. His pony would be jaded after hours of plodding through sand and clattering over rocky outcrops. Odds were

he'd lay over at Tortilla Wells. Couldbe, considered Lake, he'd guessed wrong, but he'd gamble on his hunch and head for the waterhole.

He legged into the canyon where Frosty and Slim were holding the horse herd, briefly told them of the escape and his intention to hit Wagner's trail. Packing two water bottles, he jogged out.

In no haste, he followed the curves of the creek as it wound down to the Valley flats. If he'd guessed wrong, he'd push his pony to no purpose. If he'd hit the bullseye, his quarry would likely spend the night at the Wells. He had time aplenty. Clearing the hills, he headed south.

Hour succeeded hour as the lone rider plugged southward. The rugged silhouette of the Mustangs faded behind him; Apache Butte was lost in purple haze. Around him stretched an arid plain. The blazing sun gleamed on the thousand-spined cholla, on the whitened bones of long-dead animals slowly crumbling into dust.

The purple deepened as the sun dropped lower. Shadow began to lace the dreary expanse. Features a gray mask, Lake checked his pony, rocked the saddle, spilled water into the crown of his Stetson and held it to the roan's eager muzzle. Then he took a short drink and made a cigarette. To loosen up stiff muscles and rest his mount, he led the pony for awhile. Mounting again as the shadows thickened, he continued to bore deeper into the desert.

Stars began to glimmer overhead, a hot breeze rattled the stalks of a dead ocatillo; a night hawk chittered in swooping flight.

Ahead, a faint spark glowed scarlet prickling through the darkening pall of night. Lake threw off growing lassitude. A campfire! He must be nearing Tortilla Wells. Who had built that fire?

XVIII

IN A THIRSTY land where water held a value beyond rubies, Tortilla Wells was a precious jewel, but a tarnished jewel at that. It was little more than a glorified mud hole, a wide, shallow puddle, filmed by dust, into which water seeped from some underground spring. Nearby towered an eroding rock pile.

Lake angled off to place the stack of tumbled rock between himself and the campfire. Dismounting amid a sprawl of misshapen boulders, he unstrapped his spurs, hung them on the saddlehorn, and slid his Winchester from its boot. Padding through the yielding talus of ages, he began to work around the pile.

Crouched behind a massive fragment of rock, and consumed by a growing elation, he eyed the scene revealed by the flickering flames of the campfire. Not a hundred paces distant, Diane reclined against the curve of a saddle by the fire. Hunkered, smoking a cigarette, Wagner faced her across the crackling brush. Hobbled, two ponies bulked in the background.

It would have been a cinch to plug Wagner, reflected the Diamond boss. At that range, with a rifle, he couldn't miss. The ex-foreman would never know what hit him. But somehow the idea was repugnant. He felt an urge to shoot it out face to face. Wagner had robbed him of his girl his cattle, and—almost—his freedom. A payoff had been long due.

Carefully, he levered a shell into the breech of the rifle, straightened, and began picking his way through scattered rock toward the fire.

He had approached within twenty paces when one of his boots stirred loose rock. The clatter brought Wagner's head around with a jerk. Seeing the advancing form, shadowy in the uncertain light, he sprang to his feet and jerked out his sixgun.

The sharp spang of Lake's Winchester and the boom of the .45 Colt blended almost as one. The breath of a slug fanned Lake's forehead. The girl's scream lanced into his ears as Wagner tottered, gunarm sagging, collapsed upon his face, limp as a wet sack. Lake eased forward, grasping the slanted rifle with both hands. The girl jumped to her feet, staring, green eyes distended, clear-skinned features frozen with surprise. Then she galvanized into action. Darting around the fire, she scooped up the .45 lying loose in her husband's slackened fingers, threw down on Lake and fired.

The bullet whined high. Awkwardly, she pulled back the hammer. Lake jumped at her, whirling his rifle. The Colt roared again as the swinging steel barrel smashed it sideways. With a yelp of pain, the girl raised a bruised hand. The .45 clattered down, skidded across smooth rock.

"Quit, Dianel!" yelled Lake. "It's me—Bill!"

"You dirty killer!" she choked.

The girl was wrought up, her nerves jangled, half-crazed by the strain of the past few hours, thought Lake. He reached, grasped her arm gently. "Dianel" he begged. "Get a hold on yourself. Wagner's dead. You're free! It's all over now."

She shook off his hand, back away, eyes blazing with bitter animosity. "You murdered Mark!" she panted. "Oh, how I hate you."

Nonplused, he stood watching as she moved back to the fire and sank limply upon a saddle. Better give the girl time to control herself, he reflected, and realize that the hell her life must have been with Wagner is a thing of the past. Setting the rifle against a rock, he stood looking around. By Wagner's saddle sat the gunnysack the rancher had packed out of the adobe. With no great curiosity, Lake picked it up, upended it. His eyes widened as a cascade of greenbacks, neatly wrapped, intermingled with buckskin pouches, tumbled out. Picking up a pouch, he yanked off a rawhide thong that secured its neck, spilling a jingling stream of gold eagles into his palm.

"Gawd!" he muttered. "A fortune."

"And we would have reached Mexico to enjoy it, but for you—you blundering fool!" The girl spoke from across the fire, her tone flat, hopeless, devoid of all passion now.

Lake eyed her with puzzled disbelief. "You craved—to get away with Wagner?" he ventured.

Her brittle laugh was devoid of mirth. "Why do you think we staged that getaway? We were rich. Mark milked those fool ranchers, cleaned off your range. If our plans had worked out we would have taken over the Diamond, owned the biggest spread in the Valley—with money to stock it. But you were lucky—you drunken oaf. Farley double-crossed us. I never did trust that creature."

Lake stared at her, jaw slack, scarce believing his ears.

"So you were backing Wagner's hand?" he said, incredulously.

"All the way!" she snapped. "Mark was smart, he was ambitious, he was a leader. You"—she spat.

Slow anger seeped through him. "There'll be an accounting when I get you back to Serano," he promised curtly.

"An accounting!" She laughed. "You can't scare me, Bill Lake. I'll deny every word I've said. I'm the innocent victim, the misused wife. Who'd take the word of an ex-convict against mine?"

"You feeling all right?" Even now, Lake was reluctant to believe the evidence of his ears.

"I just feel mad—good and mad." The girl's small fists clenched with an intensity of feeling. "Oh, that a fool like you should ruin everything, everything!"

Lake became aware that he was still holding a palmful of gold eagles. He spilled them into the pouch, dropped on his knees and threw the packages of greenbacks, other pouches, back into the gunnysack. Straightening, he hefted the bulging gunnysack, stepped over to where the dead man's .45 lay and kicked it into the pool.

"Scared?" taunted the girl.

"Yep!" he admitted shortly. Picking up his rifle, he strode into the darkness.

With dawn, he rode back to the waterhole. The girl was watching a coffee pot coming to a boil. Wagner's body lay where it had fallen.

"Howdy, Dianel!" he greeted. "Guess you were kinda hysterical last night."

She looked up, chilled indifference in her green eyes. "I meant every word I said," she returned flatly. "Mark made just one mistake, a mistake I shall regret to the end of my life—he should have killed you the night of the bank robbery."

"Just what do you mean by that?" challenged Lake sharply.

She ignored the question. Fighting bewilderment, he hunkered, still finding it hard to believe that all his preconceived notions about her were wrong. "You're free to ride out, if you crave to head for Mexico," he offered at length.

She laughed shortly. "And abandon close upon \$12,000 we have on deposit in the bank at Serano? I need that money!"

"Is that all you got on your mind—dinero?"

"What else is there worthwhile?" she returned carelessly. He built a cigarette, wondering. Could this be the girl he had dreamed of marrying—for three long years?

Townsfolk checked on the plankwalks, eying the two when they rode into town—Lake with Wagner's saddlehorse on the lead. He had heaped rocks on the corpse and left it at Tortilla Wells.

The girl pulled away outside Johnson's Hotel, tied her pony at the rail and disappeared inside to book a room. During the long ride from the Wells they had scarcely exchanged a word.

He headed for the livery with the spare pony.

Scarcely had the animals' hooves clattered over the loose planks of the barn when Rushby blew in. "Say," he inquired breathlessly, "didn't you ride in with Wagner's wife?"

"Sure!" admitted Lake, as he slackened the roan's cinches.

"Where's Wagner?"

"Dead!"

"At his ranch?"

"Nope, Tortilla Wells."

"What on earth was he doing at Tortilla Wells?" demanded the editor. "Fill me in before I die of suspense."

"It's quite a story," said Lake. He swung off the saddle, set it on a rack, spread the sweated blanket. Then he hunkered against a stall, rolled a smoke and told of the rustlers' return to the MW, the cowmen's attack, Wagner's getaway, his chase, and the final showdown at the Wells. When he was through, he untied the gunnysack from behind the cantle, scooped out a handful of packaged greenbacks. "That sack full of 'em," he said. "Gold, too."

"So the crook tried to make a getaway with the spoils, using his wife as a shield," mused Rushby. "I imagine the poor girl welcomed you—her saviour—with tears in her eyes."

"You'd be surprised," drawled Lake, and changed the subject. "Guess I should hand this dinero to the sheriff."

"Conover's out of town. A puncher rode in to buy shells and spread the news of a big fracas at Wagner's place. The sheriff rounded up every deputy he could lay his hands on and hightailed out there."

"Changed his ideas about cowmen keeping their own range clean?" inquired Lake dryly.

The editor shrugged, and eyed the swollen gunnysack. "Better take that money down to the bank and have it tallied," he advised. "They can hold it until Conover returns." He grinned. "I'm seeing more action in this sleepy cowtown than I ever did in Chicago. Well, guess I'll hop down to the hotel and get Mrs. Wagner's story."

He left, in a hurry, as always. Lake lugged the gunnysack down to the bank.

Manager Bullock's mask of amiability dissolved into wide-eyed amazement when his visitor emptied the contents of the

sack onto the desk in the private office. "Where?" he gasped, "did this come from?"

"Offhand," Lake told him, "I'd say from Mexican buyers, payment for rustled steers. Wagner was beating for the border with this when I stopped him—with a slug. You tally it." At an afterthought, he added: "Hold it 'til I get word from my lawyer, Archer Boothby. I figure most was payment for Diamond steers."

Bullock called his cashier and the two began emptying the pouches of gold and stacking the packets of greenbacks. Of a sudden, the bank manager let fall an exclamation. He hustled out of the office as fast as his bulk would permit. Puffing, he returned with a ledger sheet, inscribed with neat columns of numbers. With absorbed interest he began comparing the serial numbers on the greenbacks with the notations on the sheet, methodically checking with a pencil. Finally, he looked up, eying Lake with creased brow. "All these greenbacks," he said, "are part of the proceeds from the bank robbery for which you were sentenced to Yuma. The original packages are unbroken. At a rough estimate, their value is \$21,000."

The young Diamond boss stared back, rigid with surprise, too amazed to speak. Then he ejaculated: "So Wagner staged that hist?"

"Apparently he received one-half of the loot."

"It clears mel"

"That is a matter for the law to decide," the manager assured him guardedly.

Lake rode out of town, his brain in a whirl. As the roan jogged over the swales his excitement subsided and his thoughts began to clarify. The loot from the bank robbery had amounted to \$42,000. It was plain that two men were involved in the hist, of whom Wagner was one. It seemed that they had split the proceeds fifty-fifty.

But until the other crook was uncovered, he pondered, the finger still pointed at him. Folks would say that he was the accomplice and that he had cached his share of the loot, that

he and Wagner simulated mutual antagonism in order to avert suspicion. And he couldn't prove otherwise now that Wagner was dead.

Seemed Diane knew the true story of the hist, otherwise why that crack about Wagner killing him when he cracked him on the head. In her mood of fury, the girl was liable to swear that he had been involved, too, and had killed her husband in order to close his mouth. She had been the sole witness of the brief fracas at the Wells. In that event he—Lake—was liable to face a murder charge. He groaned as he visualized the black chasm into which he was liable to topple. Now he was at the mercy of Diane, and he knew that she would have no mercy.

Racked by indecision, he decided to forget his idea of riding back to the MW and rejoining the cowmen. Neck-reining the roan, he hit for his own deserted ranch.

XIX

A PIEBALD PONY was tied beside the water trough when Lake rode into the Diamond. He forgot his troubles at sight of a graying rider in shabby range garb hunkered nearby, a cornhusk cigarette drooping from his thin lips. The brim of a battered old felt hat shaded the visitor's dark eyes, sharp as needles, set in bleak, leathery features.

"I'll be damned!" ejaculated the Diamond boss joyfully. "If it ain't Cheyennel!" He stepped out of leather as his old cellmate straightened. "You're sure a sight for sore eyes," declared Lake, as their hands met.

"What you run—a ghost spread?" grated the old renegade.

Lake shrugged wryly. "Rustlers been running us ragged and I never did get around to restocking. Right now every spare puncher in the Valley's out in the Mustang Hills where they got a pack of the brand-blotching gents corralled. Wal, what brought you to San Simeon Valley?"

"Gus Harmer!" Cheyenne told him shortly. "Been hot on

the lobo's trail ever since they loosed me. Dogged the jasper through Texas, then New Mexico, now Arizona."

"Sticking like a mustard plaster!"

"I got a payoff—ten years overdue."

"You figure Harmer's around here?"

"I'm danged sure he's around," declared the graying Cheyenne. "Couldbe the hairpin is rodding your rustlers."

"Nope!" declared Lake decisively. "I downed that hombre two days back, near the border."

"Blocky built, gray eyes, square face?" questioned the other.

Lake shook his head. "His moniker's Wagner and he's most as lean as you are. A mite taller I'd say."

The renegade chewed this over. "The hairpin wouldn't have a red blotch above the jaw, left side?"

Lake remembered the smoldering red birthmark on Farley's features. "Would this blotch be shaped like a frog?" he inquired.

Cheyenne nodded. "That's his moniker—Frog."

"He called himself Farley. He was tied up with the rustlers before the sheriff beefed him."

"Then Harmer's sure around!" declared the renegade. "Frog always stuck to him closer'n a tail to a dog."

Both turned at sound of thudding hooves. A cavalcade of horsemen erupted into the yard. First came a string of punchers, led by Timmons and Vince. Several led ponies across which stiffening forms were roped. Tailing them was Sheriff Conover, ramrod-straight in the saddle, followed by a bunch of badge-toting deputies, guarding seven sullen prisoners, wrists lashed to their saddlehorns. All were unshaven, dust-plastered and apparently in no happy frame of mind.

Lake turned to speak to Cheyenne, but his cellmate had vanished.

The newcomers crowded the water trough. Then Lake noticed that the punchers gravitated to one end of the yard, the deputies with their prisoners to the other. The two parties

didn't seem to be on speaking terms. He approached the three cowmen, gathered in a knot, glowering in the direction of the prisoners.

"You gents look sullen as sore-headed dogs," he commented. "Conover crawl your humps?"

"That dogblasted townsman got no right to horn in on cowmen's business," declared Timmons, expectorating with disgust. "We dug them lobos out, had 'em lined up ready to swing when Conover busts in. Swears he'll tag us with murder warrants if we go ahead."

"You catch up with Wagner?" put in Vince.

Lake nodded. "Left his carcass under a pile of rocks at the Wells—we shot it out."

"His woman hunky-dory?"

"Spry as a two-year-old."

"Guess the gal will be hunting another husband," commented Vince with the ghost of a smile.

"She'd waste time looking at me," declared Lake.

The sheriff's party pulled out with its prisoners. Shortly, the punchers followed, packing their dead, each party heading for its own ranch. Again the yard was empty. Frosty and Slim had ducked into the cook shack. Cheyenne slid into view around an angle of the house.

"You still on the dodge?" inquired Lake.

"Nope!" snapped the renegade. "But I lamped a gent who is."

"Gus Harmer?"

Cheyenne nodded, satisfaction glowing in his dark eyes.

"Among the prisoners?" persisted Lake.

"Where else?" countered Cheyenne, poker-faced.

"Wal, he'll get what's coming," said Lake offhand.

"He sure will!" the renegade assured him. "Wal, guess I'll drift into town."

Frosty appeared at the doorway of the cookshack and yelled, "Supper's served. Come and get it."

"Stick around and feed your tapeworm," invited Lake.

But Cheyenne, tightening the girths of his pony, shook his head.

"What's your hurry?" demanded the Diamond boss. "You can't get at Harmer. They'll have him caged in the jail. I guess the law aced you out of that showdown."

"Like to bet on it?" retorted the renegade, with grim humor, and stepped into leather.

Lake shrugged and headed for the cookshack.

Uncertain of what awaited him, the Diamond boss hit for town early the following morning. If Diane had poured a heap of windies into the sheriff's ears, he reflected ruefully, he'd likely be heading for a cell, but he had to acquaint Boothby with his problem before Conover had a chance to go into action. Seemed trouble had clung to him closer than a shadow ever since he'd returned to San Simeon Valley.

Serano held its usual aspect of deceptive drowsiness when the roan jogged down Main Street. Outside the saddlery, Lake wheeled to the rail, tied up and mounted the stairway to Boothby's office. The door was locked.

Johansen, the saddler, came to his doorway when he jingled down. "Boothby's sick," volunteered the saddler. "Touch of flu."

His luck had sure hit a sour streak again, thought Lake. Just when he badly needed a mouthpiece he was left on his lonesome.

Rushby came loping along the plankwalk. "Howdy Bill!" he greeted cheerily. "Guess your rustling troubles are over. The jail's chockful of the light-fingered gentry. What did Conover think of your cash haul?"

"Haven't reported it yet," said Lake with no enthusiasm.

"Then come along with me," invited the editor. "I need the sheriff's account of the big clean-up. With your story, I bet the next issue's a sellout."

They paced across the ruts of Main Street together, and Lake told of the bank manager's identification of the greenbacks looted from the bank over three years before. Rushby

whistled. "So Wagner clouted you and planted the evidence in your pockets! Now, who stole the key?"

"I sure wish I could read his brand," said Lake fervently.

They mounted the courthouse steps. The sheriff's office was empty, the rolltop desk closed down.

"Guess Conover's late," said Rushby. "He's slipping. Usually you could set your watch by him."

A random thought struck Lake, a thought so startling that he tautened as though against the impact of a slug: Blocky, gray eyes, square faced—that was how Cheyenne had described Gus Harmer! The description fitted Conover to a tee. But it seemed fantastic to imagine that the precise, soldierly sheriff could be a notorious Texan renegade on the dodge.

"Let's drift down to Conover's place," he suggested.

"Suits me," said Rushby.

They left the courthouse and drummed along the plankwalk. In his high-heeled riding boots Lake had trouble keeping pace with the fast-striding editor.

Leaving the stores behind, the two followed a deep-rutted wagon road, weaving along beside the creek. The sheriff's neat house, with its white-painted fence, came into view. They mounted the gallery. Rushby knuckled the door. It was ajar, but there was no answer to his knock.

Rushby pushed the door half open and hailed: "Hey, sheriff!" Sound of his voice rang hollow through the house, but brought no response.

He pushed the door further back. It jammed. Glancing around it, he exclaimed, with sharp surprise, "There's a body lying on the floor!"

But Lake had pushed past him. The shades were down, darkening the room. The Diamond boss jerked them up. Sunlight flooded in, revealing the bodies of two men. Lying just inside the doorway were the remains of Cheyenne, a carpetbag beside him and a .45 Colt still loose-clasped in his right hand. Sprawled by a small table in the center of the room was the corpse of Sheriff Conover. His stiffening fingers still grasped a snub-nosed .41 derringer.

Lake stepped from one to the other, feeling the cold flesh. "They been dead for hours," he told Rushby.

Uncertain just what to do, the two stood eying the bodies. Cheyenne was in a huddled heap, half turned around. The bullet that killed him had smashed into his spine. Conover had taken his high and center, below the throat. The sheriff had died fast, considered Lake. As for Cheyenne, he could have lingered awhile. Odds were his spine was smashed.

"What do you make of it?" Rushby's voice was edgy.

Without replying, Lake picked up the carpetbag lying beside Cheyenne, opened it up. Somehow he was not surprised to find it was packed with neat packages of greenbacks.

"You'll find this hard to believe," he told the editor, setting the bag down, "but Conover once rodded a gang of Texas bank robbers. Guess his real moniker's Gus Harmer. One"—he nodded at Cheyenne's heaped form—"was captured. I met him in Yuma. The gang split up. Harmer fled the state, crossed New Mexico and figured he was safe in Arizona Territory. Under a new name, he landed the sheriff's job in Serano.

"In Yuma, Cheyenne lived for just one thing—to stage a showdown with Harmer. He claimed the lobo crossed him. Last night, I'd say, they staged the showdown."

"But that bag of money?" queried Rushby with a frown.

"The way I figure, Cheyenne jumped the sheriff right here. Conover, alias Harmer, bought Cheyenne off with the greenbacks. When Cheyenne was leaving, Conover snatched out a hideaway and cut him down. Cheyenne was a hard man to kill, he had enough life left to turn and tag the sheriff before he died.

"A duel to the death," murmured Rushby. "What a story!"

"I've got a hunch there's a bigger story than that," said Lake. "Let's mosey down to the bank." He picked up the carpetbag.

The bank manager's eyes opened wide with surprise when

Lake, with Rushby standing by, dumped another stack of greenbacks on the desk in front of him.

"My guess is that this is the balance of the bank loot," said Lake. Bullock, too astonished to demand explanations, called to his cashier for the check sheet. The three men stood watching as he compared the serial number of the top-most greenback in each package with the list. When he was through, the manager handed the sheet back to his clerk.

"Give Mr. Lake a receipt for \$42,000," he told the man, "subject to a detailed check of the monies he has returned. And restore these greenbacks to the vault."

He turned to the Diamond boss, and switched on his conventional smile. "As you are probably aware," he intoned, "your late lamented father signed a note for the amount of the bank loss—exactly \$42,000. This sum was deducted from the assets of the estate you inherited and handed over to the bank. Since the missing funds have now been restored, it is a pleasure to credit your account \$42,000. Now may I ask the source of this second installment?"

"Sheriff Conover," returned Lake briefly.

"Impossible!"

"A fact I can verify," put in Rushby, with a pleased smile.

"But how could the sheriff"—began Bullock, plainly at a loss.

The editor held up a hand. "Read *The Sentinel* for the full story. Special edition, on the street tomorrow." He chuckled. "I promise you it will blow this town apart. Good-bye, Mr. Bullock. We have two homicides to report."

XX

PLAINLY DISBELIEVING, Pecos, the hard-faced deputy, had set out for Conover's house to check Lake's report of two bodies approaching a state of *rigor mortis*. Rushby had raced back to his print shop to write the story that would shortly, as he predicted, "blow the town apart." Lake dropped into

the Chuck Wagon and was happy to find it empty of patrons. He ordered a coffee, sat sipping the scalding liquid, thankful for an opportunity to organize his thoughts. It was plain that Sheriff Conover and Mark Wagner had planned and carried off the bank hist, neatly framing him. It was a cinch, he thought bleakly, to trap a drunken burn.

Since his return, several events, previously unexplained, became clear. The warning note, left at the hotel on the day of his return, likely had come from Conover, delivered by Farley. Following that futile attempt to scare him out of town, Farley had likely made the bushwhack attempt on his life, for which he had beat up Vickers.

When he and Timmons had ridden into town in urgent quest of a posse, Farley had hurricaned out. Plainly he had been Conover's messenger, sent to warn the rustlers to clean out the canyon before a posse arrived. After which the sheriff had delayed moving out with his posse in every possible way he could devise without arousing suspicion.

Then Conover had accepted Wagner's cock-and-bull story of the strange posse hunting Mexican horse thieves without blinking an eyelid.

The unfortunate Farley had undoubtedly been murdered by Conover and Pecos en route to town from the Diamond, as a penalty for double-crossing his leader. He was too dangerous to be allowed to live. That explained the blotched-faced rider's terror when the sheriff stepped into the bunkhouse. He knew what lay ahead.

It might be a good idea, considered Lake, to check up on Pecos. Maybe he was a member of Harmer's old gang, too.

Finally, not knowing that Wagner had made his getaway, the sheriff had hightailed out to the MW when he heard that his accomplice and his rustlers were at bay. Conover was likely scared that Wagner would be captured and spill his guts about the bank hist, in addition to tying in him—Conover—with the rustling operations. It all added up now.

Lake finished his coffee, rolled a smoke and, in a genial mood, strolled along the plankwalk. At last his name had

been cleared. Tomorrow, when the *Sentinel* was published, everyone would know it.

He reached the print shop, paused and glanced through the dusty window. Rushby was busy scribbling at his copy table. Pat perched upon it, idly swinging her legs. She caught sight of him and waved. He pushed open the door and entered.

"Isn't it wonderful!" enthused the girl. "Remember, I told you the truth would out."

"There are times," confessed Lake, sitting on the table beside her, "when I had my doubts."

"If you two would shift your behinds off my desk," grumbled Rushby, "maybe I could write."

Hastily, they slid off and wandered over to the window, gazing out at the sunlit street. Diane Wagner sailed past, walking slowly, as befitted a new-made widow. Lake had to admit that she made an eye-filling picture. A black silk dress, small-waisted, swept down to her ankles. Her dark bonnet, set on glossy tresses, was secured beneath her chin by a velvet strap. Over her head she held a long-handled parasol. Her clear complexion and yellow hair made striking contrast to her subdued garb.

"Doesn't she make a beautiful widow?" murmured Pat, with a quick glance down at her own inkstained overalls.

"Beautiful like a black widow spider," snapped Lake, "and packs a worse sting."

"Why, Bill," she gasped. "I thought, I thought—"

"I liked that gal? No ma'am! Maybe I was that crazy once, not no more," declared Lake forcefully. "I got another gal in mind now. She shades that black widow all ways. Right now I'm asking her if she's dated up for the school-house dance Saturday night."

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