

A Gunfire
WESTERN NOVEL

25
CENTS
NO. 44

A HILLMAN
PUBLICATION

**LYNN
WESTLAND**



**LONG
LOOP
RAIDERS**

A FULL LENGTH WESTERN NOVEL

LONG LOOP RAIDERS

by LYNN WESTLAND

Longstreet's introduction to the Oxbow country was a pot shot taken at him by a girl. That misunderstanding was soon cleared up, but then the fast-draw gent found that by siding with a lady sharp-shooter he was exchanging attack by one lone gun for a hail of bullets.

Even worse than this lead-spitting death which Longstreet had to ward off was the eerie mystery of what happened to Carol's disappearing cattle, and the explanation of the huge bird which hovered over the valley and allegedly snatched steers up in its very claws.

Lynn Westland surpasses himself in this quick-trigger, fast-riding story.

NOVEL SELECTIONS, INC.

NEW YORK

LONG LOOP RAIDERS

by Lynn Westland

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

THICK BLUE SMOKE, rancid with the odor of scorching hair, mingled with a sharp fetid smell of burned hide, rose up from the huddled mass of yearling steer stretched on the ground. It blatted mournfully, red tongue lolling out on the dirt and dried pine needles, a few bits of dirt and debris clinging to it. Then, kicking sharply, it almost threw Longstreet, who was kneeling on its head and holding a sharply bent foreleg, off balance. Its tail threshed frantically.

Zeb Wilkins, grizzled veteran of many a round-up, ordered or impromptu, was wielding the iron. He held his spurred, down-at-the heel boot to the flank of the heaving steer and gazed a little near-sightedly through the curling smoke. Then he applied the edge of the branding iron once more.

"LW," he nodded. "Long wanderin' ended, eh? Nothin' like doing a good job," he added philosophically and, stepping back, loosened the rope which held the steer's outstretched hind feet. Longstreet, watching sharply, rolled up and back as the outraged yearling came to its feet. It hesitated momentarily, half of a mind to vent its spleen against him, then lunged off into the tangle of scrub pine and dense thickets beyond. Its long horns seemed no impediment as it vanished in the tangled growth.

"Makes seven today, as I tally it," Longstreet murmured, and wiped the sweat from his face with a brush of his shirt sleeve. A square-jawed, high-nosed, patrician face beneath dark hair, which was overlong, like his growth of beard. "Not bad, Zeb."

"Could be worse," Zeb conceded, untying the other end of his lariat rope from a tree and methodically coiling it again. "This way we'll soon have the makin's of a herd."

"Yeah." Longstreet's voice held a sardonic edge, which seemed out of place with his youthfulness. "I sure never figured to build up a herd this way, though."

"They all do it this way, son," Zeb said gravely. "Danged near every outfit you c'n mention started by runnin' a long loop. When

they get big enough, then they go get respectable all of a sudden, and start makin' war on rustlers—on little fellers ambitious to make a start for themse'ves, like you and me."

"Well, at least we aren't stealin' from any other outfit," Longstreet protested defensively. "These are unclaimed mavericks, if there ever was such."

"Don't be too sure, son," cautioned Zeb. "Sure, I'll grant they ain't a critter runnin' on this range that likely ever saw his pappy or his mammy, or their ancestors, far back as his pore li'l mind'll travel 'fore it starts runnin' around in circles, wearin' a band as a mark of social standin'. But as for *claimin'* them—why, there's outfits that claim everything under the blue sky, with a slice of hell thrown in for good measure."

Longstreet shrugged. The gesture revealed his long, smooth muscles, narrow hips and sloping shoulders, and the sparkle of his gray eyes.

"Mebby so, old-timer," he conceded. "But what I mean is, there's no outfit pushed back in the brush as far as this. I've heard of a ghost town that throve somewhere back of beyond, in here, a long time back—but so long ago that even the ghosts have quit tracin' their family tree. And, right in here, looks to me like we're the first."

"We-el, there's points to what you say," Zeb agreed. "When you find wild critters so danged wild that they're tame, like a deer that ain't ever clapped eyes on a two-laigged critter, and so don't rightly know how cussed he c'n be—that's pretty far back."

"Only thing I wish is that we had horses," Longstreet grunted. "I'm sure getting sick of hoofing it like a tramp."

"We got two virtues on our side, along with blisters on our heels, anyway," Zeb grinned. "First off, gettin' a horse when you're flat busted as a split belly band is stealin'—and they hang horse-thieves. And in this brush country, we can sneak up and dab our loops on critters, and do it afoot. They's always compensations."

"And mosquitoes," Longstreet grunted, and slapped at one. Suddenly his eyes brightened, and he tiptoed forward, moving soundlessly from tree to bush to tree again, on the brown pine needles which carpeted the land. A cow and calf were coming through the brush, and such wind as stirred blew from them to the men. Zeb grinned, and hastily replaced the cooling brand iron in the remaining coals of the little brush fire.

A moment later there was a startled blat which attested that Tom Longstreet's loop had gone true again. Zeb scurried out from con-

cealment with his own rope to aid his younger partner in throwing the calf and stretching it for the sacrifice.

The cow, standing a little way off, surveyed proceedings with wildly roving eyes and hesitated between fear for her calf and terror of these two-legged creatures. Wilkins shied a stick at her, and tossed his rope with effortless ease, yanked, and the calf was spreadeagled on the ground.

"Be a couple minutes before that iron gets hot again," he said. "Kinda keep an eye on that cow, Tom. She's got as mistrustful a look as though she was yore mother-in-law."

"I'm perchin' pretty as a settin' hen on a china egg," Longstreet grinned back, his good nature restored by this unexpected addition to their herd. "You go spend a little of that hot air you keep spoutin' toward the iron, and it'll be red hot in no time."

"You're as disrespectful as a hound dog in flea time," Zeb protested, but retreated out of sight. Longstreet squatted on the head of the protesting calf and was undisturbed by its contortions. The tangled trees and brush through which these mavericks flitted like the ghosts which, according to rumor, had a nebulous hangout in the mountains beyond, looked pretty to him now. The hard going made it a tough cattle country.

It would be a nightmare, even with horses, to round up a bunch and haze them out of here. It was Zeb's idea that fences could be built—pole fences and some wire ones later on—dividing the fields and getting the cattle halfway domesticated in time. But right now, on foot as circumstances had placed the two of them, it was easy to work in the brush.

Off to the northwest reared the jagged line of the Sawtooths, with heavy timber clothing the slopes. It was country which, up to a few days ago, had made Longstreet definitely uneasy. Reared in Kansas, and accustomed later to the wide open sweep of Texas country or the lands between, this had seemed like a fenced-in land, for all its wilderness. A place where often you couldn't see for a rope's throw ahead, where trees and brush crowded until you had to take two full breaths to be sure of getting one.

But now he was halfway beginning to like it. Somebody had lost a big herd around the edge of this country, many years before. Probably a tough winter on the plains had wiped out several outfits, and the remnants of their herds, left to forage for themselves, had crowded gradually deeper and deeper into this mountain timbered country. They were wild, no man's beef—accustomed to battling wolves and pumas, bears and other perils and learning to be as wild as any, to survive with any.

Now he and Zeb would brand them, halfway tame them, and make them their own. Until one of these days, in the not too distant future, they would have a spread of their own to rival that of any of the other beef barons. They'd spread out from the hills here and spill onto the rich grasslands of the plains—

"Reach for the sky, mister! And fast!"

Longstreet jerked his head around, startled out of his day-dream. Amazement grew in him. Seated on a horse—the first cayuse he'd seen in hungry weeks—and not twenty feet away, was a kid in overalls and an old hat, a beardless youth almost dwarfed by the heavy forty-five which slanted above the saddle horn and seemed almost to bore a hole in Longstreet's midriff, it was so close. Angry blue eyes glinted like the sunlight along the gun barrel.

"I said reach!" was the testy order. "Or do I have to let six different brands of daylight through your ugly carcass 'fore you get the idea?"

Rather hastily Longstreet raised his hands. But he kept his perch on the head of the freshly struggling calf, and his mouth had thinned a little.

"Yunker," he said. "Put that gun away 'fore somebody gets hurt. It makes me nervous!"

"It can make hash of you too, for the matter of that," was the uncompromising retort. "Get up off that calf!"

The gun was unwavering, the face as set and determined as his own. That kid would shoot, Longstreet decided, and with as little compunction as taking a chew of tobacco. But he stubbornly held his position.

"This calf's a maverick," he said. "It belongs to me."

"And it'll do you a lot of good if you're dead, won't it?" was the jeering retort. "I'm not repeatin' what I said about standin' up—not if you'd rather never stand again."

Longstreet stood up, his face suffused with red. The rage was half choking him.

"Looks like you win, sneakin' up on a man that way," he admitted. "What's the notion? If you want to dab an iron on some of these mavericks, you got a right to."

Keep talking, that was it. Pretty soon Zeb would be slipping around to the far side and giving a new twist to this surprise party.

"Mister, you got the wrong idea, complete," the boy behind the gun gritted. "These mavericks aren't just anybody's dogies. They belong to the Bucksaw Ranch, and clappin' your iron on them is plain out stealing."

"Never heard of the Bucksaw," Longstreet protested.

"You're standin' on it now. And by rights I'd ought to shoot you. Maybe you didn't know, though. Let that calf go, pronto, and maybe—just maybe—I won't this time."

The kid had a colossal nerve, Longstreet reflected. And he was making up a story out of whole cloth. Bucksaw brand! He'd never heard of such a brand. These mavericks were for any man's taking, and he wasn't going to be cheated of his chance by any beardless kid who liked to show off—even if he did have an itchy trigger finger.

For there wasn't much doubt in Longstreet's mind that the kid would just about as soon shoot as eat. Maybe sooner. He knew the type. Billy the Kid had been smooth-faced and innocent-looking—and deadly as a blind rattler in August. But he'd been around some himself.

"Supposing I let it go?" he countered. "What then?"

"Then I march you out of this country—and see that you keep going," was the prompt retort. "And make up your mind fast—whether you want that, or to stay right here permanent!"

Longstreet cursed under his breath. What the blazes was old Zeb doing, not to be taking a hand by now? But he didn't dare delay any longer, and by now, since Zeb was so slow, he had a scheme in mind. He bent, loosened the rope which Zeb had tossed about the hind feet of the calf, eased his own with almost a part of the same gesture, and stepped back, jerking.

The calf bounded to its feet and was gone, plowing into brush so thick that it seemed impossible for a rabbit to move through it. Longstreet straightened, took a quick stride, and the loop he was spreading with his fingers shot out with no preliminary warning of a swing.

It struck the hand of the startled gunman, closed and jerked, all in the smoothness of one act. The gun was flipped out and toward Longstreet before the boy quite knew what was going on, and for an instant he stared down at the cowboy with dismay and anger in his eyes. Longstreet stooped and picked up the gun, which had fallen almost at his feet.

"And now, kid," he said softly, "*I'm givin' the advice. Better get to travelin' out of this country—and keep right on. There's not room enough for both of us—and I'm stayin'.*"

Anger burned in a red tide across the boy's face, lashed stormily out of those blue eyes.

"Looks like you got the upper hand this time, mister," he choked. "But you're sure makin' a big mistake about figurin' that *you're* stayin'—except six feet underground. I'll be back."

With a sudden fury of beating heels, spurs were digging, the sleepy cayuse was aroused and plunging out of sight so suddenly that it seemed to Longstreet that it might almost have been a dream. Save for the extra gun in his hand, and the added fact that the calf was gone.

For a moment he was of two minds, whether to chuckle or cuss. Then he saw Zeb, sauntering into sight, a whimsical look on his face.

"Well, it took you long enough," he growled. "What were you doing? Settin' back to see whether I'd get killed or not?"

"Somethin' like that," Zeb admitted placidly. "Though I wasn't rightly scared none of such happenin'."

"Why didn't you take a hand?" Longstreet demanded, irritation mounting in him again. "We lost a calf."

"There's plenty more," Zeb said smoothly.

"And the kid got away. If he's got friends, he'll be back with 'em."

"Shouldn't wonder," Zeb conceded.

"Well—blazes, man! Why didn't you take a hand?"

"Wasn't just sure you'd want me to, for one thing."

"I tell you he was trigger-itchy! He'd have shot me as soon as eat!"

"Not that bad," Zeb drawled. "Fact is, that was a danged good bluff."

"Bluff?" Longstreet stared at the gun in his hand, broke it open.

"That wasn't a bluff. It's loaded."

"Oh, yeah, I reckon likely. But it was still a right good bluff."

Longstreet stared.

"Are you plumb crazy, Zeb?" he asked. "I tell you, a proddy kid like that is about as dangerous as they come—"

"Yeah. Mebby." Zeb bit off a chunk of brown plug, regarded its diminishing size mournfully, and returned it to his pocket. "I had sorta the same notion, I'll admit, till I snuck around to the other side. Then I had a kinda better look, and decided there wan't really no danger of you gettin' shot—you bein', when all's said an' done, young and upstandin' and right nigh a handsome figger of a man!"

"Mebby," Longstreet said resignedly, "you'll come to the point after a while. Providin' you haven't been makin' too steady a diet of loco."

"Looked like a kid—and was, I guess," Zeb went on. "In years. But seems like you missed the p'int. That kid wan't a killer, where a man like you's concerned—not with bullets, anyway. That he was a she."

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LONGSTREET SAT DOWN SUDDENLY about where the calf had been a little while before. Fortunately there was a fallen log handy. His jaw gaped.

"Wh-at?" he gasped. "A—a woman?"

"Woman, or girl," Zeb agreed placidly. "Looked to me she was mebbly eighteen-twenty, or thereabouts. And plumb pretty, if fixed up in a dress, I'd say. So now yuh see why I was just sorta keepin' a watchful eye. Did you say somethin'?"

Longstreet had not. For the moment he was bereft of speech. Now that Zeb pointed it out, he could see that he was probably right. Color washed across his throat and face again. A girl! And the way he'd talked to her. The— He came to his feet again.

"You figure she was tellin' the truth?" he asked. "About this Bucksaw outfit and all?"

"Calc'late likely," Zeb agreed. "Mostly when they're as mad as she was, they tell the truth."

Longstreet digested this and shook his head.

"In that case maybe we've been runnin' a long loop—without guessing it," he suggested.

"Could be, son." Zeb was entirely placid. "You was sayin' somethin' about stayin'—and runnin' her out?"

Longstreet reddened.

"I took her for just a smart kid, stickin' his nose out for trouble," he said. "I—I'm kind of flabbergasted, old-timer."

"Wimmin have that effect sometimes," Zeb agreed. "Well, the sun says its time to eat, and my stomach agrees right enthoosiastic. What say we hyper back to camp and surround some grub, 'fore we decide on anything else?"

"That's a good idea, anyway," Longstreet nodded. He reflected aloud as they plodded through the trees.

"Seven today. Nine yesterday. Ten the two days before that.

Makes about twenty-six critters wearin' our new iron in these parts, Zeb."

"Yeah. We was in a fair way to bein' cattlemen ourse'ves, at that."

Longstreet's jaw tightened as his baffled gaze swept the encompassing brush and trees.

"There's thousands—literally thousands of mavericks running loose in these hills and woods," he protested. "And under range law they belong to whoever puts his iron on 'em. If she wants to dab an iron on some, there's plenty to keep everybody busy for a long spell to come."

"Yeah. Might as well be us as for a lot of 'em to die of old age and nobody have 'em."

"That's the way I figured it. And on open range—"

"She said this was Bucksaw range," Zeb pointed out.

"Most outfits like to claim everything in sight," Longstreet pointed out. "And me, I don't like to be pushed around, Zeb. My grandfather was a state senator back in Mississippi. We had a plantation, or so I've heard tell, that stretched about as far as some folks' imagination does out here. And it was real. The whole thing was lost, though, and my dad came to Kansas—and got killed there in a cattle war! I was supposed to be a gentleman—and what am I? Just a saddle tramp, up to now. But for all that, the Longstreets never did like to be pushed around."

"Nor them Southern gentry never did push women around, seems like," Zeb suggested.

Longstreet gave him a sour look, then halted suddenly, his hand dropping onto Zeb's stringy shoulder. There was the power of a grizzly's paw in that big hand, gentle as it was. Zeb had heard nothing, but he stopped instantly and shot a questioning look.

"I've a hunch that we've got company," Longstreet whispered. "This doggone country's gettin' as populous all at once as a rabbit hole."

Ahead, at the foot of a rising ledge, was their camp—what little there was of it. Stuff that they had packed into this country on their backs. Trees clinging here and there along the cliff side leaned over from above. A few big pines made a wonderful circle about the camp itself, and there was a little spring bubbling out from the foot of the cliff.

Nothing moved or seemed to disturb the lazy serenity of the afternoon. Then suddenly Longstreet pointed. Off a little way, behind a clump of brush, stood two saddled horses.

"You saunter along in, old-timer," Longstreet directed. "See

what you jump. Me, I'll saunter around behind and do the listenin', this time."

Zeb grinned and shrugged. Then he walked ahead.

Nothing stirred as he came to the camp, but his eyes saw a boot-heel mark near the spring which was too sharp and clean-cut to belong to either of them. Their blankets had been moved a little, and apparently the whole camp had been inspected during their absence. He gave no outward sign of what he had seen, but set about gathering wood for a fire. He was applying a match when someone stepped out of the brush behind him.

Zeb turned his head and saw that the man was tall, rangy in appearance, and dressed in thick cowhide chaps with hair on, and that his gun was still in its holster. He had a shaggy mane of hair which gave mute testimony to the fact that town was a three days' ride from this country, and his face, though twisted in a smile of sorts now, seemed foreign to that sort of emotion.

"Well, I'll be dad-blamed," he exclaimed. "Who'd have thunk to find a prospector in here?"

"Or a cowboy?" Zeb countered, and stood up. For a moment they surveyed each other a little warily, and Zeb extended the usual invitation.

"I was just going to slice up a little sowbelly and dish up some beans," he said. "You alone?"

"Well—no, I've a partner ridin' with me," the other man admitted, and looked around warily. "You have too, ain't you?"

Since the stranger had already inspected their two-man camp, denial would have been fruitless. Zeb nodded as he reached for the bacon, suspended by a cord from the branch of a tree.

"Yeah, I've got a side-kick, somewhere around," he agreed.

A second man stepped out into sight now—a heavy, paunchy sort of a man with a red face and eyes too small for the big nose dividing them. He nodded briefly and sank onto a log.

"Sure could use a bite," he agreed. "Long time since breakfast."

"You fellers look like cowboys," Zeb suggested, slicing bacon into a pan. "Don't tell me they's an outfit anywhere around here?"

"There sure is," the first comer said readily. "Haven't you heard of the Ox-Bow?"

"Sure, I've heard of ox-bows," Zeb agreed. "But no outfit like that."

"Where's your partner?" the big man demanded now.

"Right here," Longstreet said, and appeared behind them. He saw them start a little at his soundless approach, and hid a smile.

"Ox-Bow, eh? What sort of an outfit?"

"Biggest in the country," the fat man wheezed. "This is our range."

"Cattle or sheep?"

There was a half-challenge, the invitation to take the suggestion in those words as an insult if they liked. The tall man scowled, but the beefy man chuckled.

"Proddy, ain't you?" he said. "I like 'em that way. We run plenty cattle, feller, and log timber as well. I'm Neff—and the Ox-Bow's my outfit. This is my foreman, Jake Reigh."

"I'm Longstreet. He's Wilkins." Longstreet did not offer to shake hands, nor suggest that he was glad to see them. He crossed to the spring, removed a stone weighting it down, and lifted out a kettle of cold boiled beans, brought it back and spooned half of it into the pan to be warmed. Zeb had a coffee pot on the coals, was digging out cold biscuits and tin cups and plates. No one said anything more until their plates had been filled. Then Neff, who gave the appearance of being only a hand, nodded ponderously.

"You two been in here a spell, clappin' yore iron on mavericks," he pronounced.

"Mebby so," Longstreet agreed. "A maverick's a maverick."

"Not in this country, feller. Stock in these hills belong to the Ox-Bow."

"Seems to me I heard somethin' about another outfit, the Buck-saw. Which was makin' about the same claim."

Neff gulped a swallow of hot coffee and waved a hamlike hand ponderously.

"The Bucksaw's been tanglin' with the buzz-saw—meanin' me," he said, and laughed at his own joke loudly, without warning, then choking it to silence with an equal abruptness. "This range is Ox-Bow—the cattle, the timber, the grass. I'm givin' you fellers the benefit of the doubt. Mebby you didn't know. But mostly we just hang anybody that we catch foolin' with a long iron."

"By which I take it that you got a mighty short memory of how you got your own start?" Longstreet challenged boldly.

Reigh reddened angrily. But Neff, after a strained moment, grinned.

"Feller," he said, "you got spunk. And that's the kind I like. Yo're right. I got my start that way like every man does. But when you get big, little ones can be a damn nuisance."

"You should know."

"I know. An' I know how to deal with 'em too. Now, we ain't the kind to eat a man's grub an' be mean at the same time. We

could hang you out of hand and be within our rights. But I don't do things that way. I always give a man a fair chance."

"That's sure considerate of you." There was sarcastic amusement in Longstreet's unruffled tones.

"That's the way I figger it, feller. Plumb considerate. I'm eatin' yore grub—them's danged good beans, old-timer—and I'm givin' you a choice. You can go somewhere else to a fresh range, if you like. But I got a good job at top pay for hands like the pair of yuh. Men with know-how and plenty brass to back it up."

"And supposin' we don't like either choice?" Longstreet asked.

"I ain't supposin' that a man like you is a fool. There's better uses for such."

"Meanin'?"

"Them two horses, mister, is just bait. I got two more of my crew back in the brush. And likely feelin' plumb annoyed at watchin' us eat. In a proper mood to shoot if I said the word. Whistle, boys."

Promptly two whistles sounded from opposite sides of the camp. Longstreet's face remained impassive, but he felt a touch of apprehension and an increased respect for this fat man. Neff didn't look it, but he was plainly far more formidable than he seemed.

"Nothin' like a hole card," Longstreet murmured.

"That's the way I always figger it," Neff agreed. "It ain't likely to be needed, but a man's a fool not to copper his bets when he can."

"You got a big crew?"

"Quite a lot of men drawin' my pay. There'll be more, too, soon as snow starts fallin' and we really get to loggin'. For we aim to get out a lot of logs. You know anything about that?"

"Nope. But how about this Bucksaw outfit? Where do they come in?"

"They don't," Neff said bluntly. "They got a girl tryin' to run it, and they're on the way out."

"In your way, eh?"

"Plenty. They *claim* this territory as part of their range, and a part of their timber."

Longstreet was beginning to get the picture. It was a big country—big enough for two rival outfits to be in here, even if they had seen no signs of them until today. And he had a hunch that the girl who had jumped him must be the boss of Bucksaw. A game kid putting up a game fight against heavy odds. And evidently making a losing battle of it, against a powerful and completely unscrupulous outfit.

"You say you got a job for Zeb and me?" he asked.

"Yeah. At a hundred a month each, an' found. Which is wages."

"Killer's wages," Longstreet said coldly.

The eyes across the dying cook fire looked back at him—deep-set, little, with obsidian depths.

"That's it," Neff agreed.

Anger flared in Longstreet. Zeb, watching him, knew the signs. Longstreet had campaigned against the Indians in the Southwest, coming out a captain. He had served a year as a ranger, and if he had a serious fault, it was quickness of temper, his lack of discretion no matter how tight the situation. The Longstreets, Zeb guessed, had always been proud, aristocratic, accustomed to speaking their mind. Longstreet was going to do that now.

"You can go to hell," Longstreet said with slow deliberation, and his nostrils pinched together. "I don't sign up to fight a woman—nor take killer's pay."

Neff shrugged heavy shoulders, unperturbed, and drained his coffee cup.

"Suit yoreself," he agreed. "Then the two of you better be ridin'—pronto. We'll escort you off our land. And don't try comin' back."

"We're afoot," Longstreet said.

"Proud an' poor, eh? Then get to walkin'."

"It'd be better," Reigh suggested, speaking for the first time since the meal had begun, "to string 'em up. If we don't, they'll just cause us trouble."

Neff considered the suggestion for a long, slow moment and wiped his mouth with the back of a hairy hand. Then he nodded.

"Reckon you're right at that," he conceded. "When a man like you ain't on one side, Longstreet, you're always on the other. Don't reach for that gun now! Come on in, boys—an' keep your guns coverin' 'em. Jake, get a pair of ropes over a tree limb and bring up the horses. We got plenty to do yet today."

3

LONGSTREET TENSED, half minded to try a reach for his own gun. Then he abandoned the thought and raised his hands, reflecting wryly that this was the second time that day. Anger was a bitter taste in his mouth, rising in his throat like heartburn, but he tried to fight it down, to keep a cool head. It looked as if he needed it.

He'd made one big mistake—in figuring that this was wild country, unclaimed by any outfit. Though up to today they had seen no sign of anyone other than themselves, no indication that riders had been back in here for long years.

That was a natural enough mistake for men new to the country. His other mistake, which might prove even graver, had laid in assuming that a man was fair because he talked that way. Neff had bragged of his own fairness, his proclivity for giving every man a chance. He had eaten their grub and by his own admission, when you did that, even an enemy was safe from you for that day. That was the old code of the range, and even the toughest horse-thieves respected it.

True, he had been truculent and outspoken, but it was that trait which had impelled Neff to make them the offer in the first place. Now Neff intended to hang them purely as a precautionary measure—and Longstreet knew with cold certainty that, even if he had kept a civil tongue in his head, it would have made no difference. If they failed to go to work for him, he and Reigh had been determined on that from the start.

The other two were coming in now. One was a man who held his head oddly on one side, as though ever about to glance fearfully over his shoulder. It was as though he had been hung, some time, enough to give him a wry neck, but not quite enough to finish him. The suggestion of the hell of that moment was still graven in his face.

The fourth man was little and sly and furtive as a fox. It was Neff himself who ran big, clumsy-looking hands over the two captives in saerch of weapons, but Longstreet could tell that his touch was light and exact. Reigh had already selected a gnarled and

twisted pine, with an outreaching, barren limb, and flipped a rope across it. The little man was leading up a couple of the horses.

Zeb looked at Longstreet and shrugged a little. His neck, turkey-like, showed thin and wrinkled above the old shirt with its ragged collar. It would look worse in a collar of hemp. And so would his own!

Longstreet leaned a little forward as Neff lifted the second gun, the one which he had taken from the girl. The movement began in a gently deceptive way, but then it seemed to explode with the violence of a firecracker. His shoulder lifted with the spring of both legs, and he hit Neff on the chin, coming up under his extended arm. The two of them went to the ground together, a sudden wild tangle of arms and legs.

He had counted on the surprise of it to catch them off guard, and that far he had succeeded. Longstreet wrapped his elbow around Neff's bull neck, crooked it tighter and reached for one of the guns. But it had fallen from Neff's fingers an instant before he could get it and rolled under them as Neff flopped convulsively.

The wry-necked man was keeping guard over Zeb now with a gun stuck against the back of his neck. His cool detachment suggested a grizzly whose paw is raised for the finishing stroke. The other two were dancing about now, trying to get in a swipe which would settle Longstreet while not hurting their employer.

The boss of Ox-Bow twisted suddenly, trying to bring Longstreet's head up for a target. He succeeded, his fingers in Longstreet's hair and on one ear, and the little man twittered like a sparrow as he lashed out with the barrel of his forty-five. But Longstreet had calculated the blow and twisted a fraction before it came. Desperately the little man tried to turn his blow aside but could not. Neff's thick shock of hair was now where Longstreet's had been, and the barrel swiped along it, a dazing blow down the side, which left a spurt of blood behind.

Neff slumped in his hands, and Longstreet rolled to one side and grabbed for the gun again, but the watchful Reigh was quicker. He kicked it aside and tromped at Longstreet's fingers. The cowboy shifted his grab, and his fingers closed around Reigh's ankle. He jerked, upsetting him in turn.

Zeb had been watching in stony silence, but very alert. Now, like a mule, he lifted one foot and kicked out behind, hitting his guard sharply on the ankle. He lunged to one side, an instinctive reflex so that the blast of the gun missed him by a scant fraction. Then he was spinning back and behind the wry-necked man, grabbing him before he could turn and fire again, going down in a twisting

mass. A wild yell broke from him as he dug his fingers into the other man's hair and yanked.

It was too good to last. It was the little man who solved the thing by taking another chance. He stepped into the fray and kicked with abandon, and his boot glanced alongside Longstreet's skull. His head seemed almost to explode, and he lost his grip on Reigh, his muscles turning buttery.

Five minutes later the delayed preparations for their hanging were well forward again, with Neff able to sit up and take an acrid interest in the matter.

Zeb winked at Longstreet. His other eye was closing, but his spirits seemed to have risen considerably with the try he had made. It had been a good one, and the wry-necked man looked as though a tornado had used him for its plaything.

"You're making a mistake, Ox," Zeb informed Neff. "Wastin' good men like us."

"The only thing I regret about it is that I can't hang you every day for a week," Neff growled. "You got that noose ready, Jake?"

"All set for breakin' a neck as sweet as pickin' a posy," Reigh agreed. "Bring up that horse. Now stick your neck in here, Longstreet, and we'll try it out."

Still dazed, Longstreet was shoved forward. He'd be forced into the saddle, hands tied behind him, rope adjusted, then the horse jumped out from under him. It was, he reflected, an inglorious end to the dream he'd had only a few hours ago. Which was often the way with dreams. It seemed to him that he was still dreaming when a sharp voice snapped from the trees beyond:

"Reach for the sky, you unhung murderers! And fast!"

There was something familiar about that voice, with its angry incisiveness, and then Longstreet remembered. Somewhere out there was the girl who had thrown a gun on him. Now she was doing the same with these others.

Probably she had lost no time in traveling to get some of her crew and returning with them for the purpose of kicking Zeb and Longstreet off this range, precisely as threatened. But what she had discovered here had caused a slight alteration in plans.

The four hesitated, caught flat-footed with surprise. The voice crackled at them again.

"Make one move and we'll fill you full of lead—watch them, boys! And shooting you would be a pleasure, at that. You, tall and unhandsome, get their guns!"

Longstreet needed no second invitation. His head was clearing again. They had been just about to tie his hands behind his back,

but had delayed too long. Now the four had lifted their hands, and he helped himself to the brace of guns in Reigh's belt, then turned to the others.

No one spoke until they had been disarmed and Zeb untied. Then the voice came again.

"You, Neff, ought to hang—and if you pester on my land again, I'll see that you do. Now get off it, every one of you, and don't trespass again. All of us have got trigger fingers that itch when we look at you!"

Longstreet intervened as they started to move, curiously cowed now.

"You can go," he agreed. "But I've got something to say about the method. Travel on foot. We're keepin' your horses—to pay for that grub and the way you acted! Now travel!"

They lost no time in availing themselves of the opportunity. Plainly, in addition to what they feared might be added reprisal by Longstreet and Zeb if they lingered, they had a healthy respect for the boss of Bucksaw and her crew. Longstreet was still wondering about her, what sort of a girl she really was, with her sharp tongue and blood-thirsty talk, when she stepped into sight again.

She was dressed just as she had been before, except that her gun belt was still empty, and he realized then, with something of a shock, that she was not only alone, but that she had made this bluff without any gun at all! She eyed him truculently, disdainfully.

"I don't know what I did it for," she said sharply. "Except that I couldn't bear to see that fatuous look on Neff's face."

"Anyway, I'm glad you did it," Longstreet assured her, and he saw now that Zeb had been right. There was no doubt that this boyish looking youth was a girl, and dressed in the proper clothes, she might even be a pretty one. "We appreciate it."

"Do you, really?" she asked, and chill scorn was still in her words. Then her eyes softened a little as they turned to Zeb. "I was sorry for you," she said.

"I was sorter sorry for myself, right about then," Zeb agreed. "And we're sure grateful, like Tom here says. And don't get him wrong, ma'am—he ain't half so ornery as he sounds—not 'less there's good reason for it. In yore case, now, it was all due to a misunderstanding'."

Something like a smile twitched her lips for just a moment.

"You don't think he still intends to run me out of the country?" she asked.

"Ma'am," said Zeb, "if anybody has to travel, we're in yore debt. Though runnin' with them rattlesnakes still at large would sure go

against the grain. They offered us a job, which we declined. But that ain't sayin' we'd turn down the right sort of an offer."

This time a smile did soften her face briefly. Transfigured it, in fact, Longstreet noted.

"That's not too bad a notion at that," she conceded. "I could use you—and even him, I suppose, since you vouch for him—on my payroll. But Neff and his crew will be out for your blood now. Maybe you'd rather get out of this country?"

"Cut and run while the goin's good?" asked Longstreet.

Something in his easy drawl caused the retort to die on her lips. She hesitated, then a momentary mirthfulness shone in her eyes.

"Maybe not that," she agreed. "You're really quite a scrapper when you get started."

Longstreet bowed from the waist.

"That, coming from such an expert, is praise from Olympus," he murmured.

She eyed him with renewed sharpness again, then, as Zeb returned with the horses which he had gathered up, nodded.

"I really liked the way you were working Neff over," she said. "Would you consider giving your own little spread up and working for me? That way, you risk your necks."

"You have an apt way of putting it," Longstreet agreed. "And strange as it may seem, we still place considerable value on our necks. After what so nearly happened, I find mine more precious than ever. So, since you saved them for us"—he bowed again, and a sudden flush rose to her face—"we are yours to command!"

"Then let's get going!" She turned to a horse, swung suddenly, gracefully, into the saddle. "I'm Carol Burke," she added briefly.

"We are honored, Miss Burke. Permit me to introduce my friend and fellow-worker, Zeb Wilkins. My own name is Longstreet—Tom Longstreet."

"And he's feelin' right near as riled today as you, Miss Carol," Zeb drawled. "When the two of you cool down some, I reckon you'll both act near human again."

Carol shot a sharp glance at Zeb, then her smile flashed again. It made Longstreet revise still further his opinion of her. When she smiled that way, she wasn't merely pretty, but beautiful.

"Probably you're right, Zeb," she agreed. "First your Long Tom here made a fool of me—and I'm not accustomed to having that happen! And then those others tried to take a high-handed course, here on my land—"

"Well, you made them look foolish," Longstreet grinned at her. "To say nothing of me. Though now that Zeb puts it in the right

light, I sure haven't any reason to be mad about it. Which reminds me that I have some of your property. And since you seem to be able to use it better than I do—allow me."

He leaned gravely across, extending her gun to her, butt first. Carol took it, her lips twisting in a sudden smile as she eyed the arsenal of guns stuck in his belt.

"I guess you won't miss it, now," she agreed, and thrust it back into her holster. Suddenly she was brisk and businesslike again.

"Were you telling the whole truth when you said that you didn't know that this was Bucksaw range, or anything about Bucksaw?" she demanded.

"Truthfulness is one of my too-few virtues," Longstreet sighed. "But Neff claims that this is Ox-Bow range."

Carol tossed her head. The gesture loosened a dark brown curl which had been tucked under her hat.

"Maybe you've guessed that Neff is a liar and a scoundrel, by now," she said.

"The notion did cross our minds," Zeb agreed soberly.

"We'd be pleased to hear the true state of affairs," Longstreet added.

"I believe you two are honest," she said suddenly, looking from one to the other. "At first, I thought you were just in here to steal cattle, or probably working for Neff. After what he tried to do to you—it has raised you in my estimation. I beg your pardon."

"Ma'am, you've sure got it," Zeb declared, and swept off his battered old hat. Longstreet nodded.

"Zeb expresses it," he said. "And speaking for Zeb, I can assure you that *he* is honest."

"How much did Neff tell you about things?" she asked. "Didn't he offer you a job?"

"Now that you mention it, he did. At gunman's pay. We turned it down."

Longstreet saw the quick light in her eyes at this, but she made no comment. He went on.

"He said there were the two outfits, claimin' this country, and that he was runnin' Bucksaw out. Claimed it was partly cattle, partly timber."

"Yes." Carol waved a hand toward the mountains in the distance. "Off there is some wonderful timber, most of which belongs to Bucksaw. Off on the far side of the river is a little that Neff owns. I never intended to go into lumbering—I've had trouble enough with cattle, which I know something about. Do you know anything about timber?"

"I'm afraid we're plumb tenderfeet that way, Miss Carol."

"Well, no matter. I've had to start cutting trees in self-defense. Otherwise Neff would steal them, too." Her face tensed for a moment, as though tears were close behind. "Pa died—a few months ago," she added. "I'm trying to run Ox-Bow, to keep it going. It's a man-sized job—but I'm not going to be licked by a creature like Neff!"

4

LONGSTREET ADMIRER HER SPUNK. She was chiefly compounded of grit, he decided, as he listened to her story. Ox-Bow was a vast piece of land, back in here, beyond even the shadow of outside law. Timber Burke had been a lumberman first, a cattleman second. And a gambler first and last.

He had found this country a couple of years before. Like Longstreet and Zeb, he had been impressed with the number of wild cattle running loose back in the hills. Once get them branded and rounded up, and a man would have a fortune. Being primarily a lumberman, that angle of it had impressed Timber as a matter of comparative simplicity. Since there was a fortune ready to hand, he would scoop it in with a superbly careless gesture while concentrating on the bigger prize—timber.

For there were great stands of evergreens ready for the axe and saw. And just beyond, handy to skid them into, with plenty of water in the spring to float them down to market at distant saw-mills, was the Bucksaw River. The thing had seemed providential to him. This vast empire could be purchased from the estate of former bankrupt owners for a song, carrying with it at least technical ownership of the maverick cattle running at large upon these wild acres.

The song was in proportion, of course. A mere matter of a hundred thousand dollars for property worth, in theory, at least a half-million. Timber Burke had figured to get the hundred thousand back out of the wild cattle, and to make his real fortune out of the big trees.

He had planked down every cent he possessed as down payment, had borrowed the rest. Men who knew Timber Burke had not hesitated to back him, for he was a dynamic go-getter. Had he lived, he would probably have made his dreams come true. But he had been laid low by a trivial-seeming object. He had stepped on a

rusty spike, and had died, only a week later, of blood poisoning.

Leaving Carol as sole owner of a suddenly growing white elephant. Not long before Timber's death, Neff had moved onto the scene, buying the old Ox-Bow spread, which, though deserted, dated back to the days of the old ghost town.

With the purchase of Ox-Bow claims, Neff had obtained some good trees adjacent to Bucksaw. He had also purchased a theoretical right to all unbranded stock running loose in the hills, since, in the old days, Ox-Bow had antedated Bucksaw as a spread.

Now Carol was faced with a staggering mortgage, with cattle which were as elusive as shadows, and with Neff's determination to be king of this entire country.

"First he offered to buy me out—for the remaining amount of the mortgage," Carol flared. "That would leave me penniless, and give him all that Pa had sunk into it. He—he had the nerve to tell me that I could make sure of getting my share out of it by marrying him! I told him I'd see him in hell first!"

Her bosom was rising tempestuously, her eyes flashing. It was plain that she detested the man, and, Longstreet guessed, feared him more than a little as well.

"He still wants to marry you, I take it?" Zeb asked suddenly.

"He wants Bucksaw—by whichever way is cheapest," Carol said. She looked suddenly tired, like a little girl who had played too long and hard.

"The trouble is that I don't know what to do," she confessed. "And my foreman—he doesn't seem to be very good at things, either. That was why I—I hoped that you'd know something about lumbering. Pa knew that by heart. But I never was around where he did any of it. I spent most of my time on a ranch, and I—I thought I knew cattle. But these wild critters that run in the timber—they're harder to corral than a herd of ghosts!"

"Just one way to handle 'em," Zeb pronounced. "Fence in a piece of ground, mebbly fifteen or twenty acres. Part with poles, between trees—lots of old ones to use, and it's cheap and won't make the cattle shy off. Use a little barbed wire where you have to. Get a piece like that closed off, and brand them that's inside. Catch others and turn 'em in." He waved a hand.

"That way, they'll stay put—and kind of tame down. Be necessary to build more fences, later on. Only way to do it, though, till you get the country kind of tamed. Otherwise, you catch 'em, brand 'em, and what have you got? An iron on 'em, but that only means they'll be twice as hard to catch next time you want 'em."

"Do you think you could do that—with a small crew?" Carol challenged.

"Fencin' wouldn't be too hard. Aside from that, Tom and me, we've been doin' it, and on foot."

"Then you're in charge of the cattle, starting now," Carol declared. She looked at Longstreet. "If you only knew logs—here's what we're up against."

"I've got a small crew cutting logs. And another crew trying to get the ranch back in shape, to round up and brand a herd, and get some cattle to sell. I need money. But Neff is interfering at every turn."

She told them more, and they could guess pretty well at the rest of it. An incompetent foreman, an inadequate crew, a staggering job, and Neff making trouble on the side. No wonder she was short of temper, desperate. She looked at them, half imploringly.

"I—somehow I feel like I could trust you boys," she said. "And that would help—a lot."

"Not speakin' for myse'lf, but you shore can," Zeb declared. "Longstreet, here, his looks is deceivin'. But he's square."

"Thanks, Zeb," Carol smiled. "I do believe you—both. And there's the spread," she added.

Half a mile away, below them, were the buildings of Bucksaw, basking in the setting sun. They had picked up their few belongings from their old camp, not being much cumbered in the process of moving. Longstreet eyed Bucksaw appreciately.

There was a big log barn, old but still in fairly good repair. An equally big, rambling log house, weathered to a dull gray which merged with the landscape beyond. Corrals and outbuildings had apparently stood empty for a long time following the virtual abandonment of this country after hard winters and succeeding disasters.

But Timber Burke had moved with resolution in the time given him, and things were livable again, almost substantial. There was a homelike look about the place.

But it was the setting which caught his eye. A hill uprose just behind the house, wooded with second-growth fir and spruce. Around the house were tall pines, forest giants with few limbs for the first fifty feet or so, and great umbrella-like tops. A few cottonwoods stood near a little stream which wound past the house and on through the corrals.

The leaves of the cottonwoods showed yellow from frost, and old shrubbery in the big, neglected yard flamed red and orange. The windows of the house, caught in the sunset, flashed gold back at them.

"It's a beautiful spot," he said simply.

"It took Pa's eye," Carol agreed. "And mine. It's worth fighting for."

They rode to the corrals, stripped off saddles and turned their horses in. The crew of cowboys were just straggling back at day's end, Longstreet noted, mostly heading for the bunkhouse not far off. An average-looking lot. He was about to head that way too when Carol stopped him.

"I want you both to come up to the house for supper," she said, and led the way.

Zeb looked at Longstreet and glanced a little wistfully toward the bunkhouse, but he followed obediently. Carol led the way to the kitchen door. It was flanked by a wide porch. Inside was a lady with graying hair done in a tight bun on the top of her head. Red-faced from bending over a big range, she looked up at sight of them. Her eyes, Longstreet saw, were sharp, but kindly.

"Ma, these are a couple of new hands," Carol introduced them. "Tom Longstreet and Zeb Wilkins. Boys, this is Ma Prescott, my housekeeper. Ma looks after me—or tries to. Thy're eating supper with us tonight," she added.

Ma peered sharply at them for a moment, then held out her hand, first to Zeb, then to Longstreet.

"Looks like you picked up something that can more than wear pants, this time," she complimented. "How are you, Zeb? Wash basin's right over there. If you can stand my cookin'." She considered Longstreet sharply.

"Longstreet, did you say? That's a Mississippi name, ain't it?"

"You're the first person in ten years to know it," Longstreet assured her.

Ma nodded.

"Thought so. I used to know of Longstreets when I was a girl in pigtails—they were gentlemen. Quality. The Longstreets of Seven Oaks. There was a Senator Hiram, I remember. Any kin?"

"My grandfather," Longstreet admitted. "Although I never saw him—or Seven Oaks."

"You look kind of like he did," Ma Prescott said, letting go his hand. "Yes, sir, Carol, that's one time you *did* make a find—where's she gone now? Upstairs, I guess. You wash up and supper'll soon be ready."

Longstreet thoughtfully followed Zeb at the basin. It was strange coming here to this old place, discovering someone who had once at least known of the Longstreets by reputation, who had seen the

home which he had never known. Somehow it made him feel as though, after long wandering, he too had come home.

He washed more carefully than usual, staring at the growth of beard on his face a little ruefully. His razor was in his duffel bag, but Ma was already putting supper on the table in the next room. The odors were appetizing—fried chicken, if his nose, long stranger to such aroma, did not deceive him. Well, there was no need to worry about shaving. Carol had already seen him with his whiskers, and they didn't matter.

Another man tramped into the kitchen and stopped to look at him. A tall man with a heavy shock of yellow hair and a pointed mustache, who somehow had an air of elegance about him, despite spurred boots and chaps, which seemed out of place here. Ma nodded at sight of him, though her voice, Longstreet thought, was not too cordial.

"Meet Mr. Longstreet and Zeb Wilkins," she said. "They're new hands that Carol hired. This is Mills, foreman here," she finished, and went back to pouring gravy from a frying pan into a big bowl.

Mills nodded, rather curtly.

"We can use more men," he agreed, and crossed to the wash basin in turn. Longstreet followed Ma through to the dining room and was about to pause there when he noted that double rolling doors opened from it to another big room—the parlor.

It was a comfortable, lived-in looking room, with a big fireplace at one end in which a log now crackled cheerfully. A mounted moose head stared dourly down from above it. A big grizzly bear rug was on the floor. There were deep, big chairs ranged along the walls. A piano was in one corner of the room, a well filled bookcase on the opposite wall. A bay window had many insets at either side and the top in vari-colored glasses, which, with the last light of day, threw a rainbow effect on the floor at his feet.

But it was not these details which took his eye. It was the person who had been staring out of the window and who turned, looking full into his eyes as he looked at her.

She was a gorgeous creature. No other word could describe her. In any setting, among any number of women, she would have attracted men's eyes as a lamp draws moths. Here, in this remote setting, where he had not been expecting anything of the sort, she was even more startling and dazzling.

Longstreet saw that she was of about Carol's age and height. But there most similarity ended. Where Carol was boyish and dark of hair, with a quick sharp way about her, this girl was very feminine. Her hair was long and honey-colored, done to show to its

fullest advantage. Long-lashed, deep blue eyes met his. And she was dressed in all the frills of lace and silk, such as he had not beheld for years.

For a long, cool moment she met his eyes, held his gaze. Then she was drifting, or almost floating, across the floor toward him, a welcoming smile on her lips, an even more welcoming light in her eyes.

"So this," she said, "is why Carol is changing from breeches to blouse! I heard them calling you Mr. Longstreet. Welcome to Bucksaw, sir!"

5

HER WELCOME, LIKE HERSELF, was a little overwhelming. She still held on to his hands, her eyes swam into his.

"I thought that such things never happened oftener than once a year to me," she murmured. "A few weeks ago I had a brief trip out from this country—a glimpse of life! For the best of the outside world to come here to me, now—"

Longstreet felt himself growing embarrassed. He was rescued by the appearance of Carol, coming down the broad, open stairs. It took a second glance to assure him that it really was Carol.

Not that she had made any extravagant preparation to offset the blond beauty of this other girl. She had merely changed to a dress, had combed her hair out so that it fell softly about her shoulders and was gathered behind in a loose bow tied with a red ribbon. But the transfiguration from boy to girl was complete, none the less. Alone in that room, she would have been breathtaking. She was eye-catching, even in the face of such competition.

Longstreet turned to her almost with relief, and he thought he saw a none too pleased sparkle in the eyes of the other girl. Carol's voice was cool.

"Have you two met?" she asked. "Mr. Longstreet, this is my cousin, Nina Adrian."

"Carol, you're positively wonderful," Nina declared. "To ride out in the brush and come back with a Longstreet of Seven Oaks! I shall have to do more riding myself, I see."

The meal was a pleasant one, though Mills was taciturn and, to Longstreet's mind, not too well pleased with them. He listened to Carol's account of the brush with Neff and his crew, and shook his head.

"Now we're in trouble," he said. "And it was bad enough before."

"Should I have sat back and allowed them to be hung, to avoid giving offense to Neff?" Carol flashed, and Longstreet observed that,

in shedding her overalls, she had dropped the boyish cowboy talk as well.

Mills shook his head.

"I didn't mean that, of course," he said. "But for them to be workin' here now—you know Neff."

"You bet I know him," Carol agreed. "That's why I'm glad to have men who have as much reason to hate him as he does us!"

Nina listened with sparkling eyes.

"This," she said, "sounds really interesting. I was getting bored to distraction with the way things were going. Now life should be worth living."

"Zeb is taking charge of the cattle," Carol added. "And Mr. Longstreet will help keep an eye on the trees and things in general. That will leave you a freer hand too."

Mills grunted, apparently not too pleased, though he made no objection. Supper over, Zeb insisted on helping Ma Prescott with the dishes. He was a bit overawed, Longstreet knew, and more at home in the kitchen.

The foreman rather curtly requested a conference with Carol. Longstreet found himself alone with Nina. The table had been cleared, and she blew out the coal oil lamp, leaving the room in a pleasant dusk lit only by the crackling log in the big fireplace.

"This is my idea of coziness," she confided. "Tell me all about yourself—Tom."

"There isn't much to tell," Longstreet said uneasily. "I'm just a wandering saddle tramp. The glory that belonged to the Longstreets of Seven Oaks is reflected very dimly in me."

"You're very modest, aren't you?" Nina said. "Strong, handsome men usually are. There's only been one strong man in this whole stretch of wilderness before—Mr. Neff. And he certainly isn't handsome!"

"But you thing he's strong?" Longstreet asked.

"Isn't he?" she asked. "When he wants something, he goes after it. That's the kind of man I like—a man who knows what he wants and takes it. A man strong enough to have and to hold!"

"Seems like you made a hit with Mis' Adrian," Zeb commented slyly when they had finally escaped to the shelter of the bunkhouse, where the rest of the crew were already asleep.

"Talk about a dangerous country!" Longstreet said fervently. "If I'd known in advance, I'd have made tracks somewhere else while I had a chance."

"You look like you was hitched an' hog-tied now," Zeb jeered.

With the morning, Longstreet began to get a more general idea of the Bucksaw and the lay of the land. The crew had been divided into two parts some time before. Some of them were at the lumber camp several miles away, felling the big trees. Others had been trying to round up and brand a herd of cattle under Mills' supervision. They had been meeting with less success, it appeared, than had attended Zeb's and Longstreet's efforts out in the brush.

"Strikes me that he's one of those fellers that's always a-tryin' hard, like a calf suckin' another calf's ear," Zeb commented. "It c'n work right hard, but not get much nourishment."

He was taking over that job, with Mills to show him around. Carol rode with Longstreet to show him other things. She was attired as she had been the day before, and it seemed to Longstreet that there had been a malicious glint in her eye when she had suggested to Nina that she might ride along with them as well.

Nina had yawned behind her fingers, very pink and well cared for, and had declared that she would be delighted, but would do it some other time.

The lumber camp itself was nearly deserted when they reached it, with the long bunkhouse drowsing in the sun and only a thin streamer of smoke rising from the cook shack to challenge the pervading atmosphere of the pines.

Back in here the trees were big. Longstreet had never seen anything like them. Mighty pine and occasional spruce which towered to the sky, three and four and five feet in thickness, sometimes more. On beyond was the river, and though his own experience was nil, it looked to him as though it should provide good water at the spring high for carrying the winter's logs out and down to market.

"It's a long way to the mills," Carol explained. "But Pa was well satisfied with that part of it. He said it was a logger's gleam of good water."

She pointed to where sunlight glinted as on a mirror, somewhere well ahead.

"There's the rest of it. The river splits, up a few miles, and swings off there, making a big island in here. Then three or four miles farther on down it joins again. We're cutting now on the far side of the island. Neff owns some timber on across the far side of the river."

"Don't look like there was room for much timber off beyond," Longstreet suggested. "The mountains seem to take up most of the room, and to fair stand on end."

"That's about the size of it," Carol agreed. "There are just a

few patches of good trees on his side—just enough to give him an excuse for cutting and stealing from me.”

“You mean he cuts a few logs, then makes a raid on across to your side when no one’s around to steal some of the logs you’ve cut, get them in the water, and mix them up with his own?” Longstreet asked.

“Something like that,” Carol agreed. “Only it isn’t that simple. If it was, we could deal with it. Every log we cut is stamped with the Bucksaw brand in the butt—just like a calf is branded. Nobody could steal, say, a hundred big logs, in a night, get them in the river and floated to join other logs, and still have time to cut an inch or more off the butt of every log to get rid of our stamp, then put their brand on them at the same time. It just isn’t possible.”

“Don’t look so,” Longstreet conceded. “But do you mean that your logs disappear that way—and can’t be found again?”

“That’s the size of it. It’s happened twice since we started cutting, a few weeks back. Of course, we’ve only had a few men working, up to now, so there weren’t many logs either time—fifty to a hundred ready. But they represent a lot of board feet, at that.”

“I can see that. And they just dissappear, you say?”

“There’s no other word for it. We scouted everywhere for miles, looking for them, and found some of Neff’s logs, but not a sign of ours.”

“Anybody keepin’ an eye on your logs?”

“The second time, yes. There were two guards. One of them just disappeared. I don’t know what happened to him. Whether he sold out—or was killed. The other man was easy to dispose of. He confessed later that it was cold and rainy, and when he was walking his beat, he stumbled over something in the trail. It was a bottle full of whiskey, and so he thought that one drink wouldn’t do him any harm. You know how that works,” she added bitterly. “When we found him, the logs were gone, and he couldn’t remember anything beyond taking the first drink.”

That was readily understandable, but the mystery of where mammoth logs could vanish to was not so easy to solve. A few miles down, Carol explained, just below where the two branches of the river reunited, and on his own land, Neff had built a boom across the river, to hold any of his own logs which might float that far.

Quite a few of them had collected there now. They lay placidly, undisturbed in the sluggish water, and it would be virtually impossible to open the boom and get any other timber past and on down the river, even allowing for the time element, without taking every

log there. The next morning there would certainly be visible evidence of what had happened in the mud along the shore.

"But it was easy to see that nothing had been disturbed there for a long while," Carol said ruefully. "I even looked at where two big log chains that hold the boom in place are hooked together. Spiders had covered them with webs."

Longstreet was intrigued. Here was a puzzle that appealed to him. If raids such as this could be made at irregular intervals, and a lot of the logs stolen from time to time despite every precaution, that would turn any possible profit from operations into loss. Which was exactly what Neff planned, of course.

But how could he do it? A log was not like a steer which could be driven for miles and soon gotten out of the country. Logs such as those, massive things, could be slid down to the water with poles and canthooks without too much trouble. But once in the river, they must travel by water. If taken out on shore again, they would leave plenty of evidence of where and how it had been done.

In addition, it would be impossible to move them for any appreciable distance except on wagons, along roads, or by snaking them along by horse power, log by log, with heavy chains attached. That would be a slow process and leave a plain trail to follow. Nothing like that had been done, Carol was positive.

"Isn't there some slough or backwater somewhere in this section where they might be floated and kept out of sight?" Longstreet asked.

They were on the island now, and from the distance came the ring of axes, the throaty gurgle of the saws eating their way through big trees. Carol shook her head.

"If there is, I don't know where," she confessed. "I thought of that, too. And there is one such side-stream, running well back across the island. We looked along every foot of it, but didn't find a thing. If there are other such places, I don't know where."

"Do you have any theory—about the logs?" he asked.

She shook her head in exasperation.

"No. That's the trouble. They couldn't vanish the way they did—it's impossible. But they did it. We did a lot of prowling around, over on Neff's land, and of course he knew what we were looking for. He just laughed at us, but invited us to make a thorough search. Said that he didn't have anything to conceal, so he wasn't afraid to have us look."

Ahead was the far branch of the river, with the sharply rising hills beyond. And in here the crew were at work, a handful of men

getting out a few logs, stacking them in a big pile close to the river: Carol spoke thoughtfully.

"Of course, I suppose you're wondering why we cut off here where it's so handy for Neff to steal," she said. "Back a way, it wouldn't be so easy. But he was cutting and stealing a lot in here before we discovered it, so I decided that we'd just get them ourselves. So far it hasn't worked. But I—I'd almost sooner keep right on trying right here, and lose everything—than to admit that he had me licked!"

Longstreet could understand that spirit and admire it. And it was basically sound.

"I'll have a bigger crew in here in a few days," she added. "That ought to help."

Longstreet pondered what she had told him as they rode. He wanted to have a good look at this whole country himself before he would be satisfied on some points. But Neff's attitude seemed to indicate that he was perfectly sure that nothing would be found. That could only mean one of two things—that the logs had been gotten clean away, or that they were so well hidden that he was equally sure that they would not be discovered.

According to what Carol had told him, either theory seemed rather ridiculous. A clever man might hide some stuff from others in thick woods, but a huge pile of big logs was definitely not in that category. Getting them out of the country seemed even less likely, but on the face of it that was what must have happened.

Neff's willingness to have them search, even back on his land, was, on the surface, a natural thing. Suspected of stealing, he was anxious to prove his innocence. But Longstreet, having seen the man, knowing just how ambitious and unscrupulous he was, was not impressed by the possibility. If the logs had been stolen, Neff had been responsible.

And he might be very anxious to have them search—once, even twice, as had been done. It might be possible, if the thing were well planned in advance, to conceal that many logs—perhaps a log here, another one or two there, in likely spots.

Then, when a bigger subsequent raid was conducted, he could—and very likely would—protest against them continuing to search his land, to suspect him of crooked work. He could argue that he had given them every reasonable opportunity to find their logs, to see for themselves that he was not implicated. And to declare, with a show of righteous indignation, that he was tired of insinuations, and wasn't going to permit it to happen again and again. He might

very easily be building up in preparation for bigger and better raids, for effectual hiding of the greater loot later on.

"I'd suggest that a real watch be kept from now on," Longstreet said. "To see that they don't make a third raid, and get away with it."

"We've had a watch posted, as I said—which didn't help any," Carol reminded him, and looked at him directly.

"I've been thinking it over. You say that you don't know anything about this job, but that gives you a chance to tackle it with an open mind. And I know how much Neff hates you. Maybe he could bribe some of my crew, but he couldn't do that to you. So, if you're willing to take the job—and I know how risky it will be—I'm going to ask you to move into the watchman's cabin, off near the logs there, and keep an eye on things from now on!"

6

THE ISLAND WAS SOMETHING over a mile wide at this point and several miles long, with the river curling on either side. Most of the cutting, by the small crew which had been operating so far, had taken place in a choice stand of trees not very far back from the river.

About a hundred logs had been moved and piled not far from the water's edge, where it would be easy, when spring came with high water, to roll them down and in. And at least until the freeze-up of the river, it would be just as easy to roll them in now, Longstreet noted, and commented on the fact.

"It was Mills' idea," Carol said. "Maybe he was wrong." She was silent a moment, looking over the country. "I guess I'm asking you to take on a pretty big job—and a risky one."

"That angle don't worry me," Longstreet said, and meant it. But she went on, after a moment:

"I'll have a bigger crew coming a little later. So that we can really get out logs. But it won't help any—unless this thing is licked first. I'll give you an extra man to help, of course."

The watchman's cabin was much like line cabins which he had seen before. There was a stove in it, two bunks on one wall, a couple of chairs, cooking utensils and supplies, and not much else.

The former watchman had arranged a system of signals with the lumber camp across on the mainland. Two piles of wood were stacked ready, so that a match could be touched to them and they would flame like red beacons in the night. If it was so late at night that everyone would be asleep, a rifle, fired a few times, would waken them.

"Except maybe on a windy, stormy night," Longstreet pondered. "They might not hear it then—that far away. I'll fix that."

Carol had gone back across the river, leaving him in charge. There was a plentiful collection of tin cans at the corner of the

shack, beside a lean-to. And at the camp it was not hard to get the other things which he required.

Longstreet set to work. It wasn't hard to use a little powder, caps and fuse to make a tin can over into a miniature bomb. With just enough powder to make a lot of noise. If one of those was set off, the men in the camp couldn't help hearing it.

With that done, he scouted the island rather hurriedly. He found the creek of which Carol had spoken, an inlet of water twisting back in from the far branch of the river, deep, sluggish, often well hidden by trees and overhanging brush. There were places where it was almost impossible to push a way through the tangle or to see the water even if you stood almost beside it.

A few logs might be hidden back in here, from the way it looked, without much danger of discovery. He'd comb it more thoroughly later on. But for the present it seemed to offer no hiding place adequate to the number of logs already stolen.

Each log, as it was brought down and added to the growing pile, was branded with the Bucksaw brand—much as a calf would be branded, with the iron heated and the imprint burned into the wood. There was no washing or scraping it off.

Down below the tip of the island, barely visible from it, Longstreet could see the boom which Neff had built across the river with a few lazy logs in the pond. He found nothing else of importance during his first search.

On across the river nothing could be seen save the thick woods, like a solid green carpet when viewed from above, an equally impenetrable mass from down below; or if one were among them, dim aisles like the nave of a vast cathedral.

Beyond was the steeply rising slope of the mountains, which seemed to climb to the skies. The occasional sound of Neff's rival lumbering crew at work could be heard. Longstreet stared across the river for a while.

Back in there, and not too far from the river, there might be deep gorges or caves. Possible hiding places, even for big logs. He was still staring when his helper came up.

He was a gangling man, and they called him Coots, he explained. He'd done, according to his own tale, a little bit of everything. Work in the woods, herding cattle, prospecting for gold, roustabout on a river boat, stage driving. Now he blinked rather vacantly at the dark hills looming beyond.

"Think there's anything over there?" he asked in a hoarse whisper. "What do you mean?" Longstreet asked.

Coots contrived a grin, but it was not entirely convincing.

"They say there's somethin' back in there—some big bird or somethin'," he said. "Uses saw logs for nestin' sticks, and stuff like that."

"You don't believe any such stuff as that, do you?" Longstreet asked sharply.

Coots shrugged.

"Nope," he admitted, "I don't. But there's some queer things happen sometimes—I been around enough to know that."

That was the sort of story which would get started, of course, when funny things happened, such as the logs vanishing without trace. That, or other stories equally fantastic. But Coots did not seem to be really afraid.

Longstreet took the first watch, until midnight, but nothing happened. In the morning Coots reported an equally quiet vigil.

"Nobody's likely to bother us none 'less it's a stormy night," he opined. "That's the kind they picked when they made the other raids."

That sounded logical. In addition to the noise and confusion of storm and the darkness of night to cloak operations, rain would wash away most sign of logs being moved in or out of the water. So long as the weather held good, with Indian summer whispering a false sense of security, there was not apt to be much excitement.

Longstreet spent the next few days in scouting the island and the surrounding country on the Bucksaw side of the river. An almost foot by foot inspection of the inlet dampened his original theory. Nowhere could he find a single log hidden away.

Changes were taking place, however. The pile of logs beside the water was growing to respectable proportions, a few more being added each day. And he could see that Neff's crew, cutting on their own side, were getting a good pile as well. Some few of their logs were sliding into the water and drifting down stream to add to the pile lazing behind the boom.

Longstreet had kept a sharp eye peeled, hoping to find butts sawed from the stolen logs or, failing that, ashes or other indications of where they might have been destroyed. But there had been nothing at all.

Zeb came once, taking time off from his new job. He was being kept pretty busy rounding up mavericks, he reported, but it was a job which he both knew and enjoyed. Years before he had hunted longhorns down in Texas. Back in the chaparall, it was even worse than in this brush and timber country.

"But I'll tame a few of 'em—'less they tame me first," he grinned.

"You do the same for these jumpin' toothpicks, son, and we'll make a country of this yet."

Longstreet rather envied him. There was excitement and action in what Zeb was doing, instead of watching for something that never happened. This watching and waiting was beginning to pall on him.

To enliven the tedium, he took to slipping quietly across the far branch of the river onto Ox-Bow land. He knew that it was a risky proceeding, and that Neff or his crew would be delighted to finish the lynching they had started once before, if they could catch him trespassing. Likewise, Neff would have his men alerted for just that possibility.

But it was wild country, well suited to a game of hide and seek. He cruised it with the same thoroughness that he had gone over the other sections adjacent to the river, his irritation mounting as he found nothing tangible. Plenty of logs had been moved into the water at different places over here, and dragged along on land before they reached it. It was entirely possible that some might have been dragged *out* of the water and back.

But Neff's own lumbering operations justified all this sign. And if there was anything amiss, there was no visible proof of it. Every log that he could see had the correct brand on it, and none of them were Bucksaw. He had a feeling that Neff was playing a cat-and-mouse game with them, biding his time, waiting to strike again. The confidence of the man was doubly irritating.

And then Carol came, her face tense with discouragement.

"I was supposed to have two dozen extra men yesterday," she said. "Loggers, men who really know their stuff. They didn't come—but I hear tell that Neff has that many extra men now!"

The implication was obvious. Neff had hired the men away before they had even arrived. Longstreet watched Carol ride away again, and swore to himself.

"He's not so much smarter than the rest of us," he fumed. "Or is he? He'll sure have to prove it!"

This particular day had started out bright and sunny, like many which had preceded it. But before mid-day there was a spreading haze in the sky, and, reading the signs warily, Longstreet turned back toward the cabin. He had come a long way today since Carol had delivered her discouraging news, examining several spots where it was risky to travel alone; ferreting out possible hiding places deep inside Ox-Bow. But, as usual, he found nothing.

Before he reached the cabin, the clouds had shut away the top of the world, crowding solidly down the mountain slopes, stretching a tight gray-black blanket not far above the tops of the evergreens.

A low, mournful breeze stirred their leaves, whistled cheerlessly through the avenues of them. The deep cushion of pine needles beneath his feet was soft and springy, quieter than usual, with a moisture drawn from the air.

Presently it was raining—a few tentative drops which increased to a steady downpour. He was soaked before he reached the cabin, and it was already commencing to get dark though normal night was not due for a couple of hours.

The woods were silent and deserted now. The loggers had gone home, off across the river. With the swirl of storm between, no light could be seen tonight for half that distance. If it became necessary to signal, his bombs would be the only thing. And Longstreet had a hunch that things would happen tonight.

He circled around by the piled logs, noting that they were intact, and swore a little when he found them unguarded. Coots should be out here now. He'd given him definite orders in case of such a situation. Probably he was in the cabin, sitting by the fire.

That looked like a good guess as he approached it. He could see the faint gleam of light through the window and a curl of smoke, with a few sparks to light it, coming from the upthrusting stove pipe. Well, the lazy loafer, who spent most of his time in sleeping, could get out there and watch—and heaven pity him if anything happened and he didn't report it—

Longstreet threw open the door, stepped inside, and stood for a moment, taken completely by surprise.

It was not his slow-moving, rather slow-witted helper who lounged in the chair by the fire. There was no sign of him. It was Nina Adrian who stood up to welcome him, the reflected light of the lamp tangling like a halo in her hair, a welcoming smile on her lips.

SHE WORE RIDING BREECHES tonight instead of a dress, but they were well cut, carefully tailored, and they set off her figure to perfection. Longstreet caught his breath at sight of her. He had forgotten how beautiful she was.

"Well?" she asked, and he had the notion that she was laughing at him. "Aren't you glad to see me?"

"Of course," he agreed. "But I—I certainly wasn't expecting to see you—not in weather like this."

"But why not?" she asked. "In weather like this it is so much more cozy by a good fire. With the storm beating outside—"

"That reminds me," he said sharply. "Have you seen Coots—my helper? He'd ought to be out there now, keeping an eye on those logs."

Nina shook her head, still smiling a little.

"I haven't seen him," she confessed. "There was no fire here when I came, and it was starting to rain. It was very lonely, very cheerless. But I thought that you would be coming back, and how good a fire would feel to you. So I built one myself." She smiled proudly.

"I am not so helpless as you thought, maybe? And I knew that you would be hungry. Men are always cross when they are hungry, so I will feed you. It will be ready in just a jiffy. Watch now."

Watching her, he was forced to confess that she could do things as competently as Carol, when she took a notion. In no time at all, she had whisked things off the stove, out of a Dutch oven, and set a hot, appetizing meal on the table.

"Isn't this cozy?" she asked, leaning forward to pour coffee for him, her head close to his. "Just the two of us, with the rain beating outside?"

"Very cozy," he admitted. "But I won't be able to stay and enjoy it. I can't imagine what's become of Coots—unless Neff has spirited him away, as he has done with the logs."

"But logs cannot move of themselves, nor so easily," Nina protested. "And as to Neff and his crew, if they plan to do anything,

they will not do it until later, much later in the evening, when everyone will be asleep over at the camp. There is no need for you to go out in the rain and the cold night—not for a long time yet. It would be wasted time. I came to see you. Aren't you going to say even that you're glad to see me, to entertain me, a little?"

"Of course, I'm glad to see you," Longstreet admitted, and frowned. By her own admission she had come here about the time that the storm had begun. The sensible thing would have been to turn back before that when she had seen it brewing.

She seemed to read his thoughts now, for she smiled lazily at him.

"You are wondering about me—here tonight, aren't you?" she asked. "But I think that I shall stay. After all, I suppose you will insist on going out and staying in the cold and storm, and if your friend—what is his name, Coots?—should show up, of course you'll make him do the same. Which would be only what he should do, of course."

She yawned a little, smiling at him.

"But that will leave this cabin empty, so it will be perfectly proper for me to sleep here, won't it? I never could find my way home in the night, and a storm like this."

That was probably true enough, and logical, in a way, Longstreet admitted ruefully to himself. But he didn't like any of it. And it looked to him as if she might have the foresight to see the situation.

"They'll be worried about you, back at the ranch," he said.

Nina laughed and shook her head.

"Who would worry?" she asked. "Not Ma Prescott. She doesn't like me. Nor my dear cousin Carol. She will have enough other things to occupy her mind without wasting any worry on me. If I get soaked, and have to spend a miserable night, she'll think it's just what I deserve."

So that was the way the wind blew, eh? He had suspected before that there was little lost love between the cousins. And he could see now that Nina was jealous of Carol. Carol, when she took the trouble to fix herself up, had as striking a beauty, in her way, as Nina in hers. And Carol owned Bucksaw—which, even though it was a white elephant now, might, with a little luck, be made into a property worth a fortune, a vast empire of both timber and cattle.

Nina apparently was the poor relation, and she resented that. What other factors might be involved, he had no way of knowing, nor time to be curious. The immediate present was too troubled for that.

"Of course, as you say, I'll have to spend the night outside, watch-

ing those logs," he agreed. "And if Coots does show up, so will he. But if you stay here—there's only our word for it that things were that way. People will—wonder. And explanations don't help."

"You mean that tongues will wag?" she asked.

"That's about the size of it."

"Yes, I suppose they will," Nina conceded after a moment. Then she shrugged. "Let them. I couldn't find my way home in this storm, with the night as black as a pocket. And I certainly don't intend to try. Talk never hurt anybody."

"I guess you're right," Longstreet conceded. "That is, about staying. It's about all you can do. There's another angle to it, though. There may be trouble around here tonight—it's entirely possible that Neff will try to sneak all our logs, and come with a big crew. If he does—"

"If he does, he will not hurt me," Nina shrugged. "Though if you insist, I suppose I could go—and get lost and wander all night—cold and wet and miserable—"

"You'll have to stay, of course," Longstreet agreed. There was no alternative, except to go with her and guide her, and he couldn't do that. "Well, I've got to get out there and take a look around."

"But why?" she asked. "There will be no trouble—if any comes—for hours yet. And I did ride out just to see you."

Longstreet hesitated. That was true, and she was a beautiful woman. And probably lonely, penned up in this far wilderness. It would be cold and raw out there, and the night would be long. She saw his hesitation and was quick to take advantage of it.

"Why not make a quick dash and see that all is well, then come back for a while?" she asked. "It is the sensible thing."

Probably it was, though he didn't like it even then. He made the trip and, finding everything as she had said, returned. They talked for a little while, but restlessness grew in him. It was mighty funny, Coots disappearing that way—and during the day. He had a suspicion that Nina had expected it to work that way, had deliberately chosen this night with its approaching storm. But such thoughts were probably doing her an injustice. He started to stand up, and she pulled him back to his chair, her hands on his shoulders, her face close to his in the dim glow of the lamplight.

"Are you so very anxious to get away from me?" she asked. "And to be out in the cold, Tom?"

"You know better than that," he protested. "But it's my job."

"But it will keep. There are hours yet—five or six, before anything would happen. They are not fools."

"Probably not, but I've got to take another look."

She sighed and shook her head at him.

"Then at least have another cup of coffee before you go to warm you. It will be cold."

"The coffee will be fine," he agreed, and stared grimly out of the darkened square of window as she poured the coffee. The night was increasing in wildness as the storm gathered fury. Rain lashed across the panes, drummed loud on the roof. It would be a mean night and no mistake. He toyed with the idea of setting off a bomb now to bring help from camp. That lazy-brained foreman ought to know enough to send extra men to help watch on a night like this.

He turned abruptly and sudden suspicion mounted in him. Nina's hand was hovering above the coffee cup, and she had dropped something in it. Not sugar, either.

He was almost sure of it, but he kept his face straight. He had played plenty of poker in his day, and it came in handy now. His thoughts were rioting. Had she dropped a drug in that cup to put him to sleep? It seemed a wild, fantastic notion, and he would not have harbored it for an instant, save for the evidence of his own eyes.

But there was something funny about all this—and it was no time to take unnecessary risks. Yet he couldn't accuse her of any such thing when he might have been mistaken. He couldn't afford to drink that coffee, though.

She was holding it out to him, but he managed to smile at her.

"Aren't you going to have some, too? I don't want to drink alone."

"Why, of course." She smiled brightly at him. "That's the first nice thing you've said to me. I didn't think you cared—about anything but logs. And if you were going out and leave me all alone—it would just keep me awake for nothing."

"I may be back," he said.

"That's a promise, now," she said gaily, and poured a second cup, set it on the table. Longstreet opened the door, and the storm swished in. The lamp guttered wildly in the wind, rain lashed across the room and at her. There was some snow in it now, Longstreet saw grimly—soft, slushy stuff, but it would be the real thing long before morning.

Taken by surprise, Nina screamed a little, and whirled. Deliberately now, for if this was a game he could play it too, Longstreet shut the door, laughing at her. He caught her in his arms and held her close, kissing her full on the lips.

For a breathless moment she yielded to him, then drew back, confused, but not, he saw, displeased. Before she turned, he had deftly switched the two cups.

"I've got to go now—but I'll be back," he said, and his eyes

were as bright as hers. He smiled. "Come on—let's drink!"

"Of course," Nina agreed, and drank quickly. She ran after him then, tried to stop him from going out into the storm, and he guessed why. But he lost no time in slipping on a heavy mackinaw and slicker over it, and then went outside.

He waited a minute outside the door to make sure that she did not try to follow. His emotions were mixed, resentment stirred sharply in him. He had liked that kiss and that angered him. And if he had misjudged her—

On the other hand, if he hadn't—grimly, with storm beating at him from apparently every point of the compass, he plowed toward the piled logs. It was a devil of a night, and no mistake. An apt one for mischief, if that was what they planned, and somehow he had no doubt of that now.

If Neff struck, he'd be hard put to it to do much to hinder. No telling when he'd blunder headlong into someone and be grabbed before he could help himself. The wild howl of wind and hiss of storm drowned all other sounds, and he could not see his hand before his face. But he had a strong instinct for direction, and found the logs, and turned back to the cabin, where the flickering light of the lamp still served as a guide.

Pretty soon he'd have to put that out. It was too good a beacon to leave for the enemy. Still, as long as Nina wanted to sit up by the fire—if she still wanted to—he'd have to let her have the light. A blanket could be draped across the window.

Or possibly it would be a good thing to leave as it was. Raiders would maybe think that he was inside there, and be fooled. Still, he didn't want any of them bursting in on her, thinking it was him—

Already, the ground, where men had worked for days with the logs, was slick and greasy with mud. He reached the cabin, went to the lean-to at the side, and looked in, but he could see nothing. He reached, and his hand touched one of the crude tin-can bombs which he had made. It was reassuring.

Satisfied, he moved around the cabin to the door, opened it, and stared, jaw tightening a little, his worst suspicions confirmed.

Nina was seated, slumped in the chair in front of the stove. And very sound asleep. Even when he shook her roughly, she showed no signs of awakening.

That cup of coffee had been intended for him. And she had placed knock-out drops in it, or something equally potent. Something calculated to keep him asleep at least until daylight. Though he had a hunch that, in such a sleep and with Neff prowling the storm, he would have had no awakening this side of eternity.

8

LONGSTREET THOUGHT FAST. It was a bad spot to be in, and getting worse. No telling what had happened to his helper. Nina might have been responsible for Coots' disappearance, or she might be innocent on that score, but the whole thing was shaping up to another one of the raids on the logs.

And that left him handicapped. The first thing to do, though, was what he had planned long before—summon help. He went out into the storm again, with it beating like a solid sheet against him, around to the lean-to. Fumbling in the darkness, he found one of the cans, but on an after-thought, took two of them, in case one might be a dud. He carried them back into the house into the light.

They were simple enough things. Just tomato cans, from which the lid had been partly cut and bent back. Emptied of their original contents, he had put a small handful of giant powder inside, well wrapped, with a bit of fuse attached. The lid was bent down again.

When the thing detonated, it would have sound and fury in its teeth, but it wouldn't amount to anything otherwise. He lit the fuse on one, watched it a moment, then carried it to the door and tossed it far out in the clearing.

Nothing happened. The moments ticked away in a slow monotony, and he could almost hear his heart thudding, like the ticking of a cheap watch. Longstreet lit the second bomb and, making sure that the fuse was so well alight that the wash of the storm could have no effect, tossed it out as well, and stood to watch it.

It fell, turned toward him, and for a space of seconds he could make out the tiny sputtering spark of it. Then that too, vanished, and there was only the darkness.

The fuse had burnt down to the powder—and nothing had happened. One bomb might have been a dud. With it happening twice, something was wrong.

He brought an armful of the bombs and pried back the lid of one, opened it up. It looked as good as the day when he had made it.

But when he took it apart, there was nothing in it but dirt. All the powder had been removed.

Longstreet's jaw drew a little tighter. They were certainly aiming to overlook no bets on this. A fresh gust of rain slashed at the window, wind shook the door in a wild fury, as though a hand fumbled at the latch. Neff and his crew might be out there now. If not, it was a certainty that they would be coming before much longer.

He checked the loads in his revolver, then plunged back into the storm. It was possible to find the piled logs only by feel now, but their rough bark, the rain-wet ends where saws had sliced them away from their anchorage, showed that nothing had been disturbed—yet. Wet snow plastered itself against his face as he turned.

Now he had a double problem. To stay here and watch the logs, alone, would do no particular good. If Neff came, it would be with a crew, and one man could not stop them in weather such as this. Again he wondered what could ail the foreman, there across the river. Common sense alone should be reason enough for sending extra men now, without a special summons. But he'd have to go and get them.

Nina's horse was in the little shed-like stable, not far off. She had unsaddled, and he fumbled in the darkness, found the saddle and got it on. It took him longer to locate the bridle and get the bit between the teeth of the cayuse, for it had turned suddenly stubborn. With it ready, he hesitated again.

What should he do about Nina? After the trick she had tried to play on him, she deserved little from his hands. But he had turned it neatly against her, and he hesitated at the thought of leaving her, helpless and in a drugged sleep, there in the cabin. Neff's crew wouldn't be expecting that. They'd be looking to find him in such a condition when they came.

She was undoubtedly an ally of Neff, probably drawing his pay. As such, she should be safe at his hands. But Longstreet distrusted the man on general instinct, and despite his suspicions, he knew that he had no way of being sure. There were mysterious and sinister things happening here in the wilderness. If by any chance she *wasn't* with Neff—

He cursed under his breath, then tramped into the house and stared down at her. Sleeping, she looked small and fragile and defenseless, and very beautiful. He found her slicker, and got her arms into it, then lifted her in his arms and blew out the light.

The way she slept testified to the potency of the drug. He kicked the door shut behind them, found the horse, which was inclined to

dance and shy away, and had some trouble in lifting her up and getting into the saddle himself. It was snowing steadily by then, though there was still rain in the air as well—a very devil's mixture on such a night and under existing conditions.

Nina's cayuse was inclined to act up at the idea of a double load, to try bucking a little. Longstreet was in no mood for foolishness, and jerked it around with a heavy hand, lined it on the trail, and they crossed the island at a gallop, the storm, sifting through the trees on either side, seeming to come from all directions at once.

Here, with the forest blanketing them on both sides, the wind did not hit much, but up above it was a steady roaring blast. Reaching the river, where it had a better sweep, the force of the wind was like a giant hand shoving.

They splashed across, and now the cayuse knew that it was heading for home and went more willingly. Longstreet's sense of direction, the sound of bare, harder ground under the pony's hoofs, told him when they had reached the lumber camp. There was little else to show it on this night. No gleam of light came from any building, there was nothing to be heard save the drum of wind and rain.

He found one of the buildings, though nothing showed any darker, or lighter, than others now. Leaving the horse to stand with dropped reins, Longstreet lifted Nina down, carried her, found a door and got it open. Inside, with the door closed, it was warmer, not so boisterous. He yelled, then, finding a chair under his hand, eased Nina into it and fumbled for a match.

Always he carried some, protected against the weather. But now his hands were wet with the slushy snow plastered all over him, his whole person dripped with it. The silence persisted, and it took some doing to get a match lit.

But the gleam of the flame did reveal a table with a lamp on it. He drew the match across the wick, replaced the chimney, and looked about in the welcome flare of light. And his mouth drew down.

This was one of two bunkhouses—the only one in use now, with the small crew on hand. There was plenty of evidence that this was the room ordinarily used. Tonight, the bunks should be filled with sleeping men.

They were not. Save for Nina and himself, the room was empty.

A quick look told him most of the story. Lumbermen, axe-men and sawyers, occupied this place normally, instead of cowboys. But there was not much difference under the skin. The signs were all the same. Rough work clothes piled on edges of bunks, hung over chair backs or benches or from hooks, or dropped carelessly on the floor itself. Evidence where men had shaved hastily and preened

themselves a little, getting ready for a shindig, then had changed to their best and departed.

The evidence was complete, now. No one had come from camp here to help because there was no one left in it. He could fill in the blanks with sufficient clarity, and his unwilling admiration for Neff's ability grew. Whatever else he might be, he had an artist's touch about such matters, and he worked with a thoroughgoing completeness which left nothing to chance.

It might well be that Nina had stopped here and left a message, or it could have been arranged otherwise. Certainly it had come before the storm, and had apparently seemed genuine enough to the loggers. Probably an invitation to a dance and party at the home ranch buildings. Something of a gala occasion had been promised, from all the sign.

By the time they could get back here, their finery soaked and spoiled, undoubtedly in an ugly mood, it would be too late to cross the river and offer any hindrance to whatever was planned there for tonight. Probably it was already happening, Longstreet reflected grimly.

He left Nina in the chair and found the horse again, not without difficulty. It had wandered over behind another building to get a little better shelter, and finding a horse in this blackness was not easy. But he finally climbed in the saddle again and turned back.

He had been gone nearly an hour. There was still no light, no sound above the noises of storm. It took him a while, moving about, feeling with hands and feet, to discover that the logs were no longer neatly stacked. And that a good part of them were gone.

It wouldn't have been difficult to knock loose a few key sticks and get them sliding, and a lot of them into the river. That had happened, and apparently the crew who had made the raid had disappeared like the logs. It was a perfect night for their work—if they liked that sort of weather. It would require familiarity with the country, an apt working knowledge, to handle the logs, once they had come, and to get rid of them before morning. If they could do it.

But he had no particular doubts on that score. Having worked this much of it so well, the logs would vanish as the others had done—unless he could find some trace of them tonight, and catch the thieves in the act. And that, he realized sourly, would be a piece of sheer luck which wasn't too likely to happen.

Maybe, if he had stayed right here, he might have done just that. But even that wasn't too likely. He couldn't have stopped them, and if he had tried, he'd have been knocked over the head or filled

full of lead with scant ceremony. Everything was going wrong tonight—or right, according to the raiders' plans. And ruin was being spelled for Carol.

It was that thought that drove him. She was a game kid, putting up a fight against even greater odds than she knew, when her own cousin was in the enemy's pay. Everything they had planned for this night had worked like clockwork, except for himself—and he was making no real difference.

The thought brought him up short. He was using his muscles enough tonight, but not using his head at all. It was worse than useless to prowl the island in this night of storm. While the real key was across the river now, in the empty bunkhouse. Nina.

She could probably be awakened by now, and could tell the secret, or plenty of it. A second time he rode hard.

The camp was still wrapped in the savagely cradling arms of the storm, still with an appearance of complete desertion. Once more he found the bunkhouse and got a lamp lit. Then stared in amazement which mounted toward consternation.

It was completely empty, now.

Nina was gone. And the reason was easy to see. There were still-wet boot marks on the floor, where men had trampled in and out again, with slush and mud on their boots. Three of them, he decided, after a careful study of the sign.

Which meant, along with the continuing absence of the rightful occupants of the camp, that some of Neff's crew had been here looking for her, probably following a hunch that she might have been brought here. They had found her, taken her away with them.

9

DOGGEDLY NOW, LONGSTREET TURNED back into the storm. Once more in the saddle, he turned the unwilling cayuse, purely on guess-work—or a hunch. He preferred to call it the latter, though he was only too well aware that there was far too much guessing mixed with it, that any sort of luck now depended more on the element of luck than anything else.

But there were certain reasonable factors in the case too, things which, added up, had to make two and two and come to four. There were only two outfits, back in this whole section of forgotten wilderness. The Ox-Bow and the Bucksaw. Others, who had tried in years that were gone to tame this country, had been broken by it, and were gone long since.

That automatically narrowed things down to Ox-Bow.

So Neff had been hunting for Nina, who was leagued with him, helping him. He would guess that somewhere she had made a slip, and might be in trouble. So he had set out to find her, and had done so. The logical thing, then, since she couldn't very well risk returning to Bucksaw, would be to take her to Ox-Bow.

Longstreet's jaw felt like the closed angle of a steel trap, it had been hard-set for so long. There was nothing in this to cause it to relax. Maybe Nina was just as bad as the outfit she was mixed up with, and he rather suspected that to be the case. Even so, she was involved with a mighty tough bunch, with a man at the head who was as unscrupulous as he was clever. Behind his gross, unlovely exterior, Neff was a foe to be chary of.

Maybe this way would suit Nina best. Maybe not. Since he was, in a way, responsible for her present predicament, he wanted to find out. It would be like Neff, if he had merely bribed her for this night's work, to now hold her for a hostage.

If they were heading for Ox-Bow, they'd keep on this side of the river, keep heading down for several miles, then cross the river and head on back to the other ranch. Longstreet had had a good

look at the ranch buildings a few days before. Though whether he could keep straight and find it in the night and storm was another matter.

It was still blowing, still a mixture of rain and snow. Slush was underfoot, covering the mud, so that his horse slipped and slid. Overladen branches jerked and allowed fresh chunks of the slop to fall soggly on him as he rode beneath. The sharp crack of breaking branches rose now and again above all the other sounds, like pistols popping. His horse kept fighting the reins, seeking to turn around.

But Longstreet knew that he was heading in the right direction, and now, luck smiled on him momentarily, as if repentant of the deal it had been giving him. The wind died to a low mournful wail, and somewhere ahead he heard a snatch of voices.

Presently they came again, a little louder now. He was gaining. Longstreet rode warily, and now he could make out individual voices, and one of them was the deep booming bass of Neff himself. There was also the squish-squish of horses' hoofs in the slush.

"They'll sure raise a row," another voice said, that of Neff's foreman. His voice held an uneasy quality. "Packin' her off this way, unconscious and all. They'll claim we kidnapped her, Neff. And doin' a thing like that to a woman—it'll raise hell."

Neff's voice came back, a booming quality of laughter behind it.

"Scared, Jake?" he taunted.

His foreman admitted the fact, doggedly.

"You're damn right I am. Any ordinary deal—shootin' it out, stealin' the logs, if we have to—fightin' men—that's one thing. But there's one thing that folks won't stand for in this country. When you kidnap a woman, or anything like that, you're treadin' a straight path to hell."

"Guess you're right, ordinary," Neff conceded, his voice good-natured. "But how'd they know we had her? This storm's coverin' our tracks—everywhere. It's a perfect night for our work."

"Yeah—perfect as getting treed by a grizzly an' then findin' a puma on a limb above yuh," Reigh grunted. "You ain't fooled by that none. Where else would she be?"

"Well, I'll tell you boys something," Neff said, still in vast good nature. "We ain't got a thing to worry about. It just so happens that I married this little lady, here a few weeks ago. Been necessary for her to stay on at Bucksaw and kind of keep the fact dark, up to now. But I'm just as well satisfied to be bringin' my bride home, now."

Longstreet became aware, presently, that his horse had stopped, as though the end of the trail had been reached. Which, he reflected dourly, it had. The sound of the others had faded out in the distance now, and there was no need to go any farther, as his tired animal seemed to have sensed. That was indeed the end of that trail.

It explained a lot of things. Though there were others left even more tangled by that new development. But if Nina was Neff's wife—and he was sure that, under these circumstances, Neff had been telling the truth—then there was no point in pursuing any farther, with any wild notions to rescue her.

He recalled that she had made a trip "out" not long before Zeb and himself had come to this country. That explained the wedding.

Slowly, a little heavily, Longstreet turned his horse, which now went willingly enough. He was still a little dazed by this new development, emotionally upset. Nina had played her part well. She was a clever actress, whatever else she might be. And he had kissed her, tonight

He shook his head, smiling a little wryly. Considering the pair of them, Neff and Nina, it came to him that each had gotten just about what he deserved, in the other.

By now, the wind had completely died away, leaving a curious sense of stillness, following the long turmoil of the night. It was still snowing a little, but even the nature of that had changed. The flakes were large, feathery. And it was commencing to show a faint grayness in the east.

Longstreet realized that he had spent the night in riding, and, aside from this one bit of knowledge, all to no purpose. He was tired, and his horse even more so—Nina's horse!

All sign of the log raid had of course been washed away in the driving rain, then covered additionally by fresh snow. There were a couple of inches of it blanketing the ground now. But at least there was one good thing about it. He swung the protesting cayuse a little, heading off toward the river. It wasn't much out of his way, and by the time it was light enough to see, he would reach the boom which Neff had stretched across the river below Bucksaw.

Daylight was a soft grayness now, stealing through the dripping timber, laying a lighter hand on the river itself, when he came in sight of it. Only a few flakes remained in the air now, as though reluctant to call it a night and go home.

Nothing marred the fresh white blanket on either side of the river or around the boom. There were still logs there, lying lazy in the backwater just as they had done for days. Snow coated the upper

side of them, and a muskrat disported itself among them even as he watched.

But it did not look as if there had been a single additional log added during the night, and it was plain enough to Longstreet that no man had been here to open the boom and let a fresh influx of logs through and on down river. If the soft muck at the sides had been trampled by booted men, it would have showed it now.

Though this was about what he had expected to see, he shook his head unbelievably. Where else could those logs go? This boom, placed squarely across the river here, was like a mockery to taunt them—proof that the logs had not come down, which, on the face of it, was the only thing that they could possibly have done.

Well, it would do no harm, now, to ride up along the far side of the river, and see what there was to see—if anything. It wouldn't take much longer to get back to his cabin, and he was already so thoroughly soaked that nothing else made any difference. And if anybody had been at work for the last two or three hours, the sign of it would still show.

His horse splashed across the shallows, not much more than knee deep, and was on the island and Bucksaw land again. Off across the river lay Ox-Bow, with an occasional narrow strip of well timbered ground. But even and again the mountains themselves, seeming now, in their fresh coating of white, to rise more than ever straight up like a mighty barrier, crowded clear to the river's edge.

It was easy to see, viewing these hills, why Neff coveted the Bucksaw. Neff's spread compassed some land farther down, but mostly it took in this range of mountains, and, he supposed, some of the valley on the far side. None of it, save for small patches here and there, amounted to much, either as graze for cattle or for timber fit for market. There was plenty of land, had it been spread out and flattened so that anything other than a mountain goat could find foothold on it. But in its present condition it was good for little except scenery.

He had scouted that far side of the river pretty thoroughly, eager with his first theory that somewhere there must be a side stream, a backwater, where logs could be hidden. Or perhaps a cave near the river, something that would serve. He had not, of course, combed it thoroughly. That would be a far bigger job than he had had time for.

But he had done a passably good job, and had found nothing. Yet now, as he had half-fatalistically come to expect, the snow was a white unbroken blanket, and there was no sign that man had worked along here in the wild dark. Nor were any of the missing

logs in sight. The only sign was the trail of his horse, stretching out behind.

The clouds were lifting toward the tops of the mountains, beginning to break, a fugitive ray of sunshine dazzled on the snow as he neared the cabin. The snow was melting, now, the forest was adrip, a vast weeping legion of trees. But none of the loggers had showed up, so far.

He turned the cayuse into the stable, went to the corner to fork some hay, and stopped, tines of the fork suspended. The hay was stirring. He shoved it aside, and there was Coots, bleary-eyed, just waking up.

One look was enough to tell Longstreet what had happened. Nina had given the man a cup of coffee, and tossed a knock-out drop into it, then had probably made some excuse to get him out to the barn before it took effect. She had covered him with the hay and left him.

Coots confirmed the guess. He had suspected nothing when she had arrived, and had been easy to dupe. Longstreet couldn't much blame him. He took a look at the logs. About half of the scattered pile remained on the ground. But the other half, the choicest cut of the last several days, were gone.

He was making coffee and frying bacon and flapjacks when the logging crew finally began to arrive. With them was a much disgruntled woods-boss.

"So," he commented dourly, looking at the scattered logs. "They got 'em, huh?"

"They got what they wanted," Longstreet agreed. "And gave you the run-around, eh?"

"Well, what was we to think?" the foreman demanded disgustedly. "Miss Nina, the boss' cousin, she come and said we was to knock off work and come up to the ranch house for a big shindig. Said it was Miss Carol's birthday, and to all come, that she was sendin' some of the cowboys to help you keep watch of the logs, in case anything happened.

"Well—hell," he exploded. "What could we do? When we got there, Miss Carol didn't know a blasted thing about it. We come back—and on across here, but you was gone and so was the logs. So we went back and got a little sleep. Though what'll happen now—or what the blazes *has* happened—" He shook his head.

"The logs are gone, same as before," Longstreet said. "We know that much." He went on to explain what he knew about the events of the night. He did not tell about Nina being taken to Ox-Bow,

however, or what he had overheard Neff say about her. Carol deserved to hear that first.

The woods-boss listened, amazed and disgusted, while Longstreet ate his breakfast.

"Well, we got to have a real crew here—and if Miss Carol 'll agree, I c'n go get 'em myself," he declared. "Then we can give 'm a battle. Right now, I s'pose we might as well go on cuttin'—at least, till we're told diff'rent."

"Yeah," Longstreet nodded abstractedly. He was tired, but he had no thought of sleep. "I'll go across to the ranch and tell her about things. We'll do some things different from now on. For one thing, make the new pile farther back from the river where they can't be slid in so easy. And keep a few men here all the time till I get back."

Those were vain precautions for the day, he realized, even as he made them. Nothing more would happen here for a few days, not till more logs had been cut and another stormy night came along. By then, and despite whatever precautions they might take, he had a growing feeling that another raid would be made—or at least attempted.

And now he had to report to Carol, to tell her of the treachery of her cousin. She already knew something of it, of course, having been told that Nina had brought the spurious invitation. But what she'd think of the rest of the story that he had to tell—

A wild yell from the woods halted him, swung him in that direction. All the men were converging on one spot, dropping whatever they had been doing. Staring, grave-faced and uneasy. Here was more trouble, he knew.

It was a mark on the ground which had attracted their attention. Not too clearly defined, as though the storm had partly washed it away. But clear enough to see, for all that. Tracks, as though a giant rooster might have alighted there and squatted for a while.

Only those tracks had never been made by any rooster, or other bird of earth. Each imprint was huge. A creature that could make that would have the body of an elephant—or something equally monstrous. And there was only the one pair of tracks, as though this bird had indeed alighted here from mighty wings.

10

DESPITE HIMSELF, LONGSTREET SHARED some of the uneasiness which was so apparent in the others. He had heard wild and fanciful tales of something—no one seemed to know quite what—which dwelt in these fastnesses. Rumor had it that the mining camp had become a ghost town because of that; that ranches had been deserted for the same reason.

"Looks like somebody was trying to play on our nerves," he said, making his voice sound casual and amused. "Some kid trick—scratchin' that thing in the mud, then leaving the storm to wash it so it'd look right."

Some of the men looked a little relieved at that explanation, and they all returned to work. But he could see that they were not more than half convinced. Yet it had to be that—it couldn't be anything else. Nor, he mocked his own thoughts wryly, could huge logs disappear and leave no trace behind. Yet that was what had happened.

He found Carol at the ranch house in overalls, working in the kitchen with Ma Prescott, and curiously subdued. She led him to her little office and motioned to a chair.

"You look all tired out," she said.

"I've had a busy night of it," Longstreet confessed.

"So did I," she said. "Somebody tried to scatter our herd that Zeb has been gathering lately. They cut the fence, tried everything. But Zeb was on the job. He shot one man—at least, there's blood to show for it. And kept the cattle safe. I had a look, then came back here for some breakfast."

Longstreet's eyes lighted.

"Good old Zeb," he said. "He's hard to fool. I wish I could make as good a report."

"I suppose the logs are gone?"

"About half of them. I— Tyler told me about the party."

"And Nina is gone," Carol added. Discovery of such treachery on the part of her own cousin must have shocked her. Certainly it had subdued her. "What did she do at your end of the line?"

He told her, mincing no words so far as the first part of the night was concerned. Carol listened, and her face was pale. Outside, the sun was shining now, the eaves dripping. The snow would be only a memory in another hour.

"I'm—not much surprised," Carol confessed. "Though I—it did get me, a little, just at first. I've given her a home, here, tried to treat her like a sister—do you know what has become of her?"

"She's with Neff. He came and found her at the bunkhouse, and they took her to Ox-Bow. I know, because I trailed them."

Carol looked at him steadily, a question in her eyes.

"She's working for Neff, of course, which explains it. But—I wonder if she knows what he's really like?"

"She's his wife," Longstreet added. "He told Reigh that they'd been married for several weeks."

Even this did not seem greatly to surprise Carol. She stared out of the window for a long moment, then looked back at him.

"Then we don't need to worry about her," she said. "She's chosen that way, so it's up to her. In one way, I'll admit, I'm more glad than sorry. Though I'm just a little surprised that he'd marry her. Of course she married him, even though she despises him, because he owns Ox-Bow."

Longstreet pondered that for a moment, a new and disturbing thought coming to him.

"Seems to me I heard, somewhere, that she was your only relative," he said. "That so?"

"That's true," Carol agreed. "And under the circumstances, maybe it's just as well."

"And maybe it isn't," he retorted bluntly. "They didn't marry each other for love, but for what each could get out of it. If something was to happen to you, Nina would inherit Bucksaw. Which would be a perfect reason for Neff to marry her, since he couldn't get you to take him, and there might still be some hitch about getting hold of it."

She looked at him, a little startled.

"I—I don't believe that Nina—would have been a party to such a notion," she said. "But Neff—there's nothing he'd stop at, of course."

That confirmed Longstreet's opinion. They talked for a while, Longstreet giving his theory about the huge pair of chicken-like tracks, and then Carol surprised him again.

"I fired Mills this morning," she said. "He's either incompetent or crooked—or both, I think. Yesterday noon, when it looked to me as though a storm was on the way, I ordered him to see that

most of the lumberjacks were sent to spend the night on guard with you. He didn't do it. So now I need a new foreman. You're him."

"Me?" Longstreet was startled. "I agree with getting rid of Mills. But I sure haven't made any record to deserve promotion."

"I think you've done as well as anybody could under the circumstances," Carol said, and smiled at him with sudden warmth. "Anyway, you're it. I trust you and Zeb. If the two of you can't save Bucksaw—I don't think anybody can."

"We'll do our best," Longstreet agreed. "Zeb can handle the cattle end of it—there's no better man for that job. I'll try and solve the other—though, as I told you before, I don't know a thing about timber."

"Have you any ideas yet about those logs?"

Longstreet shook his head.

"That's the dickens of it," he confessed. "I know good and well that logs like them can't just vanish—but that's what they seem to be doing. And I haven't any idea. I've had theories, but they don't seem to work out at all. I'm going to tackle it from a new angle."

"How do you mean?"

"Neff—and Nina. They've no reason to suppose that I overheard what he said last night, or to guess that they're married. But they know that we know that she is a traitor, and that we'll guess where she is. That gives excuse enough for going to see about her. I'm going to take a dozen men to back me, and go calling there today. We might learn something."

"Well, it can't do any harm, anyway—not with a crew to back you," Carol agreed. "But be careful."

"I will," Longstreet promised. "And I want you to do the same thing—and not to ride out alone ever till this thing is settled. You know why."

"I guess that's sensible," Carol agreed, "so I'll do it."

Considerably relieved that she would make that concession, Longstreet got a fresh horse and picked a crew of the cowboys to ride with him. They were plainly excited at the prospect of heading for Ox-Bow. From the way they looked to guns, he knew that they were more than half expecting trouble, and spoiling for it.

"We may run into trouble before we get back, boys," he cautioned. "If they start something, we'll give them plenty. But I'll do the talkin'—and don't start anything unless I give the word. I've hopes of learning more by being diplomatic—this time!"

That "this time" was significant, and they exchanged grins and gave a ready promise to follow orders. The woods had a fresh, washed, pungent smell today, and the wild cattle moved less like

shadows when they encountered them. But despite the sun, there was a sharper bite to the air as well. This storm had been only a curtain-raiser, but real winter would not be far behind. On the higher mountains the white had already a permanent look to it.

No one challenged them when they crossed onto Ox-Bow. Indeed, the range had the same deserted look that most of this country possessed everywhere. It was an untamed land, and subjugating it would not be easy—even if there were only men to fight against.

Longstreet had a hunch that most of Neff's crew would be sleeping and taking it easy today, following a wild, hard night. For certainly that trick of conjuring the logs had not been done by sleight of hand. Men had been involved, and at best, it would mean hard work.

They came in sight of the ranch buildings and, as he had expected, a few men lounged about, as though they had just got up. They stared truculently at the newcomers, but showed no surprise nor open hostility. They did gather into a little watchful group—three of them. Longstreet lounged in the saddle, his crew behind him, and looked down at them.

"Where's Neff?" he asked.

"He ain't here right now," was the answer. "Rode off a couple hours ago, along with Reigh."

That was better luck than Longstreet had hoped for, but his face showed no sign of it.

"In that case," he said easily, "we'll talk to Mrs. Neff."

The trio exchanged rather startled glances, but it was plain that they were not prepared to cope with this situation. Longstreet was already swinging to the ground, tossing the reins of his horse to one of his men. He walked toward the house, a log structure, square-built, unlovely, as was this whole layout, by comparison with Buck-saw. They watched him go in silence.

He rapped sharply at the door, and after a moment it was opened by a Chinese cook with a bland, inscrutable face. He looked at Longstreet and waited.

"I want to see Mrs. Neff," Longstreet said. "Tell her it's Mr. Longstreet."

"Can do," the cook nodded, and padded away in slippered feet. Presently he was back, with a slight bow. "You comee this way," he said.

He ushered Longstreet into a big, rather elegantly furnished room, and padded out again. Not until he had disappeared did Nina appear. She came in then, clad in some sort of a negligee, looking as fresh and smiling as though she had not been given a

dose of her own medicine the night before. She smiled at Longstreet, almost gaily.

"Good morning," she greeted. "It's awfully nice of you to come and see how I am."

"I was naturally a little curious," Longstreet confessed. "I hope you're feeling well—Mrs. Neff?"

"Thank you, very well," she agreed. "Won't you sit down—here, where we can talk." She smiled again, warmly, seating herself on a stool almost at his feet. "That was very clever of you, last night." She made a little mouth at him.

"Your own act was nearly perfection," he drawled. "But self-preservation, they say, is the first law."

"But I didn't intend to have anything happen to you," she protested quickly, and somehow he found himself almost believing her. "I was so afraid that something would—if you persisted in trying to watch those logs. I could see no other way to keep you out of danger. You wouldn't stay inside, even with me exerting myself to be good company," she added plaintively.

"You were charming enough," he said. "But I had a job to do. And—I'm a little surprised, you know."

"Because I married Neff?" she asked directly. "I hadn't met you yet, Tom. And it was purely a business proposition. After being the poor relation, with nothing, and feeling yourself under foot—well, to be mistress of a big ranch is something, at least."

"That's one point," Longstreet conceded. "But to try and betray your own side, your own cousin—"

Nina shrugged, half mockingly.

"This is a country of dog eat dog," she reminded him. "I thought you had found that out by now. But don't let's quarrel. There's no reason why we should." She leaned a little toward him. "You kissed me once last night, Tom. Didn't you like it?"

He drew back, a little angry, and disturbed as well.

"What sort of a woman are you, anyway?" he demanded.

She shrugged again, the gesture causing her wrap to slide a little and reveal one white, ivory-like shoulder.

"Not a fool, at least," she declared. "I know what I want—and how to get it. And I have it in me to give full measure in return—where I choose to give. Don't be a fool, Tom. If you'd come along just a little earlier—I'd never be here. Neff owns Ox-Bow, and he's ambitious. But we've had only a business partnership, pure and simple. Compared to him—well, there is no comparison where you're concerned, of course. Not with me. Nor ever could be, Tom.

You and I together—we could rule this whole country. It could be worked.”

Longstreet eyed her, a little puzzled, no longer shocked by her forthrightness. She was a beautiful woman, but again he had the thought that she and Neff had both gotten exactly what they deserved when they married in secret. Behind the shell of her beauty she was fully as hard and calculating and cold as Neff, and just as devoid of scruples.

“Are you suggesting—that you’d give up this for me?” he asked.

“Of course,” she agreed, without an instant’s hesitation. “But we could work together for more than this.”

“Maybe you could tell me what happened to the logs?” he asked tentatively.

Nina shook her head, with a slow smile.

“I might even do that, Tom, to prove to you that I’m willing to risk everything for you,” she confessed. “Only, as it happens, I haven’t found out—yet. But if we’re together—nothing that anyone else can do can stop us.”

She was very direct today, and completely ingenuous when it came to pursuing a determined course. And it was plain that she had chosen her course last night, and that things had gone wrong. That had thwarted her, but it had not lessened her determination in the least.

Longstreet’s face remained a mask. But behind it he was thinking fast. He’d enter into no compact with her, but on the other hand, the anger of a scorned woman could be a mighty ugly weapon right now. He was trying to think how to get away without rousing her active resentment when there was a stir outside.

Three more men were riding up. They looked out of the kindow, and Nina’s animated face grew calm and composed. One of the men was Neff, and after a few words with Longstreet’s crew he turned, came toward the house.

They heard his step on the porch, and a moment later he came into the room. And this, Longstreet reflected, was the second time they had met—the first occasion since Carol had disrupted this man’s plan to hang him, and he had been driven away, humiliated and enraged.

11

NEFF CAME IN, AND THIS TIME he did not remain for a while in the background, as on the occasion of their first meeting. Today he was in his own house, sure of himself, and rather enjoying the situation.

"Been meetin' my wife, I see," he said. "Like everything else about Ox-Bow, she's the finest."

He stood beside her, slipped a big arm about her waist. Nina smiled at him, briefly. Her eyes were still on Longstreet.

"I think that Mr. Longstreet has come to talk about logs," she suggested.

"Logs, eh?" Neff's whole attitude was impersonal now, giving no hint of the strain of their first meeting or how they had parted. He shook his head. "Ain't that funny? I was just aimin' to talk about logs, too."

"Such as?" Longstreet asked.

"It's a right funny thing," Neff drawled. He sank into a chair, stretching his rather stubby, booted legs out before him, resting his hands comfortably across his paunch. His eyes, too little and deep-set, gleamed slyly as he looked up.

"A right funny thing—but somebody stole most of the logs we had cut an' piled last night. So far we ain't been able to find a trace of 'em. What'd you say to that?"

"I'd say it was remarkable, if true," Longstreet said, and his drawl matched Neff's own.

"Oh, it's true enough," Neff insisted. "You can take a look for yourself if you like—providin' that'll tell you anything new. Looks to me like there's been a lot of talk about Bucksaw losin' logs—but talk's cheap. And it takes a crew of men to steal logs."

"My idea exactly," Longstreet agreed. He was wary now at this new development, the implied charge that Bucksaw had stolen the logs, that their own reported losses had been just a red herring across

the trail. Neff was up to something. "A lot of our logs vanished last night, too—and maybe you can explain that?"

Neff stood up again. His voice was bland.

"Maybe I'll find the explanation of what's going on around here sooner or later," he said. "I sure intend to do a good job tryin'. And when I do, I'll make it plenty hot for somebody, I can promise you that."

"That's a statement in which I find myself in full agreement with you," Longstreet told him, and saw the brief chagrin on Neff's heavy face. "But since you don't seem to be able to shed light on things, I'll have to be going."

He bowed to Nina, who was watching with sharp, questioning eyes. His own gaze was completely aloof. He walked out, followed by Neff. Outside, a little of the cloak fell from the big man.

"Seems to me," he said, "that I recall somethin' about cattle rustlin'. And where that sort of thing goes on, anything can be expected."

"It's nice to be expecting something," Longstreet assured him. "Something like Christmas, eh?" He walked to his horse and swung into the saddle, leaving Neff staring after him, rage and puzzlement on his face. Longstreet led the way, his own crew falling in behind him.

"Find out anything?" one of the men asked finally.

"He claims that most of *his* logs were stolen last night—and implied that we were the only ones who could do it," Longstreet said.

"His logs? Hell, everybody knows that he'd rather lie than eat."

That was true enough, but Neff was up to something. He had been so sure of himself that he had paved the way for whatever scheme he had in mind by making that indirect charge. Longstreet had a feeling that a trap had been set.

Well, Neff had invited him to take a look around, and he intended to avail himself of the chance. They reached the river, but kept to the west of it, on Ox-Bow land. Neff's crew were at work again, the saws making a steady drone, axes ringing. With his augmented crew, he could get out a lot of logs.

But in one thing at least Neff had told the truth. Most of the logs which had been piled near the river the day before were gone now.

After what Neff had said, that was not surprising. The baffling thing was where they could have gone to. No added logs were in the pond above the boom. On the face of it, the logs had to be in the river. But the river was empty of them.

One of the cowboys scratched his chin and spat uneasily.

"Me, I've seen some queer things in my day," he pronounced. "Saw a feller once in a town that could look at you and make you do whatever he wanted—called himse'f a ventriller, or somethin'. He could make you do fool tricks, or put you to sleep. One feller laid in a store window three days, just like he was dead. Never stirred."

"Yuh don't mean a ventriller, yuh mean a hippo," another rider contradicted.

The first man shook his head, looking above at the whispering pines crowding close above them.

"Well, whatever he called himself, it was danged queer," he said. "But I sure never saw nothin' so funny as what's happenin' in this country. I been raised in open country, where when you take a look, you can see who's follerin' you. Here, in these big trees, it's spooky!"

Longstreet knew how he felt. He was a man of the open country, too. He had come to like this land, the mountains and the giant trees, but they did have a way of pressing in on you, of seeming to shut away the world. And the thing was baffling.

Like that set of tracks, as of a giant bird! That story would be all over the ranch by nightfall, and it wouldn't help any. Some man could have fixed that up—that must be the way of it. And there would be an explanation, and a perfectly natural one, he was convinced, for the disappearing logs.

Great timbers did not vanish of their own accord. Neff was outsmarting them, making fools of them, and laughing up his sleeve as he did so. And planning new deviltry as part of his campaign to win this whole country for himself.

It was night when they returned. The day had brought one new and pleasant development. A couple of dozen experienced loggers had arrived and were already at work. Two of them were French-Canadians, Big Louie and Little Louie—though both were virtual giants. And they had listened to the story of the "beeg tracks" and laughed.

"By gar, I like for to fin' that bird," Big Louis roared. "Roast heem, and he mak' a fine meal, eh? W'at a drumstick!"

Their attitude and ability to top any yarn, however wild, with a bigger one, was helping to dispel the gathering cloud of fear, to instill new confidence into the men. But it would all be needed, and then some, if things kept on this way.

Morning brought Zeb, looking as placid as usual.

"How you comin', Tom?" he queried. "Thought I'd drop around

and sort of compare notes, as you might say. You been havin' a lot of excitement, from what I hear."

"Neff's been making a fool of me," Longstreet said bitterly. "And that's what gets my goat. He doesn't look so smart."

"He's had a piece of luck somewhere," Zeb said comfortably. "It's right funny how a feller can stumble onto somethin' not requirin' no brains a-tall nor much work on his part, and do big things for a spell. He's found some place to hide them logs, some sort of a spot that it took luck to ever stumble on. So he figgers that huntin' for it ain't going to find it, for us. And likely he's guardin', strong as he knows how, against us bein' lucky. But you'll find that's about the size of it."

"Likely you're right," Longstreet agreed. "Still, I've combed this country pretty well. And I can't see where he can hide all those logs. They aren't toothpicks."

"You give a feller like Neff rope enough, and sooner or later he'll use plenty and hang himse'f with it," Zeb declared. "Tangle like a green bronk just picketed out. But I got one piece of news. Might mean somethin'. I ain't figgered out how—but I reckon it has a meanin'."

"What's that?"

"Feller was headin' in t'wards Ox-Bow, late yestiddy. Ought to get there some time this mornin'. Askin' directions. Kind of a close-mouthed gent, like he had the toothache, but not what you'd call a tenderfoot. Nope. Rode a horse like he'd growed there. And he was just a mite careless. He was wearin' a badge—pinned so's not to show. But I got me a glimpse of it."

"A badge? What sort—"

"Couldn't make out too good. But I've seen twins to it before. And besides, there's only one logical kind of a badge would come into this country. No reason for a sheriff to come pokin' in here. He wouldn't have no jurisdiction, no way. Be as lost as a cow without her cud."

"You mean a marshal?"

"Must have been. Deppity U. S. A. law man 'd be my guess."

Longstreet pondered this. It fitted with what Neff had hinted at the day before. No U. S. marshal would come into this country without good reason. But if Neff had sent for him, and if he hoped—or planned—to show him some evidence which would tend to substantiate Neff's new claim that he was losing logs, and pin that stealing on Bucksaw—

The whole notion seemed fantastic, but that was all the more reason for giving it serious consideration. Neff was shrewd, far

more so than he looked. And if he could get the federal law to crack down on Bucksaw, that would be, beyond any question, the straw to break the camel's back. All that would remain would be for Neff to take over, and he could do so at his leisure.

After Zeb had ridden away, Longstreet pondered the thing. If what he suspected was true, there was no time to be lost. But what could he do to combat it? As he had guessed the day before, Neff must have his trap already set and baited. He wouldn't be getting the marshal in here until he had it all ready for springing.

The rub was to discover where the trap might be placed and to find it before it was sprung. Longstreet had done a little trapping as a boy, had matched wits against coyotes and wolves. You had to hide all sign of your own presence and of the trap as well. In addition, you had to outthink them and outsmart them before you stood a chance of catching them. In addition to a natural wiliness, wolves had an instinct for danger which was even more difficult to overcome.

Now he was in the place of the wolf. No ordinary caution would save him here. It required the same instinct of the hunted which so often saved the wolf. The rub was that it was natural with the wolf, and he had to acquire it—if he could.

As foreman of Bucksaw, he could put a crew of men to searching, if he liked. But with no clear notion of where they should look or what they were looking for, that would probably be wasted effort. It was up to him.

"One thing sure, if there's a trap set with bait that's incriminating evidence, it'll have to be on Bucksaw land," he told himself. "And I've been over everything on the island with a fine-toothed comb—"

He stopped, then his face relaxed a little. It was almost a certainty that Neff would know how thoroughly he had searched. But after that last night of storm, the clever thing for a trapper to do would be to place his trap in an old, familiar runway of the game, where danger would not be expected.

Longstreet set out on foot. He could go more quietly that way, and in this tangle of trees and brush, about as fast as with a horse. This time, if his hunch was correct, he didn't want any spy, perhaps watching from a vantage point somewhere in the hills across the river, to see what he was up to. Unless Neff was a lot smarter than he gave him credit for, the trap had to be somewhere along that quiet backwater which led part way across the island.

It was perfect country for such a trap. The channel was generally narrow, though now and again it widened. It was deep, with little or no current. There were inlets at the side, overhanging trees and dense brush, so tangled that he could hardly fight his way through

them. But lumbermen, accustomed to long drives of logs down turbulent streams, would not have too much trouble in poling logs, perhaps tied together, two and two, raft-like, back from the far branch of the river, up into some of these hidden, otherwise inaccessible ponds.

It was hard, slow work, pushing along the shore of the back-water, frequently forced to go around obstacles. There were bogs, blow-downs, almost everything that could be imagined, and he wished heartily for a boat.

He had been along here before and had a certain familiarity with the place, but even so, each new step was a separate quest. Even the wild cattle did not venture back in here. It was too tangled for them.

Other animals liked it, though. A wildcat moved like a dark shadow. A grouse scuttled away in the brush, and farther on, a rabbit watched him, wide-eyed, ears erect, unafraid. A beaver swam in the dark water.

There were no boot tracks anywhere, though the ground was soft from the recent storm. If anybody had been hereabouts, they had come by the water channel and had returned the same way.

He commenced at the river and worked back for more than a quarter of a mile, with the same disheartening results as on his other quests. Then, deep in the shadows overhanging brush and giant shadowing trees, with black water to add to the illusion, he found it.

Here was the trap, and the bait. One look was enough to show the whole thing. These were not logs, floating here, well back out of sight—they were the ends of logs. Round, wheel-like pieces, a few inches in thickness, which had been sawed off logs already burned with the owner's brand. Cut off, ostensibly, to get rid of those brands.

And on each piece, stamped damningly into the butt, was the brand. Neff's Ox-Bow.

12

THERE WERE ABOUT HALF A HUNDRED of them here, lying like giant checkers in the water. Probably towed there behind a boat in the first place. And to all intents and purposes hidden here, where the chances were slim indeed that they would ever be found by any ordinary search.

Only this whole thing was exactly in reverse of what it seemed to be.

There was something more, as he looked around carefully. It took considerable hunting, but Longstreet finally located three full-length logs, so skillfully concealed in hidden spots that they were doubly hard to find. These too had the Ox-Bow brand on them.

The trap was plain now. Neff would protest to the marshal, as he had done to him, that Ox-Bow logs had been stolen. He would give it as his opinion that the wail of Bucksaw about their own missing logs was merely a plaint to give cover to their thievery from him. It would be easy to insist that the only way in which Bucksaw logs could disappear would be for Bucksaw to haul them back, somewhere in the recesses of the ranch, and hide them.

With the marshal, Neff would make a hunt for tangible proof to back up his claim that Ox-Bow logs were being stolen. Here they would find these branded butts—ostensibly sawed off stolen Ox-Bow logs, so that the logs could be restamped with the Bucksaw brand.

Since the logs had been stolen on a stormy night, it was perfectly obvious that even a big crew, working through the night, could do only just so much. They could steal the logs, could saw them off and restamp them and apparently dispose of most of the logs somewhere—though those three logs, with the brand still on them, would make it look as if the job had hurried them, and these had been left over, with daylight on the way. And so hidden in here, along with the butts.

The fact that Bucksaw had too small a crew for such operations

would be discounted, since Bucksaw now had a bigger crew—and might have had them secretly before.

This was the crowning touch, the proof which the law couldn't doubt. There could be no satisfactory explanation for these logs and these sawed-off butts, hidden on Bucksaw land.

The thing was doubly clever, Longstreet realized now. He had found the trap, the bait—but what was he going to do about it, even now? How could he get rid of it before the law was led to it?

Half a hundred log butts as big as wagon wheels, to say nothing of three massive timbers, were not easy to dispose of. Water-soaked, it would be impossible to burn them, even if they were out of water. To try and haul them away on wagons would leave such a trail that it would be only too obvious, and easily followed.

They were too big to bury. Too big, in fact, to do much of anything with—except hide them, exactly as they had already been hidden, back in here. That was so obvious that it was just one more damning bit of evidence.

Longstreet scratched his head, staring in dismay. He could, of course, go to the marshal and lead him to these butts, telling the facts as they were. But the very act of going to him would have a guilty look. The law would be pretty sure to believe Neff's story—that, knowing they would be caught with the evidence, Bucksaw was trying to weasel out of it.

But something had to be done, and no later than today, or tonight. He had a strong hunch that, with the marshal only arriving today, and a lot of things to look over, he would not be led to make this "discovery" until tomorrow. It would look a bit too much like a plant if he was led directly to it. There would have to be some looking around in other likely places first, to get the marshal good and tired and thoroughly disgusted and plenty mad, when the evidence was finally found.

That gave him the night to dispose of the evidence. But the question of how to do it loomed as big as ever. Yet it was up to him. He was Carol's foreman now. If he couldn't solve this, there would be nothing more left to do.

Longstreet pondered it as he worked farther back along the inlet to make sure that no more traps had been set. But back in here was a shallow muddy spot in the channel, where nothing could have been dragged past. It had not been disturbed. Anyway, it was logical that, hurried as they supposedly would have been, all the butts should be left in one place.

Still turning the thing over in his mind, Longstreet returned to his cabin. The loggers were at work again, the pile of logs was

once more growing. Even if this trap was avoided, it was but one incident in the bigger fight which faced Bucksaw. He still had to discover how Neff could steal scores of huge logs and make them vanish like a conjuring trick, and then repeat the performance almost at will.

There was a boat drawn up in the brush not far off. He had seen it before, had even considered using it a time or so, but he was no boatman. He felt much more at home on land or on the top of a bucking bronk than on the water, so he had not touched it.

Now he examined it attentively. It had been used enough so that it was in good shape. If those butts were to be moved, it would have to be done by boat, since they had been towed that way to get them there. This boat would serve.

Only where could they be taken and hidden? There were other possible hiding places on the island, but Neff would at once be suspicious, and the search would likely turn them up.

Maybe across the river, back on Ox-Bow territory. But there was one serious rub. The only likely places where they could move them would probably be well guarded, to see that no such eventuality happened.

Then his face cleared. The simplicity of the solution left him feeling a little sheepish, but it was workable and eminently satisfactory. He saddled a horse, rode across the island and to the more populous lumber camp in a much improved frame of mind.

It was well to keep a watchful eye out for the rest of the day, to make certain that Neff did not put one over on him by leading the marshal direct to the cache without delay. If he tried that, some way would have to be found to delay them. But the day passed without alarm. Neff was working it now exactly as he had figured.

He gave the afternoon to affairs of the ranch, familiarizing himself with a lot of things that, as foreman, he needed to know. It was pleasant, he discovered, to work with Carol, and she had a good business head on her shoulders. Given half a chance, she'd make a success of the big ranch, despite the mess it was in.

He was strongly tempted to tell her of what he had found, and what he intended to do, but refrained. Until the thing was done, there was always a chance for something to go wrong, and he did not want to worry her needlessly. He was rewarded by a smile and a pat on the back from Ma Prescott as he was leaving.

"It was a big change for the better when she put you in to boss the job," Ma declared. "Mills, say the best you could for him, was no good to start with. More like a kid, he was—buildin' kites and fool things like that. And always worryin' Carol with everything

that went wrong, 'stead of doing anything himself. After talkin' to him she always looked that worried, it made my heart bleed. But now she looks rested and plumb cheerful. 'Tis a pair of shoulders you have of your own to carry things on, though, being a Longstreet, that's not to be wondered at."

Her confidence was encouraging. Certainly he needed some himself. For in the bigger thing he was up against a veritable stone wall, and he saw no way either to climb over it or to knock it down.

Back at the lumber camp, he spoke quietly to Big Louie and Little Louie, and once night had fallen they slipped away without anyone being aware that they had gone.

It was a good night for what lay ahead. There would be no moon until nearly morning, and then only a thin sliver high in the sky. The stars gave a dim light, barely enough to work by, not enough to reveal anything to watchers even though they might be quite close. The air was chill with frost. Big Louie shook a weather-wise head.

"She storm again, 'fore many days," he opined. "And by gar, w'en it come, it be the real thing."

They pushed off in the boat, working along close to shore, paddles moving with a feather quietness. Reaching the inlet, they worked back up it until the pile of butts was finally reached. And there they went to work, still quietly, but with complete efficiency.

"By gar," Little Louie complained, "it wan beeg shame for to have to do thees. Theese here lettles pieces, they'd be good checkers for to play weeth, eh, Beeg?"

Big Louie dissented.

"Mebby for you, Leetle," he said. "But for me, I lak' them so I don' 'ave to squint my eyes for to see them!"

It was quite a job, but it was all done before midnight, and they were back in bed. Outwardly nothing looked different. But they had made sure that not a single stamped butt remained, nor any of the Ox-Bow logs.

Big and Little Louie had been as delighted with the scheme as Longstreet himself, and had chuckled when it was finished.

"Every butt and the extra logs floatin' on the pond there behind their boom, and out full in sight on Ox-Bow water," Little Louie rumbled. "By gar, but I'd lak' for to see Neff's face w'en he makes the sight of them. He can talk himself black in the face, sayin' we sawed the butts off his missin' logs—but eet weel be the devail of a good trick to find the logs!"

It would be a good trick, and well within Neff's power. But it was one which Neff would never pull. To do so would be to betray his own secret, and compared to that, this thing was small potatoes.

13

THINGS WERE NOT GOING so well on Ox-Bow. True, the finding of those log-butts in his own pond, with the knowledge that Longstreet had gotten ahead of him there, had been annoying. It was a setback, but Neff was no fool. The scheme had been only a minor part of his bigger plan, and a man had to expect a certain amount of bad luck.

He could write that off without particular rancor. It was Nina who bothered him. He was perfectly well aware that she had married him simply because he was owner of Ox-Bow, and in a fair way to become rich. And that he might very likely become still richer.

It was also plain to him that Nina was not angelic in temperament, but as harsh and hasty as himself. That angle of it had not worried Neff particularly. Not at first. She was beautiful and would make a charming hostess when he had important guests. Neff was looking ahead. His ambitions extended far beyond this back country, wild cattle and big timber. These were but stepping stones.

Money would buy power. With the two of them he could go out, move to the state capital, and take the next step. Politics, even a governorship, was his goal. There were ways of getting things if you had money and power and no scruples about the use of them.

When such a time came, a beautiful wife could be a distinct asset. Nina filled all the qualifications admirably. He had been lucky to get her, on whatever terms, and had accepted her on those terms.

But his first complacency of mind in regard to that deal had been rudely jolted. An emotion of which he had not believed himself capable, at least not in a businesslike transaction of this sort, had come to plague him now. Jealousy.

It was double-barreled. He strongly suspected that Nina regretted her bargain with him, and that her regret had sprung full-blown since the coming of Longstreet to the country. There were plenty of signs, little ones, and it galled him that she, being his wife, should prefer a penniless cowpuncher to what he had to offer her.

In addition, and this was the real barb which pricked him, he had made the rather unwelcome discovery that he was in love with his wife. He had envisioned no such possibility. The whole deal, in his mind as in hers, had been a wholly practical business proposition. But there it was.

It tormented him now, especially as he saw that she scorned him. For the first time in years he was uneasy and at a loss as to how to proceed.

Nina was equally distraught. It seemed like a good bargain at the time, the best that she could hope to make back in this forgotten wilderness. But then Longstreet had come along, and that altered everything.

She had become aware of the fact that her husband had fallen in love with her. He was somewhat like an abashed dog which had been punished and was abjectly afraid. A sort of clumsy, tail-wagging creature, creeping back, unsure of himself or his reception. This was so unlike Neff that at first she had been puzzled, then, sensing what had happened, she was amused. It was certainly a good joke.

But the other manifestation of his emotion was not so pleasant. She saw that he had suddenly become insanely jealous of her and was taking steps to keep what he believed was his own. All at once she found it impossible to take a ride without one of the cowboys tagging along with her. To go anywhere or to do anything without being watched.

For that was exactly what it amounted to. Neff didn't trust her and was having her watched.

That angle of it was not amusing. Marrying Neff had been a business proposition. She had understood something of his ambitions and had figured that she could probably go farther with him than without him. But now she had changed her mind. The coming of one man, a man who had kissed her once and then had refused to look at her again, had changed all that.

Her ambitions still soared. With a man like Longstreet, who had charm, natural grace, and the background of the Old South, as well as brains, it ought to be possible to go a lot farther than with Neff. But Nina knew one thing. Even if it wasn't possible to get half so far up the social ladder with him, or to ever live in anything better than a wilderness cabin, she would choose Longstreet in preference to the governor's mansion.

Still, if she could get him at all, there was no reason why her other ambitions should be discarded.

So it was that Neff's new-found jealousy, his surveillance of her

movements, presented a new problem. She was still considering how best to deal with this development when Neff himself surprised her by returning to the house at mid-morning, and though he was almost tongue-tied and ill at ease, she guessed that he wanted to talk things over as well.

"I—er—" He looked around the room, twisting his hat in big hands, crumpling it and quite unconscious that he was doing so. "Uh—everything all right, Nina?"

Nina eyed him for a moment from under long lashes, a glance which made him squirm and quiver between embarrassment and gratitude. Suddenly she smiled at him graciously, and sat down on the couch, patting the cushion beside her.

"Sit down," she urged, and when he had complied, moving somewhat clumsily, smiled secretly to herself. She might as well turn this to good advantage while she had a change.

"What makes you ask that?" she demanded

"Well—" He stared unseeingly down at the hat. "I—I want you to like it here, Nina, to be happy. And, uh—it just seemed to me that mebbby you wasn't—"

"I'm not—entirely," she confessed. "Maybe you can guess why."

Neff turned a glance, dark with suspicion, on her. He thought that he could guess why, and he didn't like it.

"What do you mean?" he asked harshly.

"How should I be happy?" Nina asked. "You married me because you thought I'd be useful to you—a spy in the other camp, a sort of cat's-paw—"

"You ought to know better than that," he protested, relieved. "It was a business deal, in a way. But you wanted to get things, and we agreed to work together—"

"Yes," she agreed. "But a woman wants more than that—when she gets married."

"How—how do you mean?" Neff asked hoarsely.

"She doesn't like for her husband to be in love with another woman," Nina threw her bombshell.

Neff turned to stare, a little stupidly, wholly bewildered.

"In—in love with another woman?" he added. "Me? Are you crazy?"

It was exactly the reaction she had wanted, and Nina almost laughed in his face. But she did not relent.

"Of course," she flared. "You always wanted Carol. My cousin. You only took me for second choice, because she wouldn't look at you."

Neff drew a deep breath, secretly elated. It had suddenly oc-

curred to him that, behind all this, Nina might be jealous, too—and if she was, then that could only mean she liked him, too! The thought almost bowled him over.

It was true that he had sought to marry Carol, but that had been because she owned Bucksaw, and a wedding would be the simplest way to obtain possession. And Carol had the beauty and ability to make as fine a hostess as a successful man could desire, later on.

Now he shook his head vehemently.

"That's nonsense," he protested. "I never cared a snap of my fingers about Carol. I wanted her ranch, that's all."

Nina looked at him searchingly, though she knew that was the truth.

"How can I believe that?" she asked.

"But it's true," Neff insisted. "She don't mean a thing to me—never did. You're the only one I care about."

"You're sure you don't care anything about Carol?"

"Mighty sure. I—"

"Then," Nina asked coldly, "why are you protecting her?"

"Protecting her?" Neff gaped, astounded. "I don't understand—"

"You said that marrying me was a business proposition," Nina reminded him. "I thought so, too. If Carol was out of the way, I would inherit Bucksaw—and we'd be getting somewhere. As it is—nothing happens."

Neff eyed her, still bewildered, but afraid that he understood.

"I don't quite know what you mean," he said slowly.

"If you don't care anything about her," Nina said bluntly, "and do care about me, as you pretend—well, an accident could happen to her—a lot easier than getting things some other ways."

He did understand now, and Neff drew back as though he had touched a hot stove. For his own part, he had long prided himself on being a businessman, coldly practical, without emotion. And it was true that he had toyed with the notion of getting hold of Bucksaw in exactly that manner.

But he had turned away from the idea, revolted at himself. He had been a little surprised to discover that, deep down, he had a sort of code of ethics beyond which he would not go. Murdering a man was one thing. But such callous killing of a woman was beyond the pale, and he knew it.

Now it was doubly shocking to him that this woman, his wife and Carol's own cousin, should so coolly suggest such a thing. She was beautiful—but that beauty was only a shell. It cloaked something colder, more ruthless even than himself, and the discovery left Neff a little appalled.

"I'll get hold of Bucksaw in my own way, in my own time," he said a little thickly.

"In other words, you think more of Carol than you do of me," Nina accused. "You always have."

Neff clutched at that straw, though he knew that it was a broken and flimsy thing at best. But it was a straw. What she had suggested had been to test him, and not meant in earnest. She was jealous of Carol!

"What I'm doing can't fail," he protested doggedly. "And it's the best way. Carol don't mean a thing to me—"

"Words, words, you smother me with words, but you don't tell me a thing," Nina said. "You don't trust me. What is this scheme of yours that is so certain to work?"

Neff half opened his mouth to tell her, then closed it again. He had had a glimpse of her which still shocked and horrified him, and he knew something of her ruthfulness, her ambition. With it was the old jealousy and fear, intensified. He loved her, but he did not trust her.

"It's something that I can't very well explain," he parried. "I'll show you, one of these days. And that's what I came to talk to you about," he added, suddenly relieved that he could find a good excuse for ending this talk and getting away.

"I'm going to be gone a day or so on a little trip. Got to look after some details. You be a good girl, and I'll have something to show you, pretty soon. Something that'll surprise you."

He patted her shoulder, a clumsy gesture intended to be playful, but she stared stubbornly away from him, and her shoulder was like cold ivory under the cloth. Neff hesitated a moment, then moved to the door and out. He went out almost as he had come—still rather like a whipped cur, trying to keep from slinking.

Nina stood until he had gone. Then she crossed to the window, a small, tight smile on her lips, and watched him ride away with two other men at heel. He always rode with at least two others, she had noted—rather as if he was afraid of ever being caught alone.

The talk had not gone precisely as she had hoped, but on the whole it had been satisfactory. She at least would have a day or so to do as she pleased. She turned, hurried to her room and changed swiftly to riding clothes. Then, as she returned to the other room, it was to find the big Chinese cook and house boy standing imper- turbably in the way.

"Missy go ride?" he asked.

Nina eyed him, a little warily.

"Yes, I think I will, Ah Heck," she agreed. "Just for a little while."

Nina called him Ah Heck. What his real name was she did not know. Neff had bestowed that name upon him, except that Nina had softened it a little.

"Me call boy," he said. "Him saddle horses."

"I can saddle my own horse, thank you, and I'll ride alone," Nina said sharply.

"Me call boy," Ah Heck returned, unmoved.

Nina eyed him a moment. As she had suspected, he was set here, like a watch dog, to guard her movements. She turned back with a shrug.

"Don't bother," she said. "I've changed my mind. I don't want to ride after all."

In her own room she considered this angle of the thing. She had to get away—and without being watched. She had tested Neff, and had found him wanting. He didn't have what it took, not for a program such as she envisioned. Besides, she didn't want him, not any longer. The fact that he loved her, which was now so apparent, merely caused her amusement.

There would be a way to circumvent Ah Heck, of course. She considered for a moment, then smiled to herself. For several days now she had been quietly watching his every move, even as he in turn had been set to watch hers.

She knew that toward evening of each day he helped himself to a drink from a bottle in his pantry. Watching her chance, she slipped in when he was in another room. There was just about one good drink left in the bottle. She still had a few of those knock-out drops. They could come in very handy, and they were highly potent—she smiled tightly to herself, remembering how one of them had been turned against her.

A quarter of an hour later she saw Ah Heck lift down the bottle, look quickly and slyly around to make sure, as he thought, that no one was observing him, then lift the bottle and drain it. A puzzled expression crept across his bland Oriental face as he lowered it, and he eyed the bottle accusingly, as though the taste had not been quite right.

Fifteen minutes later he was sprawled in a chair, sound asleep.

14

NIGHT HAD FALLEN WHEN Nina slipped out and saddled a horse. A light still burned in the kitchen, another in her own room, to give the impression that Ah Heck was busy about his usual duties, and that she was awake as usual and would be for a couple more hours. By that time every man who occupied the bunkhouse would be rolled in his own blankets and asleep. It was unlikely that anyone would notice the still burning lamps at a later hour, but if they did, it would not matter.

There was a chill breeze abroad tonight, and Nina shivered a little as she rode. From all the signs, winter was close at hand, and the leaves of cottonwood and aspen had almost all been shaken off starkly bare branches. They rustled underfoot with a small, cold sound, and she urged her horse to a faster pace. She had little love for nocturnal prowling, but when a job was necessary, she did it.

It was close to midnight when she reached the cabin. A little careful scouting satisfied her that not one, but at least three guards, were out by the newly growing pile of logs, alert men who packed rifles and went warily. It would be better not to disturb them.

Luck was with her. Longstreet had just been out, apparently to have a look for himself or to post the change of guards, and was just returning to the cabin. She reached the window ahead of him and, looking through to where a lamp burned, saw that the room was empty. If someone else still occupied the cabin with him, he had gone out on watch now.

This was really good luck. She had been afraid that perhaps Longstreet would have moved back to the home ranch buildings now that he was foreman. But she had taken a chance that he would be here. Everything was perfect.

She slipped in at the door, noiseless as a shadow, was seated in the chair before the little stove and its cheerful warmth when Long-

street entered. He closed the door and did not immediately look her way. Then he turned, and stared in silence for a moment.

Nina smiled at him and stood up.

"Hello," she said. "Aren't you glad to see me?"

Longstreet continued to watch her. His face betrayed no emotion, and she reflected that he was a far more dangerous man, in the control of himself, than Neff would ever be.

He was startled, seeing her there, and wary. But after a moment he returned her smile.

"Why, of course," he agreed. "This is an unexpected pleasure, Nina. You really surprised me."

"I intended to," she agreed and, pulling a blanket off one of the bunks, hung it across the window to exclude the lamp-gleam from showing outside. Longstreet watched this proceeding, but offered no comment. She turned and crossed to him, standing so close that her breath was on his cheek. He saw that she was excited, breathing fast, despite her effort to appear calm.

"You said you were glad to see me," she repeated, pouting a little. "But you certainly don't act like it."

"The last time you called on me here," Longstreet reminded her, "you came bearing gifts. And you know the old saying about Greeks bearing gifts."

She had the grace to color a little.

"I told you before that I only gave you that drugged coffee to try and save your life," she insisted. "I was afraid that you would try and stop them when they came to steal the logs, and get yourself killed. I took the only way I knew to try and keep you safe. And that is the truth, Tom."

He more than half believed her. But it was, of course, only a part of the truth.

"But you knew that they intended to steal the logs," he said. "You were working with them, all the way."

"That's true," she agreed, and turned suddenly and sank into the chair again, as if weary.

"I wish I could make you understand, Tom," she said. "I don't suppose you've ever known what it is to be an orphan, and a poor relation. Unwanted, alone, friendless, lonely—lost in a huge wilderness, without any real hope of ever getting out of it. Watching life pass you by."

He was touched by the poignancy of the picture she painted. Probably it was considerable overdrawn, but there was a basic fabric of truth underlying it. And he saw that she believed it herself.

"I think I know what you mean," he said.

"I thought you would," she confided, and smiled warmly. "You're an understanding man. Well, that was the way it was with me when Neff came along. He put it up to me, to marry him and help him—as a purely business proposition. It seemed to offer at least some hope of escape. And—you hadn't come along then, Tom. How I wish you had—just a little sooner!"

He couldn't misunderstand, either the look or the words, and he flushed uncomfortably, but took refuge in words.

"So that was why you married Neff?"

"That was why," Nina agreed. "And that night—I had to go through with things, as I'd agreed. It was the only way. But I didn't want you hurt. My main idea, above all else, was to save you. If—if you'd been willing to stay with me—if I could have kept you here out of harm's way without the coffee—I wouldn't have used it. But I was desperate."

She was still telling the truth, he saw, and it made him more uncomfortable than before. He knew her as a woman completely without scruple, even as Neff had discovered. The beauty of her was only a cloak for a dagger. Yet she was very attractive, none the less.

There were few creatures quite like her, at least in his own experience, which had been fairly wide. Most men, or women, had at least a certain line beyond which they would not go. Like Neff himself, who had been surprised and shocked to discover that a woman, the woman he had married, could be so much more ruthless than he had ever contemplated being.

But now and then, as Longstreet knew, there were such people. One tiger in hundreds would be a man-killer. It was somewhat the same thing here. Given the opportunity and the proper setting, such people had a way of throwing the world into turmoil. Napoleon had been one. Or Helen of Troy. Nina was another one of like mind.

It was not so much the fact that one like Nina was immoral, as unmoral. She would keep her personal self fastidious as a sleek cat until she chose to give. The rights or wrongs of a thing did not enter into it at all. She had no sense, no standard of moral or ethical values. It was what she wanted, and what she wanted she would take by whatever means was handiest and best. It was that which made her so dangerous.

Longstreet possessed one advantage over Neff. He could understand her. And he knew that he might have her and her loyalty.

for the taking. It was not a love which would make a man comfortable or happy for long. Once again he knew that he was faced with such a showdown as had been averted at their last meeting by the coming of Neff. This time he'd probably have no such help in solving it.

"Don't you like me?" Nina challenged suddenly, and leaned toward him again.

"That isn't the question," Longstreet said quietly. "You're Neff's wife. And there's such a thing as trust."

"Neff's wife!" Nina laughed suddenly, a little wildly. "I am—because you came too late! But that can be remedied. Don't you believe me, Tom? You're the only man in the world for me. If we work together, we can win everything. And you can trust me, then. I'd be true to you while the world lasted. I can be loyal—where I love."

Again the obvious truth of this made him uncomfortable. And the nearness of her, the fascination of her beauty, was something that he had to fight against. But he did not lose sight of the fact that she was both as beautiful and as dangerous as a pantheress.

"You married Neff," he repeated. "And while you're his wife, you owe him your loyalty."

"Him? Loyalty?" Nina repeated, and remembered fleetingly, half guiltily, that Neff loved her. But the thought checked her for only a fleeting moment.

"I owe him nothing," she said bitterly. "I've paid him all that I agreed to—working as a spy! And do you think that I like that sort of thing, or being married just to be used as a spy? As a betrayer? That's what he wanted of me. And how does he treat me now? Afraid to trust me, he tries to keep me caged, with his crew set to watch me. That's what he thinks of me. And I won't stand for it!"

Longstreet was silent, more uncomfortable than he had been since he could remember. The fire in the stove had gone out, and a chill was stealing through the room. Somewhere a mouse rustled in the walls, and was silent again. The heaviness of the night pressed in like a great hand closing. Nina seemed to feel it for she shivered, then went on quickly.

"As to his being my husband—those difficulties can easily be resolved. If he were to die—I could marry you then. And as his widow bring Ox-Bow with me." Her voice was suddenly eager, pleading.

"You came into this country, Tom, hoping to get a start as a rancher by catching wild mavericks and putting your own iron on

them. You were ambitious to be more than just a cowboy all your days. You're a Longstreet, and used to the best. Well, this way you'll have your start—a big start, a lot easier than the other would have been, and faster. Don't you see it?"

Longstreet saw it. And Nina, looking at him, saw now that she had gone too fast, that she had made a mistake. She had drawn back the curtain from her soul, revealing the ultimate starkness and littleness of it, and she knew that she had shocked him.

Murder was bad enough. But to suggest to him that he should murder her husband so that he might have her—that was a depth of depravity which far transcended the other. To add the idea that he could in that manner win Neff's ranch was the ultimate of meanness.

He still had said nothing. But he did not need to. His face was a little thin and pinched looking and, despite its mask, his eyes could be read. He shrank from her and what she was, and she knew then that, with her own words, her overeagerness, she had lost him. If ever she had a chance, it was gone now.

Realization, and the added knowledge that she had done this thing herself, stunned, then enraged her. For a stark moment she saw mirrored in his eyes her own soul, and the smallness of it. It was a revealing but unpleasant thing, that glimpse, before she looked away and refused to see. But now knowing that he had scorned her, that she had lost, wild fury was welling up in her.

"So!" she said, "that's the way you feel, is it? You don't want me!" And with sudden jealous insight, "It's Carol you want! Carol—and Bucksaw! You fool!"

She swung suddenly and her eyes blazed back at him.

"I offered you everything—and you wouldn't take it! You fool! Don't think that you'll ever have Carol, or Bucksaw—or anything! My husband loves me—he'll do anything I say! At least he's not a prig!"

15

NINA RODE FURIOUSLY, BLINDLY. The night was dark, and she well knew the folly of a headlong pace through woods such as these, even by daylight. But for the moment she could not think clearly. Longstreet had said no word, but there were times when words were superfluous. She had seen in his eyes something of the same shock and drawing back that had been in Neff's, and she knew that she had lost.

Something hit her suddenly, a blinding blow which bent her head back and tore an involuntary scream from her throat. For a few moments then she rode unheeding, both hands pressed to her face, while the reins dropped to the ground. Since her pony was well trained, it stopped then. Nina sat there, the pain still wracking her in a dizzy flood.

She knew what had happened. Riding so carelessly, a low branch had hit her in the face, right over her right eye. Instinctively she had half sighted the thing, had closed her eye a fraction of a second before it had struck. Even so, she wondered now if she had been blinded or not.

But gradually the first blistering sting of it eased, until she could see out of the eye again. A haze of tears made objects misty and unreal, and, feeling tenderly of it, she realized that it was already considerably swollen. She would have a beautiful black eye to show for this most eventful night.

As the pain of it eased, and the fear of being blinded lessened, passion shook her anew. Everybody and everything seemed to be against her. But the accident had taught her caution. She remained there and considered things while her horse stirred uneasily.

In the first flush of her anger, she had planned to return to Ox-Bow, as she had threatened. To make common cause with Neff.

But considering the matter more rationally, she decided against an immediate return. Neff might be useful later on. If so, he would

still be there. But at this stage of the game she could do better alone. Neff had scruples, especially where Carol was concerned.

Nina was not troubled that way. If she had made the suggestion in a half jesting mood in the first place, it had become grim reality to her now. But for an entirely different reason. Jealousy had flamed in her, white-hot, corroding. Suspicion, at first a small gnawing maggot in her mind, grew to certainty as she brooded over it. Longstreet preferred Carol to herself. That must be it, that had to be it.

Carol had always been the favored one. She was the heiress instead of the poor relation. And now she would come between Nina and Longstreet. That was motive enough for what had to be done—enough and running over.

Nina was in no mood to be critical of her own conclusions. Quite the contrary. With her eye swelling and blackening, her vindictive mood increased. Abruptly she gathered up the reins and turned her horse, heading now for Bucksaw. If Neff refused to act, she would do it herself. And now she was as subtle, crafty and stealthy as she had been headlong a little while before.

Darkness shrouded the buildings of Bucksaw when she came to them, but Nina knew her way around here. She left the horse, went to a window which raised easily and soundlessly, and let herself in. A few moments later she rapped softly on Carol's door, and when Carol came to the door a few moments later, sleepy-eyed and clutching a robe about her, Nina met her with fingers on lips.

"It's me—Nina," she whispered. "I—I've got to talk to you, right away. It's dreadfully important."

"What is it?" Carol asked, startled by the strangeness of Nina's manner. She led the way back into the bedroom. "Here, sit down. I'll strike a light."

"I'll draw the shade first," Nina whispered.

She did so, and Carol lit the lamp on the bureau, puzzled still more by Nina's strange behavior. Then she gave an exclamation at sight of Nina's swollen, blackened eye.

"What on earth—" she began.

Nina sighed, sinking down on an edge of the bed and cuddling there like a kitten.

"I've been a fool, Carol," she said. "An awful little fool. I know that you must hate and despise me, but you can't do that any more than I do myself. This is what I get for being a fool."

"You mean—you don't mean—"

"Neff is just a brute," Nina sighed, and noted with satisfaction

that Carol believed what she was implying, that Neff had struck her. She was, she reflected, doing very well with this act. She could have been a great actress, given the opportunity.

"That wasn't what I came to talk to you about, though," she went on hastily. "Though it opened my eyes to what a fool I had been—when he closed one of them. It took that to make me understand."

"But I don't understand," Carol said, still bewildered. "Is something wrong—something else, I mean?"

"Awfully wrong, I'm afraid," Nina agreed. "That's why I came. When I saw how I'd messed things up, how I'd made things worse, by being such a blind little fool and believing his promises—I wanted to do what I could to make it right, Carol. You believe me, don't you?"

"Yes, I—I guess so," Carol said. Instinct warned her to be wary of this unnatural cousin of hers, but Nina's act, with the black eye as tangible evidence, was very convincing.

"I'm glad of that," Nina half-sobbed. "And there isn't a moment to lose."

"But what's the trouble?" Carol demanded. "Tell me what it's all about."

Instead of that, Nina straightened a little and looked at Carol strangely.

"You're in love with him—Tom Longstreet, aren't you?" she asked.

Carol stared at her, surprised. Suddenly she colored, and whether it was from anger or not, Nina was not quite sure.

"In—in love with him?" Carol retorted. "Are you crazy? Why should I be?" I scarcely know him."

"You knew him well enough to make him foreman," Nina reminded her. "And a thing like that doesn't take long. And this is important. If you do love him—if you want to save him—"

"Why, what has happened to him?" Carol demanded, with sudden fierceness. "Tell me!"

"I don't know—not for sure," Nina said. Her voice dropped. "It—it's what I'm afraid of, though—what I know will happen. Neff is afraid of him—he's been the first one to stand up to Neff and to be able to stop him at all. He was sure that if he could get Longstreet out of the way, that everything would be easy then. That—that was what we quarreled about. I—I knew that you loved Longstreet, and so I tried to stop him. "T—that was why he h-hit me!"

She was half-crying now, and Carol felt her few remaining doubts dissolve, even as her apprehensions increased. She had to restrain herself to keep from shaking Nina.

"But what—tell me what has happened?" she gasped.

"They captured him," Nina said. "Tonight. I don't know just when or how—but he's g-gone! We've got to save him!"

"Of course," Carol agreed. "Run and rout out the crew while I dress. We'll start after them, right away—"

"Wait!" Nina cautioned. "That wouldn't do at all. That's what they're half-way expecting, of course, and guarding against. If a whole big crew starts blundering along after him, and if they should ever get close enough to stand a chance of rescuing him, don't you see what would happen? They'd just kill Tom, rather than take any chances."

"But what can we do?" Carol demanded. "And what are they doing to him now?"

"That's what we've got to find out," Nina explained. "I know that they managed to capture him without raising any alarm. And I'm pretty sure that I know where they're taking him. You remember that old ghost town over across and beyond the mountains?"

"I've heard of it," Carol agreed.

"Well, I'm pretty sure that they're taking him there for questioning," Nina added, and was hugely pleased with herself at the excellence of this inspiration. "Anyway Neff has gone off there, and it seems to fit. They'll keep him alive till they get him there and question him. Neff is sure that Tom knows something that will be useful. So if we go after him—just the two of us, we can find a way to fool them. And do a lot more good than a hundred blundering men could."

That sounded logical enough to Carol. Though she was a little appalled at the thought of trying to find a way across the mountains at this season of the year to locate a lost ghost town. But if Longstreet was being taken there, it was the thing to do. She was deeply touched that Nina should have fought in her behalf and have returned home in so repentant a mood.

"I'll be ready in a minute," she said. "But why are they taking him away off there?"

Nina lowered her voice a little.

"There's something big behind it," she said. "Something is back in there, Carol. I don't know what—whether it has anything to do with the logs, or not. Though I guess likely it must have. It's a big secret of some sort."

That, she reflected, was a good piece of story-telling. The whole thing had popped into her head at just that instant. Almost to her surprise, she found Carol regarding her gravely.

"I've been hearing strange stories about that," she confessed. "One of the crew at the lumber camp told a regular Paul Bunyan story the other day. Somebody had seen what looked like the tracks of a bird's feet, where it had lit, back in the woods—but those tracks would have belonged to a bird as big as an elephant!"

Nina shivered a little, then shook her head.

"I heard that too," she said. "But of course it's ridiculous."

"Of course," Carol agreed. "But that wasn't the story. The story that this man told after that, was worse. He said that he saw a bird come over the mountains, a bird that could pick up one of those logs in its claws and fly off with it, like a sparrow does with a twig for building a nest. Of course it's just a lumberjack story—it has to be. But the crew is badly scared. And of course there is the old Indian superstition of something back in these hills—something taboo."

"And the logs *do* disappear, don't they?" Nina whispered, her one eye big. Secretly she smiled to herself. It would be someone hired by Neff, of course, to spread such wild stories, to create fear and dissension among the Bucksaw loggers. Right now, it fitted in with her own story very well.

"But, as you say, it's just a Paul Bunyan story," she added. "You aren't afraid to go—just the two of us?"

"Of course not. I'll tell Ma Prescott now, and we'll get some supplies and get started right away—"

"You get the supplies, and I'll tell her," Nina suggested. "That will save a little time. And every minute may be important."

"All right," Carol agreed, unsuspecting. "Meet you in the kitchen in ten minutes."

"I'll be there in less than that," Nina nodded.

She was, since all that she had to do was to return to her own old room and wash her eye with some of the water standing in the big pitcher on the bureau, just as it had always been. Her room had not been molested since her departure. She took one or two things that she might need and rejoined Nina in the kitchen.

"Come on, and I'll help you get a horse saddled," she urged, and grabbed up the sack which Carol had hastily packed. "It'll be a lot better, if no one sees us or knows where we're going."

So completely had she lulled Carol's suspicions that they rode away from the ranch buildings a few minutes later, with no one the wiser. They headed west past the silent lumber camp, and swerved from the regular crossing on to the island, to another one farther

upstream. The men on watch at the pile of stacked logs might hear or see if they ventured too close there.

"Don't they know that—that he's been captured?" Carol asked.

Nina shook her head.

"Not a thing, so far," she said. "They'll find it out in the morning, of course, and then they'll start a search. That ought to work out about right. They'll be far enough behind us, not to hamper our movement or endanger Tom. But if we need help later, maybe they'll be along. Do you think we can find a way across the mountains alright?"

"I think so," Carol agreed. "It will be a slow, hard climb to get to the top and across. But I think I can find the way."

The air was sharp and chill now, and as they reached the foot of the sharply rising mountains, there was a feel of winter. Nina looked around, feeling baffled by their immensity, and more than a little nervous.

But this was what she had wanted, and she had to go through with it now. Carol led the way. More than once, in the remaining hours of darkness, and while daylight came, Nina felt like crying out in protest. This was a climb, indeed. She had never known that it could be so far to go only a mile or so up in straight distance—though many weary miles might be involved in gaining that one.

Here they were forced to see-saw, back and forth, working gradually upward. Now following an old trail, then climbing sharply up a timbered but very steep slope, with the old pine needles slippery as oil beneath their feet. Skirting abrupt cliffs or yawning chasms, where a misstep could mean a fall, and a fall could send them plunging to dizzy depths below.

It was hard, exhausting work, for most of the time they had to plod on foot and lead the horses. And it was all so much worse than Nina had figured on, so unnecessary, too—save that it was working out perfectly.

So far, Carol didn't even suspect that it was all a gigantic hoax. Or that somewhere in here, high among the mountains, in trackless wastes soon to be deep covered with snows which would blanket every sign away for half a year, it was her cousin's coldly calculated plan that her body should lie broken and forgotten. One sudden shove from one of these dizzy heights—that would be all that was necessary, and no one would ever know.

16

LONGSTREET WENT TO BED, but he slept fitfully. Nina's visit, and the whole interview, had left him disturbed and upset. There were good men, and bad. But somehow, when a woman was both so beautiful and at the same time so wholly heartless as Nina had revealed herself, it was far more shocking than with a man.

Most people were in between—with much of good in them and always something of evil, dual natures battling against each other, with the good generally in the ascendancy. There were a few sainted folk walking the earth whose better nature had so triumphed that they could be called truly good. Longstreet had known a few of them, a very few.

So too, there were the almost wholly bad. Most of these were people who had gradually degenerated through successive steps of debauchery to the dregs. But now and again there was one such as Nina, and that was vastly more terrible than the other. Doubly so, since there was even in them such a thin dividing line between the good and bad. Had things been only a little different somewhere along the way, she might have been as noble as she was selfish.

He was early astir, and saddling a horse, headed for the main ranch buildings. The lumber camp was still asleep when he passed it, and the men in the buck house at Bucksaw were just rousing as he rode up. But there was smoke coming from the chimney of the big house, and when he entered the kitchen, the savory smell of flapjacks and honey, of bacon and coffee, greeted him.

Ma Prescott was bending over the range, skillfully adding to the already big pile of cakes on a plate, and Zeb Wilkins, looking more scrubbed and closely shaven than Longstreet had ever seen him before, was seated on a chair and watching the proceedings raptly.

"As I was sayin'." Ma nodded. "My first husband—Jerry, that was—he was a great lover of hot cakes. Liked 'em cooked in a big stack, and piled high, then stood to cool a spell. So's they'd

be warm and sort of rich-like, but not hot. Claimed it improved the flavor just double, and I sort of agreed with him. With maple syrup, or honey, Jerry'd eat three-four dozen at a settin'. Did my heart good to see a man eat that way."

"That's the way I like 'em, too," Zeb declared. "I ain't never rightly had my fill, to see just how many I *could* eat fixed that way, but it'd be a lot, I reckon. At least three-four doz—"

"Well, they're ready now, Zeb. You set up and see for once. I sure admire to see a man enjoy his vittles—land sakes, Mr. Longstreet! Where'd you come from so early in the morning?"

"I guess I smelt those hot cakes too, Ma," Longstreet grinned. "I hope you've made plenty for me to have some."

"I always make plenty," Ma assured him. "You set right up with Zeb." She lowered her voice a little. "You come to see Carol?"

"I guess so," Longstreet agreed. "No hurry, though."

"She was up late, last night, working over the books," Ma explained. "Those dratted books that won't balance! Poor dear, she's that worried. Let her sleep, if you can, a spell."

"Sure," Zeb concurred. "I was hopin' you could come with me a while, Tom. Got something to show you."

"Be glad to," Longstreet said, reaching for a fresh stack of cakes. "You sure know how to make these, Ma."

"I ought to," Ma agreed. "I've made plenty. If I had a dollar for every hot cake I've cooked, I'd be a millionaire, I guess. How many is that, Zeb?"

Zeb looked up, a little guiltily.

"Gosh, Ma, I don't know," he confessed. "I guess I sort of lost count."

"Well, anyway, your lightin' into them the way I like to see a man eat," Ma nodded. "No pindly appetites for me."

Longstreet looked at Zeb, as they rode, a little later, and grinned. Somehow, with a good meal beneath his belt, Zeb for company, and the early sunshine slanting down from the hills, some of his imaginings of the night before seemed unreal, like nightmares. None of it could be half so bad as he had allowed himself to believe.

"You were hangin' around the kitchen there, bright and early, seems like," he commented. "But then the early bird gets the pancake, eh?"

To his surprise, Zeb flushed clear from his Adam's apple to his ears.

"Tom," he said, glancing around a little diffidently. "I been a cowpuncher now, near as long as I c'n remember. They tell me

I was born in a covered wagon. I could set a horse before I could rightly walk. That's all I ever done. And I liked it well enough. Mebby I ought to be old enough to know better, but—well, hot cakes like them—and it ain't rightly the cakes, either. It's Ma herself—”

“You mean you're thinkin' of getting married?”

Zeb colored a second time.

“Likely I'm an old fool, that ought to know better,” he confessed. “I'm going on t'wards fifty, I guess. Ain't never had no such notions before. But Ma, she's sort of companionable—just like a herd of cows sort of bellerin' at feed time—and when you ain't around, son, a man sort of gets lonesome—”

“Sure, Zeb, and you're not old,” Longstreet assured him. “You're as good a man as ever you were. What does Ma think about it?”

“Well—” Zeb stared dreamily. “I ain't rightly got to that point, yet. She likes a man that can eat cakes, and I been sort of provin' my p'int's that way, so far.” He grinned. “And I won't deny that it's enjoyable.”

Presently he halted to point out a new enclosure. The fence was built partly of poles, partly of barbed wire, and took in a dozen acres or so. There were some trees, water, and plenty of good grass. And in here were now nearly two hundred head of the wild cattle, all grazing docilely enough, all fresh branded with the Buck-saw iron on their right ribs.

“Not enough grass to keep 'em long without haulin' in some hay,” Zeb said proudly. “But they stay put here, and while they ain't great shakes as beef, bein' wild like they've been, they'll soon make a bunch to bring in a good piece of money.”

Longstreet surveyed the set-up with some amazement.

“You've certainly done well, Zeb, to corral so many,” he agreed. “But this fence, now—it don't look to me as though it would hold some of those old-timers, when they took a notion to travel.”

Zeb chuckled.

“Look docile enough, don't they?” he asked.

“They sure do, right now. But will they stay that way?”

Zeb's grin broadened, and he opened a gate.

“Ride in and take a look,” he invited. “I figger I've got 'em tamed. And some of them dogies was as right-down ornery mean as a skunk that's just met himself unexpected, comin' around a windy corner.”

They looked it, Longstreet conceded. Some of those steers were probably ten years old, and they had existed that long because of brawn and ugliness and a greater instinct for self-preservation than

any of their numerous enemies of the wild. They had a vast sweep of wicked horns. Yet they certainly looked and acted docile enough now.

Coming closer, Longstreet stared. Zeb nodded placidly.

"You know how plumb proddy these old rannys act when you get 'em throwed and clap an iron on 'em and otherwise sort of make 'em feel sore at you," he nodded. "They'll get up and mebbly turn of you and aim to pay you back in yore own coin. One right near paid me, too. Made me nervous. And that give me the idea. Tames 'em down meek as blind kittens."

The thing was simple, yet plainly highly effective. What Zeb and his crew had done, with all the steers and cows which had long horns and an ingrown disposition, was to stretch a double strand of wire between the tips of their horns. In the center a short stick had been twisted, giving the wires a few turns, until it was now one strand, and taut, almost as a fiddle-string. That was all.

"All you got to do is put a leetle tension on the horns," Zeb explained. "They walk careful as if there was a rattler hid in the grass. Ain't looking for no more fights, nary trouble anywhere. Wouldn't think of riskin' bustin' through a fence, any more'n a kid would of suckin' aigs—after he's had one bust in his mouth, which was past its first freshness."

"It's certainly a good idea," Longstreet agreed, and turned back toward the ranch house again. Zeb was doing a good job with the cattle—a mighty good job. Almost any day now, he'd have a bunch ready to drive away and sell for enough to pay wages and current expenses of the ranch, so that the logging operations could continue. And the cattle would be as easy to handle as old milch cows.

At that rate, Zeb could keep ferreting the wild ones out of the brush, brand them and tame them and build up a herd. If only he could show comparable results for his own job, with the logs. But there was still the unsolved mystery of where they vanished to, the ever-present threat that more timber would go the same way. And it was there that ruin or success lay.

Longstreet lifted his eyes, gazed toward the mountains beyond. Clouds hung like a blanket near the top of them this morning, there was a haze in the air, as though another storm might be on the way. Another storm would probably mean another raid.

And somewhere back in those mountains was the secret. But what was it? Longstreet, too, had heard the story of the big bird, some prehistoric monster which clutched a log in its claws like a straw. One or two men had claimed to have actually seen it, but, despite

that track which he had discovered on the ground, Longstreet placed no credence in such tales. It was Neff who was behind the vanishing logs. But how?

He shook his head and turned in at the house again. In answer to his look, Ma shook her head, her face a little anxious.

"Carol ain't come down yet," she said. "Seems kind of funny. She always gets up early, no matter what."

"Maybe you'd better call her," Longstreet suggested. "I've got to be getting back pretty soon."

Two minutes later, Ma was back, looking frightened.

"She's gone," she said. "Her bed's been slept in, but she's gone, just the same."

Longstreet came to his feet, his own face whitening.

"Show me," he said.

He followed Ma to the bedroom, looked around. The feminine evidences of the room made him a little diffident, since he had never known much about such things. And these belonged to Carol, which somehow set them apart still more. He saw the gown which she had worn and tossed over the foot of the bed, and he saw something more.

"Somebody's been here," he said. "During the night."

Ma looked dubious.

"Some other woman," Longstreet went on. "Nina, I'd say." He plucked a long blond hair from the sheet. Ma nodded.

"Looks like her hair," she agreed. "But why'd she come back?"

"Where was her room?" Longstreet asked.

He took a look, and by now he was convinced. Nina had been here. Her own suspicions stirred, Ma looked around and discovered some supplies gone from her pantry. Likewise, Carol's favorite horse and saddle were missing.

"But what's it mean?" Ma asked, bewildered. "Why'd she go off with Nina—and not let me know?"

Longstreet was only too much afraid that he knew the answer. Outside the bright sun which had arisen was already dimming behind the growing haze, and his own pleasure in the day was gone as well. The suspicions and fears of the night, which had been virtual certainties then, but which he had brushed aside in the day, returned now. And he knew that he had been right at the time.

Nina was not like most women. She had a vast capacity for love or for hate and the ruthlessness needed to carry a purpose through. That she hated Carol, he had been afforded ample proof already. She had coolly suggested to him that Carol should meet with an ac-

cident, so the Bucksaw would go to her, Nina—and to the two of them through his marrying Nina, after she had disposed of Neff in similar cold-blooded fashion.

Those had been no dreams, however bad. They were the cold reality. And Nina had lost no time in starting to put her plan into execution. It was only too plain to him now.

And they had been gone for hours. Even if it was not already too late, it was a long start. With luck, he might yet pick up the trail, and follow it before darkness again blotted it away.

But a second look at the sky made him break into a run toward his own horse. By another day, any trail would be completely lost in the swirl of a fresh storm. And here, he guessed, teeth clenched tightly, was more of the cooperation between Nina and Neff. Here was a fresh diversion to draw off his forces, so that Neff could strike again.

17

THE CLOUDS HAD BEEN LOWERING steadily for hours now, and here on the mountains all the roof of the world was wrapped in a gray, dank clamminess of fog. Out of it, trees appeared ghostly, cliffs showed unreal and fantastic. Something like fear came to Nina.

It had seemed such a good scheme at first—so easy to put into operation, so very sure. Merely to get Carol to go with her, to climb deep into these towering hills, and then the accident. After that, to return to her new home on Ox-Bow. No one would know, or likely even suspect. No one could even guess that she had been near Bucksaw, or had seen Carol.

In theory it had been simple. The reality of these cloud-compassed peaks was not so easy. Without Carol, she would have been lost, and she knew it. Everything looked the same, with no sun nor moon nor stars—for whether it was still day, or if night had crept again upon them, she could not even be sure. The drab grayness was so dense that it could be night and make little difference.

Carol did not seem disturbed, even by the repeated setbacks which they had received. She had been able to find a trail to the top of this pass, but beyond that her personal knowledge of the country ended. In theory, it had seemed to Nina that it would be perfectly simple and easy to find your way down a mountain again. But mountains such as these would be complex enough without the fog, which shut away all objects even a stone's throw ahead.

There were canyons which kept appearing in unexpected places, deep chasms to turn one back. Rearing cliffs thrusting barriers in your path, turning you again. Hills, peaks, patches of brush and timber, and once a strong odor which nearly drove the horses frantic—probably that of bear, and close at hand. But they did not see it.

Pride alone kept Nina silent now. She wanted to turn back, but she was forced to depend on Carol for her very life. Without her, she doubted if she could ever escape this maze of hills. And she had told Carol that Longstreet would be taken across these hills, on in to the valley beyond, where once men had lived, and now only the ghosts remained.

It loomed now like such a ridiculous story, so silly a lie that she was surprised that Carol credited it. But having come this far, Carol was determined to go on. To find a way through the endless maze of the mountains, and down again.

What they would do when they reached that other valley, if they ever did, troubled Nina now. She recalled some of the vaguely fearsome tales she had heard whispered of it, and of the great monster, half-bird, half-beast, which was said to dwell in these hills. Tales to which she had never given any credence in the past. In this setting, it seemed only reasonable that they might be true. Certainly, if it was a deserted valley, then they would be farther from home, worse off than before.

The supreme irony of it all was being dependent on Carol now to get her out of this!

Nina had wit enough to realize it, and it galled her. But her pride had taken a sharp drop. If it would only clear, if this fog would lift so that she could see. And then she gave an exclamation.

"Look, Carol. I think it *is* lifting!"

It was true. A wind had sprung up, was whipping the fog to rags, revealing open stretches where none had been a few minutes before. Carol's face was sober.

She had said little, giving all her energies to the task which faced them, realizing that it all depended on herself, that in such an emergency, Nina was helpless. If the fog would lift for a while, so that it were possible to see, it would be so much easier to find a passable route. This had been almost literal wandering in the dark.

But now that the wind was coming, lightening the murk, she knew that it was the forerunner of storm. There might be a few minutes of fairly clear weather. Then the clouds would close down more tightly, get thicker, choked with storm. If they still hadn't found a way down before night overtook them—

But even a few minutes of rift might serve to show her the way. By now, with the wind gaining in velocity, moaning in the higher crags, whistling eerily down below them, there was a widening gap in the shroud. But just above it fog still clung. And about all that the break revealed was the edge of a sheer precipice, which must lead back down into the valley that they had left.

Somehow it had not occurred to Carol to doubt Nina's story, having once accepted it, or to question her as the hours wore on. For an excellent reason. She was confident that Nina would not make such a back-breaking climb, especially in such weather, unless it was true. And her reason, Carol believed, was that Nina too was in love with Longstreet.

They stared at the clearing space before them. On down was another blanket of clouds, looking gray but soft. With the wind stirring, there would be more clear air down in the valley below.

The thought came to Nina that here was the opportunity that she had been looking for in the first place. It would be easy to step behind Carol and give her a sudden shove, and the slope was so steep that the thing would be done, with the cliff itself somewhere on below, and those dizzy, cloud-wrapped depths, which looked so soft and fleecy—

She gave a strangled cry, and clutched at Carol's arm. Her face had gone as white as the eddying fog itself.

"Did—did you see it?" she gasped.

Carol nodded, not trusting herself to speak for an instant. The thing was fantastic, utterly incredible, not to be believed for a moment. A nightmarish thing out of forgotten ages, or the product of a logger's unrestrained fancy. Yet there, for an instant, it had been—not a hundred feet away, swooping down out of the mists above, vanishing into the gloom below—a great monster, half-bird, half-beast.

And clutching a man in its claws!

A man who writhed and struggled desperately, helplessly. A man whom both of them had seen, plenty of times before. Mills, whom Carol had recently discharged as foreman of Bucksaw.

They stared at each other, frozen with horror. It was increased as a scream came drifting up from below, where the thing had descended with its prey—the terrified scream of the victim.

That was the thing that was reported to carry saw-logs in its claws like toothpicks. And it might do even that, it seemed now. Flying there, at the edge of the fog, it had been indistinct, huge, awful. But the man in its grip had been real enough. It was something which could not be, but was.

"I'm getting out of here," Nina sobbed. "Likely it saw us. If it comes back—"

Before Carol could stop her she turned, plunged away at a run in the opposite direction. Carol called sharply, but Nina did not stop. That was understandable. Carol's own heart was thudding painfully, a fear rising up in her which was more monstrous than anything she had ever known, a terror out of ages dim in man's memory. And then Nina screamed.

Carol found her, a minute later, lying in a huddled heap. Running blindly, she had slipped and tumbled over a ten-foot drop, narrowly missing a plunge of twenty times that at the side. But it had been far enough for mischief. Her right leg was doubled under her,

and she was biting her lip in agony to keep from crying out.

One brief look told Carol the worst. The leg was broken. A fracture below the knee. Just how bad it was, Carol had no way of guessing, but it was bad enough—and it could scarcely have happened at a worse place, or time.

But it had one good effect. It helped to take their minds off the shadowy thing which they had seen out there, and brought them back to this more immediate and desperate problem. Nina was curiously calm as she looked up.

"It's broken, Carol," she said. "And I guess it's no more than I deserve. There's nothing you can do. You'd better go on and get out of here while you can."

"And leave you?" Carol retorted. "Nonsense. I'm taking you with me."

"What—what if it comes back?" Nina asked.

"I don't think it will," Carol said shortly. She did not give her reasons, which were too horrible, and not too convincing. It might be feasting now, sated—

Nina clenched her teeth and said no more. Shock was beginning to overwhelm her, the pain was severe. But in a crisis of this sort she had courage enough. Already the brief rift in the fog was closing again as the clouds reclaimed their own, pressing grayly down upon them from all sides. That might help—hiding them from any creature which hunted. But it came to Nina that this was the end. Even if there was no other danger, the storm would probably overwhelm her. And that, she realized, was only justice.

Then all other thoughts were driven from her mind as Carol set to work, with a sort of steady desperation. She cut straps from both saddles, and sliced off a part of the saddle-blanket on her own horse for padding. There were plenty of sticks for splints. Somehow she got Nina's leg straightened and splinted, strapped in place. Nina moaned, and then was still. Looking at her white face, Carol saw that she had fainted.

That was just as well too, she realized, as snow struck wetly on her cheek. The storm was beginning, and she had now to get Nina into the saddle, then get down off the mountain. But there was what looked like a possible trail down ahead.

Somehow she managed it, lifting Nina, getting her on the horse. Nina regained consciousness, and managed to ride, holding to the saddle-horn. It was necessary to go slowly, for every reason. And the storm continued to thicken about them, until the ground was white, and the air was choked with snow. By morning, there would be two or three feet of snow at this elevation.

But this was a way down. A fairly good path, everything considered. Carol walked, leading both horses, picking and choosing. She stuck to the task at hand, forcing herself not to think of other things—of Longstreet, or worse nightmares. The thing now was to get back down, and get Nina to a bed.

It was very still now. The gusty wind which had ushered in the storm had dropped, and the snow fell silently. Somewhere, invisible, came the sound of a waterfall. Carol could think of no waterfall that she had seen. A stone rattled off from beneath the hoof of one of the horses, plunged to the side, and there was silence again—then a faint ping, like an echo. It had plunged off a cliff, unseen there at the side.

Though she had no good way of telling, Carol guessed that they must be at least half-way down the mountain again when night began to close down. There were more trees here again, big ones, and here was a deadfall, where either a snowslide or roaring storm had toppled trees some years before, feeling them in a wild tangle. Back among them was a cave-like shelter which would do for the night. Like it or not, they must stop.

It was a long night. Carol kept a fire for warmth, and with the remembrance that fire would scare off beasts—any sort of beast, she hoped. Over it she cooked food.

She had fixed a fairly comfortable bed for Nina, but Nina was feverish and restless. And the next day, Carol knew, would be harder for her. To ride again. Yet ride they must. They had to get home.

Carol realized now that the two of them had been very foolish, starting out as they had done. Maybe Nina had intended well, but she at least should have known better. But it was too late to regret mistakes already made.

Nina was a little better by morning. She had slept the last few hours, enabling Carol to do the same. And she was free from fever when she awoke. She looked at Carol strangely, then at the snow everywhere around them, clinging to the trees, making a fantastically beautiful landscape. It was still cloudy, but the storm had stopped.

"We'll make better time now," Carol said, with more cheerfulness than she felt. "And get you back to the house. You'll have to be as spunky as you were yesterday, Nina."

"Where are we?" Nina asked.

"I don't exactly know," Carol said. "But we're getting off the mountain, anyway."

"I mean—which side of the divide?"

"Why, I—" Carol looked around in the brightening day, and dis-

may came to her. This was the other side of the mountains! They had set out for here, originally, but with Nina injured, she had tried to turn back. But the trail, winding and twisting in the gloom of storm, had fooled them again.

Nina shivered a little, as she realized the truth. What a fool she had been from the start. And now it was too late to start over, to make restitution. It was a new day, a new, white world, and she had suffered a change of heart which was almost as strange to her, as these new surroundings. But it was all too late.

Carol was good—that was the word for her. Good, and forgiving, and generous. But even she couldn't get her out of this. That—thing, might have its lair back in here. Entirely aside from that, this was the ghostly side of the mountains, the uninhabited land.

Nina made no more objections, however, as Carol fixed breakfast, then helped her into the saddle again. It brought cold sweat popping on Nina's face, but she clenched her teeth. She had it coming!

They went on, down and down. The snow was too deep, above them, to turn back. Here was the valley, now—and off at the bottom there was another stream, black between the endless white on all sides, looking a lot like the river in the opposite valley. In actual distance, Carol calculated, it might be no more than about a mile straight through from one valley, one river to the other. Though this was somewhat lower down, and in the tangle of rearing hills between, they had traveled plenty of distance—often in virtual circles.

Everything appeared unmarred, unbroken, where they could see now. They were nearing the foot, though some steep, tough going remained. But no sign of any human habitation. Nina turned with new decision to Carol.

"It's no use, Carol," she said. "There isn't anything—or anybody. And besides—"

She would tell the truth, now—the whole truth. Carol would hate her, of course. But she could do no less. Tell her that she had lied, that Longstreet was not a prisoner, that he had never been near this valley. Though Carol must have already guessed that much. She opened her mouth, closed it again, staringly.

Down, below, plain to see in the clear air of day, was a man. Here in this far valley. And it was Tom Longstreet himself.

18

LITTLE LOUIE AND BIG LOUIE were mighty loggers, in the Paul Bunyan tradition. Doughty fighters as well, of unquestioned courage. Big Louie stood six feet and six inches with his boots off, while Little Louie lacked two inches of that.

They were no relation, as Longstreet had learned, but they were inseparable friends. Tradition had it that, somewhere in the years gone by, they had met and fought, being each considered a champion. That was one fight which neither man had won. Both had finally knocked each other out, in a double climax. Reviving, they had solemnly shaken hands, and had been friends ever since, an unbeatable team with axe or saw or fists.

But their real prowess lay in the tales they could tell. Here they were true disciples of the great master of the Blue Ox. It was Little Louie who had first heard the tale of the flying nightmare, which carried saw logs between its claws for nesting sticks, and had been delighted with it. Subsequently, he and Big Louis had elaborated upon the story, adding a wealth of fanciful and fantastic description. Each solemnly swore that it was the truth, that both of them had seen the flying nightmare. Their wild tales had been so unbelievable as to dispel most of the terror growing in the rest of the crew.

Now, turning homeward at mid-afternoon, from a special chore which had taken them apart from their fellows, Big Louie gazed upward as the wind hit them, tearing at the clouds overhead. He scratched a square chin with an axe handle.

"By gar, Lettle, it been goin' snow," he declared.

"Mebby," Little Louie agreed. And winked one eye. "Good weathair for the bird, eh, Beeg?"

"Pouf," Big Louie snorted. "That bird, eet fly only w'en the weather gets stormy—not lak'—"

He halted, mouth dropping open. Little Louie followed his gaze, and, having just bitten off a generous chew of tobacco, gulped and swallowed his cud at one choking gasp.

For there, at the edge of the fog, high above, swooping like a kite in a gale, was the thing which they had so solemnly declared to be true—the mighty monster itself, just vanishing from sight. It was gone even as they looked, and then they turned and eyed each other, for once uncertain.

"Leetle," Big Louie whispered. "Did you see w'at I see, eh?"

"Beeg," Little Louie countered. "There ain't no such a theeng!"

"And w'at it hold in its claws—like a man," Big Louie groaned.

"By golly," Little Louie muttered. "We're both liars!"

Big managed a sickly grin.

"I weesh we were!" he said.

Following Longstreet's departure, Zeb had been busy. On such a day as this, with the imminent threat of storm in the air, the cattle were restless. Instinct warned them of things which man, with his higher intelligence and slower perceptions, could only guess at. They were uneasy, huddling together, then moving to find new grounds.

On such a day men who knew their business could round up more mavericks than under ordinary conditions. So Zeb and his men were taking full advantage of it, and adding several cattle, with hides made newly sore and resplendent with unwanted decorations, to those already in the enclosure.

It was along in the afternoon that Zeb and three of his crew had just hazed some new captives through the gate, and turned to shut it. They swung around to stare, startled and a little shocked, into the leveled guns of five men who belonged to Ox-Bow. Jake Reigh himself was at their head.

Reigh was grinning broadly. He had been assigned a job of rounding up for the afternoon, and whereas Zeb was rounding up wild cattle, they were herding rival crewmen. Since Zeb had been present at Reigh's discomfiture on that former occasion, the foreman of Ox-Bow was doubly pleased to have taken him so tamely now.

"Get their guns," he ordered his own men. "And see that you don't overlook any. These hombres are plumb slippery."

Zeb, and his men, outraged but helpless, submitted to being disarmed. There was a time for valor, and a time for discretion. When you were looking down the black muzzle of a gun, with a trigger-itchy finger behind it, it paid to take things easy.

"Just what's the idea?" Zeb demanded. "Ain't you fellers kind of bitin' off more'n you'll be able to chaw comfortable?"

"We'll do the worryin' about that," Reigh assured him. "Got 'em all dehorned, boys? That's fine. You know what to do. Take these

others along with you. Me, I'm going to stay here with this old mossyhorn. Got a few things to tend to."

He lounged there in the saddle, grinning crookedly, the gun in his hand covering Zeb with a seeming carelessness which made it all the more chilling. The clouds were lowering, but a wind was commencing to spring up, and there was nothing in the immediate prospect to cheer. Zeb, standing tautly, had only too good a notion of what it was all about.

It would storm soon. And tonight there would be another raid on the logs. This time it looked as though Neff was working in the open. His crew were filtering in, onto Bucksaw range, taking as many men by surprise as possible, making captives of them. When the time came for the raid, there would be that many less to worry about.

Zeb fumed. Then he stirred petulantly. The others were out of sight and hearing, and still Reigh lounged there and threatened him with drawn gun.

"Well," Zeb demanded testily, "can't yuh make up yore mind? Or ain't yuh got none such to make up? Do I have to keep reachin' all day? It's right tirin' on the arms."

"Is it, now?" Reigh bantered. "Ain't that too bad? Well, there ain't nobody can say that I ain't kind-hearted. I'd step on any worm to put it out of its misery. We'll fix that."

He had been toying with his rope with one hand, loosening it. Now, with a lazy, almost careless gesture, he tossed his loop. It fell neatly over Zeb's uplifted hands, and with a quick jerk Reigh closed the loop around his wrists. That done, he held it taut and thrust the gun back into holster.

"Since you complain of how hard it is to keep 'em lifted, I'll give you some help," he said. Swinging down from the saddle, he tossed the other end of his rope, with equal dexterity, over the outjutting limb of a big pine tree, just above the wire gate. He caught the end as it circled down, pulled it taut again, so that Zeb's arms were stiffly erect.

"That ought to make it easier to hold 'em up," Reigh chuckled. "You sure are scheduled to hang—seems to me you were to do that some time back, but you've been cheatin' the rope quite a spell. So now we'll do this up proper."

Zeb glowered, but made no comment. He was watching Reigh like a hawk.

"Climb up on that fence post there," Reigh ordered suddenly. "Clear to the top."

He took a quick snub, a half-hitch with the end of his rope, around an upjutting root of the big pine tree, giving him plenty of purchase. Pulling on the rope, taking up the slack, he assisted Zeb to climb, however unwillingly. Zeb stepped on the stretched wires, and so to the top of the post itself. A couple of times he almost lost his balance, and managed to keep it only because he knew that Reigh was hopeful that he would tumble. On the post he stood, arms in air. The top of the rope, looped over the branch, was off at the side several feet.

Deliberately Reigh took an extra turn about the root, then tied the end of the rope fast.

"Now you can set off," he instructed, "and try danglin' there for a while. With the rope on your hands, it won't break your neck—but it sure ought to be enjoyable. Go right ahead!"

"Go to the devil," Zeb retorted.

Reigh grinned again and drew his gun.

"You got two choices," he said. "Either do at I say, or I'll shoot yore toes off!"

Zeb hesitated. He knew only too well that Reigh meant it. He was having fun with him before killing him—but it was plain now that he intended to do the latter. A bullet through his boot would not only make a nasty wound, but it would make him jump in any case, and set him swinging.

Zeb didn't like the look of things. But he had one ace in the hole, and he didn't want to waste it. Reigh figured that he had him completely helpless. Growling loudly, Zeb stepped off the post and swung.

The jar of the rope, cutting against his hands, the jerk on his arms, sent pain lancing through him in a dizzy wave. Then he was dangling, some four feet above the ground, in about the middle of the wire gate.

Reigh chuckled again and opened the gate, pulling it back and to the side, and now Zeb was beginning to see his plan in all its ugliness. Some of the cattle which had been so laboriously rounded up were grazing not far off. Among them was a big steer with unusually long sweep of horns—one of the meanest critters, four-footed variety, that Zeb had ever encountered. Not quite so mean, though, he figured as the two-footed critter who tormented him now.

With that twisted strand of wire between his horns, the big steer was docile enough now. But it was still restless at being penned up. Zeb saw what Reigh intended. He didn't know that the captive longhorns had been gentled. He figured that, given a chance, they

would soon find the open gate and start a plunge through it for freedom. And with Zeb hanging there, in their way—they'd rake him with those long horns, for as long as there was any of him left hanging.

"Those critters look to me like they didn't enjoy being penned up," Reigh went on blandly. "Been used to runnin' free."

Watchfully he moved to one side, keeping the fence between himself and the cattle, then shied a rock at the big steer. It raised its head, eyes red with rage, and glared at him. Then, as he retreated craftily, it began to advance, still with plenty of fight in it. With gun handy, and his horse just beyond, Reigh wasn't worried. What he wanted now, and figured to do better on foot, was to get it headed for the gate.

The steer saw Zeb, and hesitated. But it also saw that the gate was open. By now Reigh too had seen the taut wire, and was beginning to understand, growing bolder. He flung another stone, and again the steer advanced.

Zeb was watching tensely. The first shock of the jerk on his arms had passed. His chance had seemed slim enough, at best. Now, though Reigh was fixing to make things worse, it might be bettered through that very scheme.

The one thing Reigh had failed to notice was that only one wrist was well caught in the noose. Zeb's right hand had been caught in it too, instead of the wrist. Now, with Reigh's full attention focused on the advancing Longhorn, Zeb pulled. It took some skin as well, but his hand came loose.

With his free hand Zeb took an iron-fingered grip on the rope up above, drew himself up a little, and held there, straining, until he could get enough slack to pull his other hand free. Then, since the longhorn was now almost below him, he drew his legs up and waited.

It was still advancing warily, mincingly along, eager to escape, but wary with the wire on its horns. As it came below him, eyes rolled redly up, Zeb kicked suddenly. His foot struck the taut wire, popped it in two.

The big steer stood still for an instant, and a bawl of rage and pain was torn from it. It shook its head. Then, finding the galling tension on its horns released, it lowered its head suddenly and charged for its tormentor.

Too late, Reigh saw his peril. His horse was not far away, but too far to reach. He tried to run, tripped and fell. The next instant the big beast was upon him.

Zeb let go his hold, dropped to the ground and rolled. His arms were stiff, nearly numb from the strain. He came to his feet again, raced for the tree and climbed desperately. His tumble had attracted the attention of the now thoroughly maddened steer, and it left off its attack on the now limp and formless thing which it had been horning, charged at Zeb.

He was barely in time, drawing himself up among the branches. Then, breathing heavily, he crouched there.

It could be worse. But it could be better, too. Reigh himself would cause no more trouble. He had been caught in the trap of his own setting. But the crew of the Ox-Bow were still at large, and already, along with the booming wind, a few flakes of snow were beginning to spit. Zeb had a pretty good notion of what was intended for tonight, and it behooved him to be doing something about it.

Likewise, a lot more of the newly corralled herd, attracted by the commotion, were beginning to mass together, to sniff the air, catching the odor of blood. Roused to a fighting mood, they were drifting closer to the gate.

Unless he could get it shut pretty soon, they would all be out, precisely as Reigh had intended, and all the work of the past weeks would be wasted.

But how could he do anything? The big longhorn, that galling tension at last removed from his horns, showed no intention of going away. His appetite for vengeance against these two-legged creatures, who had heaped so many indignities on him, had been merely whetted by his first victory. And the others had taken Zeb's gun.

Zeb groaned. It looked as though nothing could stop the herd now, turn them away from the gate. They were nearly to it, and started to break into a trot as they sensed that freedom lay just ahead. And then it happened.

It came swooping down at them—a nightmare object out of the thickening storm and wild fury of wind. A huge, birdlike, terrible thing, clutching a man in its claws, diving straight at them. The big longhorn which had been worrying the tree, trying to get at Zeb, bawled in strangled terror and plunged back through the open gate, inside the field and away in a wild run—the whole herd at his heels.

Zeb, seeing the swooping monster, almost lost his own hold. Then he steadied, descended. The monster was on the ground now, only a few feet away. Zeb picked up the wire gate and shut it again, methodically now. One look he gave toward what had been Reigh,

then turned toward the mass lying in a broken and crumpled heap on the ground. The thing which, at the last moment, had saved the day, but which still held a man in its grip.

It was clear enough to Zeb now. For the man, one foot tangled and held inextricably in a mass of heavy cord, was Mills, who had been foreman of Bucksaw, but who had, beyond any doubt now, been a traitor in camp as well, taking the pay of Neff. Mills, the man who liked to build kites as a recreation.

This was a kite-like thing of vast size and weird appearance—shaped to fly, and to resemble a creature half bird, half beast.

He had climbed high in the mountains, of course, had spent the last few days building it, and had been prepared to launch it out over the valley just before the storm hit, a fearsome flying creature to make real the stories already circulated. Once men saw the monster, dimly through storm and haze, there would be no opposition to a new raid on the logs.

That was about the way that Mills had planned it. And he had built well on this giant kite. But in the end it had proven itself more of a monster than he had counted on. That sudden gust of wind had snatched it up, off the high cliff side, his own foot had tangled in it, in the cord with which he had aimed to control it. Nina and Carol had heard his scream of terror as it plunged away toward the valley with him.

Zeb surveyed it and shook his head.

"For my money," he muttered, "it wasn't bad. I danged near fell out of that tree!"

19

LONGSTREET WAS MAKING A GRIM HUNT of it, his apprehensions growing by the hour. He had stopped at the timber tract where the crew were at work, and had questioned them in a casual manner, learning that they had not seen anything of Carol. Which was about what he had expected to hear.

He had considered pulling them off the job and onto the hunt, but had decided against it. He might be imagining things, making trouble where there was none, and in that case Carol wouldn't like it. But it was not that which deterred him. An aimless hunt by a lot of men could do more harm than good. They would destroy a trail without even seeing it.

Leaving orders for a doubly sharp lookout to be kept on the logs, he put all his own skill to the task. It was his guess that they would be heading for Ox-Bow, but the course to be followed was another matter.

They might head directly south and west, not crossing the river until well down on Ox-Bow. Or they might strike across to the far side and keep close to the hills. He was inclined to the latter theory.

The feel of storm was in the air now, and the way the clouds hung, holding what seemed like a choking grip about the mountains, pressing down on the earth like a heavy hand, lent added drabness to the day. It was dark under the trees, with a sort of whispering silence.

Here and there was sign, but whether it had been made by those he sought, or by some of the Ox-Bow crew in recent days, was also hard to tell. Longstreet quested patiently, holding himself in check when everything cried out for haste. There was nothing to be gained by running in blind circles.

The sound came to him just as the first flakes of snow started spilling down. A distant sound, which for a moment he thought might be the wailing of the wind. But it grew to be a faint, steady hullabaloo. It came from off across the west branch of the river, over on the island, from where his own crew were at work.

It was impossible to see. All that he had to go by were his ears. But one thing was plain. There was a fight going on there, one on

repeating rifle in one hand, as well as a six-gun in his holster. a major scale. Which could only mean that some of Neff's crew had invaded the island.

The boldness of the thing, while it was still daylight, argued that more trouble was brewing. And as he turned, Longstreet saw that there were other men of Neff's crew prowling here, that he too was in for trouble.

There were two of them, and they had slipped up on him while his attention was distracted by the distant commotion. One of them was the wry-necked man who had been with Neff when they first met. The other was a thick, beefy man with the look of a pug, even to thick ears and a nose which had been broken more than once. They were coming at him from two sides, the wry-neck brandishing a club, the other man confident in his big fists.

Longstreet reacted instinctively. He jerked his gun and jumped for the wry-neck in one continuing movement, bringing the clubbed barrel down on his skull before he could dodge. That evened the odds, at least temporarily. But as Longstreet spun around to meet his other antagonist, the beefy man had snatched up a stick and flung it. It caught the gun barrel in Longstreet's hand, knocked it spinning from his grasp.

Now it was the two of them, hand to hand. This ex-pug had bone-crushing power, and he figured to use it to decide the issue quickly and easily. If he was allowed to use it as he planned, Longstreet knew that it might well do so.

He took a blow which grazed the edge of his jaw and sent him reeling back, dodged a second one, then was forced to close for self-protection. He jerked his head to one side to escape a repetition, slammed his own fist in turn deep to the other man's midriff. That brought a grunt from him, straightening him up and back, so that the out-reaching, clutching arm could be evaded.

From then on it was a seesaw sort of thing, fierce and savage. But Longstreet was tough, wiry, and he had been in more than one such mix as this. He saw now that if he could keep up these tactics he could outlast him, and eventually wear his heavy and tough opponent down.

But that would take time, and he heard others coming, knew that they were also of the Ox-Bow. By now the storm had become a steady thing, filling the air. Longstreet sent his opponent reeling back from a blow which made blood spout anew from his battered nose, then, turning, had vanished before he could recover.

Against such odds, and with his gun gone, there was nothing to do but try and evade them. That was not hard to do in the thicken-

ing storm. Night would soon be here as well. But he still had found no trace of Carol. She might be down at Ox-Bow now, or almost anywhere else.

One thing was plain. There was, beyond any doubt, some fresh deviltry scheduled for tonight. Well, in one way he was ready for it. Whatever happened to those logs, they had to come this way, across to this far side of the river and Ox-Bow land. Unless all his calculations were wrong. And, wild tales to the contrary, Longstreet placed no credence in logs vanishing by any supernatural methods.

Standing close beside the bole of a great pine, he waited while the hunt for him subsided. By now, though down here it still melted as it fell, the air was full of snow. The wind had mostly died away, leaving only the whispering of the storm among the trees. The half-dusk was already deepening to night.

The disturbance on the island had long since died away. What had happened over there he could only conjecture. But he had a strong feeling that, whatever his crew might do to try and prevent it, some of those logs would be moving again tonight, by hook or crook. If he could find where they went to, their disappearance would be a good thing.

For the next hour or so he moved like a ghost, while the night closed down, thick and muggy. Nothing happened. Then he heard voices, somewhere close, saw the gleam of a lantern reflected on the snow. These men moved without much caution, and he fell in behind them.

They had not gone far when the light vanished abruptly, and the men with it.

Longstreet listened, puzzled. With the light so suddenly gone, it was impossible to see anything, and there were only his ears to depend on. But where could they have gone to? At the spot where they seemed to have been last, there was only the side of the hill.

Down below, just a few feet away, was the river itself. He could not see it, but he could hear it, the soft sound of a deep pool, stirring a little from swifter water up above. He knew about where he was now. Not more than a couple of hundred yards on downstream from where the Bucksaw logs were piled, but on the opposite bank. The water made a deep, gurgling sound. This was a sort of backwater.

He was off a little way, trying to discover what could have become of the men, when he saw the light again. There were three men, going somewhere. The thing was spooky.

Excitement mounted in him. Here, he knew, must be the key to the secret, if he could find it. But in the pitch black darkness, find-

ing nothing was easy. And he had been past here not once but at least half a dozen times, in daylight, and had seen nothing out of the ordinary.

This was about where they had vanished and then reappeared. The light, and the men as well, were out of sight again now, having gone on down stream. It was slippery here, muddy under his feet, with the fresh snow making it worse. Longstreet slipped, and grabbed wildly for something to steady himself. Something moved as his hand closed on it, and he realized with a thrill that it was some sort of a door.

That made sense, he realized. If there was a cave, back in here, the stolen logs might easily be hidden in it, the entrance cleverly concealed by a door fixed up to resemble the surroundings. Not knowing of such a thing or where to look for it, along miles of such country, it would be luck alone that would lead a man to it—or luck and being on the spot, as he was tonight, when they were busy about the place.

Likewise, it would be simple and quick to float logs across the river, downstream for such a short distance, and, with skilled loggers doing the work, to get them out of the water and back in here, since this was so close to the water. This must be it.

He swung the door a little wider, and from the feel of it guessed that it was of planks, hinged on one side to swing easily. There was rough bark nailed on the outer side for camouflage.

Longstreet stepped inside. The door closed behind him again, of its own accord. He felt a moment of panic, in the black darkness of the place, the feeling of being trapped. But, standing still, he felt around again, found a handle and pushed. The door swung open.

Relieved, he allowed it to close again. He could open it from this side easily enough. There was no spring or secret catch to hold it shut, at least from this side.

If those three should return with the lantern, or if others of the crew came along and caught him in here—well, it wouldn't be pleasant. But this was too good a chance to miss. Before he got out he'd have a look around—if it could be managed. In such darkness, looking was hardly the word for it.

Feeling his way, keeping one hand on the door, he crossed to the opposite wall. It was only a few steps. If this was a cave, it wasn't very wide. He moved a few paces along the far wall, still guiding himself with one hand, stopped with a sudden tingle at what his fingers encountered. A lantern, hanging there, high up, on a nail or peg!

He lifted it down, shook it. The slosh assured him that it had plenty of oil in it. All that he needed to do was touch a match to the wick to have light and a chance to look around.

Again he hesitated. Did he dare risk it? If someone were back in here and saw that light, or if someone returned and opened the door suddenly, it would put him in a bad spot. But there was no sound, and the temptation was too great. He found a match, applied it to the wick, and held his breath as light blossomed in a narrow arc around him.

Nothing happened. And now he could see. His eyes narrowed a little. This wasn't what he had expected. There were no logs anywhere in sight, nor was it a natural cave. It had more the look of a man-made mine shaft.

And that, he decided, was exactly what it was. It was only about eight feet wide, and of similar height. And it led away in a straight line, back into the hill, but sloping steadily, at a fair slant, downward into the darkness.

The air was good enough in here, as testified by the fact that the lantern burned without flickering. That meant, probably, that the other end of this was open, somewhere lower down. And when this door was also opened, the whole shaft would be ventilated. If that happened every now and then, the air would be kept fresh enough.

There were signs here as though much of this tunneling had been quite recent. The tunnel, he saw, was well braced with stout logs and beams overhead. These posts which held the beams had been set back in the walls on either side, so that they did not jet out to offer any obstructions. Moreover, there was a U-shaped ditch in the bottom of the passage, starting at this end and likewise running off into the darkness below.

Longstreet studied that, a little puzzled. It was about three feet deep, and nearly five feet wide at the top, or floor level. This place held the secret of the missing logs. He was convinced of that now, but it was still a little hard to understand.

He followed the shaft a little way, noting that the downward slope was steady, the line of it perfectly straight. But here the nature of it was changing. There were traces here as though coal might have been mined, in a vein which had been worked out. And here, though some fairly fresh work had been done, as if to get things in good shape again, it looked as though the main shaft had been dug and used, and probably abandoned, years before.

His curiosity mounting, Longstreet followed it, his confidence increasing as nothing happened. For the moment, this tunnel was

plainly empty. And now, wild as the guess seemed at first, he believed that he understood the secret of it.

This must be an old mine shaft that someone had worked, a long while back, from the opposite valley! Apparently they had found a vein of coal and had followed it through the hill, for perhaps a mile or more. Finally it had been worked out, and the mine abandoned.

He remembered now the stories of a ghost town in another valley, where there had been a boom lasting for some years. Most of the mining had been gold, but this one had been black gold, to furnish fuel. And a few good coal miners, Longstreet guessed, could probably have made money just as fast and far more surely, getting out coal for a community, than by digging in the never too sure hope of finding gold.

The gold, and apparently the vein of coal as well, had been worked out, the old diggings abandoned. And, if his hunch was correct, Neff had found the old shaft on the far side, had explored it, and had gotten the idea which he had been carrying out since then.

Finding the old tunnel in fairly good shape, and guessing that it wouldn't need to be extended very much farther to come clear out into the other valley, smack up against the river, he had set to work. And proved his theory. The far valley must be considerably lower down, since there was a steady downward slope all the way. It had been cleaned out, braced strongly again, this V-shaped trench dug next, nothing, along in the middle—

And a log, once started, would slide along through, to come out in the opposite valley. The trench would guide it, hold it in place. And who would ever think of looking for stolen logs clear over on the other side of a sky-piercing range? With another stream over there, to float them to mill in the spring, each log properly branded with the Ox-Bow—it would bring a fortune to Ox-Bow, and ruin to Bucksaw at the same time.

By now he was sure of it. The tunnel ran straight and at a steady slope. And here were signs where logs had been slid through, plowing the trench out, making it deeper, smoother.

He checked suddenly, turned. Far behind, and above, there was a momentary fugitive gleam of light. And there was something else, far more sinister. A rumbling sound, growing swiftly in intensity. They were starting more logs through now, to make the plunge through the heart of the mountain. And the first one was already hurtling down toward him at express-train speed!

LONGSTREET CAUGHT HIS BREATH. Whether anyone, working up above there, and quite a way behind—for he must have come back in here nearly a quarter of a mile, as he belatedly realized—whether they had happened to see the pin-prick of his own light, far down here, or not, he had no way of knowing. It was possible, though rather unlikely.

In the first place, they wouldn't be looking for anything, and would be busy with the logs. Open the door, shuttle them across the pond and in, start them sliding—it was an easy and simple job for a trained crew. An hour or so would dispose of all the logs stolen in a night. Once started, with all obstructions carefully removed, the trench to guide them, and the pull of gravity, most of them, at least, would keep going straight through with only very little trouble.

Some of them might get to jumping around, especially if they were uneven or rough. But even if they did that, they could do a lot of it and still keep up their headlong pace. The posts on either side, which held the roof braces, were so deeply recessed that they offered nothing on which a log would be likely to catch. The walls were smooth and would turn it again as it struck, and close enough together that the long timbers could not get stuck crosswise.

But there was evidence that some of them, in the past, had done plenty of jumping and plowing as they thundered through the hill. He could see signs of it on every side, down here where they would be attaining a terrific speed. And he was in here, with a fresh deluge of logs starting to come through!

Sweat popped on Longstreet's face. This was the one thing that he had forgotten to figure on. He had foreseen the possibility of a hide and seek game with men, of a possible fight. But he had been willing to risk that. The obvious was what he had overlooked. And logs were something else again. Against one of those hurtling monsters, he'd be like a worm under a boot.

If his light had been seen, they evidently decided that anyone who would be in here was an enemy, and to be treated as such. In any case, the first log was on its way!

The rumble of it was swiftly increasing—a sound which seemed to shake the whole mountain, not only under his feet but all around

him. It was a rushing, roaring sound, and Longstreet looked swiftly around for a place to get out of the way.

If he stood on either side, close up to the wall, he might be safe—if the log didn't roll or jump as it went by. If that happened, it would brush him off as though he hadn't been there.

One log, or a dozen, might go by safely. But with a lot of them coming through, it was no place to stand.

Nor was there any chance of getting in beside one of the posts and being fairly safe. This had been designed so that there was no chance for the logs to jump, catch on something and stick.

The only possibility was overhead, on one of the supporting beams. They were braced up against the dirt and rock ceiling, but an occasional brace, running at right angles, offered a sort of V where the two joined, and it might be possible to draw himself up there. Then to obtain a precarious hold, with legs drawn up and braced, and hold himself, till the deluge of logs had gone past.

Immediately overhead was such a place, and the rumble of the approaching log was very close. Longstreet did not stop to think. He analyzed the chances in a split second and acted, jumping. His hands found a rough place, a cut-off branch, and a hold just above, next to the roof, for his other hand. He drew himself up, the lantern slipping from his fingers, dropping on the ground, shattering.

Instant darkness engulfed the place, and he pulled his legs up, feeling the swish and wind of the huge log as it roared past beneath him. It appeared to be going quite smoothly.

He found a hold against the opposite brace for his boots, braced and clung there. The receding thunder of the big log lasted a little longer—not much more than a minute in all. Then there was echoing silence, which was proof that it had been shot clear through the tunnel and probably out into the far valley. Proof enough that Neff's wild scheme worked.

By listening up above, they could tell when a log was through, and whether it had gone clear through, or had been stuck somewhere. There were a few seconds of silence, then the roar began anew. Another log was coming.

Longstreet clung grimly, bracing with his feet, holding with his hands, his main weight suspended over thin air. He had a fairly secure perch, and, unless some log got really wild and took a great jump into the air as it swept under him, none of them would be likely to touch him—unless he lost his hold and fell.

That was the rub. It was a cramped, uncomfortable position at best. How long could he hold it? He tried to calculate the matter calmly. On those other nights they had stolen about half a hundred

logs each time, and sent them through here. That would take about an hour.

But there were more logs, now that Bucksaw had a bigger crew at work. And tonight, as likely as not, they'd try and clean up, and send every log they could get hold of! That battle had evidently been crew against crew, with the object of stealing the logs. And judging by results, and with what other ruses he could only conjecture, to draw off parts of the crew, it looked as if they had succeeded. If they tried to send a few hundred logs through, working most of the night—

That would be a clean-up which would finish Bucksaw. And it would finish him, too! He might possibly keep his hold for an hour. But that would be the extreme limit.

A swish and a roar told him that log number two had gone past. The vibration of it shook the timbers to which he clung, almost jarred him loose. That was something extra which he hadn't counted on.

He moved a hand cautiously to get a better grip, and, lifting one foot, found a toehold above the brace. That helped a little, for, with the silence which denoted the passing of the second log, a new vibration told that another was already on its way.

For a while, then, he lost count of time. It seemed to be a continuous sort of thing, and the growling roar of the monsters shuttling along the groove was unending. It was bad enough in the darkness. But he knew that if he had been able to see, it would have seemed even worse.

Then, all at once, there was a new note. Along came a log which, due to some defect, was really acting up. Apparently it was jumping, plunging like a wild bronk let loose. Something splintered not far from him, the shock all but jarred him from his hold. Then the log went past like a wild thing.

He waited, arms aching, but there were no more. Either that was all, or else the men up above had heard the crash and were afraid to send others until the tunnel had been looked over and repairs made, for fear that they might jam up and cause real trouble.

Apparently that was it, for now a light was starting to bob down toward him. A lantern, with a few men coming to have a look. Longstreet lowered his legs, dropped to the floor, then, guided by the feel of the ditch, walked onward. He didn't care to be there when they came along.

Presently, looking back, he saw that the light had stopped its advance. Apparently the damage was not great, for the light soon started back the other way again. Longstreet walked faster. Without any light to show him a good place, he couldn't grab another hold.

And if they started more logs to coming before he was through—

Somewhere down ahead now he saw a faint lightening of the heavy darkness. It was only a gray murk, but it was welcome. Since there were no obstructions anywhere, he walked faster now, with more confidence. It would still be night outside, a black night with snow falling. But the white snow itself lent a faint reflection by comparison with the absolute blackness of this old mine shaft.

It demonstrated his theory that the far end was left open so that fresh air would suck up through it. He could feel the current of it now, though it was not strong. And then, far up behind, sounded anew the rumble of a log starting down the tunnel.

The dim grayness down below was too far to reach. Longstreet flattened himself at the side, and heard the big monster hurtle past, so close to him that he could feel the wind of it. Instantly he was following it again, long before the final rumble testified that it was through.

Two more logs came, forcing him to stop again and crouch far back, trusting to luck. But now the grayness was close at hand. He was still hurrying when he heard a new log begin the descent, and he knew, from the pounding, that it was another wild one.

He abandoned caution and ran wildly. No place to be in here, with such a thing on the loose. It was getting close now, but there was open air just ahead, a brighter light by contrast with what was behind him. No telling what lay outside, but he burst into the open, sliding down a steep slope, rolling instinctively to the side, out of the path of the log.

Not that he need have worried about it, as he realized a moment later. He heard the sudden end of the rumble, saw a dim shape in the air as it hurtled out through the air, well above him—to vanish. Then there came a mighty splash, a shower of spray which reached him. There was a river for them to fall into, then, as he figured would be the case.

He was at the foot of an old fill of dirt and rock from the mine now, and he slid to a stop, with the water just a little way beyond. Snow was on his face as he looked up.

Now he had the secret of the vanishing logs. A secret which would ruin Neff and restore Bucksaw to prosperity—if he could get back with it alive.

Whether they had seen the light of his lantern, back in the tunnel, or would suspect that he might have lived to get through it, was a question. But there would, sooner or later, be some of the Ox-Bow crew around here, checking to see that the night's steal of logs had gone through all right. A routine job, but something to watch out for.

Regardless of that, he had to wait for daylight before doing anything. He had no desire to venture back in that long tunnel, even after the logs had stopped coming through. To go anywhere in the night was out of the question.

The storm would cover all tracks which he might make now. With daylight to aid him, he could figure things out better.

It wasn't hard to find a sheltered spot—originally there had been a trestle built out from the mouth of the mine, with waste dumped to either side of it, gradually making a fill. Back close to the hill he found a spot where the fill had left a gap, and crawled back. It wasn't too comfortable, but he had slept in places no better than that before.

He awoke at daylight, stiff and cramped and hungry. But hunger was the least of his troubles. He saw that there was nearly a foot of snow on the ground, a fresh white blanket which would leave telltale tracks wherever he moved. And it had stopped snowing, though the clouds still lowered. On foot, with a mountain pass between him and Bucksaw, it wasn't too pleasant a prospect.

Keeping back where no snow had fallen, he looked around. This was quite a valley, and he could see the signs where long years before men had grubbed in search of the elusive yellow metal. Good-sized pine trees sprouted out of old dumps, proof that the ghosts had claimed this for their own years before.

It was a pleasant looking valley, with the river down below. There was a big, wide pool there, and quite a few of the logs which had splashed out into it during the night were lodged in a tangled pile against the far bank.

The logs, piled just as they had landed, were brazenly showing themselves now. On some of them, lying at the right angle, he could see the brand of Bucksaw. Off at one side, in more shallow water, lying partly in and partly out of the water, was a pile of what might almost have been wagon wheels. But these were butts, sawed off other logs and left there, so that stolen timber could be rebranded with the Ox-Bow.

Those butts all bore the Bucksaw brand.

Here was proof, complete and damaging. The whole story, its secret made plain.

And somebody was moving out there, now, near the water, but on this side of the river. He stepped into full view of Longstreet and stood surveying the logs with a wide, satisfied grin on his face. Then he turned, and it seemed to Longstreet that Neff must be looking straight at him. Certainly some sound had come to his ear, something alien which had roused his suspicion.

21

FOR A LONG MOMENT THE BOSS of Ox-Bow stood, like a listening, watchful coyote. Despite the grossness of his body, the smile seemed apt in that moment. There was a lot of coyote in him—the craftiness, the cunning, and other traits less desirable.

Today, it seemed, Neff was here without his usual gun guards. He seemed to be alone. Watching him, Longstreet hoped that he would turn and go away. But whatever it was that had aroused the man's suspicions, he was inclined to investigate them now. After a few dragging moments he started forward, shuffling a little in the snow, but with eyes ranging widely, the rifle held loosely at the ready.

Longstreet moved cautiously. He had to get out of here or be trapped. Without a gun he'd stand no chance at all, and he knew with weary certainty that Neff would give him none. If he once caught sight of him and lined him in his sights, that would be the end.

It was to be a game of hide and seek. Down here, beneath the old trestle, where the fill had left occasional gaps, there was bare ground—sometimes big patches, then only a narrow path. If he could keep out of sight of the prowling Neff, and avoid leaving tracks in the snow, the hunter might abandon his quest. But if Neff once caught a glimpse of him, or forced him out into the snow, then the hunt would be a relentless one to the final end.

It looked as though Neff had tired of the game, deciding that there had been nothing, after all. He hesitated, then a bit of snow skittered down, a little puffing cloud of it, not far from where Longstreet flattened against the cliff side. Something had disturbed it, far up above.

Whatever it was, it was enough to bring Neff plunging forward again. It was plain that his nerves were jumpy, that, despite the success of the night, he was not satisfied that all was well. In that mood he was as dangerous as a wounded grizzly.

There was no choice but to move again. Longstreet looked around. There was snow in front of him, but bare ground ten feet

beyond. He poised, jumped. His heels landed in the snow. He paused to hastily brush out the sign, then dashed for cover as he heard Neff's boots on rocky ground. If he didn't take too good a look—

But it was apparent, only a moment later, that his suspicious gaze had seen that sign and interpreted it. He was coming on again now, but Longstreet could still keep ahead. There was a sort of canyon into which he was being hunted, however. Overhanging ledges, from high above, protected it at the side so that there was bare ground close up against the cliff.

There was no guessing where it might lead, but there was no choice in the matter—so far. If he could keep going, he might find a good hiding place, some spot where, if Neff ventured too close, he could jump out and fight, hand to hand. The advantage would still lie with Neff, so long as he was armed, but a fighting chance would be better than this.

The clouds still lowered grayly, but with signs of breaking. Longstreet looked about, hopefully, for some sort of a weapon—a stone, a club. There was nothing. This ground was barren, a solid rock floor underneath, with nothing loose on it. Apparently water poured off the cliff up above when the spring snows melted, washed down here, and swept the canyon floor clean. Nor were there any cracks back in the cliff side where he might hope to hide.

The canyon possessed one advantage. It wound and twisted, so that Neff had not yet come in sight. But Longstreet could hear the hunter still coming along behind, and just ahead now there was an unbroken stretch of snow.

There was no choice. He had to keep going, trusting to luck that something on ahead would give him a chance. That was his big handicap—he did not know this country. Neff, on the other hand, was familiar with it. And Neff must have a pretty good hunch that he was unarmed.

Longstreet crossed the snow and came to another dry stretch of bare ground, close up against the cliff. There were high, rocky walls on either side of him now. This was a canyon, here at the edge of the mountains. The walls which hemmed him in were no more than thirty feet apart. The sides were of smooth, polished stone, as though, in ages past, a river of ice had flowed through here, grinding away all roughness. Not even a goat could find a foothold to climb or descend. And it was now hundreds of feet to the skyline above.

Longstreet had the feeling of being trapped. If this canyon ended in a blind pocket, he was done for. And then, two hundred feet

straight ahead, he saw that it did exactly that. He was trapped!

A second quick look, even as he walked forward, dashed any last hope of reprieve. The prisoning walls were solid, secure on every side. He could go just so far, and no farther. Neff, coming along behind, would have him at his mercy.

Despite the surety of it, Longstreet continued to walk ahead. A dozen feet or two hundred would make no difference to a rifle bullet. But there was nothing else to do.

Neff was rounding the last bend, coming into sight, as Longstreet reached the far wall and turned. This was it.

Up above, Carol and Nina had watched the last stages of this hunt with strained attention. Not once had Carol thought to look at her cousin's face, so absorbed was she in watching Longstreet himself, in praying under her breath that he could find some way out. It was apparent to her that he, like herself, had lost his gun somewhere.

Had she thought to look, she would have seen the same look mirrored on Nina's face as upon her own—and have guessed the truth.

By now it was apparent that Longstreet was trapped. Another certainty was even surer—that Neff intended to kill him.

Instinctively Nina urged her horse ahead to get a better look. By keeping on, turning to the left, there was a passable trail on down to the valley floor. It wound and twisted for at least a quarter of a mile to cover these last few hundred feet, but it did look like a trail of sorts.

But off to the right there was only the canyon below, and no way down. But from here they could see what was happening. Going the other way would take them down, but it would also take them out of sight. And they would be too late to do anything.

They pulled up, of necessity, at the edge of the drop-off. Neff had just come into sight of Longstreet, down below. He stopped, his rifle at the ready, and surveyed his enemy for a few moments, his eyes crafty, wary. Then, convinced that Longstreet had no gun, he spoke jeeringly.

"Looks like you've cornered yoreself, feller," he said.

Longstreet made no reply. Neff, in his present mood, would like nothing better than for him to plead for mercy. And any such plea, Longstreet knew, would be wasted breath.

"You come into this country and made a damn nuisance o' yourself," Neff went on vindictively. "You've had a long string of luck, but it's plumb played out. And so are you!"

Still Longstreet made no reply. He stood with folded arms, and the gesture seemed to infuriate Neff.

"Damn you!" he shouted again. "You couldn't be satisfied without takin' everything I ever cared about—though what a woman could see in you—"

It was jealousy speaking now, wild, insane jealousy, and with it Neff was whipping himself into a killing mood. Up above, Nina heard, but the confession that Neff was making had no power to stir her now. Agony looked out of her eyes. And the truth, for anyone to see. She did not care about that. All that she wanted was to help Longstreet, and there was no way of doing it.

Neff stood almost below them now, though unconscious of their nearness. Carol was searching, as silently, as desperately as Longstreet had done a little while before, for some sort of weapon with which to take a hand, even if it would do no more than distract Neff's attention for a moment. But here, too, there was no loose snow, nothing. Or if there was, it could not be seen under the blanket of snow.

"I'm going to kill you," Neff went on relentlessly. "Kill you and be done with it—"

"Neff!" Nina screamed. "Don't!"

Both men looked up, startled. They could barely see the girls, up above, a little back from the cliff's edge, but Neff was quick to see the despair in their faces, to understand that they, too, were weaponless, unable to do anything to stop him. And Nina's next words confirmed his worst suspicions.

"If you kill him," she cried, "I'll see you hang for it!"

Neff stared upward for a moment, and then he shrugged, a new, cold fury on his face. This was murder, the thing that he planned to do, and he had not counted on any witnesses, nor wanted any. And Nina's threat gave him pause for a moment.

But Nina was pleading for the life of this man, and if there had been any doubt or hesitation in him before, that wiped it away. He was going to kill Longstreet, and he would take an added satisfaction in doing it before her eyes.

He didn't need to worry about them being witnesses. Murder was murder, in the eyes of the law. Two killings would be no worse than one. Nina had suggested that extra killing—and it would give him Bucksaw, and remove one witness at the same time.

As for Nina herself—she was his wife, and could not testify against him. Shrugging, his face savage, Neff swung back.

Nina was still screaming hoarsely at him. Carol had said nothing. There was a stony outward calm which showed nothing of the

storm in her heart. She had seen Longstreet look up quickly at Nina's call, seen the swift flash of hope in his face. But now he realized, as did Neff, that they had no gun, that there was nothing that they could do.

Her own desperation was equal to Nina's, but even that was not enough. She snatched up a handful of the fluffy snow, made a ball of it and flung it at Neff, down below. It whizzed past, inches from his face, and he glanced up once, and the turn of his shoulder was disdainful. They were helpless to stop him, and nothing was going to do it.

His finger was tightening on the trigger when it happened. Nina had stopped shouting. She did not scream this time, even when, scrambling with desperate haste out of the saddle, she fell on her injured leg and her face went white.

In that moment she almost fainted, but nothing could stay her now in her sudden, desperate resolve. Carol, still hunting for a stone, for anything that could be used, heard her, and turned just in time to see Nina fling herself wildly over the edge of the precipice—out and down.

22

WITH NINA, IT WAS ALL OR NOTHING. This morning there was fever in her already hot blood and a loathing in her soul—a loathing of herself, born of the new understanding which had come to her in these last hours. For the first time she was seeing herself as she was, with all pretense stripped away, and the picture had turned her sick.

But it had not altered one thing—her feeling for Longstreet. In a way, she knew, the responsibility for everything rested with her. Had she not pursued the course which she had followed, many things might have been different. She would not be here now, nor Carol. Nor, in all likelihood, would Longstreet be down below there, awaiting death.

All of that was in her mind in that moment, and it created a fixity of purpose above all else. She could do this thing, to help wipe out the rest. And to save Longstreet. That was what counted.

Neff heard Carol's choked scream. He half turned, started to look up, and was knocked flat by the hurtling body of Nina. They went down together, and after a little both were still.

It took half an hour for Carol, with the horses, to work her way around and down. Her eyes were blinded with tears, which made it hard to see.

Longstreet, hunting near the mouth of the tunnel, had found a shovel. Some of the loose dirt at the old fill could be caved down without too much trouble, and after a little thought he had decided to make it a double, common grave. He and Carol performed that last rite together, almost in complete silence.

Otherwise the peace of the valley was unbroken. The big logs still floated with a low murmuring of the waters lapping around them, the snow made an unbroken pattern of white across the valley. Carol turned, her face still showing the strain.

"I suppose we'd better be starting back," she said. "It will take all day."

"We'll go through, not over," Longstreet replied. "The way the logs came. It won't take long."

He explained to her what had happened. Up to then, though she had looked at the logs, he knew that she had not really seen them, her mind still on what had happened. But her interest quickened now.

"You won't be afraid?" Longstreet asked.

Carol shook her head.

"Not with you," she said. "But—the horses. They won't want to go in there, in all that blackness—"

"There's a lantern here, near this end," he explained. "I found it when I was looking for the shovel. With the light, and me to lead one, I think they'll go all right."

And so it proved. Longstreet had helped himself to Neff's guns, though he did not expect trouble in the tunnel today. But there might be some at the other end. Neither of them knew what had happened in the valley the day before, except that, despite all precautions, more logs had been stolen, had been sent on their heretofore mysterious journey.

"Once we're convinced Neff's crew that their boss is dead, and our boys have seen the evidence, there'll be no more trouble, of course," Longstreet said. "As for the logs that are here, they can be handled in the spring the same as the others. I have an idea that this river joins the other somewhere on down below. The two valleys must come together—likely on the lower reaches of Ox-Bow range."

The long, black tunnel was not so terrifying today, with a light and a companion, and the horses plodding along, reassured by the humans who led the way. The door at the far end was shut, but Longstreet pushed it open a crack and looked out, and at the edge of it there was only unbroken snow to be seen. All tracks and activities of the handling of the logs, during the earlier part of the night, had been blanketed away. Once again Neff had chosen his time well.

They mounted, forded the west branch of the river, and were on the island again. And here was reassuring activity. Axes were ringing, saws eating their way into the big logs, almost as though nothing had happened. They found the logging crew, and a whoop went up at sight of them.

"What happened?" Longstreet asked.

"Sure, and we had a grand foight," a big Irishman volunteered,

with a broad grin. "Neff's crew came an' jumped us, sudden-loike, and for a while it looked as though they might be a few too many for us. But when somebody tried to carve Big Louie with an axe, Little Louie got mad. And from then on—"

He shook his head, spat emphatically.

"'Twas a noble foight," he sighed. "Only mistake we made was in chasin' them clear off down onto their own range—and be the toime we got back, way afther dark, damned if a lot av our logs wasn't gone ag'in! Sure, and mebbly that was what they intinded—to have us chase thim, the dirthy spalpeens! Begorra, and 'twas a brouight idea, at that."

So that was the way it had been handled. The thing had been clever enough, and it had left the crew confused and undecided, more than a little frightened in the dawn of this new day. But Zeb had appeared then and straightened them out.

"If it's that bird-beast that some of yuh are worryin' about, come along and I'll show it to you," he had offered. "And dead enough to satisfy anybody, I figger—along with him that it caught, like he deserved. As for the logs—or Longstreet—your job is to cut more. I have a hunch that he'll be showin' up, when he gets around to it, and tellin' you all about the logs. 'Tis a way he has."

Carol, who had been listening to the story, looked up suddenly to smile at Longstreet.

"That's true enough," she said. "Tell them about the logs, Tom."

Longstreet explained and invited the whole crew to take time off and explore the tunnel, to see for themselves on the far side of the hills. With that evidence, and the whole crew for witnesses, there would be no more trouble.

Still exclaiming with amazement, the men trooped off to do as he suggested. Longstreet and Carol rode on back to the main ranch house. There they found Ma Prescott almost in tears with worry over Carol, and Zeb trying to soothe her apprehensions.

"Aw, now, Ma," he was saying. "Don't go takin' on that way. Them two c'n take care of theirselves—sure, they'll be together, 'fore it winds up. I have a feelin' in my bones—"

"Rheumatiz, likely," Ma snorted, seated at her work table, head in her arms. "It gets one when weather like this strikes. And if they was together, I wouldn't worry. But with Carol off with that flighty Nina, and no tellin' where Longstreet—"

Zeb, standing behind the chair, eyed her worriedly, uncertainly. He reached an awkward hand to half pat her shoulder, drew back, and then he found the solution.

"Well, I reckon they'll be all right," he repeated. "'Course, I'm

aimin' to start out and see if I can find 'em—and I could do better on a full stomach. I had a right skimpy breakfast, to say nothin' of missin' my supper entire last night—"

"Why, you poor man, I'm forgettin' all about feedin' you," Ma exclaimed, and jumped up. She turned, saw Carol and Longstreet in the doorway, and stared. Then her eyes snapped.

"Well, and do you two young 'uns have to stand there and laugh behind a body's back?" she demanded. "I ask you, is that nice now? What you been doing, anyhow?"

"We missed our breakfast, too," Longstreet said promptly. "Any chance of getting fed?"

"I'll have things dished up in two shakes of a lamb's tail," Ma agreed. "Land sakes, Carol, I—I'm that glad to see you again—the both of you—I feel that I was going to cry."

Spring had come to the valley. Flowers carpeted the hills at every open spot, where snow was just giving up its reluctant, winter-long grip. The big log drive had boomed and roared away down river as the ice went out and the white water frothed in its wake. Now the logs had been sold, and Carol, figuring it up with Longstreet assisting, looked up to announce that Bucksaw was definitely and finally on its feet again.

"And with that big herd of cattle out there that Zeb has rounded up and branded and halfway tamed, why—things look grand," she added. "And it's all thanks to you."

"Thanks to Zeb, mostly," Longstreet contradicted. He'll make a good foreman—"

"Why—what do you mean?" Carol looked up quickly. "You're foreman—"

"Zeb can do as well as I could," Longstreet said. "And when spring comes, I—I kind of get an itching foot—"

"But you—" There was dismay in Carol's voice now, though she tried to hide it. "But last year, you intended to start a brand of your own, an outfit. Is that it?"

"No," Longstreet denied, and stared out the window. "That's not it."

"Then—you mean—Nina—"

"Nina's dead," he said gruffly, and continued to look out of the window, while Carol stared blindly at the jumble of figures before her. It was an exuberant whoop from the kitchen which startled them, then Zeb burst into the room, Ma beside him, her face more flushed than usual, his arm about her waist.

"Hey, kids," he yelled. "Know what? I done it! Got my cour-

age up and popped the question! Ma's agreed—yep, she's agreed to keep on makin' flapjacks for me! Think of it—us gettin' spliced!"

"Why—why, that will be wonderful." Carol agreed, and forced a smile. "I want to congratulate both of you."

"Sure is mighty fine," Longstreet concurred. "Better luck than you deserve, you old ranny!"

"I know that," Zeb agreed. "I never did think she'd do it, but a man can't do no less than find out."

"It's no pleasure to cook 'less you have somebody to cook for that appreciates good food," Ma nodded.

"At least you won't be leaving," Carol said, crossing to stare out of the window in turn. "Tom—he thinks he has to be traveling—with his itchy feet—"

Zeb stared, his jaw sagging. Then he looked at Ma, met her eyes, and closed it with resolution.

"Here, now," he said authoritatively, "what's all this nonsense? Trouble with him, Miss Carol, he's a Longstreet—and though, bein' sort of poor, they ain't got no call to be so proud, they sure c'n ride a high horse! But there wouldn't be no Bucksaw now if it wasn't for you, Tom. Ever think of that? He's achin' to ask you the same question I asked Ma, Carol—only that he's too proud to do it. But if I was you, I'd make him climb down off that high horse—"

"We could make it a double weddin'," Ma suggested. "I think that'd be real nice—"

Longstreet turned and looked at Carol for the first time. What he saw in her eyes made him forget the others.

"I—I guess—I've been a fool—too proud to see—" he said uncertainly.

"I guess you have," Carol agreed. "But don't go on being one, Tom. I—I couldn't stand it."

"Guess we can go back to the kitchen," Zeb grinned. "We ain't needed here any more."

T H E E N D

BE SURE TO READ THE LATEST **FIGHTING WESTERN NOVEL**

RUSTLERS OF TABLE BUTTE

by **ERNIE PHILLIPS**

He wasn't certain, but he thought two shots had been fired at him from ambush. As he struck the hot, dusty ground, the young cowboy squirmed and twisted so that he was lying flat on his stomach, his head cushioned upon his left forearm, his legs sprawling with one knee slightly bent upward and with his right hand clapping his gun-butt.

Someone had to rid Table Butte of the terrorizing rule of the Lizard. His victims were left with bones stripped as though by a buzzard—but madman though he seemed, he held the ranges in a vise-like grip.

It was up to Jay Bemis to do something about it—and he did. Marcella Covington was in danger—the loss of her ranch threatened. But Jay's steel nerve helped him ride and shoot his way to the downfall of the Lizard.

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