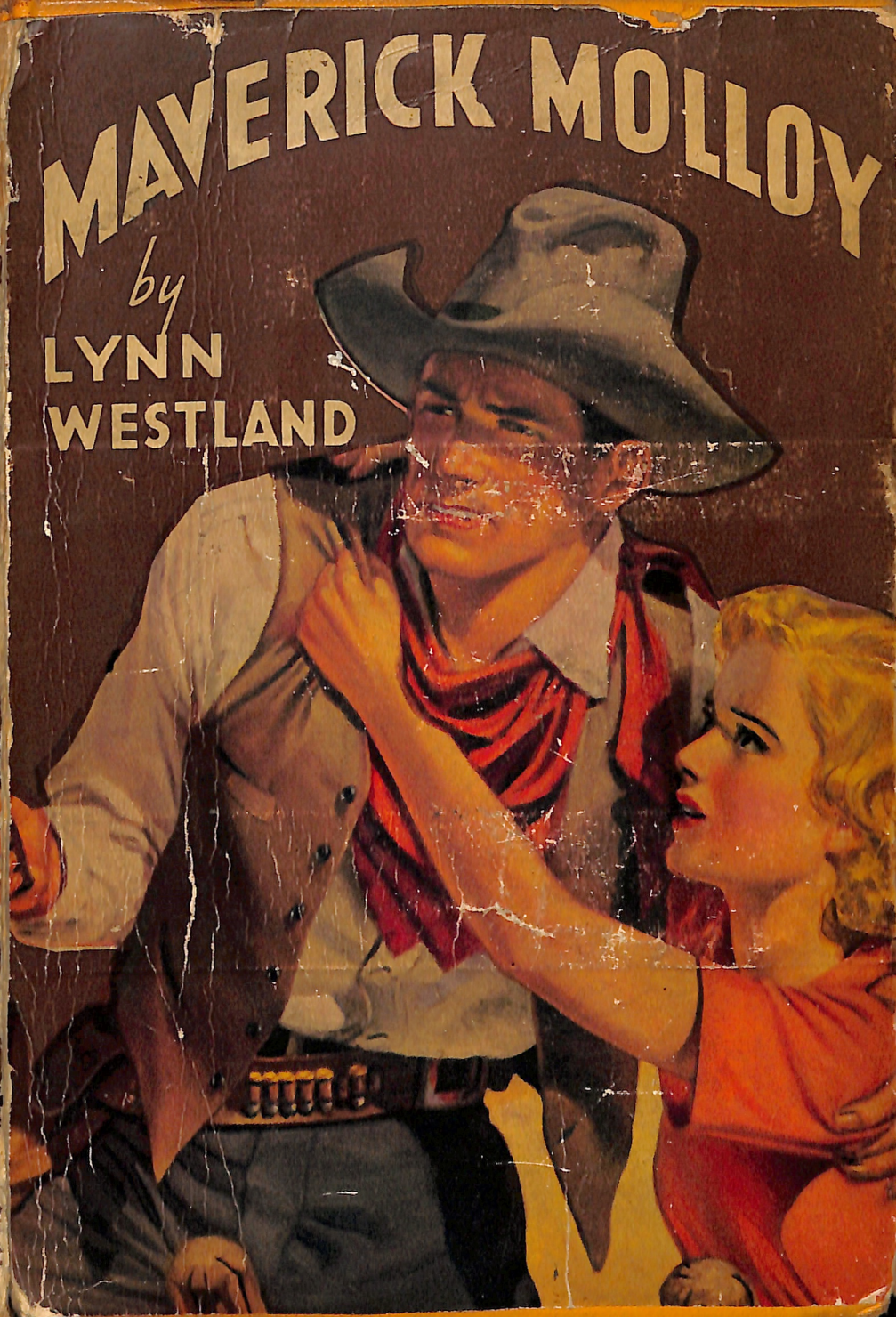
MAVERICK MOLLOY

by

LYNN WESTLAND



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Author of **"DAKOTA MARSHAL,"**
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★

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Maverick faced a firing squad more than once until by dint of swift riding, swift shooting and swift thinking, he was able to face the lawbreakers at the Pass of Dead Men in a final showdown.

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TO

NEANDER

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1. *Guns of Treachery*

THE ARIZONA NIGHT was hot and muggy. The moon, early abroad like a hunting nighthawk, had sailed over the scantily timbered mountains lying like a jagged black finger to the west, leaving a star-sprinkled darkness behind. Through this darkness, coming suddenly as Maverick Charlie Molloy rode out of an arroyo, resounded the whanging thunder of guns.

Maverick's black horse, a darker blot in the gloom, pricked ears forward and snorted softly, then leaped to a sudden touch of the spurs. Maverick had discovered whence the sound, still an irregular booming like the voice of approaching doom, came.

His hand slapped softly down on the Colt forty-five at his hip; the well-worn feel of it was comforting. Topping the rise, he set his horse to a run, the sagebrush a soft swish against its hoofs, occasional clumps of stiffer mesquite a harsh rasp as he held a straight course. Those gun-growlings

were coming from the little cabin where he and old Neversweat Nevins had hung out now for seven weeks, here on a far outpost of the big 6 Bar J spread. And Neversweat was alone there tonight.

Maverick's lips tensed a little; the big, easy-flowing bulk of him, seeming at one with the running horse, made an unconscious effort to hurry the pounding hoofs beneath, to outdistance in spirit the lagging flesh. His ears, long attuned to noises of the open, had already identified three separate guns in that fusillade—in addition to the sharper whang of Neversweat's old forty-four. That had sounded only once.

The lean jaw set harder, under the glint of steel-gray eyes; slightly curly brown hair was moist with the long ride. An orphan of the open trails, knowing no other life but the saddle and the song of the gun, Maverick believed in hunches, and he had had a strong hunch of impending trouble when he'd read that letter of Neversweat's, back in the little adobe post-office at Pinion.

Neversweat Nevins was a man of wide and varied accomplishments, but reading was not one of them. For the last ten years, Maverick had handled that end of it, on such infrequent occasions as it was required. So he'd opened and read that letter, with its eastern postmark, as a matter

of course. And, with the reading, had come the premonition that trouble was riding the trail.

Not that he'd expected it to take any such form as this, or strike so soon—horse and rider now were at the rim of a little bowl among the rolling hills. Down in there, less than a quarter of a mile away, he could see the blot which was the cabin, built there hopefully by some homesteader in years which, like the builder's dreams, belonged to a long dead past now. The empire of the 6 Bar J had taken such things in its stride. Now, for seven weeks, from this outpost, Maverick and Neversweat had ridden this corner of the range, keeping a watchful eye on a thousand scattered dogies who wore the 6 Bar J with a sort of lazy nonchalance, as though realizing that it was a mark of distinction.

The gunfire had all but stopped now. Nothing moved in the open on this side, which meant that the attackers were bunching in that fringe of trees behind the cabin—probably getting ready for a final rush.

Maverick weighed the odds briefly. To go back around and try to reach the house through those same trees would afford him shelter, of a sort, but he'd probably run right into them. Which might be a mixed sort of a blessing.

To cut straight across the open would be

quicker and, if Neversweat were badly in need of help, better. On the other hand, if they discovered him too soon, he'd offer a perfect target, with nothing to shoot at in turn.

The sudden crash of guns again decided him. They were making that last charge already, creeping through the trees like skulking Indians. The fact that they were making it at all, the long silence of that whanging forty-four, must mean that they were pretty confident. Maverick put the black to a swift, humping gallop, straight across the open.

The guns had stopped again. A heavier, jarring crash testified to a ram smashing hard against the door. A man dashed along the side of the house, a blurred shadow in Maverick's eyes, and paused at a window; yellow flame lanced the night as he fired through the pane. He leaped back with a howl of terror as Maverick's own gun roared, then stumbled and went down.

A moment later he was up, running. Too dark for good shooting at that range. Other guns were suddenly belching lead toward Molloy, the owners shulking near the shack, keeping at the corners. Flinging himself off his horse, Maverick ran on foot, heedless of the wasp-like buzz of bullets all about him, fear gnawing at his mind, the hot

taste of hate sending him on, reckless of consequences. If they'd hurt old Neversweat—

They broke before his own fire, his charging rush, and scurried back deeper for cover. Relief sobbed from his lips in a catching breath. The log lay there, twenty feet long, where they'd dropped it; the door was partly splintered, but it still held. They hadn't gotten in.

In front of the door, their bullets were thudding at him, while they still skulked in the gloom of the trees beyond. The silence of the shack did things to Maverick. That bloody taste was like acid in his mouth—strong acid, burning up to his brain. Coolly, he flipped the empty shells from his gun, slipped fresh ones in, marched toward those lancing points of flame.

Something jerked his hat on his head, not quite able to pull it off. He fired at point-blank range at the flash; saw a man stagger into the open, arms wide-flung, pitch forward. Maverick didn't waste a second glance on him. The others had broken before the advance of this madman who walked into the teeth of the dragon, were running for horses off at one side. One turned to fling back a wild shot, went down as Maverick returned it. The third had reached his horse and, scrambling wildly, was half in the saddle.

Only half. He fell back, clutching wildly; his

horse, mad with terror, turned to gallop. An object, one foot caught in the saddle, dragged and pounded behind, adding to the frenzy of its flight. Maverick, a little sickened, turned back. The other horses, riderless, were shying away, running with dragging reins.

He pounded at the door, shouted Neversweat's name hoarsely. Sweat was streaming from him, but he seemed cold. He could do nothing with the door. Circling to the window, where the first renegade had fired through the pane, he pounded the remnants of the shattered glass out with the butt of his revolver, stuck a long leg over the sill and slipped inside.

His hand had been cool enough, outside, while he thumbed the hammer of his gun and faced bullets in the dark. But in here, save for a faintly acrid smell of burnt powder smoke upon the air, the place had a lifeless quality which increased the chill at his heart. His hand trembled so that he could scarcely light the coal-oil lamp on the little table.

Its yellow rays shot out as he adjusted the chimney, and he saw, even in that glance, that it sparkled, proof that Neversweat had rubbed it painstakingly that afternoon. It had been sooted up the evening before. He turned, almost stumbling over what lay sprawled on the floor, then dropped

on his knees beside Neversweat. There was a spreading pool of crimson on the scrubbed puncheon floor.

A slow sigh escaped him as he made a swift examination. Neversweat was still alive—but, to all appearances, little more than that. Rising, Maverick went to a cupboard, lifted down a white silk shirt, Neversweat's particular pride, and tore it into long strips. Then he set about the grim business of dressing the wounds.

One was a little above the heart. A clean wound, but a bad one. It had bled a lot. Whether it had punctured the edge of the lung or not Maverick wasn't quite sure. Probably it really didn't matter. There was another, one that hadn't bled much—not outwardly, at least, and which had a blue look around the puckered edges of the wound. It was up on the right shoulder.

Maverick's fingers were skillful, tender in their touch as those of a woman. He heated water and washed the wounds; the wounded man groaned once or twice, but did not regain consciousness. Looking at the paper-whiteness of that usually ruddy face, the spare, lean frame of Neversweat, the gray hair which lay in clammy wisps across his scalp, Maverick knew that just how bad the wounds were didn't really matter much. They were too bad—the two of them.

His bandaging done, he returned to the cupboard and lifted down a brown bottle, kept by Neversweat for emergencies. This was one. Maverick forced a few drops of the whiskey between the pallid lips, saw the eyes flutter open as Neversweat coughed and sought to rise.

"Take it easy, old-timer. It's me, Maverick."

Neversweat quieted to a long, sighing breath. Maverick fed him a few more swallows of the whiskey. The old rannyhan blinked and essayed the ghost of his old time grin.

"Looks like you—come just in time, Maverick," he whispered.

"You'd better not do much talking, Neversweat."

There was the infinite wisdom of approaching death in the old man's eyes.

"Reckon it won't—make no difference, boy. Besides, if I want to do much more talkin'—I'd better be improvin' my opportunities."

Maverick offered no denial. He had seen too many men hard hit to dispute cold facts, knew that words would bring no delusion to Neversweat. He had ridden his last trail. Those murderous bullets had found their mark too well. He might live a few hours, possibly a few days, but it was inconceivable that he could long survive.

"How'd it happen, Neversweat?"

"Reckon they had it in for me, Maverick. Mebby you remember that Quentin gang I busted up—that was close to a dozen years ago."

"I remember."

Maverick did. He'd been only a boy at the time. Neversweat, as he did on infrequent occasions, when some outlaws were particularly in need of taming, had worn a United States Deputy Marshal's badge. There had been eight in the Quentin gang. Neversweat had rounded them up, single-handed. Seven had lived to face life sentences. And now—

"I recognized Quentin hisself, before they drilled me," Neversweat added. "There was three of them come back. You'll have to round 'em up for me, Maverick."

"Rest easy, Neversweat. They're pasturin' beyond the Great Divide."

Neversweat blinked again, then smiled, a tired but contented smile.

"You run into 'em, eh? Well, they had it comin'."

Maverick was considering a problem. Whether to get a wagon and take Neversweat to a doctor, or to bring a medico here. Either way involved leaving the wounded man alone for a time. Neversweat seemed to read his mind.

"It won't matter which, Maverick. There's

nothin' to be done for me, anyway. You get things in town?"

Remembrance came to Maverick; a shadow passed across his face. He nodded, drew out the letter.

"There was a letter from your sister, old timer. Seems she's gone on ahead of you. And she's shipping her nephew out here for you to look after."

A startled look came and was gone again on Neversweat's face. Seeing it, remembering things of the past, it came to Maverick that perhaps, after all, those bullets from ambush had been a bit of luck for Neversweat Nevins.

2. *Tenderfoot Trouble*

MAVERICK READ the letter aloud, wishing that he could skip over it. Many of the phrases which it contained were like fresh stabs in Neversweat's wounds. Or would have been, had they been any less bad. As it was, standing at the divide, able to look both ways, possibly they didn't have the power to hurt which they would have had ordinarily.

Neversweat listened, his eyes closed, face calm until the letter was ended. When he spoke, his voice was a little stronger.

"I've told you some about my sister, Maverick —and about that skunk she ran away from—after she'd run away with him. He was no good, Laney wasn't. Fact is, he was strung up, years ago, for somethin' or other—and I reckon he had it comin' to him. Only it's a pity they didn't do it before he broke Nancy's heart."

Maverick nodded. He'd heard the story of Bart Laney on two different occasions, when some-

thing had moved Neversweat so strongly that he felt obliged to go into family history. One of those occasions had been a year ago, when Nancy Laney had written to the brother she hadn't seen for over twenty years, confiding her fears for her son.

Reading between the lines, it had been easy enough to see that she feared that young Bart was going to follow in the footsteps of his father. She had tried to raise him right, but he was headstrong, and, apparently, a number of other things not much better. Neversweat, at the time, had summed it up briefly:

"Bad blood! It's his Dad's nature comin' out in him. Only hope, as I see it, is for the Nevins in him. Maybe it'll be strong enough to make a man of him yet. The Nevins have always been an honest, hard-workin' line. Me, I'm the black sheep of the bunch, as you might put it—just a foot-loose cowpunch. But I've never been crooked."

Maverick could testify to that. Neversweat was the only father he had ever known, and he could not have asked a better. In him, coupled with the rugged honesty of New England ancestors, was the sense of stern, unyielding duty which had flowered from that same tree. It had been as much that sense of duty, at first, as his love for a lonely little waif which had caused him to take Maverick and raise him.

"I knew yore Dad, boy," he had explained. "A right fine hombre—though I wasn't well acquainted with him. Ganged on by three gunmen for some money he had, and he didn't have a chance. And yore Ma dyin' of fever the same night. Mebby it was better so—for her. She didn't have to be told about yore Dad. Which news'd have broken her heart."

That had left Maverick, two years of age, orphaned, friendless and alone on the Chisholm trail. From that day on, Neversweat had been father and mother to him, and Maverick's eyes misted now as he looked down at the drawn face of the old rannyhan. Neversweat had brought him up to be a man. Remembering how his father had gone down before those three gun-wolves, partly because he had been lacking in gun-savvy himself, Neversweat had seen to it that Maverick's education was not neglected along such vital lines.

It had been a wilder boyhood than his mother, had she lived, would have chosen for him. Ranging from Canada to Arizona, west to Oregon and east to Kansas, never long in one place. Yet, somehow, Neversweat had contrived that Maverick should get a lot of savvy besides that of guns in the course of the years, and, could his mother have seen the result now, Maverick was sure that she would have been more pleased than other-

wise, at least insofar as Neversweat had had his way.

His thoughts jerked back to the letter. Nancy Laney had written it, knowing that she was dying, more fearful for the welfare of her boy than she had been a year before. Evidently that year had shown no improvement.

Thinking of him, she had written to Neversweat. The gist of it was that she was sending young Bart Laney out for his uncle to look after, and, if possible, to make a man of. He would arrive in Pinion the next day.

"It'll be up to you to look after him, Maverick," Neversweat broke the silence. "Maybe it's askin' a lot of you—him not havin' any claim on you, like he would on me. But there ain't nobody else I can turn to now."

"I'll do my best, old timer." Maverick's voice was husky. "Anything I can do, no matter what, won't halfway pay back the debt I owe you. I—"

A hail sounded outside, the jingle of bits and spurs. Maverick crossed to the door, relief loosening the tense lines of his face. A moment later two men, riders of the 6 Bar J, entered the cabin and stood blinking in the lamplight. Surcingle Young, short, bald and red-faced, stared in dismay as he took in the scene, and Slim Rogers, peering owl-

ishly over his shoulder, allowed the perpetual motion of his jaws to cease for a moment.

"We was passin', and thought we'd drop in," Surcingle explained. "What happened, Maverick?"

Maverick explained briefly. Surcingle swore.

"Yuh say yuh got them killers that done it?"

"I think you'll find 'em around, waiting."

"That's something. To get poor old Neversweat that way—reckon I'd better be ridin' for a doctor." He was already turning toward the door when Neversweat's quiet voice stayed him.

"Wait a minute, Surcingle. I been thinkin'. Maverick, he's got to get back to Pinion, anyway, to meet a train, so he'd better go for the doc."

"Meet a train?"

"It's right important. Read 'em that letter, Maverick."

Maverick complied. Slim, squatting in a corner, chewed solemnly; Surcingle worried at a corner of a walrus mustache.

"You see, boys, it's quite a problem I'm leavin' for the rest of yuh," Neversweat explained. "This Bart, he's apt tuh be sort of a unbroken colt, in a way of speakin'. And Maverick, he'll be needin' a little help, maybe."

"We'll all take a hand," Slim promised.

"You'll be doing that, yourself," Surcingle growled heartily. "Give yuh a little time—"

"No use wastin' breath, Surcingle. Though I'm hopin' to stay alive till Maverick can get back with Bart."

Half an hour later, Maverick was in the saddle again, heading back for Pinion. Slim was riding north to bring the word to ranch headquarters. Surcingle remained with Neversweat.

It was twenty miles to Pinion. Maverick routed out the doctor and started him on his way. Then, because there was nothing else to do, he took a room at the hotel and waited. The train, if it were on time, wouldn't be in till noon the next day. Usually it was late.

A dozen hours to kill, hours when he'd like to be back with Neversweat. But it was his job to meet this tenderfoot, and it would take all the time to ride both ways again. Fuming with impatience, he was at the little box-car station half an hour before the train was due. At a quarter to one, a streamer of smoke in the distance denoted its approach.

Two cowboys swung off the train. One was a Mexican, old, toothless, wrinkled—a little, chattering ape of a man. The other was young, big, rather handsome, togged out for a rodeo. Maverick glanced briefly at them and turned back to

watching the train. A single passenger swung on board and it pulled out again.

Maverick swung around, stared at the cowboy again. His mouth set a little harder. If this was Neversweat's nephew—

"Si, señor. Adios, Boston."

The little Mexican was grinning and waving. "So long, Curley. Be seein' you."

He looked up at Maverick's approach, yellow hair above blue eyes set too close together, a big nose under them. The lips were too thick, but he was handsome, in a way. Maverick's voice was clipped.

"You wouldn't chance to be Bart Laney, would you?"

"Well, I might, at that. But you wouldn't be my Uncle George, that's a cinch."

Uncle George! Maverick blinked. Funny, but in all their years together he'd never heard Neversweat called that, never thought to ask what his name really was.

"Nope, I'm not your uncle, but I'm from him." Maverick held out his hand. "My name's Molloy —Charlie Molloy. Mostly I'm called Maverick."

Bart Laney accepted the hand with a sidelong glance. His shake was like the flip of a fish's tail.

"Maverick, eh? I've heard of you. You're the kid my uncle took in and raised."

"That's me. I've got a horse here for you—I suppose you know how to ride?"

"Sure I can ride. But what's the hurry? Let's have a drink or so before we start. There's a saloon over there."

"No time, and besides, I don't drink. Got any duffle?"

"Duffle?" Laney stared. "Oh, you mean baggage? Just a bundle." He gestured to it, but made no effort to pick it up. Maverick swung it up, estimated the weight, tossed it toward the station agent.

"We'll pick this up the next time a wagon's in town. If you're ready, Bart—"

"I'm not. And I don't like to be called Bart. Mostly I'm called Boston."

"Suits me, Boston. But let's get stepping."

"What the blazes is the hurry? I tell you I want a drink—"

"And I tell you we're riding. Neversweat was shot last night, and he's trying to keep alive long enough to see you. Get on that horse."

"Shot, was he?" Boston's curiosity seemed lively. "Who shot him? What was the trouble?"

"He was ambushed by three convicts who must have made a break for it. They'd had it in for him ever since he took them up about a dozen years ago."

"How'd he take them up?"

"He was actin' U. S. Marshal at the time."

"Oh, a law man, eh? I didn't know he was that sort."

"Well, he was. Are you going to climb in that saddle, or do you want to stay behind?"

"Oh, well." Boston complied, scowling. "You say he's hard hit?"

"He'll be lucky to last the day out."

"Been pretty much of a rolling stone, hasn't he?"

"He's knocked around a good bit. Why?"

"I was wondering if he'd gathered any moss. I could use some, as his only heir."

Somewhere overhead, a black dot in the sky made a tiny spot of moving shade. Maverick looked up; his lips tightened. A buzzard, there in the sky, waiting for something to die. And riding beside him, another buzzard, waiting for something to die, hoping there'd be bones to pick.

"I'm afraid you're going to be disappointed," he said shortly.

"You mean, if he has anything coming, you figure you get it?"

Maverick turned, and for a moment, at the look in his eyes, Boston blenched and drew back. Then Maverick shrugged.

"I mean he hasn't anything," he said. "Do you suppose it would be asking too much, when we

get there, to try and act like a long-lost nephew, or at least like a chance acquaintance? Neversweat is dying. I'd like for him to die thinking you had a little Nevins blood in you."

Boston's face flushed darkly.

"Don't get tough," he said. "I can be plenty tough myself, if it comes to that."

3. *Last Request*

MAVERICK'S TEMPER flared. He'd been chafing at the waste of all these hours, and now, it seemed, Boston was not merely as bad as Neversweat had feared, but worse. Maverick promptly swung down from his horse, dropping the reins.

"I'll get as tough as I please, Boston," he growled. "And what are you going to do about it? Are you going to be a dutiful nephew when you meet Neversweat, or do you figure to show up like your Dad used to be? If that's your idea, get off your horse and I'll beat it out of you."

Boston drew back, but made no effort to get down.

"Can't you take a joke?" he demanded. "I thought you was in a hurry to get there. What do you take me for, anyway?"

"I'd hate to say," Maverick snapped, and swung back into the saddle.

They rode in silence then, mile on mile. At least Boston had told the truth about that. He

could ride. Nor did he complain as the hot miles fell behind them. Maverick fell to studying him. He must have half Nevins blood in him, and that was good blood. Maybe, out here, with the crew of the 6 Bar J to give him a little rough treatment on occasion, they could make a man of him.

He wore a heavy cartridge belt, a six-shooter in a new holster. Everything about his outfit shrieked tenderfoot, but you couldn't hold that against him.

Over a dozen horses were grazing not far from the cabin when they sighted it. The afternoon shadows were lengthening fast; the hills to the westward rose blue above the heat haze. Several men lounged in the shade. Among them was Big Jim Seaver himself, owner of the 6 Bar J. He advanced as Maverick and Boston swung down from their horses.

"How is he, Jim?" Maverick demanded.

"Alive." Seaver's voice hid his true feelings. "He won't last long, Maverick."

"Jim, this is Bart Laney—Boston is the handle he goes under. Neversweat's nephew. Boston, meet Big Jim Seaver, owner of this spread."

"I'm right pleased to meet you, Seaver," Boston agreed. "You say the old man's sinking fast?"

"He won't last long." Seaver's lips tightened a little. "You'd better wait outside while Maverick goes in for a word with him."

"Sure. I want a drink, anyway."

Boston crossed to the group over at the edge of the fringe of trees—those trees where they had ambushed Neversweat the night before. Maverick heard him laugh as he entered the cabin.

Neversweat lay with closed eyes, his face feverish. The doctor stood up at sight of Maverick, nodded, and slipped outside. Neversweat opened his eyes.

"You back, boy?" His whisper was feeble now. "I've been waitin'."

"I'm back, old timer."

"You—brought him?"

"He's outside."

"How—is he?"

"I'll bring him in."

Neversweat lay quiet for a moment, then nodded. Maverick stepped to the door, called. Boston detached himself from the group and came over. He remembered to take off his hat as he came inside, and stood staring down.

"How are you, Uncle George?" he asked.

Neversweat stared up at him.

"I'm glad to see you, boy," he said.

"Guess it's mutual. Kind of tough to find you this way, though."

"Everybody has to go—seems it's my time, now.

Your mother, she wrote and asked me to look after you, Bart."

"Call me Boston. I don't reckon you can do much lookin' after anybody, now."

"Nope, that's a fact. But Maverick, here, he'll sort of take my place. You can trust Maverick."

"I'm of age, feller. I know my way around."

Neversweat was silent a long moment, his eyes on his nephew's face. Then he motioned to the door and, at Maverick's sign, Boston stepped out, almost with relief. Neversweat's eyes came back to Maverick's impassive face for a long, slow look. Then he sighed.

"I was afraid, from your face, and what you didn't say, that he was pretty bad," he said. "Looks like Bart Laney over again."

"I'll do the best I can for him, old timer."

"I know you will, boy. Only—seems like it's askin' a lot of you. He'll be difficult."

Maverick's mouth tightened. Then he grinned.

"I can get kind of difficult myself, sometimes."

"Which is lucky. I wouldn't ask it — but his mother, she was the only sister I had. She had a hard time of it—a right tough time. And she loved him. Likewise, he's got good blood in him, and it ought to show. That was her dyin' request of me—and so I'm passin' it on to you, Maverick."

"I'll sure try and ride herd on him, Neversweat."

"That's a promise, boy?"

"It's a promise, Neversweat."

Neversweat's face lightened a little. He lay for a moment, breathing hard; then his fingers moved, seeking something. Maverick took them in his own hand. Peace came over the old rannyhan's face; his breathing became quieter. Suddenly he opened his eyes.

"You've been a good boy, Maverick—a mighty good boy. The only son I've ever had. And I know you'll go the limit in lookin' after him—for my sake."

"I sure will, old timer."

"I know you will. And that's why — he's got Laney blood in him. Bad blood. Which side 'll come out on top God only knows. He'll be a trial, Maverick. And—give him several chances. But—if it comes to the point where that don't do no good —then I'm relievin' you of your promise, Maverick. I can trust your judgment."

Five minutes later, Maverick stumbled outside and motioned to the doctor. Not that the medico could do any good, now. Neversweat had crossed the big divide to a wider range.

Over in the group by the trees, Boston was tipping a whiskey bottle which he had borrowed from somebody; his laugh arose, raucous and loud. See-

ing Maverick, he sauntered across to meet him. His walk was almost a swagger.

"Old man kicked off yet?" he demanded.

4. *Valley of the Beleaguered*

NEVERSWEAT NEVINS had left a priceless heritage—that of friends. He had had enemies, bitter ones, but they belonged to the stripe of those who had murdered him at the last. And they were outnumbered, a hundred to one, by friends. Such men as Big Jim Seaver, who had dropped everything to ride thirty miles through the night at news of his plight, and to remain with him until the last.

So for Neversweat there had been a funeral with a sky pilot brought from beyond Pinion, and when that was over, Jim Seaver had proven his friendship by the offer of a good job to Boston. Proof indeed, for, in those three intervening days, it had been plain enough to the boss of the 6 Bar J, as it was to Maverick, that Boston was a troublemaker.

Boston had listened to the offer, shook his head.

"I never saw Neversweat getting rich punchin' cows," he said shortly. "At least, Maverick tells me

that about all he left was the duds he was buried in. I'm going to look around some and see if I can't find something better."

Maverick was saddling his own horse, packing his turkey. Boston stared at him.

"You coming along?" he demanded.

"Thought I'd ride with you a spell," Maverick agreed mildly.

"I didn't ask you to."

"No, but Neversweat did."

"See here, cowboy. You and me haven't hit it off any too well together, and I don't figure we're apt to I'm of age, and you're not my guardian. Better get that straight."

"Nope, I'm not your guardian, Boston. Neversweat, he asked me to be your friend. I'm tryin' to be."

Boston stared a moment longer; and, at something in Maverick's face, the retort died on his lips. He shrugged.

"Okay, if you want to ride along. Just so you don't get in the way. I'm surprised at a top-hand like you, though, givin' up a good job here."

"I can 'most always pick me up a job. And I'm kind of like Neversweat. Got an itching foot, I guess."

"Saddle-tramp, you mean. Well, come along, then."

During the next three days, Maverick was watchful-eyed, placid, his temper unrufflled despite whatever Boston might say or do. This was a job he'd taken on, and it would require plenty of patience. He could exercise it, on occasion.

He was not surprised, the second day, to meet up with the little, wizened Mexican again, whom Boston introduced as Curley, giving no last name. Curley, he explained, was a friend he had met on the last hundred miles of the train run, and Curley had something in mind that might pay well.

"Something crooked?" Maverick demanded bluntly.

Curley spread his hands and cackled.

"The Señor Maverick jests," he grinned. "No, no, it is nothing like that. Far from it. You have heard of the Rancho of the Sun, is it not?"

"Can't say I have."

"It is known as the Gun Brand, señor. In the Valley of the Sun, as they call it."

Maverick frowned.

"The Gun Brand? Let's see, that's the Floweree brothers, isn't it?"

"The same, señor. Beeg cattlemen, who took this valley long years ago and built up a great outfit. And in doing so, of course, they made enemies. Are there not always men to envy when one makes a success?"

"Reckon you're puttin' it right."

"Si, señor, I do but speak the truth. You will have heard of the trouble which even now besets these Flowerees, of course?"

"This is the farthest south I've ever drifted, Curley. The news hasn't reached me yet."

"Which is no matter for wonder, for few know. Only word came out to me, for once I worked in their Valley of the Sun with them. Three horsemen tried to get out with word. Two died in the Pass—it is called the Pass of Dead Men. The third, he reached me but last night, and with three bullet holes in him. To me he tells his story; then he, too, dies."

"What's all this?" Maverick's eyes narrowed suspiciously, swung to Boston. "Boston told me that you had some scheme in mind when you met him before."

"Of a truth, I did, señor. To go into the hills to the north and seek for gold. You have heard of the lost mine—the Mine with the Iron Door? Much treasure, and I think I have a good idea. But now this other comes first, when honest cattlemen are in danger of being wiped out."

"Go on." Maverick conceded that most of his suspicion arose from Boston's connection with anything. But he was nevertheless doubtful. This sounded like something serious.

"It is this way, Señor Maverick. A week ago, ten days—the messenger, as I say, was dying when he reached me, and of the details he gave but a few —several days ago, at least, a strong force of the bandits, they surround this Valley of the Sun and attacked it. It is their plan to kill the Flowerees, to butcher their crew. You know thees Flowerees, who have sent cattle thieves to the gallows before now."

Maverick knew. Here again, from the sound, was some such vengeance as had been wreaked on Neversweat.

"It has been a stage of siege for days. This Valley of the Sun, it is big, but surrounded by cliffs, and there are but three ways in or out. These the bandits hold. They struck when they knew that the Gun Brand was low on ammunition, on guns. They made a swift raid and captured many guns. Now, holding the siege, they will win, unless help, with more guns and ammunition, comes to the besieged. It is dangerous, of course, but once, as I say, I worked there. For that, and because, if we save them, they will also pay well, I run the risk. I plan, with a crew, to run guns through the blockade to them. I tell this to Boston, and he is enthusiastic."

Maverick felt his own blood quicken. He looked at Boston with more respect in his eyes.

"This Gun Brand Ranch is close to the border, isn't it?"

Curley nodded vigorously.

"But a little to the north. And it is only fair to warn you. These bandits, they hold all three passes. We will go by the pass called the Pass of Dead Men. It is a long, winding canyon—a perfect place for ambush. But it is our only hope. Likely there will be a fight. It will be dangerous."

"We'll risk that," Boston said. "We can't leave a lot of cattlemen to be wiped out."

"How about the law?" Maverick demanded. "Why not take word to them?"

Curley shrugged.

"You know the politics! In this country, there are two factions. The Flowerees are one. But in the last election, I was told, the other side won. The law knows, but it chooses to conveniently ignore what it knows. Other ranchmen covet the Valley of the Sun."

Maverick nodded. He had run into such cases more than once. Local law could be bought, for a price. Which was why, on occasion, Neversweat had been sent in to represent Federal law.

"You say you've got a crew and guns ready?"

"Si, Señor Maverick. We leave, from three miles beyond the town, at dark. By midnight, we reach the Pass of Dead Men. If we are lucky, we are

into the Valley when its sun rises. If not—" he shrugged.

"He's offering us a pro rata share in whatever profits there are, if we go along," Boston said eagerly.

"If we get ambushed, the profit will probably be a plot of ground about six feet by three."

Curley grinned, a toothless smirk.

"Or maybe not that," he nodded. "In the Pass of Dead Men, there are the bones of many who have never had even that much given them."

"I'm ridin' with you," Boston said with finality.

Maverick nodded. Win or lose, with the promise he'd made, he had to go along. And this sounded like the sort of thing which had always drawn Neversweat and himself. Maybe there was more of the Nevins in Boston than he'd given him credit for.

5. *Pass of Dead Men*

A RIFLE CRACKED warningly from up ahead. Then another. What might have been the tiny watch-fires of a vanished race, high up against the midnight horizon ahead, showed in spiteful flashes. For every flash, a bullet came droning down into the pass below.

Close-crowding hills on either side shut out the light of the moon, dimmed the star-shine. Dried bones rattled underneath hoofs—human bones, as likely as not, for Maverick could see that this was aptly named the Pass of Dead Men.

They had started on schedule, slipping away like shadows from a wooded arroyo a few miles from town, creeping across the rough country beyond. Everything had been in readiness, as Curley had promised them, even to the crew he had hastily gathered for the job.

There were a couple of dozen men, mostly Mexicans or half-breed Indians, and as tough a bunch of cutthroats as Maverick had ever seen gathered

into one group. Men who understood the risk they ran, but who were attracted by the promise of excellent pay if they got these guns in to those who needed them so desperately.

Some twenty-odd burros made up the string—about the biggest breed of burros he'd ever seen. Each one bore uncomplainingly two wooden boxes, long, not very wide or deep, one on each side. Each box carried what might one day fill other, larger wooden boxes with even grimmer burdens. Modern rifles, and several rounds of ammunition for each gun.

Maverick tensed in the saddle, striving to peer through the gloom ahead. The three or four men in front had slowed at those first warning shots. They knew their business, he reflected grimly. Such business as this. No sign of panic, for the shooting, so far, was blind. It might be a mistake on the part of the bandits. Or again, it might be a clever trap, to make them think their adversaries were all ahead, trying to frighten them back. No telling when guns would start blasting from the sides and behind them.

Already, his courage of the afternoon oozing out at his fingertips, Boston was cursing, raising a rumpus. It seemed impossible for him ever to go quietly, whatever the need. Old Curley was trying to soothe him down, for there might be real trouble

at any moment. It would all depend on whether there were just two or three guards at this end of the pass, trying to scare them out, giving the alarm to those farther up ahead; or whether they should be face to face with a small army. Though even two or three men, well posted, could raise plenty hell.

For a moment, there had been a lull in the firing. Now it began again, and the droning bullets seemed to throw the little cavalcade into confusion. Maverick steadied his horse with a few soft words. Men were shouting, horses and men close to the verge of stampede now. Boston's voice rose on a thin note of terror.

"Take it easy," Maverick advised coolly. "They seem to have the jump on us, but it's only what we expected. And one good cowman is worth a dozen renegades, any day."

The gunfire was thickening. A horse went down, kicking and screaming, under the impact of a bullet. The close-crowding hills shut out the light of the moon, flitting like a white moth above the jagged horizon. Maverick spurred to reach the head of the file.

Old Curley, unmoved as if this had been a gentle rain, was struggling with the burros, shouting to the men. But there were plainly too many up ahead.

"We've got to reach a side coulee, circle around,

and flank them," Maverick jerked out. "It's our only chance. Come on."

He led the way, Curley, with one or two others, falling in behind. There was something terrifying in the steady drone of death in the dark. Boston's horse took the bit in its teeth and whirled; Boston's face, briefly glimpsed, was white as paper.

"We'll be killed like rats in a trap!" he screeched, and his spurs came up red.

"Don't be a fool!" Maverick growled. His hand jerked out, caught a bridle rein close up to the bit and pulled Boston's plunging horse to a stop. "Shut up and show some sense, if you've got any! You wanted in on this party!"

A gash in the side of the canyon showed a deeper pool of blackness. Maverick swung into it. Bad traveling, in the dark, and no telling what might lie ahead.

Behind them, gunfire still echoed, but it was quieter here. A small stream slipped among trees and underbrush which scarcely ever saw the sun. Curley was following in silence, but Boston still mumbled. How on earth could Neversweat have a nephew like him?

The moon leered at them again as they swung up out of the coulee. It would be easy now to keep on riding and escape, but the lives of those behind might depend on what they could do, as well, per-

haps, as those of the defenders of the Gun Brand, trapped in the valley ahead. Maverick spurred, leaning low in the saddle, circling. Brush whipped at his face, tore at his clothing. If they could surprise the bandits on the heights, they'd stand a chance.

Moonlight picked down on a rocky pit ahead, a shelf that seemed to hang suspended above the blacker deeps of the pass. Crouched down on it were two men, cuddling repeating rifles. One of them was thoughtfully shoving fresh shells into the breach. That meant that they were about ready for real trouble, though, so far, they had seemed mostly to shoot high, as if in warning. Strange that they would do that. As far as Maverick's eyes, keen as those of an owl by night, could see, they were alone. And plenty cool about it.

Boston's hand was streaking toward his holstered revolver. It was Curley, mouthing something in a toothless whisper, who stopped him.

"Better that we take them queeck and quiet, without the others on our heels," he amplified.

"Better lift 'em, hombres," Maverick warned softly, his voice drifting down to the pair below. "It'd be too bad to muss things up. And we've got you covered."

The two were startled, discomfited. Slowly they turned to stare up at him, a spectral rider against

the moon, white Stetson above blue shirt, faceless shadow between, the others outlined behind him. After a moment, reluctantly, they raised their hands.

"That's better," Maverick approved softly. "You'll understand, gents, we hate to shoot if we don't have to."

Curley, chuckling softly, went sliding down over the rocks between, agile as a squirrel in his descent. One of the two spat out a word at him, but Curley merely grinned.

He had expertly disarmed them as Boston rode alongside Maverick, a darker blot in the night. It was twenty feet down to those below. A coiled lariat twirled slowly in Boston's hand, like a spinning wheel. Maverick had noted before that he wasn't half bad with a rope. Without haste, he flipped the loop downward, then tightened it with a jerk as it closed around the uplifted hands of one of the two bandits, lifting the struggling man half off his feet.

"Those little jokes of yours 'll get you in plenty trouble, some day," Maverick grunted. "Special if you keep on holdin' your rope that way. Apt to tangle around your wrists."

"Reckon I know my business," Boston snarled. "And if I want tuh give that damn Mex a taste of dancin' on air, I'll sure enough do it."

"That's your lookout," Maverick sighed. "And about what I'd expect—"

Guns crashed from somewhere in the black recesses of the pass ahead; bullets whistled by like driving hail. One of them cut the rope leading down from Boston's hands, and the man on the shelf staggered as he was released. The shots were aimed high, well above the heads of the two men on the shelf. High, straight for Maverick and Boston, starkly outlined.

For a moment, Curley was still in command down below. The tempo of gunfire had changed, like a snowstorm shifting to driving sleet. A shrill, chattering burst of bullets—and these were not fired in warning.

Ape-like, intent only on self-preservation, Curley was over the edge of the shelf, scrambling on down to the blackness of the canyon below. Maverick whirled his horse, and in this, for once, Boston needed no telling. Men rose up on the horizon behind them, like phantoms in the night—outlined clearly in the moon's shafts, khaki-clad figures. Maverick stared in amazement and growing consternation.

"Soldiers!" he gasped. "Mexican soldiers."

6. *Guns in the Dawn*

THE DISCOVERY was stunning. Soldiers—not renegades. This might be the Pass of Dead Men, but it wasn't the Valley of the Sun, the Ranch of the Gun Brand. Far from it. These were bandits, renegades, running guns across the border, into a friendly country—and he was one of them, completely fooled by Boston into such an enterprise. Boston's taunting voice confirmed it.

"Of course. They're the Federals. Ride, you crazy fool. You're in this now as deep as any of us. They've seen you!"

Black anger bit at Maverick.

"You lied to me!" he rasped.

"Yeah," Boston admitted. "This is the border—and we're runnin' guns to revolutionaries. You'd never have gone into it if you'd known that, would you? Which was why we had to tell you that pretty yarn about the Gun Brand, and them being hard-pressed by bandits." His voice became a snarl.

"I didn't want yuh taggin' along, but you in-

sisted on comin'. So if you trail with me, you'll take this—and like it. I'm not such a damned fool as old Neversweat, to risk my neck all my life for a law man's wages. If I risk it, it'll be for a profit. And there's money in this—ten times the profit of the other way. And you're in it now along with the rest of us. They had a right good look at you up there. Don't forget that."

That was true. He was in it now, seen and spotted. After being raised by Neversweat, he was on the side of the lawless. This was what he got for trying to look after Boston. If it hadn't been a hopeless job to start with, it was fast becoming one.

But there was no time for thinking now. It bordered on a miracle that they hadn't been hit already. The men who pursued were an efficient crew, chosen for this work because they knew the grim byways of this twisting pass, even at night. Sounds from behind indicated that they were following close. If they were to escape, they would have to go quietly, but Boston had no sense of stealth. Not much sense of any sort, Maverick reflected bitterly.

He pulled up in a sudden flare of temper, jerked his gun, turned. The dull light glinted on the long barrel as he leveled it. Behind, pursuit sounded louder. Maverick's voice rasped.

"Either you quit being a damn fool and go a

little silent, Boston, or I'll shoot you and be done with it."

The glinting gun-barrel seemed proof enough. Boston, following close behind, stopped, jerking his horse back upon its haunches. His face showed pasty in a slanting ray of the moon.

"Yuh can't do that, Maverick," he gasped. "You promised to look out for me."

"I was fool enough to do just that," Maverick conceded bitterly. "And I aim to keep my word—to look out for you, as far as others are concerned. But hanged if I said anything about myself, and if you keep on being a fool, I'll plug you. Don't forget that you've got us mixed in with border-jumpers and gun-runners, and that we're a fair target for any honest man's gun."

"What'll happen if we're caught?" Boston asked huskily.

"You'd ought to be able to guess!"

Boston digested this. His voice was high and shrill.

"You—you won't desert me now, Maverick—even if I did get you into this? You won't, will you?"

"Shut up and come on," Maverick adjured.

Ahead, darkness still lay thick, with numerous side canyons leading off from the pass. Maverick pulled his horse into one, with Boston still hard

on his heels, and the thin white disc of moon was shut away like the last hope of salvation. Sounds behind diminished, but did not quite die away.

Boston was coming a little more quietly now, badly scared. Which meant that he'd be vindictive later on, if the chance presented itself.

Apparently there were a lot of soldiers abroad tonight and, from all indications, they knew their way around. Some of them, however, were having their hands full trying to catch the rest of Curley's slippery crew. Maverick picked a devious way, turning from one dark defile to another, scrambling up rocky sides and sliding down sheer declivities. Gradually all sounds died behind, were swallowed up in the peace of the night. Only then did Boston venture a protest.

"We're safe now," he whined. "No need to break our necks with any more of this, is there?"

"There'd be small loss if one of us broke his neck," Maverick retorted. Anger still seethed in him at Boston's treachery. "As to being safe, we're ahead of them, yes. But we're quite a ways south of the border, and they'll have Indians, and they'll keep on our trail like bloodhounds, and if they catch us—" He shrugged.

"Can't we head north and get back across the border before morning?"

"I've tried to swing half a dozen times. And

pretty near run into them every time. No chance for that tonight."

"I—gosh, Maverick, I didn't figure on getting into anything like this. If we get out of it again, I'll go straight."

"How about the profit?" Maverick's voice was sardonic.

"A dead man can't spend money."

"You're showing sense. Stick to it—when we do get out."

If the lesson worked, it would be worth it. But the prospects were none too bright. Getting across the border and into this had been easy enough. Getting back was something else again, now that they would be doubly on the lookout for them. He swung from the saddle where a small stream trickled darkly down a little gulch, sprawled flat and drank.

Boston, about to follow his example, started back with a hoarse cry. The last light of the shifting moon had clearly defined white bones—a human skull.

"This is still a branch of the Pass of Dead Men," Maverick reminded him. "And you knew all about the Pass, because you talked about it before we started."

Maverick led the way, while the night waned and pale gold glinted in the east, then shifted to

flaring crimson banners that spread clear across the horizon. A chorus of bird voices lifted, filling the grim-walled canyon with song. The Pass of Dead Men was a long one, but they had left it several miles behind, had come a long way in a winding, devious course. Yet there was no safety here.

As if in verification, there sounded, faint and far, the crash of arms—a dozen guns together. The sound echoed and reechoed through the hills, sank away in a whisper of derisive mockery. Boston's head jerked.

"What's that?" he husked.

"Some of your precious crew. Remember that we're south of the border now."

"You mean—?"

"Sunrise firing squad," Maverick answered grimly. "Though if they get us, they're not likely to wait for another sunrise."

7. *Dolores*

IN THE GROWING LIGHT, Boston's heavy face looked sick. It was one thing, Maverick reflected grimly, to dream of big and easy profits, of riding as a bold desperado, and quite another thing to be a hunted man with the price of death on your head. He didn't like it himself, and he'd been in places just as tough, even if he hadn't been wanted by the law. With a man like Boston, this should either kill or cure.

Their worst handicap lay in the fact that he didn't know the country. Didn't even know what it was like, except for the territory they'd traveled over. Farther north, in Wyoming and Montana, where he and Neversweat had spent most of their time, he'd be at home in any section, even if he had never set eyes on it before. Here it was vastly different.

Right now they rode jaded horses, which would be in no shape for a race if they were discovered. Maverick was hungry, but it would never do to

shoot any game and cook it. Pretty soon they'd have to find a spot and hole up for the day, and probably go breakfastless to bed. But it might be worse.

"What's the chances of finding a ranch and getting us something to eat?" Boston demanded.

"Slim, on both counts. If we find one and go down, it may not be a healthy thing to do."

"I'd be willing to run some risk for a meal."

"Sell your neck for a mess of grub, eh? Well, I halfway feel the same, right now."

They were climbing, now—a long slope, partly timbered, where the sun, a little later, would bake down mercilessly. Occasional giant boulders studded the hill. Somewhere near the crest they could hole up, and have a good lookout for possible danger as well.

They topped a long succession of ever higher peaks, then stared down at a verdant valley below —long, easy slopes of green, leading down from where they stood, fringed by darker lines of trees.

Maverick caught his breath at the sheer beauty of it. He was used to country a lot farther north, and somehow he'd pictured all this border country as being hot and dry and sere. He hadn't dreamed that such rich, green country could exist hereabouts.

Blue pine studded the hills; a waterfall arched out and down, glittering in the sunlight, and ran

away in a silver thread of a stream that joined a river curving in from the south farther down the valley. Cattle grazed peacefully here and there; men were riding to work, tiny specks in the distance. A big, long adobe house, mellowed by time, surrounded by outbuildings and a big corral, nestled cozily among great trees, at the foot of the hills and a couple of miles away.

"We might eat there," suggested Boston huskily.

"We might," agreed Maverick. "Though we're marked men, anywhere we go. But we can chance it."

He led the way, keeping to the shelter of the trees for as far as possible. One thing, which Boston would never think of, bothered him. Right now they were renegades, fugitives from justice. As such, he didn't want to implicate anybody and get him into trouble. But since it was Mexican soldiery who pursued, and a Mexican ranch below, a hungry man couldn't draw too nice a distinction.

Soldiers might be waiting for them, on the chance that some of the fugitives would come here. The silence of the place seemed ominous to Maverick. Nothing moved as they approached. A few chickens cackled, and a rooster strutted. Water tinkled musically from a hollow wooden pipe into a mossy trough.

All at once an ancient, wrinkled peon appeared, a once gaudy scarf about his shoulders and a huge sombrero upon his nearly bald head. He greeted them courteously, without show of surprise, and took their horses. It was almost as if they were expected.

Of course, Maverick reflected, at some of the older ranchos, the ancient customs of hospitality to all who came in peace still held. Any stranger was treated as a welcome guest, and no questions asked, until he proved himself otherwise. That might be it—

Again, it might be a trap. Unostentatiously, as he swung down from the saddle, Maverick loosened gun in holster. Boston was already heading toward the hacienda, and Maverick followed. Then, at the broad, cool doorway, he stopped as if struck.

A woman—a girl of eighteen or nineteen—had appeared, was eying them gravely, questioningly. Maverick caught his breath at the sheer beauty of her—blonde loveliness in a land of brunettes. Somehow, she belonged in this valley. Moreover, she was American.

As he usually did at such a moment, Boston was thrusting ahead, hat off to reveal the handsome face of him, smirking, self-assured, very much the ladies' man. It was that trait, Maverick had learned

already, which had won him his derisive nickname, a libel on the ancient city of patriots, for Boston had never been farther east than Wisconsin.

"Ma'am," he declared, "you're sure a sight for sore eyes. Beauty blooming beside the desert, and all that—"

The girl gave him one quick, appraising look. A look which seemed to measure him and to judge him with devastating accuracy. Then, disregarding him pointedly, she turned to Maverick, her eyes questioning him, gravely watchful, noting the big, sun-browned build of him, the steady gray eyes which were admiring and respectful. She was quick to read the strength in him, the weakness in the boastful, fulsome Boston. Maverick's fingertip briefly touched his betraying white hat brim, came away again.

"I reckon we sort of made a mistake, ma'am," he explained, his voice soft and calm as the early sunlight. "You're one of the honest ranchers, and you'll likely have heard about us. We're sort of in trouble, and that being so, we don't aim to implicate anybody else—especial not ladies. So we're askin' your pardon for intrudin', and we'll be moving on again. And thank you kindly."

Boston had never taken his eyes off the girl. They were bold, devouring. Now he laughed carelessly.

All his fears of the night had vanished with the day.

"Don't believe any of that," he said. "Maverick here, he's been a lone wolf, unbranded and all so long that he's subject to queer ideas. There ain't no trouble, except that we're near starved, and we thought maybe—"

Save for one quick, passionless glance, the girl did not look at him. Her eyes were still on Maverick—reading something in his very silence. Though she answered Boston's words, she spoke to the big Wyoming cowboy.

"However things may be, you must stop long enough to eat," she said, and her voice reminded Maverick of the bird-song at dawn. "It can do no harm, and for you, it may do good." She smiled suddenly. "Please — since we are fellow Americans."

"There's plenty of difference, even in Americans," Maverick said, but he yielded the point. "We'll just water our horses at the corral, and take a lunch to eat along the way, if you'll be so good. But we won't stop, thanks."

"If you prefer." Nodding, the girl turned back into the house. Maverick heard her soft voice somewhere in its cool recesses, instructing a servant to prepare the lunches. The old peon was beside them, leading the way courteously toward the

water. Maverick followed, his eyes hawk-like on the surrounding heights. A detachment of khaki-clad riders might come drifting down at any time, and if so, that meant riding.

He became aware, suddenly, that Boston had slipped away, and instinct told him where to go. Cursing softly, his spurs jingling in muted haste, Maverick strode back to the house, in at the open door. In a little alcove off the big main room he saw them: shadowy figures, struggling, the girl in Boston's arms. She fought fiercely, silently, like a tigress at bay, disdaining to call a servant. Boston, assured of his charms, was laughing softly, his mouth seeking her vivid lips.

"Dolores is a right pretty name for a right pretty girl," he was saying. "And a pretty girl is to be kissed. Since we're Americans together, like you say—"

Even as Maverick saw them, her hand went to a little recess in the wall behind and came up again with a short, heavy riding whip clutched in whitened knuckles. She lifted it, slashed. Cursing, a red welt across his face, Boston leaped back. For a moment he stood staring, his face livid with anger. Then he threw up an arm to protect his face, suddenly gone livid with anger, the full lips bloodless, and leaped again.

"So that's it, eh?" he snarled. "I'll tame you, you little hell-cat, by—"

Maverick's hand caught his shoulder and whirled him back across the room, to bring up, staggering, against the far wall. Ignoring the panting Boston, he turned back to the girl, his own face as white as her own.

"I'm right sorry this had to occur, ma'am," he apologized. "I knew we shouldn't have stopped at all. There ain't much I can say, except—"

A cry from Dolores caused him to turn. Boston, his face livid with fury, was dragging at his gun.

8. *Gun Law*

THERE COULD BE no doubt of what Boston intended. Maddened by Dolores' resistance, he was doubly infuriated at Maverick's interference. The fact that Boston had saved his life during the night was forgotten. He had his gun out of the holster already, was starting to bring it up.

Maverick hesitated, stopped. For a moment he had the mad impulse to spring at Boston and try to wrest the gun away, but there was no chance of that, no time to draw his own gun. He raised his arms, but, even as he did so, he knew that it was a futile gesture. Boston intended to kill him.

It was Dolores who intervened, startlingly. The whip was still in her hand, and now, even more quick than Boston, she flung it, the stock striking him full in the face. As he staggered back, cursing. Maverick was upon him.

For a moment they struggled, two big men, for possession of the gun. But the flabby Boston was no match for the cowboy. With a twist, Maverick

jerked the gun away and slipped it into his own pocket.

To his surprise, Boston hurled himself at him again. A swinging fist got in a lucky blow, catching Maverick at the point of the chin, rocking him on his feet. He swayed, staggered back against the wall, and Boston was upon him once more.

Lowering his head, Maverick parried the blows a moment while his brain cleared. Suddenly he leaped aside; his fingers found Boston's collar and closed there, swinging, lifting, with a twisting, choking motion.

Clawing, futile in his rage, Boston struggled vainly. Half-choking, his motions grew weaker; then he stopped altogether, and Maverick released him. Dolores was watching, dishevelled, panting a little, wide-eyed and incredulous.

"You'd better apologize to the lady for losing your temper, Boston," Maverick said mildly.

His voice and face gave no hint of his emotions. Inwardly he was seething. But the memory of Neversweat had returned to him. He'd made a promise to Neversweat, and it was up to him to keep it. And, in a way, he had something to thank Boston for.

The memory of Neversweat, the way he had died, had been a bitter, rankling wound in Maverick. Boston, unwittingly enough, had plumped

him down in the middle of so much trouble that he'd had little time to think about those things, and would have plenty to do to keep his mind off them for a while yet.

Surprisingly, Boston had reversed himself. The red died out of his face, leaving it a little white.

"Reckon you're right, Maverick," he agreed. "I did lose my head. I owe you both an apology—a lot more'n that, I reckon. But I'm makin' that, anyway. I won't do it again."

He turned directly to Dolores, bowing a little clumsily.

"I'm right sorry, ma'am," he added. "I deserved that whip, and if you want to use it some more, that'll be all right."

Dolores stared, a bit uncertain. A servant peeped from behind a door, and she sent her away quickly.

"That's all right," she agreed.

"I'd like to get better acquainted—sometime," Boston went on, eyes still on the floor. "Just to show you that I mean it."

"I reckon we'd better be going now," Maverick said sharply. "We've stayed too long already. Thank you kindly, ma'am, for treating us a lot better than we deserve."

"Thank *you,*" she said softly. "Your name is—Maverick, isn't it? Then thank you, Señor Maverick. Things will, I hope, be all right."

"I'll join in that hope, both ways," Maverick agreed. He wanted to linger there, but drove himself grimly out the door. He turned sharply. "Come on, Boston."

"I'm coming." Boston was a little sullen now. "I just wanted to really apologize—"

"You've said plenty."

With Boston marching sullenly ahead of him, he led the way to their horses. Boston's apologies, his change of front, didn't ring true. That sullen look on his face belied his words. The horses, at least, were watered, had rested for a few minutes. Only after he had mounted did he notice that the old peon had stuffed their saddle-bags. He turned quickly, his face flushing.

"Here, Pedro," he called. "It's right fine of your mistress, to do this, but we can't take this—now. Tell her thank you a thousand times, but—"

Again Dolores had appeared in the doorway. No trace of the storm which had risen and eddied around the three of them showed in her face now, but her eyes and words were for Maverick. Her voice, cool and soft, stopped his fumbling fingers.

"But you must take it now, please—as a token of my thanks to you. What the one can do, the other can atone for, perhaps."

Maverick hesitated. His eyes lifted, instinctively, to the escarpment of the hills, a couple of

miles away, and what he saw caused him to decide. Half a dozen tiny figures, like toys moving on a mighty stage, were coming into sight.

Probably they hadn't seen himself and Boston yet, and by riding with the buildings to shelter them, cutting down the valley, dipping into the shelter of a vast gash of a ravine which ran back from the river, they might win to the hills again without being seen.

For themselves, that was important. It might well mean the difference between life and death, and Maverick had never felt more urgently the wish to live. For the girl, and the others on the ranch, it could mean almost as much that no suspicion of lending aid to the enemy should attach to the ranch. It was of her that Maverick was thinking now. He touched spurs gently to his horse, lifted a gloved hand in salute.

"Adios, then—and thanks," he said.

Boston still obeyed sullenly, fear of Maverick in his quaking bones. Now he glanced back, eyes glowing. He had no inkling of those riding figures, coming relentlessly, grimly patient, at the fringe of the valley.

"I'm trustin' this won't be my last call, Miss. I'll be ridin' this way again."

Dolores ignored him, but Maverick's icy glance caused the color to surge in his cheeks again.

"Damn you, Maverick," he said under his breath. "I've as much right to do as I please as you have—and I'll do it." His voice rose defiantly. "Don't be forgettin', Dolores. I'll be comin' back for you."

"If you ever molest that girl again, I'll kill you with my own hands," Maverick promised quietly.

In a new silence of hate, they rode down the valley.

9. *The Federals*

MAVERICK'S MOUTH twisted ironically. This was as crazy a situation as he could have dreamed in his wildest flights of fancy. To be riding with a man who hated him, and whom he was coming to dislike with a cordiality which amounted almost to hatred, and to be pledged to do all that he could to insure the welfare of that man.

He'd be better off, safer, and the country would be in the same position, if he simply left Boston to his own devices. Maverick could swing off and lose the blundering Boston in five minutes. And in about as many more, the soldiers would have him.

It had been a favorite saying of old Neversweat that, once an egg was addled, you could do nothing with it. Boston, to all intents and purposes, was a bad egg already.

But he'd made his promise, and he owed everything that was worth while, including his life, to Neversweat. As long as possible, he'd keep on.

What was that about giving a man a long enough rope and he'd hang himself—

Already, as they rode, Boston was delving into his saddle-bags, gnawing at the generous lunch packed there. For a time, absorbed in his thoughts, busy in choosing their course, keeping in mind those who rode behind, Maverick paid little attention to him. His attention was recalled abruptly as sunlight glinted on a beef bone, picked clean, twirling in the air. He turned on Boston savagely.

"You crazy galoot, you do want to stretch hemp, don't you?" he rasped. "Get down and pick up that bone, pronto."

"What for?" Boston demanded truculently. "You're not my boss. And I've had about enough of your blasted interfering in my affairs."

A rifle spatted at them from a ridge a quarter of a mile away, the bullet droning by like a lazy bee. Boston's beefy face paled a little at that unexpected messenger. Already, Maverick was riding hard, heading for the temporary shelter of a little arroyo. Boston, of course, had been leaving sign behind them all the way, and the damage was done now. This wasn't night, it was scarcely mid-forenoon—and a soldiery trained to the hunting of bandits was relentlessly on their trail.

Maverick smiled grimly. Bandits! Well, that was what they were, in the eyes of the law. Border raid-

ers. If they were caught, they could expect to be treated as such. And they couldn't expect much of anything except to be caught.

Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out Boston's revolver, passed it across to him. Boston hesitated, accepting it with the doubtful air of an overfed dog given a moldy bone. Another bullet quested for them. The Federals were trying to close in. Well, this wasn't a bad country for a little fox and hounds.

He'd played it before, but always from the other side of the fence. Any man who rode with Neversweat rode on the side of law and honesty. Just as any man who rode with Boston, it seemed, was fated to be on the wrong side.

Fox and hounds. And plenty of relentless hounds on their trail now. At least twenty men, probably more.

By noon, he knew that superior numbers and real skill had offset whatever skill he might possess himself. His desperate attempts to get back into the wilder tangle of hills again, into the deep timber which showed like a glimpse of cool, unattainable paradise, had been neatly frustrated. They were being herded, gradually but steadily, back into the lower reaches of the widening valley, out into the open. Driven to where they could be hunted down without a hope of escape.

It had been a long, slow climbing of the sun. A longer, slower climbing of weary horses and weary men. Even Maverick's big midnight horse was tiring fast under the strain.

If they had seen fit, Maverick knew, the Federals could have picked them off before now. But they evidently didn't care to do that, except as a last resort. They played the game. Though to be taken alive and face the consequences of gun-running wasn't any more pleasant an alternative, as far as Maverick was concerned.

For another hour, Maverick did his best. Then he turned to Boston, with that grim smile playing briefly across his face, his eyes coldly amused at the growing panic in his companion's face.

"Here's where we stop and fight it out," he announced. "They've got us surrounded, and they're closin' in fast. Maybe we can give a good account of ourselves as a grand climax, anyhow. I kind of hate to do it, against honest men—but if we don't, they take us alive."

Hope flared briefly in Boston's eyes.

"Wouldn't that be better?" he gasped.

"Not for me. I'd rather go out in fair fight than kicking in a noose or before a firing squad."

The panic in Boston's face mounted higher. The heavy color in his cheeks was draining away to an unhealthy whiteness. His thick lips looked blue.

He gazed around jerkily. A few boulders, a coulee bottom with some brush—Maverick could never get used to calling them anything but coulees—none thick enough to turn bullets. Trapped here, and they couldn't hold out for long against such overwhelming numbers.

"Can't we do nothin'?" Boston demanded. "Make a break for it—"

"We might, if you've got the guts to ride through their lines," Maverick conceded. "It's one chance in ten—maybe."

"But if we stay here—"

"If we stay here, we can put up a good scrap, for an hour or so."

"And then they'll get us?"

"If not sooner."

Boston groaned.

"But why not surrender? They'd give us fair treatment?"

"Yeah. Justice. A firin' squad in the morning."

"But we're Americans—"

"Caught in the act of transporting guns into a friendly country. Cases like this, it's a firing squad, and no questions asked on either side. That's understood."

Boston's face was chalky now. His fingers clutched at the saddle-horn.

"We ain't got *no* chance, you mean—if we're caught?"

"Mighty slim, the way I figure it."

"But I've got money—fifteen hundred dollars—"

"It'd depend a lot on the man in charge. Some men can be bought for less than that, on both sides of the line. Others can't be bought, on either side, for any price. It's a chance, of course."

"Then let's make a ride for it," agreed Boston, with the courage of desperation. "If we're caught, I can try it."

"Suits me," agreed Maverick. He did not add that, if caught in trying to fight their way through, no man then could afford to accept a bribe from them. As he turned to lead the way, Boston's face whitened again.

"My papers," he gasped. "I just thought—if I'm caught with them on me—"

"What papers?" Maverick jerked out.

"Some that old Curley asked me to take care of for him. He said they were pretty important, and worth a lot of money—names of men who're wanted by the law, and all that sort of thing—"

Maverick's lip curled again. Each new revelation which Boston made seemed a little worse.

"Better throw them away, while you've got a chance."

"But I can't do that. I tell you, they're worth a lot of money—"

"They'll hang you, sure, if they catch you with such a list on you."

"But if I could get away with them—"

Maverick shrugged. Boston had pulled the papers out and was staring at them, fascinated. A packet of treachery, of blood. Names, there, of men—poor, hunted devils—for which the law would pay a lot of money. Other information, prepared by some Judas, on a par with it.

Again a gun barked. No time to fool now. Maverick snatched the papers and stuffed them into his own pocket; then he led the way again.

"If you're caught now, maybe you can bribe your way out," he sneered. "It's me they'll hang—"

His jaw clicked shut, eyes narrowing. Ahead was a chance—such a chance as he'd been hoping for, but hadn't dreamed of getting. A dark, narrow opening, mostly screened by brush, between high ledges, leading away in a narrow, twisting canyon. There wasn't a chance in ten thousand that the soldiers would know of it, or suspect its existence. One man could ride into it, come out safely beyond the closing line of men, reach safety.

One man. Two couldn't hope to do it, for the other one must go back, show himself openly, boldly, and decoy the pursuit away from this spot,

to give a chance to the other. Otherwise that exit would be speedily discovered, and capture merely delayed a little. And he'd given his promise to Neversweat—

In a few quick, jerky words he outlined the plan to Boston.

"If you go careful, you'll stand a good chance," he said. "I'll occupy their attention for a while."

Boston didn't hesitate. Maverick had known he wouldn't. But he did pause briefly.

"Give me back my papers, then," he said.

Maverick complied. That grim smile twisted his face for a moment again. Despite peril, Boston had held on to them up to a little while ago. Now, with a chance to escape, he wanted them again, because they might mean money—blood money.

He watched Boston disappear, turned, rode for the open. They'd sighted him now. Bullets began to drone down from the heights above, cutting leaves off the bushes. Ahead, beyond the mouth of the arroyo itself, showed the wide, green valley. If he could reach it, and had his horse been fresh, he'd stand a chance of lasting a little longer. But his horse was faltering now, and riders were sweeping across the opening, attracted by the shooting, in a desperate effort to bottle him up before he could get fairly out.

They just about had him now. A triumphant

yell attested to their faith in that. They were closing in, no longer shooting, preferring to take him alive—there was far more ignominy in going out before a firing squad or kicking at a rope's end. But it wouldn't be rope's end for him. Maverick jerked at his own gun, the sun gleaming on it in signal of death.

10. *Rescue Party*

EVEN WITH his gun in his hand, Maverick hesitated. He hated to shoot at honest men who were only doing their duty. It went against his grain. The only reason why he'd do it would be to make them shoot in return. In this sort of situation, he didn't care to be taken alive.

He couldn't do it. He'd ridden on the side of the law too long. Of course, it would be easy enough to shoot at them, make them think he meant it, but send the bullets wide—

Then, ahead, he saw an alternative, and shoved the gun back in holster again. Twisting in like a green lariat was the creek that wound down the valley. It wasn't far ahead. He hadn't been able to see it before, hadn't guessed it was so close, since there was a sheer drop of fifty feet down to the water, a high cliff intervening.

Knowing that, they figured they had him trapped. They were closing in on every other side now. But they didn't have him—yet.

Maverick had a glimpse of deep blue waters, of

a trout leaping, glittering in the sunlight. He lifted his horse with the reins, touched it lightly with the spurs. Space was beneath. A hush fell on those behind as they watched man and horse soar out, then drop.

They struck in a mighty splash which rained upon the level shore beyond, before going down and out of sight. Then they came up again, the big black fighting gallantly, snorting defiance as its head broke water. An easy slope was beyond, and the horse scrambled out on this. Behind and above, at ledge-crest, the soldiers had gathered to watch. But they did not shoot as he rode away. Silence was their tribute.

It would mean a ride of a couple of miles either up or down river to a decent crossing where they could take up the pursuit. Evidently, weary with the chase, they were of no mind to try it. Maverick laughed and rode on.

But things weren't ended, as they had promised to be a little while before. He was again a fugitive in a hostile land. Boston, from all appearances, had made good his escape. If he'd have the sense to lie low during the day, he would have no trouble.

Maverick's mind returned to the ranch up the valley, to the girl. Dolores. A mighty pretty name. With a Mexican sound, but she was American.

And she had been as fine and fair and square as one could wish for. He'd have to try and see that she didn't get into trouble for helping them—

A shout, behind, came faintly to his ears. Maverick, turning, looked back. The khaki-clad figures were over a mile away now. They had left the creek, headed back into the low false hills, and were gathered in a group on a little butte, up there as though for inspection.

And they had got the man they wanted, after all. In his own flashy suit of white chaps and flaming green shirt, Boston was clearly recognizable among them.

Maverick stared in disgust and shook his head.

"He couldn't get away if he was followed by one-legged blind men," he growled to himself. "I'd sure ought to leave them hang him, now. After an egg's rotten, ain't nothing can be done to make it good again."

It wasn't likely that they would do anything to Boston that day except take him into camp and grill him. Those incriminating papers which they would find on him would serve at least as a temporary reprieve, for they would want to study them, ask him a lot of questions about them. Though that same list would almost certainly condemn him, if there had been any doubt of it before, to face a firing squad later.

Before the sun rose as a signal for it, Maverick decided resignedly, he'd have to have another try at helping Boston out. Not for Boston's sake. As far as he was concerned, Boston could stop good lead, and serve a useful purpose for the first and last time in a worthless career. But there remained the promise made to Neversweat; for his sake, Maverick would play the hand he held, down to the last joker in the deck.

Beyond the hills which skirted the valley's southern rim stretched bleak brown plains, with scant vegetation gasping under a pitiless sun. To the westward lay the Pass of Dead Men. Only the ranch here in the valley was an oasis, a green spot in the midst of desolation.

Finding a sheltered spot in a brush-lined arroyo, Maverick slept. He awoke as the moon was climbing the hills, ran a hand over the stubble of beard on his chin, and saddled up. He must have looked a fright, that morning, to Dolores. He hadn't had a shave for quite a spell, and there was no telling when he would have one again. Then he grinned.

"A lot she cared, one way or another," he grunted. "Better quit dreamin' and get to work."

The night was peaceful now, with only a coyote yapping mournfully on some distant butte, a night bird swishing softly past on outspread wings.

Leading his horse where the going was steep, Maverick headed deeper into the hills. From a butte, an hour later, horse and rider were silhouetted, sentinel-like, for several minutes. From that vantage point he could see mile on mile in most directions. Presently he discovered what he sought—the tiny red eyes of several smoldering camp fires, not more than a couple of miles away.

Approaching, he left his horse and moved softly on foot. This was the camp he sought, no doubt of that. But it was a far bigger one than he had counted on. Evidently the couple of dozen men who had pursued Boston and himself that day were only a part of the total forces now quartered up this way.

There were, as nearly as he could judge, nearly a hundred men wrapped in blankets or sheltered in tents, sleeping heavily. A few were Indian scouts, the rest regular soldiers.

Sentinels paced, watchfully, at either end of the camp; a third marched like a mechanical toy before a bigger tent, from whose interior a light glowed yellow against the canvas, silhouetting a weird figure like a crouching monster within. This, Maverick judged, would be the commanding officer, sitting up late over some work. He could guess with pretty fair certainty what that work would be, too.

Such a force, with sentinels on the alert, complicated matters. But it was now or never. Timing his movements to those of the guards, walking softly, Maverick slipped inside the lines. Off at the side, horses moved uneasily, the faint jingle of hobble chains making music in the night. Save that these men were soldiers, that there were tents instead of a chuck wagon, and save for the absence of a big trail herd not far off, it might have been a cow camp at night.

The fires had died now to white ashes. Maverick stepped across a man, blanket-wrapped, sleeping loudly with his mouth open. Others were scattered more or less at random, since tents were at a premium, but the night was warm. Buzzing mosquitoes apparently offered no annoyance to the weary men.

One of the sleepers stirred and groaned. Maverick poised, motionless, ready to drop prone. Then, as the man turned a little, he saw that it was Boston, bound securely, wide awake. But there were other sleeping men all around him.

Boston hadn't seen him, which was lucky. There was no hurry about him. Maverick had had a brief look at that list of names which Boston had carried, and it contained a long count—bad men mostly, riders of the owl hoot trails, men wanted at one time or another, often with a list of their

crimes appended. A list which some yellow-backed renegade, lost to all stirrings of decency, had managed to compile, and which, by devious routes, had finally come to the greedy hands of Curley and Boston.

Some of the men listed deserved no better fate than to have their names and lists of hide-outs fall into the hands of an interested law. But there were others, some of whom Maverick knew, whose names he had seen in that brief look. Men who had given up ways of crime and were leading worth while, honest lives, with no taint of crime held against them now. Men of family, good citizens.

For such men to have the past resurrected, a noose set about their necks—that was different. It was sometimes easy to be classed as a renegade, and still be innocent of evil intent, as Maverick knew now by grim experience.

He reached the shadows of the big tent and crouched. As the sentinel approached, he swung suddenly, timing his blow nicely. Caught by surprise, a ludicrous expression on his face, the guard slumped into Maverick's arms without a sound. There were no other tents nor sleepers close by. Maverick contrived bonds and a gag, then raised a flap of the tent and slipped softly inside.

11. *Bloody List*

THE OFFICER sat at a little table, his back to Maverick, busily transcribing names and data from the spread-out list he had taken from Boston. His pen made a soft scratching, the only noise to be heard save a distant, vague stir from the outer camp.

He was a young man, Maverick saw, scarcely older than the cowboy himself, of slender build and medium height, with a fine-cut, sensitive face; and his mouth twisted as though in repugnance while his pen raced across the paper. This was a job that duty demanded be done, but it was one to turn the stomach of any honest man.

There was blank bewilderment in his eyes for a moment; he stared in surprise as Maverick's hand reached across his shoulder, closed on both lists together and drew them back.

Maverick's other hand held a revolver, its cold rim touching the back of the officer's neck, and Maverick's lips were grim-smiling.

"You'll pardon my butting in like this, I hope, Captain," he drawled softly. "I sure hate to interrupt, special in such a rude way, but the truth of the matter is—in lookin' over your shoulder, why, first thing, I saw the names of a couple of men I used to know—and they're honest men. Likely there's others like them on the list. Probably there's plenty others who ought to hang, but who's going to be wise enough to sort out the sheep from the goats?"

The officer stared back at him, unblinking, for a long moment. There was a calculating look in his black eyes, but what might have been a twinkle lurked deep back in them as well. Then he answered, in excellent English.

"I perceive, Señor Maverick, that we made a mistake in not shooting, at the reevair today. But you were the so gallant gentleman, your horse made such a leap—it seemed a pity to spoil its great effort." He spread his hands slightly.

"And you know my name, Captain. Which means that Boston's been talking."

"It took but little grilling. Birds of a feather, they say—" The captain shrugged. "But you are not of a feather with him—no."

"You're a man of discernment, Captain. And thanks for the compliment. Yes, I guess likely you

should have shot me. As it is—well, first, this list can't do anybody any real good, so—"

While the captain watched without the flicker of an eyelash, Maverick lifted the chimney from the smoky coal-oil lamp, touched a corner of the papers to the flame, dropped them on the dirt floor and watched those blood-stained lists consumed to ashes.

"That's one thing, Captain. The other is—I've come for Boston."

The captain shrugged. His hands spread expressively; a smile lifted his neatly-trimmed mustache for an instant.

"Under the circumstances, I am forced to listen to your suggestions. As to the papers—perhaps you were right. I am not greatly sorry that you have ended an unpleasant duty. But for the freeing of the Señor Boston—that is different. It desolates me to refuse, but there is no question of his guilt, his lack of worth in the world."

"He's only a kid, Captain, and he kind of got started off on the wrong foot. And this is the first time he's really been in bad."

"Perhaps. There always has to be a first time. But you, you are not so ancient, no. It is not so much a question of age."

"He's promised me that he'll go straight, if he gets another chance."

The captain's eyebrows raised inquiringly.

"That was while we was ridin', this morning," Maverick explained.

"Oh. You take a great interest in him, yes?"

"He's sort of—of a cousin. Mother just died, not long ago. I promised to try and look after him. I'll admit, I haven't had much luck so far. But—"

"With him, I fear you would not have. And, as I say, his guilt—"

"I had it in mind to suggest a trade."

"A trade?" The captain's eyebrows lifted faintly.

"Me in his place."

"But you—you are a gentleman. He is a—what word shall describe the infamy of him? No, no, señor. You puzzle me. But it would be an unfair trade from any standpoint."

Maverick sighed.

"You make it doggoned hard, Captain. You're a gentleman yourself, and, most times, I reckon we'd see about eye to eye on things. But as it is, I guess there's nothing else left to do but tie you up, and then take Boston and go. I don't like it, but you see there's not much choice."

Again the captain's eyebrows twitched.

"I shall deeply regret the necessity of a firing squad for you, señor. Truly, it will be a waste of a real man. But even you, I fear, a gentleman of parts though you may be, will find difficulty in

walking out of this camp with your—shall I say friend?"

"Friend would be puttin' it pretty strong. Say cousin, and let it go at that—since he ain't, really. But each man according to his own lights, I guess. And now this gag. I'll stuff a gag in and prop your teeth open with a stick. Uncomfortable, I'm afraid, but a soldier has to take some risks, of course."

Presently he laid the well-trussed captain on the cot at one side of the tent, covered his head with a blanket and slipped out into the night again. So far, the sentries at either end of the camp hadn't noticed the absence of the guard on duty at the captain's tent, but he'd have to move fast. He couldn't expect such luck to hold much longer.

The moon had vanished beyond the range of mountains now, and the faint yellow stars gave little light. The sleeping men snored heavily. They had worked close to the point of exhaustion since that attack in the Pass the night before. Which was all in his favor.

Moving lightly as a stalking cat, Maverick came to where Boston lay without disturbing any of the others. If they could get out, his own horse was waiting, and it shouldn't be too much trouble to get another cayuse, since the watch kept on the

herd was a perfunctory one. With luck, they might be close to the border by dawn.

Stooping, he slashed the bonds which held Boston, making a quick gesture to stifle the incipient yell of terror which surged up in Boston at sight of the knife. Boston relaxed, then was aided to his feet, where he stood unsteadily, swaying a little, making no attempt to walk. His arms and legs, Maverick guessed, were cramped by the bonds, and it would be a ticklish job to get out of camp.

Fear was etched on Boston's heavy face at the thought of trying.

"We ain't got a chance, Maverick," he whispered hoarsely.

"It's a blamed sight better one than you had a little while ago, with a firing squad waiting in the morning," Maverick retorted. "Come on."

"I can't walk—and I ain't got a gun or nothin', if they jump me."

"Take this," said Maverick impatiently, and handed his own over. "And get started, quick—"

A shrill yell of alarm came from one of the sentries, who had suddenly discovered that the guard at the tent was no longer on his beat. Then he challenged sharply and started to run toward them.

Maverick turned, prepared to run for it before the sleeping men should come awake enough to

act. He wasn't worried about a chance shot from the running sentry. It would be close, rather ticklish, but no worse than plenty of other bad places he'd been in—and out of.

As he turned, there came another shout from beside him—Boston's voice, crying the alarm. A gun, the one he had just handed to Boston, crashed down on Maverick's skull with a thud, and, dazed with incredulity, he sank down in a blinding burst of fire which gave way to darkness thicker than the night itself.

12. *Fortunes of War*

MAVERICK STRUGGLED back to dim consciousness, in which an aching head seemed at first the predominant factor. Winking eyes swirled dizzily about him when he opened his eyes, objects which might be stars or bonfires kicked to life again, he couldn't tell which.

He was securely tied, he discovered, as his head cleared a little. Excitement held the camp in its grip, like an ant hill suddenly kicked into. Men were hurrying back and forth, talking like a flock of magpies. Fires blazed high as more wood was flung on them, thrusting back the darkness to a sullen line beyond.

And this was the work of Boston. Maverick remembered now. It was Boston who had struck him down, shouting the alarm—Boston who, despairing of escape, afraid to run the risks of it, had hit upon this scheme: trying to prove his own good will by making a prisoner of Maverick. Let him be the sacrifice. Maverick's lip curled bitterly.

How the devil could such a fellow be the nephew of Neversweat?

A couple of soldiers hurried up, untied his feet and jerked him roughly onto them. Half dragged, he walked between them back to the captain's tent, was led inside. The captain sat in his chair, much as Maverick had first seen him, betraying no sign of excitement save for the glittering of his eyes. Three or four other soldiers were inside, and with them, tied again as well, was Boston.

Boston was protesting volubly against this treatment when Maverick entered. Now he jerked his chin toward him.

"That'd ought to be proof enough for any man," he grunted. "Do you think I'd capture such a man if I wasn't all for you, wanting to help you out—"

"Be quiet," the captain said impatiently. Then, when Boston still poured out words, he jerked an impatient shoulder. One of the guards clapped a hand over Boston's mouth and raised a gun-butt threateningly above his head. Eyes startled, Boston at last fell sullenly silent.

For a long moment the silence held, while the captain studied Maverick curiously. Then he gave brief orders that the tent be cleared of everyone else. When they were alone, he smiled a little.

"So, Señor Maverick, we meet again, eh? The

fortunes of war, they are variable, is it not so? And it would seem that the Good Samaritan, he it was who fell among thieves."

Maverick grinned wryly.

"That might be as good a way as any of puttin' it," he conceded.

The captain grew serious.

"I am sorry that it works out this way. But it leaves me little choice. You have gone among my sleeping men, evading my sentries, and have freed this Boston," he summed up briefly. "That, you will understand, is serious business—more serious than what has gone before."

"Really, now?"

The captain twisted his mustache perplexedly.

"It is so. Which makes it puzzling. You freed this Boston, as I say. Then, a coward at heart, he is afraid to try and escape, and in sudden desperation when the alarm is given, he thinks to win favor with me by knocking you over the head and bringing you to me, a prisoner. Also, he tells me a fearful and wonderful tale."

"He would."

"I have been, it would seem, mistaken in all my assumptions. Those bloody papers, they were planted upon his most innocent person. He has been among bad company, yes, but not of his own free will. It was you who led him, unknowing, to

associate with such. And then, when he sees you sneaking in the camp tonight, and suspects your nefarious intentions, he heroically frees himself —why he did not merely give the alarm, I do not know—and captures you, single-handed, as a proof of his good intentions." The captain sighed. "He lies very clumsily, as he does all other things."

Maverick's head throbbed painfully. This was just a little side-show, with an inevitable end. He preferred to have it over with.

"I'm not begrudgin' you your fun, Captain. Reckon you've got it coming. Likewise, you've been a square shooter. But since there's just one ending, why not have it over with? It'd save a lot of trouble."

The captain eyed him thoughtfully, nodded.

"Undoubtedly it would, only—I am more or less of what you would call a sentimental fool. Often I surprise myself that way. A dreadful thing, of course, for a soldier." He shook his head as though puzzled.

"But there it is. You are a brave man, Señor Maverick, and for brave men I have a weakness. You come into this camp—alone. You free this Señor Boston, and would have taken him safely out of it had he not lost his head. That, I know, is the truth. It is due to no virtue of mine, or my men, that you are a prisoner now. So it is this

Boston who shall face the firing squad, and you —well, I am going to let you go."

Maverick stared, this time in genuine surprise. He felt a warm glow of friendliness for this man.

"You'll be gettin' yourself in trouble back at headquarters, that way, he hazarded.

The captain shrugged.

"My men, they are loyal. They look to me—not to a shadowy government far away. Besides, they remember their own shortcomings of the night. They will save their words for silent ears. You will go free, because I believe you to be an honest man. I would advise, then, that you return to your own country."

He picked up a knife and started to slash Maverick's bonds. The big cowboy halted him with a wry grin.

"Wait a minute, Captain. I won't say that I don't appreciate this—I do. You'll think I'm a crazy fool, and maybe I am. But under the circumstances—well, you'll have gathered that I wanted to see this Boston hombre get away. I still do. I made a promise, once, to a dying man—but let that go. How about it? I'll trade myself for him, and I'll sure see to it that he hits the trail out of Mexico and stays out, and goes straight. If he don't, I'll kill him myself, or—"

Maverick stopped. A crimson tide of embarrassment stained the roots of his whiskers.

"I'm sure making a plumb fool of myself with promises, eh, Captain? Offerin' to stay in his place and then promisin' to look after his conduct?" He chuckled mirthlessly. "Reckon a man can't be in two places at once, but the first part still holds."

The captain had sunk back into his chair. Now he smiled.

"Truly, you are a fool, Señor Maverick," he agreed softly. "It is that foolishness which almost makes me love you. Tell me, now, the reason why you would do all this for a man whom you admit to have no liking for."

Maverick shrugged. Then he told, briefly, of Neversweat, of his promise. The captain listened intently.

"It seems to me that you have kept that promise," he said. "Past the point already where Neversweat would expect you to go. Either that, or—"

He hesitated.

"Or you, too, are a very clever liar—much more so than this Boston. And that I am not willing to believe, after what I have seen—"

Outside, far off but clear, a sentry challenged sharply, something of consternation in his voice. Immediately there broke on the night a chatter-

ing fury of gunfire, the yells of men, neighing of horses, wild confusion. It seemed to come, not from one point alone, but from every direction at once. High and shrill above it all arose a yell which Maverick recognized—the voice of old Curley.

Which meant that Curley had gathered his scattered forces again, was attacking the camp. Not, of course, with the primary aim of rescuing either Boston or himself, but for something else which Curley would regard as of much more vital importance.

The captain sprang up, stood looking wildly about for a moment, then jerked at a flap of the tent. He was thust violently back as two of the renegades burst in, big men whom Maverick had seen before on that night of march into the Pass of Dead Men. The captain's face darkened with sudden fury as he jerked at a gun, but it was toward Maverick that he turned it.

"So," he jerked out, "I *am* the fool, you the clever liar—and they come here to free you! Which they shall not do!"

13. *Marching Orders*

HIS GUN was swinging to bear on Maverick, but the big cowboy scarcely noticed it. The other two were pouring out a swift torrent of Mexican, pure gibberish to the ears of Maverick, but their actions were plain enough. One of them was jerking a knife as the captain turned, his purpose only too evident.

With a heave, Maverick was off the edge of the cot. His shoulders, hurled as a battering-ram, struck the renegade between the legs, sending him sprawling and screaming. The captain whirled, aware now of his own peril; his gun flamed at close quarters as the second man closed in. Then the two of them were down, rolling over and over, locked together in mortal combat.

Maverick had no time to watch this fight. His own adversary was turning, the knife still in his hand, a murderous yell on his lips. And Maverick, with his hands still tied behind his back, was badly handicapped.

He rolled, bringing up his legs and drawing them back. One kicked out, but the renegade dodged nimbly and hurled himself at him. Rolling over, Maverick heard the thud of the knife blade as it was buried to the hilt in the ground, not an inch from the side of his neck. The renegade's breath was hot against his face as the man sprawled on him with the force of the blow.

For a moment, knife imbedded in the ground, he was at a disadvantage, and Maverick brought his head up with a jerk, a battering-ram which caught his opponent in the stomach, sending him flopping back, gasping painfully, the breath knocked out of him.

Maverick lunged to his feet; his boot heel caught his still nearly helpless opponent beside the head, a blow which sent him sprawling, to lie inert. That done, Maverick was free to turn his attention to the other fight.

The little stand had been knocked over, the coal-oil lamp smashed, and the place was in darkness. The two were only vague huddles as the light went out. The tent reeled drunkenly, on the verge of collapse. Maverick bent above the two, eyes peering, his ears telling him more. He saw the flash of a knife, kicked out swiftly, heard a groan and the snap of bone as his foot sent the arm back; then the captain was on his feet again.

Outside, confusion still reigned; a few shots echoed on the night, accompanied by the sound of galloping horses, receding hoofbeats. The captain flung back the flap of the tent, turned to where his late opponent lay gasping and cursing, then swung back to Maverick.

"My apologies, a thousand times, Señor Maverick," he said. "It was I who was the fool. They came to kill you, to recover those papers—and to kill me as well, which they would have done, had it not been for you."

He picked up a dropped knife, and a moment later Maverick's arms were free. The captain snatched at his dropped gun, and stepped outside as several men hurried up.

For a minute, the captain listened to a confused jargon of reports; then he snapped out orders, and the confusion began to die away. His men straightened the tent and took the prisoners away. He turned to Maverick, almost wearily.

"Boston has been rescued," he said. "The attack was a complete surprise. I have lost four men, and they lost but two—and you captured both of them. Curley came for Boston and the papers, and got away with the Señor Boston. He would much rather, I think, have had the papers which you had the foresight to destroy."

The camp was in orderly movement now.

Though it was not long past midnight, they were packing, getting ready to move.

"Going to pursue?" Maverick inquired.

"Of a certainty. Do you think that I would let him get away with that—this renegade of a Curley? He has long been a thorn in my side, but I think his time grows short." The captain's voice was grim.

Maverick nodded. It was a course of which he approved. Then the whole camp was at grim attention again. From the rim of darkness there came once more the pound of galloping hoofs, heading straight for the camp. One horse, hard-ridden. They paused briefly at the challenge of a sentry, came on again. The messenger rode into the circle of firelight, half fell from the saddle, saluted stiffly and extended a sealed letter.

With a muttered exclamation, the captain broke it open, read it swiftly. For a moment he stood, biting his lip, staring into the circle of darkness beyond. Then he shrugged.

"Prepare breakfast for everyone," he ordered. "We will eat before we march. Señor Maverick, might I have a word with you, please?"

Maverick followed him into the tent. The captain sank down on a stool, motioning to Maverick to do the same.

"These are marching orders," he explained.

"Orders which I cannot disregard. They come at a most inopportune time. Just when I should pursue, I cannot." The captain sprang up and took a few swift turns up and down the narrow confines of the tent. His jaw was granite. "Which leaves this Boston free for more deviltry."

Maverick nodded, waiting. The captain dropped wearily back into his chair.

"I have some good men, Señor Maverick. You may have seen that. Given time, I shall assuredly track this Boston and Curley down. But, in the meantime, he and his renegades will be causing more trouble, I am afraid. And they wanted to kill you. That was at Boston's orders, from what I overheard. Which convinces me that I can trust you. Though I have felt that, all along."

Again he was silent a moment, as though debating his course. Then he swung with decision.

"Señor Maverick, you are a man of parts, as you have shown. And a while ago you were making a proposition to me. That you would, given a chance, get this Boston out of Mexico, would make him go straight. That, failing in that, you would kill him."

"That was about the size of it," Maverick agreed.

"Do you not think that — after this, he has

sinned past his day of grace? That Neversweat would hold you now free of your promise?"

"That's a little hard to say, Captain. Neversweat, he could be plenty long-sufferin' and patient—he was with me. Though I'm about getting fed up on this Boston."

"Exactly. Well, it does not greatly matter to me which you do, as long as you keep your promise to make him go straight or be rid of him. But I'm putting it up to you to do one of the two. I'm overlooking any irregularities there may have been, for you've more than atoned for them in saving my life tonight. I want you to start after that gang now. Then, for the next few days, it'll be up to you. I'll be on their trail as soon as I can, but till then—how about it?"

"I'll do my best," Maverick nodded.

They shook hands solemnly. Half an hour later, mounted on his own big black again, Maverick rode into the spreading dawn.

14. *Wolf Pack Wild*

THAT THE RENEGADES, under Curley's leadership, had staged that swift raid on the camp and freed Boston was not due to any love for the man or respect for his talents of leadership. Maverick knew that. His rescue had been due to a far different cause — that bloody list of papers which he had somehow acquired.

Curley and his henchmen had been afraid of that list of papers, afraid of the treacherous heart of Boston. And there was always the possibility, sufficient to make it worth while to risk helping him, that he might have the papers hidden out somewhere, where they would turn up unpleasantly in the event of his demise.

Boston was free now, and with Curley. It was a grim certainty that they would be up to more deviltry. The captain had been sure of that. Maverick rode with a growing fear in his heart, for he knew Boston better than the captain did.

The trail left by the bandits was easy enough

to follow, as the sun came up in a splash of gold. They had ridden openly, making no effort to hide their trail. Either they were supremely confident of their ability to get away with it, or else Curley, wily old devil that he was, had gotten wind of these marching orders of the captain's, and knew that they were safe for the time being.

They had a couple of hours the start of him, and from all indications they had moved fast. Now the trail was leading straight for the ranch in the valley, and a chill grew in Maverick's heart as he followed it, coupled with a mounting rage, such as he had felt on that night when he had returned to find Neversweat besieged by three killers.

This would be Boston's idea, of course. Remembering his repulse at the hands of Dolores before, he'd take an unholy delight in swooping down when he could do as he pleased. That had been his threat; to return.

Not that the ranch alone would account for all of this. A raid on it might pay in cash and loot, which were the only things ever to move Curley. But there must be some other scheme afoot to draw the wolf pack together again, so soon after their bloody dispersal at the Pass. Some rich pickings for vultures.

Mid-forenoon brought him to where he could look down into the valley again. The valley was

as green as before, the waterfall from the distant heights caught the sun as brightly. The sprawling adobe house, in the shade of those great trees, seemed as ageless as ever. But there was a vital difference.

Today there were no cattle to be seen in the fields; no smoke arose in lazy signal from the chimneys; no men moved in the broad reaches of the valley.

Maverick looked down for a moment, tight-lipped. Then, spurring with a reckless disregard for the steep slope, he raced toward the buildings. Drawing closer, he saw a man, sprawled in the dust near the barn, as though asleep in the shade. But this was a sleep with no awakening. A round bullet hole, with a small brown stain of dried blood below, was just below his eyes. Flies swarmed above him. His dress proclaimed him to have been one of the cowboys of the rancho.

There were two other dead men not far off. Men who had fought bravely, against overwhelming numbers, who had died in defense of their duty and their lady. Where was she now? With a chill gripping his whole body, Maverick left his horse, moved toward the house. A shattered pane of glass showed where a bullet had moved.

Boston's crew had been here, striking at dawn —mad dogs, wolves on the loose. They had come,

had murdered and looted, and had gone again. All signs of life, even to the cackling chickens, seemed blotted away. Maverick strode through an open doorway into the dusky recesses of the house.

Not quite all. A groan sounded from an inner room. There he found old Pedro, who had served them so graciously on the occasion of their first call, lying in a twisted heap on the floor, his bald head battered and bloody, his sombrero crushed. He had been pounded with a gun-butt and left for dead. Maverick carried him to a bed, poured water over his face, and the old man sighed and opened his eyes.

There was no fear in them, only hopelessness. Then they brightened a little as they rested on Maverick, and he struggled to sit up.

"You have come, señor," he whispered. "You are the good man, eh—the man to stop this wild devil who calls himself Boston, and the wolf pack who run at his heels?"

He spoke in English, his voice weak. Maverick gave him more water.

"Can you tell me what happened?"

"But yes, señor. They come, like the wind at dawn—a wild crew. Devils in the dawn, señor, and what can a man do against such? Though we fought, yes, to the last man, hopeless though it might be. Unfortunately there were only a few of

us here. Most of the crew are away at another ranch, helping with the round-up."

They had killed the three cowboys whom Maverick had found outside, giving them no chance, had stormed the house. Pedro they had left for dead. They had looted everything, then had ridden away again, taking the women with them—the housekeeper, the maids, and Dolores.

Dolores Daventry. She was owner of the ranch, as Maverick had gathered. Pedro's voice softened huskily as he spoke of her.

"A wonderful woman, señor—so beautiful, so brave, so fine. Like her mother, who had much spirit."

"You knew her, too?"

"Knew her? Señor, I have been here for sixty years, on this rancho. I saw her grandmother, wife of Don Perez, brought here as a bride. I watch her mother grow to womanhood, the pride of Don Perez' heart. A lovely maid, she, like her mother. But headstrong, wilful, like her father."

He shook his head, his eyes dim with memories.

"One day this gringo comes riding—pardon, Señor Maverick, I use the term with all respect. This Señor Daventry. A dashing man, who makes wild love, which is returned. Don Perez was furious. He hated all gringos. And he had set his heart

on his daughter making a brilliant marriage. She should not waste herself upon a penniless cowboy, a gringo, so he declared.

"But he forgot that in his daughter flowed his own headstrong blood. When he refused his consent, she eloped with her gringo, and broke, I think, her father's heart. But he was a stern man, and unforgiving. Not until two years ago did he relent. Learning then that his granddaughter was an orphan, he went to Arizona and brought her back with him to cheer his declining years. A girl as beautiful as her mother, with the same fire, the same spirit. And now—to be in the hands of that Boston!"

Don Perez had ridden his last round-up a year before, Maverick learned. Since then, Dolores, heiress to the great ranch, had tried to run it. Of late, things had not been going so well. And now this—

Pedro's voice sank to a hopeless mutter. Him they had thought to kill as well, as he tried to resist, to protect his lady. But he was hard to kill.

Maverick roused him again. Did he have any idea of what the renegades planned? Pedro's eyes glittered.

"But yes, señor," he agreed, feverishly. "They think that I am dead, they talk. But I hear, I know —only, it do no good."

Despite that belief, he unfolded the details of the plan. Not completely, but enough so that Maverick could readily piece it together. A diabolical plan, hatched evidently in the devious mind of Curley, aided by Boston.

It was a plan which confirmed Maverick's earlier hunch. Last night's surprise attack on the encampment, the bold, open raid on the ranch had been executed because Curley had known something of what the soldiers would be doing for the next few days, knew that he could move pretty much as he pleased.

For such open, murderous raids there would, of course, be a price to pay later on. But they had taken that into consideration, too, made it all a part of this plan.

Tomorrow night there were to be dark doings at the Pass of Dead Men. Boston and Curley were planning not merely on an ample revenge against the soldiers who had so nearly dispatched them before, but to remove all danger to themselves for the time being. And though, tomorrow night, there would would be half a dozen soldiers for every renegade, they had a plan for making force of numbers of small account.

"It is not alone revenge that they seek." Pedro struggled to a sitting posture, his voice shrilling higher. "The soldiers, you see, will be escorting

a shipment of gold. Gold from the government mines, back in the hills to the west—mines but lately opened up, but rich—rich. There will be much gold in this shipment, at least fifty thousand dollars in your money. And this they plan to have."

"How?" Maverick jerked out the word.

He knew that, coming from the mines, the escort would follow a route which ran, for a while, through the long Pass of Dead Men, turning out of it and east again a little while before the border was reached. It was the only natural route through the mountains for miles around. But, despite its possibilities for ambush, it looked to him as though a couple of dozen renegades would be biting off a big chunk of trouble to go up against the escort of soldiers. They would be on the lookout for some such attack, would not be caught napping.

"It is a true scheme of the devil which they have." Pedro's voice cracked. "They talked of it, and laughed. There were many cattle on the rancho here, which they drove away with them. And in the storehouse, much dynamite. With fuse and caps. And the cattle, señor—a wild bunch, but lately brought down from the hills, and ready to run if the hat be dropped."

His voice sank to a whisper as he pictured what was planned.

"You know the Pass of Dead Men, señor. How like a trap it is. With many side canyons, and narrow paths leading down them. At some point to be chosen, they will place wire nets across these paths. To the nets will be tied ropes. When the soldiers come, it will be at dusk, probably, and they will be weary, unsuspecting of such danger as that— Then the cattle will be stampeded down these side canyons, to come suddenly upon the caravan. Their horns will catch in these nets of wire. The ropes will be jerked along, and, señor—"

Pedro raised his hands; his eyes were wild.

"At the end of each rope, set upon the ledges above the Pass, will be a package of dynamite, with caps. These bombs, many of them, will be jerked loose by the running cattle, falling down on the one spot—upon the cattle, the horses, the men, all trapped there — the horses and men hemmed in on all sides by the cattle, who will bring death with them. And in that place, then—" He shuddered and was silent.

Maverick understood. It was a wild, fantastic plan, yet it might be worked feasibly; and against it force of numbers, discipline, would be utterly useless. The soldiers, trapped hopelessly, would

be wiped out in a thundering carnage, while the renegades waited back in safety, merely sending the cattle plunging down the side canyons at the proper moment.

This was the task to which the captain had referred in speaking of orders which must be obeyed. But the gun-runners knew more than he had suspected, were taking advantage of every move the soldiers made.

The attack, as planned, would take place about night-fall. It would be easy to time it, for the soldiers escorting the gold would be in the long Pass before mid-afternoon and could not get fully out of it until an hour past dusk. Likewise, once in it, and however weary or late the hour, they would keep on so as to get through it, shunning a camp anywhere in its dark depths.

A wolf pack on the rampage—and it was strictly up to him to check them.

15. *Trail of Trouble*

MAVERICK was in a fever of impatience to be off, yet there was much to be done first, and haste would defeat his purpose. It was more than likely that sentries would be posted somewhere in the high hills which rimmed the valley, keeping watch against possible pursuit. To start blindly now would be to tip them off that he was coming.

There was time enough for what had to be done by waiting here until darkness fell, then starting. He would have the night and the next day to reach there and give a warning to the Federals.

But it wasn't of the Federals that he was thinking now. His thoughts persisted in returning to Dolores, in the power of Boston. There was only one comforting reflection. Curley was a wily old renegade who would probably insist that the women be held, unharmed, until after the attack had been made successfully. If anything went wrong, hostages would be of value.

Maverick spent the next hour in fixing Pedro up more comfortably and in looking the place over thoroughly. As he had suspected at the start, the other men were dead. Aside from pulling them under the shelter of a roof and covering them with blankets, there was nothing to be done for them.

Pedro was making rapid improvement. He declared, presently, that he could get along by himself. Just what Maverick could do, lone-handed, against the renegades, he had little idea, but nevertheless he was in a fever of impatience for him to be off and doing something. Therein he matched Maverick's own desires.

So before long, deciding to risk a ride by daylight, Maverick mounted again. Pedro hobbled to the doorway to watch him.

"God go with you, señor." He made sign of the cross. "For your sake and theirs, and for the sake of the blessed señorita. She will need your help—and His!"

One thing alone was comforting as Maverick turned the black. He'd made a promise to the captain, which must be kept. And he was certain that Neversweat, had he known the facts would be the first to insist that Boston must die.

There was no need, now, to try and follow the trail left by the raiders. It was plainly marked, since they were driving cattle and horses with

them. Maverick knew that he could take a different trail and reach the same objective.

He rode into the timber, climbed. Far off, the waterfall made music on the air; a bird was singing somewhere. It had been only a few days since he had come down into this country, under cover of darkness and ushered in by thunder of guns. Yet it was as though half a lifetime had passed since then.

The coolness was grateful, after the heat of the midday sun, just past its zenith. His horse followed a leafy path along the slope, hoofs clicking occasionally on a bit of stone, snapping a twig underfoot, or scuffling softly in a carpet of evergreen needles.

They climbed higher, crested a long slope. Off in the distance was a wavering column of smoke, ascending in the still air. Maverick watched it a moment, then, his jaw clamping hard, turned his horse that way.

Someone had built a cabin, here beside a trickling spring in a little patch of valley. Had striven to eke out an existence amid unfruitful surroundings. The cabin now was a smoldering pile of ruins; a man was trying to drag himself to the spring. He was an old man, with scanty white hair, his face pale underneath streaks of blood. His right leg was broken above the knee.

He looked up, eyes hopeless and full of terror, at the sound of the horse. Maverick dismounted, filled his hat with water, brought it to the wounded man and aided him to drink, which he did thirstily. He sighed, his eyes on the face above him, and murmured something in Spanish.

They could not understand each other. But there was little need. The raiders had passed this way, stopping to loot. Which meant that they were now, openly, on the outlaw trail, burning all bridges behind them. What did that mean? Something far more serious than one attack against the Federals must be in the wind to cause them to incur the enmity of the small settlers scattered about the countryside. Usually, in time of trouble, they depended on them for shelter.

That could not be all Boston's doing. He would know no better, but old Curley was no fool. Something was in the wind.

From somewhere ahead a whistle arose, slightly quavering, as though the owner were fighting against a growing uneasiness. Then there sounded the plodding hoofs of a burro, and a voice raised in adjuration.

"By the forked tail of the Evil One, will you not bestir your sluggard feet? Must you pause even yet to nibble at grass, in such a country as this, and with my own belly clinging through long

hours to my backbone? Bestir yourself, ungrateful beast that I have cherished."

From a side trail burro and rider appeared—the latter a little man with uneasiness graven on his face as he caught sight of Maverick. His hands shot skyward with startling alacrity.

"I am only a poor man, by the saints I swear it, and not one to do harm to man or beast. Yet spare my life and such as I do possess—"

"I don't want your money," Maverick said reassuringly. "I'm just a lone traveler myself, who'd as lief be in some other section of country right now."

The little man sighed audibly.

"And once this was a fair, fine country! But no longer. Yet I am relieved to hear such sentiments fall from your lips, big brother. I ride westward—por Dios—and shiver at the prospect. A safer country, once it is reached—but to reach it!"

"You mean that you're travelin' by way of the Pass of De—"

"Do not say it, señor! Already I quake like a bowl full of jelly. Such words as that Pass is called by are better if used sparingly. Yes, I go that way—and wish I did not."

"You'll be going through it tomorrow, then, I take it?"

"I take it the same, brother. At least, such is my

hope. When the sun is high and warm, its gloomy length will not be quite so bad—I hope. Though this sluggard burro will not hasten, even though renegades hang like vultures above the Pass—Santa Maria, but the thought does congeal the blood."

"You have no love for the renegades, then?"

The little man opened his eyes a little wider.

"Señor, does the bird have love for the snake which charms it? Or the mouse for the cat which plays with it?"

"You may be lucky enough to meet up with a detachment of soldiers, coming this other way through the Pass." Maverick watched him narrowly. The little man's face brightened.

"Soldiers, you say? If they are about, mayhap the renegades will keep well back. It is a thought, that."

"Chances are they will—though they'll be watching, like the vultures you mentioned. I'm wondering if you'd be willing to carry a message to the soldiers, when you meet them—one that may sort of spoil things for the vultures, but that will bring you a rich reward?"

"If I could but do such a thing, big brother, the act would be reward enough."

There was a sincerity in his voice which convinced Maverick. Swiftly he outlined the plot

which had been laid for the caravan's destruction. The little man listened in amazement, with voluble exclamations.

"Por Dios! That the human mind could conceive of such a thing! It causes my blood to lump like the ice. But of a certainty, señor, I will hasten on to meet and warn them, at such speed as this sluggard beast will bestir itself to. I shall tell el capitan that the Señor Maverick sends the word, yes. I go now."

Despite nervous glances at the frowning hills in the long course ahead, he waved cheerily and went on, belaboring his burro to a semblance of speed. Maverick drew a breath of relief. This harmless traveler would stand a far better chance of getting to the captain than himself, for it was unlikely that he would be bothered. And if the captain were warned, there would be no need to worry about him. Maverick could then bend his efforts to try and find Dolores, who might be in desperate need of help.

Taking a course to the side of that followed by the little man, Maverick covered a few miles. This was hilly country, mostly barren, sun-baked. Here and there the earth was scarred by holes of varying proportions—prospect holes, most of them long years abandoned, representing the eternal hope which surges in a prospector's breast, repre-

senting also the recurring disappointment of repeated trials.

At wide intervals, a prospector or a small ranchman still dwelt, trying to eke out a living amid unfavorable surroundings. It was a good country for coyotes, Maverick reflected, both of the two and four-legged varieties, but not much for anyone else.

The raiders shouldn't be far ahead now. Striking at right angles to their course, he figured to see their camp fires when dusk fell and come up abreast of them. Then, given a little luck—

He'd have need of plenty of luck, of course—but with a six-gun in his hand, he might be able to help Lady Luck out a little, in a pinch. There'd be nothing like trying—

"Lift 'em, hombre! High! And make it snappy, 'less yuh want to fed on lead pills for dinner."

Maverick's hand half dropped toward his gun, came away again. Two men had ridden abruptly out from the shelter of a clump of boulders, guns on him. Before the menace of those guns, the stark red light which glittered in their eyes, Maverick did not make the mistake of trying to complete the draw. Slowly he obeyed the command, raising his hands.

16. *Breath of Death*

"GO OVER HIM, Felix. Get his gat and frisk him."

The speaker was a big man, a Mexican in appearance, though he spoke like a cowboy from north of the line. His companion, small and wiry, was just as obviously a Mexican. Maverick's first thought had been that they were members of Curley's gang, but he had never seen either of them before. And the big man's next words sent a surge of relief through him.

"Hold still while he searches yuh, yuh damned renegade! I'd just as soon let daylight into a man of yore stripe as eat dinner—and I'm right fond of my grub!"

"Looks to me like you gents are makin' a little mistake," Maverick protested. "As it happens, I'm not a renegade at all. Just a wandering cowboy."

"Yeah?" The word was a sneer. "You'll be tellin' me next that you're not acquainted with this sneakin' Curley or that murderin' hound of a Boston that runs with his pack."

"Nope, I wouldn't tell you nothing like that," Maverick denied. "It happens I know both of 'em —and right now, I'd like nothing better than to be interviewin' 'em, same as you are me—over the barrel of a six-gun!"

"Meanin' you're honest, and don't trail with 'em?"

"Meanin' just that."

"Get down off that cayuse. Now you can put yore hands down—behind your back. Tie 'em good, Felix. We ain't takin' any chances. Damn, there ain't a decent tree in miles tuh string him up from."

"But a rope, from a saddle-horn, eet is verry effectiv'," Felix suggested, with a flash of white teeth.

"We ain't barbarians, even if we're dealin' with that stripe uh skunks," the big man growled. "There's other ways."

"I wish I could convince you gents that I'm an honest man," Maverick protested." Right now, I'm trying to meet up with this Boston hombre to put a stop to his acting up. I—"

"Yuh might as well save your breath, hombre. We know all about yuh. Yore name's Maverick, and yuh're a member of this same gang, white hat and all. Talkin' till yuh was black in the face wouldn't help. Yuh're one of the worst of the

bunch, but yuh'll raise no more deviltry. I got an idea, Felix. That old mine shaft off there."

Felix's teeth gleamed again. Maverick found his sense of humor an unpleasant one.

"Si, that weel do verry nice, I theenk. Eet should be verry effectiv', yes."

"By rights, we'd ought to fill yuh full of lead as yuh stand—only I can't quite bring myself to do that, even to a rattler of yore stripe. March ahead, there."

With two guns on him, hands tied behind his back, Maverick marched. He'd been properly ambushed. The irony of the thing was that these men hated Boston and the gang as bitterly as he did.

"If you'd just listen to me, I can prove what I say—"

"Better save yore breath. You'll be needin' it!"

"Curley has got a plot to kill the soldiers tomorrow night, in the Pass. I've got to get word to them—"

"Shut up! I wouldn't believe yuh on oath, and if yuh shoot off yore yap any more, I will plug yuh. Felix here, he's hankerin' for the same."

"Si, Señor Mulligan! Eet would be the great pleasure, yes. And why not?"

"If he opens his mouth again, yuh can do it. But not if he keeps it shut."

"I would be so glad to hear what you have to

say, Señor Maverick," Felix suggested ghoulishly. "Just the one leetle word, yes, eh?"

Maverick compressed his lips. Knowing Curley and Boston, the devastation and brutality they had been inflicting in this mad orgy, he could understand the spirit of bitterness which animated these men now. But that Felix would shoot there was no doubt. He stumbled ahead, then stopped at an abrupt order from the big man.

"Here's the end of the trail, Maverick. I'd a little ruther see yuh swing from a noose, but I guess that plantin' yuh underground will do just as well. And I'm hopin' the rest of yore damn crew of cutthroats will soon be joinin' yuh!"

Both men had dismounted, dropping the reins of their horses and of Maverick's midnight cayuse, which the man called Felix had led this far, as well. Now, just ahead, Maverick saw it — a yawning black hole, some six feet square at the top. An old prospector's shaft, dug and abandoned long years before. The refuse thrown out around it was nearly the color of the surrounding soil, with bushes and coarse grass growing in it.

Suddenly, closing in on him with a rush, both men grabbed him and shoved. Maverick attempted to fight back, but the attack had been too quick, the handicap too much to overcome. He tried to kick out, to catch the big man with

his boot and hurl him back, but Felix's nimble foot tripped him, and a moment later Maverick found himself falling.

His luck had not entirely deserted him. He struck, feet first, against an outjutting rock, some ten feet down, a stone which had gradually loosened from its place and now hung poised. It gave way before the impact of his weight, falling in a shower of dirt and small stones, but it had temporarily broken his fall. Fifteen feet farther down he came to a stop with a jar, landing all doubled up.

But he knew, instantly, that he wasn't much hurt, which was rather in the nature of a miracle. Thinking fast, he lay as he had fallen, unmoving. Far above, in the thin square of daylight, he could see the two men peering down, but he knew they could not see him. They were ominously quiet, listening. After a long minute, the big man spoke.

"Don't hear nothin'. Must have broken his neck."

"Eef he did not, still he weel not climb up, no."

"I'll say not. He's planted there for keeps. Well, that's one less of the skunks. Guess I'll take his horse. Looks like a good animal."

They moved away. Cautiously, Maverick got to his feet, peering around as his eyes became ac-

customed to the gloom of the hole. What he saw was not encouraging.

Such timbering as had been put in this shaft had long since rotted away and fallen in. The sides were straight up and down for twenty-five feet, and so crumbly and gravelly that it would be out of the question ever to cut steps and climb up, even if he had tools to work with. The sides were too far apart to climb up by bracing himself against opposite walls.

There was just one encouraging factor, aside from his being unhurt by the fall. An old, half-rotten plank stood upright, where it had fallen, a projecting spike about on the level with his hands as he stood up. Maverick set to work, patiently, and within ten minutes his hands were free.

Which didn't help much. If he had a rope, he might contrive some way to climb out. Without a rope, he was "planted there for keeps," as the big man had so grimly said. The chances of anyone, in this wild country, ever hearing his calls for help were about one in ten million. With the odds that they would leave him down there if he did attract anyone.

For a moment, incipient panic, such as comes to all trapped creatures, fought for possession of Maverick. Grimly he forced it down. His only

chance, if any, lay in keeping cool and using his head.

He moved around, testing the walls, and brought up against more planks, half covered by dirt which had tumbled during the years. Studying it more carefully, he saw suddenly that these planks covered a hole leading off to the side.

Grimly, Maverick scooped the dirt away with his hands, refusing to get excited. It was probably only a little hole at the side, and even if it were a long side tunnel, the chance that it had ever led out anywhere else was remote. If it had, probably it would long ago have caved in. But it was a chance.

He yanked an old plank aside, peered in, and his heart gave a thump. Far off, like an elusive will-o'-the-wisp, he glimpsed daylight. Feverishly, he worked to enlarge the hole, until it should be big enough for him to crawl through into the side tunnel. The light, he estimated, must be at least two or three hundred feet away—higher up, naturally, than where he was.

That might mean something, might not. Perhaps at the end of the side tunnel he would find another vertical shaft up which he could no more climb than the present one—providing he ever got that far. About to try the venture, Maverick stopped and drew back.

The air, so far, had been good. But the stench which crept in as he opened up the old, clogged tunnel was not so pleasant. Maverick, feeling in his pockets, pulled out a few matches which Felix had not bothered to appropriate.

He scratched one. The flame burned clear and bright in the shaft where he stood. Scratching another, he held it at arm's length into the side tunnel, saw it flicker and waver.

That wasn't so good. Grimly, Maverick crawled through the opening, holding his breath. He was able to stand upright in here, though his head touched the ceiling. He took half a dozen cautious steps, for the darkness was almost complete, save for that faint ray of light far ahead.

Some sixth sense gave him warning. A slight slope beneath his feet. Maverick scratched another match. For just an instant it flared sputteringly, and he saw that the slope led downward. Then the match went abruptly out.

A minute later, sweating, Maverick found himself back in the original shaft, gulping in breaths of the air. He was shaking as with a chill. When a match wouldn't burn in such air, there was only one answer. A gas pocket, such as collects in old, unused mine shafts. Foul air, to breathe which was certain death.

17. *Boston Gets Ambitious*

MAVERICK STOOD for a minute, his pulses hammering. The few breaths of bad air which he had breathed had effected him so that he felt shaky. But, bad air or no bad air, he knew what he had to do.

When his breathing was normal again, he set about preparing for the journey ahead. He knew just what steps to take. It meant crawling in there, then going as fast as possible, holding his breath, until he was through that pocket of bad air down below.

The uncertainty was what made it bad. That dip might be just a slight one, or it might mean another vertical shaft; and if he stumbled into such a pit, filled with bad air, in the darkness, that would be the end, there and then. The only way to find out was to go ahead and try.

Even without such a trap, the gas might extend on for as far as the shaft went. Whether he could get clear through it before he had to breathe or

not would depend on how far it was, how good the going turned out to be. He might be badly mistaken as to how far ahead that gleam of light really was. A miscalculation would be the last one he'd ever make.

And, even if he got safely past all that, there might still be no way out, and the air would be bad enough soon to finish him at the other end. Once there, he could never return.

"Not that I would if I could," he reflected grimly. "If there's a way out, fine. If there ain't, it'll be a lot quicker and easier to go to sleep down in that bad air."

Certainty lent calmness to his movements. Certainty that it was one of two things, and that whichever it was had to come quickly. Crawling swiftly inside the side tunnel again, he stood up, eyes fastened on that speck of daylight so far ahead, and started toward it as fast as he could trust his footing.

Half a dozen steps, and the way was turning downward. His heart seemed to choke him for a moment as one foot, reaching out, went sharply downward. He barely saved himself from stumbling and falling as it found a resting place; his other foot did not go down. Some big stone had been taken out of there once, leaving that hole, and it hadn't been filled with débris.

Such equipment as had been used in here had either long since been removed or had rotted. With jaws tightly clenched and fingers clamped on his nose, Maverick kept on. The light ahead was growing stronger as he approached; the tunnel was leading gradually upward.

Then the hope that had grown in him was dashed as he reached the end. Above him was a narrow, vertical shaft, leading up for another fifteen feet. The daylight was up there, partly shut out by an overspreading growth of bushes which had hidden this opening. An old ladder was still fastened along the side of the shaft.

Maverick's heart was hammering, his lungs felt as if they would burst. He had to breathe; there was no longer any way to avoid it. As he expelled the air, sucking in fresh, there was still that taint in his nostrils which he had noticed before. He grabbed a rung, high up, and felt it crack as his weight came on it.

A clawing hand caught desperately at the next rung above, and he pulled himself up, feeling another rung snap beneath his foot. He was climbing frantically now, racing against two things—the death which lurked in the air here, even this close to the top, and the cracking, buckling ladder.

A rung jerked loose in his hand as he clutched

it, almost throwing him back. Another was cracking under his foot. His head was reeling; a dizziness seemed to make the world whirl around him. Desperately, Maverick clutched at a branch of a bush which hung down, drew himself up, took hold of other branches with both hands.

For a moment he clung there, feeling faintness sweeping over him, knowing that he was about to let go, to fall back. That once he struck the bottom, it would be the end.

His brain was numb, his muscles seemed leaden. But the strong desire for life was still a spark which dominated. Somehow, he found another foothold on the crumbling ladder, and, in one final effort, pulled himself out on the ground above. The crash of the ladder, falling back and down, never reached his ears.

Maverick stirred finally, moved a little, blinked sleepily and sat up. He stared to see himself on the very edge of a deep, dark hole; then, as recollection came to him, he edged away from it, and got a bit stiffly and unsteadily to his feet.

Save for a slight headache, he felt well enough. He grinned a little as he understood why. He had been rendered unconscious by that bad air, and a few more breaths of it would have finished him.

By now it was night. Outside, in the pure air,

he had gradually revived; but, dog-tired as he had been, exhausted by that final desperate effort, nature had taken its own course, allowing him to drift into a deep sleep. During the hours his lungs had cleared, his head as well. Now, except for a gnawing hunger, he was nearly as good as ever.

The moon was coming up. Which meant that it was late—close to midnight. And he was here, unarmed and afoot. But alive, out of that hole where he'd been thrown to rot. That was something.

A great owl coasted out of the banks of darkness on silent wings and dropped like a plummet, and a rabbit screamed once. A coyote yapped querulously; a dried bone gleamed white in the moonlight.

From somewhere another familiar sound came —the faint jingle of a riding bit, the slow hoofbeats of a horse as it moved about. A darker blur showed ahead, and Maverick moved cautiously toward it. Then the horse raised its head, neighed joyously and trotted toward him, reins dragging at one side. Midnight!

Maverick repressed an exultant whoop. A moment later he was in the saddle. He didn't need to be told what had occurred that afternoon. He could picture the scene very nicely in his mind, for he'd seen other men try to ride Midnight.

Some of them had been good riders. But no man, aside from Maverick himself, had ever remained in the saddle more than two minutes at a time. When the big man had tried to ride him, Midnight had promptly shucked him, probably with such force as to knock all desire for a second attempt out of him. They'd let him go, then, figuring him bad medicine.

"Which was certainly using your head, old boy," Maverick confided, stroking the horse's glossy neck. "You're a horse in a million, and having you under me makes things look a whole lot brighter."

Midnight turned his head, nipped playfully at Maverick's leg, then turned to the more serious business of getting more country behind them.

There had been a good many hours lost, but that might not be serious. The rest helped a lot, and the soldiers escorting the gold shipment would not be along until the next night, which gave him plenty of time as far as that was concerned. And the messenger he had sent ahead should give the captain warning in plenty of time.

But Dolores was a prisoner in Boston's hands, and that was an entirely different matter. He had to find them—which might not be so easy a job now. Their camp fires would have burned out before this, and in the numerous side passes and hid-

ing places fringing the Pass, he might hunt for a week and never find them.

He wasn't far from the Pass itself now. Close enough so that it would pay to go cautiously, especially since he was unarmed. He didn't propose to ride into another trap, if he could help it. His luck might not hold that good another time. . . .

Horsemen ahead. A dark file of them coming, riding single file or two by two, beside a hill trail. Maverick tensed, a warning hand on Midnight's head, a whisper in his ear. Midnight, a deeper bit of the darkness, stood unmoving, making no effort to signal the other horses. He was a well-trained cayuse who understood such grim business as this.

Six. Eight. Ten. Fifteen. Seventeen in this line who moved steadily ahead at a purposeful trot. Maverick counted them. It was too dark to see, but, from the looks, they were some of Curley's gang. Deliberately picking his time, Maverick rode out of the dusk, joined the rear of the line without any of them noticing the difference.

This was risky business, but it was a sure way of finding out what was going on, and Maverick craved action. He could drop out again, in the darkness, if he wanted to.

One man rode just ahead, two more, side by

side, came behind. They were talking in low tones, but Maverick could hear them.

Their first words confirmed his suspicions. He had heard those voices before, on his first night in the Pass. These were Curley's riders—some of them, at least. And the two, half-breeds who had joined up there in Arizona, were talking in English.

"But what the blazes is up, Pancho? I do not understand all I know about this."

Maverick could almost picture Pancho's complacent twirl of his mustache.

"And so you come to Vargas to find out, little one. For there is little—oh, but little—that escapes Vargas. Of a truth, he is one with brains, yes."

"You are over afflicted with words, if you ask me. Words aren't deeds. If you know so much, answer my question."

"But of course. I was coming to that. I, Pancho Vargas, am a great man both with words and deeds; with the ladies I am a favorite, with the men a great leader. It is lucky for this too cocky Boston that Pancho Vargas has chosen to ride with him. I will give him the great advice, the good advice, so that how could anyone help but succeed?"

"Perhaps. If we grant all that, you will tell me, eh—providing you do know anything?"

"I know all, my little one. Tonight we ride across the border. Ah, you suck in the breath, you blink the eyes. We go raiding tonight. The Rancho of the Gun Brand. You may have heard of it, eh?"

"Who hasn't, windy one?"

"We strike swiftly in a raid, killing, looting. Tonight, because of a sale of cattle, there is much money on the Gun Brand. And money is what we need, eh?"

"I can always use it."

"Travel with Pancho Vargas and you will have more than you can use—it is a certainty."

"I thought the Señor Boston was the one I was travelin' with."

"Yours is a suspicious nature, my little one. Truly, we ride with Boston, who will be a great man. And why? Because Pancho Vargas advises him, stands at his right hand to guide and counsel, to strike a good blow for freedom when the occasion demands."

"What do you mean: freedom? Ain't we free now? We can get a job punchin' cows, or we can ride guns across the border, or hold up the Federals in the Pass."

"Yes, all that we can do. I grant it. But is that freedom? Is it freedom when we have to run these guns by night? Is it freedom when the Federals would shoot us if they could but catch us?"

"Well, mebby not—but if you do this sort of a thing, what can you expect?"

"A proper question, and put to the right source. Much can be expected. What are those guns for? A revolution? Truly. And why the revolution? For freedom! A new president in Mexico — A revolution costs money, and that is why we raid the Gun Brand tonight. It will anger the United States, will strain relations with the government now existing—all of which aids our cause."

"What do you mean: our cause?"

"I mean, little one, that we are to be the revolution. This Señor Boston, he is a man with great ideas, and he has Pancho Vargas at his side."

"I thought he had Curley."

"Curley is a good man, yes. But he grows old. Pancho Vargas, like the Señor Boston, is young. One day, when Boston is president, I shall be commander of his armies, and—who knows?—mayhap even more than that. Yes, we ride with the Señor Boston, a man of vision, of ambition. Ride you with me, and you shall be great, my little one."

Maverick nodded thoughtfully. The pattern was clearing up. So Boston aspired to head a revolution, did he? It was the sort of crack-brained idea that Maverick would expect of him. Now, figuring on a big sweep, working under the guise of the law, under the banner of a false freedom,

he and Curley felt that they could trample on the little fellows who had once sheltered Curley's raiders. They would not need them now, so they could be killed, ruthlessly exploited.

And these schemes were bold enough. A raid into Arizona tonight. Tomorrow night, that slap in the face of the Mexican government.

"One thing I'll have to admit—they're an ambitious pair," Maverick conceded. "Guess I'll have to ride along tonight, and maybe kind of take a hand. It was the Gun Brand sort of got me into this—that and Boston. Might be a good idea to trail along."

18. *Pilfered Password*

"BUT I DO NOT so much like this—this crossing of the border. We may run into trouble, Pancho."

"All that is arranged for," Pancho Vargas assured the doubter airily. "Even to the password."

"What do you mean: password?"

"My little one, trust Pancho, and be not so dumb. One will report to us on whether or not the border is guarded. That we may know him, he brings a secret password for tonight. So all will be well."

"And what is the password?"

"That, of course, is a secret. But since it can do no harm, I will tell you. 'Glory rides tonight.' "

"What's glory got to do with it? I thought you were going to tell me—"

"Sometimes," Pancho sighed, "I think you are dumb in the head, of a truth. I tell you the password, that Glory rides tonight, and you ask me—"

Maverick, grinning in the darkness, pushed his

horse ahead a little. He had deliberately fallen somewhat behind, so that now a gap separated himself and the two men behind from the rest of the cavalcade. Not far ahead, one man still rode alone. Maverick pushed his horse alongside in silence.

The next thing of importance was a gun. Maverick felt only half dressed without one, especially in such company. For five minutes he rode beside the other man, knee to knee, in a silence broken only by the soft clop of hoofs, the jingle of bits and spurs, creak of saddle leather and breathing of the horses. Pancho Vargas and his friend still rode some distance behind.

Casually Maverick reached over; his fingers closed softly on the protruding butt of a revolver in an open holster. He tugged gently, slipped it out and into his own pocket. The man beside him had not noticed anything amiss.

Dropping slightly back, Maverick examined the gun swiftly. It was fully loaded, ready for business. That helped.

A moment later the darkness had swallowed him. Off at the side of the cavalcade he rode fast, circling up ahead. Somewhere, not far off at the side, he knew, was a little town—one frequented by renegades, border wash. That might work in with his plans.

His horse dipped into a draw, brush swishing against his legs, then the hoofs dragged suckingly in mud. Stopping, Maverick swung to the ground. Somewhere up above was a little trickle of water from a spring. This was luck, just when he needed it.

Scooping up a handful of the soft mud, he smeared his hat thinly, but completely, so that the white Stetson, which failed to show at a little distance in the night, was as black as the horse he rode. Then he circled back toward the trail the others were taking.

Boston, riding with another man in the vanward of the cavalcade, jerked his horse to a stop with a startled oath, and Maverick caught the gleam of guns. The big horseman, waiting there in the middle of the trail, unmoving, stared back in silence.

"What the devil's all this?" Boston demanded. "Who are you? What do you want, hombre?"

"Glory rides tonight," Maverick intoned, his voice deeper, harsher than usual.

"Oh!" Boston's relief was like escaping steam. "It comes from the east."

"The border is guarded tonight," Maverick went on swiftly. "Gringo soldiers. Something's made them suspicious. It'd be suicide to try and cross tonight."

Instantly there was excitement, confusion in the band of raiders. Without old Curley to quiet them, they were practically leaderless. Maverick, silent in the darkness, grinned, ventured a low-voiced suggestion to one of them.

"Since we can't go on, there'd ought to be time to get a drink somewhere. Ain't there a place near here?"

The other man nodded vigorously, and raised his voice to convey the suggestion. Three minutes later, Boston as eagerly as any, they were heading for Los Pinos, not more than a couple of miles away.

Maverick rode with the rest, silent, grinning to himself. That had spiked the raid across the border tonight, and after tomorrow night there would be nothing more to fear on that score—not if the captain was alert and did his part, and Maverick knew that he would be eager for the opportunity.

Boston was still to be dealt with, but if Maverick's additional plans for tonight worked out, he, and these bandits who rode with him, would be kept pretty well occupied for a while. That was the important thing now. Dolores had to be considered first, and further business connected with the other end of the Pass.

Los Pinos lay asleep, a little scattering of 'dobe buildings along the edge of a hillside. It was long

past time for honest men to be abed, but these who rode tonight were not honest. A fusillade of shots announced their coming, rousing the little village, and Maverick grinned again in the darkness. It couldn't have been staged better, according to his plans.

Presently lights were springing up; the main building, a saloon, was open by the time they reached it. Los Pinos was not a town composed of honest settlers, and they were accustomed to visitors at any hour of the day or night. Moreover, when they came, Los Pinos was prepared to welcome them and profit by their trade.

They filed inside and crowded up to the bar. Maverick hung back, keeping to the shadows, and arranged for some supper. Ten minutes later, in a side room, he was eating, served by a red-lipped, smiling girl with bold eyes.

"You do not drink with them, no?" she asked, glancing through the crack in the door to where Boston's crew were already becoming boisterous under the influence of the fiery liquor.

Maverick shrugged.

"I come as a friend of the honest people of Los Pinos, not as an enemy," he said. "True, I rode in with them, in the darkness—but to give warning."

"What do you mean?" The girl's voice was startled.

"Has no word reached you of what has been happening in the past couple of days? How these renegades under Curley and Boston have been turning upon the friends who have protected them, given them shelter in the past?"

He saw by the gleam in her eyes that word of those depredations had preceded them. Her voice was passionate.

"Do you mean that they have come here—here, to Los Pinos, for the same purpose?"

"Why should I risk my own neck in trying to warn you, if I didn't think so?" Maverick demanded bluntly.

The girl drew in her breath sharply.

"What is to be done?"

"It will be a little while before they are ready for trouble. Why not pass the word around, and be ready before they are? They think to take you all by surprise. But if it should be the other way—"

"I will see to it." She half-turned, then swung back in indecision. "But I cannot understand it. We have always given them a place of refuge when one was required. Why should they be so foolish as to turn against their friends?"

"They've been doing it. I've seen the smoke of

more than one place, seen dead men. Don't ask me the answer. Better be ready if they try to start trouble. If they don't, being ready will do no harm."

"That is so," she agreed, and slipped away. Maverick saw her, a minute later, in low-voiced counsel with the bartender—a man with a patch across an empty eye-socket, whose other eye seemed doubly bright and penetrating. Then she had slipped out, into the night.

She was back within five minutes, a little breathless.

"If they want trouble, they may find it," she nodded coolly. "Is there anything more I can get for you?"

"I could use a handful of forty-five shells," Maverick said. "If trouble starts, they might be handy."

She was back almost at once with an unopened box of cartridges, eying him approvingly.

"You look like one who could use a gun," she agreed.

His supper finished, Maverick sauntered back into a corner of the saloon, watching, a slow smile about the corners of his mouth. There was much yet to be done tonight, but it was working out. Already this crew were becoming quarrelsome, riotous, more than half drunk.

Old Curley would have kept a tight rein on them—as he had done in the past. One drink, no more. Now, freed of this restraint, with Boston to set a reckless example, they were going the limit. All that was needed was a spark to set off trouble. After that, everybody was primed for it.

If necessary, Maverick intended to strike the match. But Boston, as he had counted on him doing, saved him the trouble. The girl was in the saloon now, helping to serve the tequila and whiskey. Boston reached out roughly, seizing her wrist, and jerked her toward him.

The violence of it must have hurt her, and tonight, believing that these were enemies, she was in no mood to submit lightly. Her other hand slapped resoundingly across his face, leaving a white mark for a moment against the red. With a curse, Boston turned savage, and the next instant the one-eyed bartender was leaping for him, silent but grim, a bung-starter swinging in his hand.

Boston leaped back, narrowly evading the swing of the weapon, flinging the girl from him with a brutality which sent her crashing onto the floor, sliding across it. His hand was pawing for his gun, his voice raised in command to his followers to help him.

Coolly, from where he stood, Maverick raised his own gun, throwing three swift shots, and the

coal-oil lamps went out in a burst of darkness. Men would be hurt in the dark, but it would prevent a swift slaughter, assure a general fight. It had been certain, anyhow, but Maverick couldn't think of anything he would enjoy better than for these two nests of desperadoes to turn their spleen upon each other.

He slipped out into the night and moved back to where Midnight waited. There he paused, viewing the affair with an air of detachment.

Within three minutes, Boston's bravos had made the unwelcome discovery that they couldn't clean up this town the way they had swept through other places in the last couple of days. Los Pinos was aroused and ready, a rattlesnake den aroused. Finding a real fight on their hands, things happened exactly as Maverick had hoped. Boston and his men tried to break, to get to their horses and away.

Maverick had said only a word or so to the girl, but it had been enough. Their horses were no longer where they had left them. Now it was a battle, with the odds against them. It was Boston himself who, gasping frantically, caught sight of Maverick and rushed up.

"Let me have that horse," he gasped.

Maverick stopped him at the point of cold steel.

"Glory rides tonight," he said coldly. "But I'm forkin' this cayuse myself."

He had expected Boston to recognize him in that moment, but, in his agitation, Boston did not. Repulsed, he fell to pleading.

"Then ride—ride like hell," he gasped. "Get word to Curley. Tell him to come with his crew and help us. You'll go find him?"

"Yeah, I'll go find him, pronto," Maverick agreed, and his smile was grim as the night swallowed him.

19. *Cabin in the Canyon*

WITH THE GANG divided, and Boston in trouble—trouble which should keep him and his followers where they were for a while, at least—Maverick was well pleased. The other things that he had to do tonight shouldn't be so difficult.

With a good dinner under his belt, he felt a lot better than he had before. Riding fast, with any luck he should find before dawn where Curley had made camp. The hour when everyone would be asleep, numb with weariness, slow to think and act if awakened. Perfect for his purpose.

Los Pinos was set a little to the west of the Pass of Dead Men, conveniently close to the border. The camp, judging by the direction from which the raiders had ridden, would be somewhere along the west edge of that long, bloody canyon, but several miles south of the border.

He found it, finally, the impatient movements of a hobbled horse warning him. Investigation showed that it was the camp he sought, though there were no cattle around, as far as he could dis-

cover. Some twenty horses were hobbled and left to graze in a little meadow, saddles stacked at its edge.

Not far off were nearly as many more of Curley's men, wrapped in blankets and asleep. Maverick was startled. He had supposed that Boston would have most of the crew with him, but, from all appearances, Curley had gathered new recruits from somewhere. Which wasn't so good.

Leaving his own horse, Maverick searched, puzzled. Where was Dolores, and the other women taken from the ranch? It was important to find them while the darkness held. Daylight would present plenty of new problems.

One thing favored him. The sky had gradually become overcast, clouds blotting away the faint stars, and that would delay daylight for half an hour. Moreover, here in the canyon, it would remain dark much later than out in the open.

Something loomed ahead, darker than its surroundings. A cabin built of logs, evidently constructed long years before. Examining it, Maverick was surprised. It was two stories high, with a basement, and set up close against the sheer wall on two sides, in one of the narrow by-passes leading off from the main pass. One not knowing its location might ride within a stone's throw of it and never guess its existence.

Evidently this cabin had been built here as a sort of halfway house for the renegades who operated in this section of country, making occasional raids across the border, indulging in rustling, gunrunning and other occupations which would not bear the light of day. Evidently the soldiers had failed to discover this cabin, providing they knew of its existence.

That it was occupied tonight there was no doubt, and it was more than probable that Dolores would be inside. Maverick tried the door, which opened readily under his hand. He stepped inside, pausing for a moment in the intense gloom of the place. It was risky business to blunder about in here, in the dark, but a light would be even more dangerous.

Deep, regular breathing came to his ears—as of someone asleep. With it, a whiff of faint, intangible perfume, which made Maverick catch his breath. He had breathed that same perfume before when he had talked to Dolores Daventry.

Listening, he caught a false note in the breathing. She was awake, but trying to feign sleep; probably lying there, in terror of this night visitor. Maverick risked a match, shielding it in his hand, holding it close to his face for a moment so that she might recognize him.

A cot was on the far side of the room, and

Dolores lay stretched on it, tied down more or less uncomfortably. Cold rage swelled in him at the sight, and a swift desire to get his hands on Boston.

Otherwise, the room was apparently empty. The match died out in darkness, and he was beside the bed, his whisper soft in the gloom.

"It's me—Maverick."

"I know. I was praying you'd come."

Maverick was fumbling at her bonds, striving to loosen them. Her hands were tied together in front of her, another rope running from them to either side, allowing her a little movement but no chance to escape.

"You're all right?" he breathed hoarsely.

"I'm fine. Oh, Maverick, they told me you were dead."

"I'm a long ways from that. Where are the others from your ranch?"

"I wish I knew. I don't think they're in the house, though. But be careful. There are men sleeping somewhere in it, on guard."

He had her hands free now, and held on to them to help her sit up. Then she was in his arms, her lips, warm and tremulous, on his own. Maverick held her close a moment, then sat down beside her in the darkness. Liquid fire seemed to course in his veins from the touch of her lips,

bringing elation and the certainty that he could accomplish whatever might be necessary tonight.

"I knew you were an honest man, Maverick, a gentleman, that day at the ranch. When the others were against you, that was proof."

She was whispering, close to him, emboldened by the concealing night to say things which she would not have voiced by daylight.

"I knew you were the person I've been waitin' for—all my life," Maverick retorted. "Though I'm just a saddle bum, without a cent to my name—"

"But a man," she whispered. Then, with a little catch in her voice. "Do you know what they plan, for tomorrow night—when the captain comes with the gold?"

"Pedro told me about it. I'm aimin' to put a little spoke in their wheel. I've sent word to the captain, and he'd ought to know about it by now."

"Pedro?" Her voice broke a little. "He is alive, then—faithful old Pedro?"

"Alive and in pretty good shape. They figured they'd done for him, but he'll come through."

She buried her head for a moment against his shoulder, and he felt her sobbing. But she did not ask about the other cowboys, old retainers of the ranch. Maverick's silence concerning them was confirmation of her fears.

She had, she explained, been brought directly here by a small detachment of riders, along with the housekeeper and maids from the ranch. They had been together until in the afternoon, when, on Curley's orders, the maids had been taken to some other cabin for the night. Where it might be located she had no idea.

Boston had visited her briefly during the evening, to gloat, to assure her that Maverick was dead, and that he would be back later on. Then he had gone away, preparing for his midnight raid in which Maverick had taken a hand.

Of the cattle, driven away from the ranch, she knew nothing. They had followed more slowly, of course, and she had neither seen nor heard anything of them near here, though they might, of course, be somewhere quite close at hand.

"I am so glad that you have gotten word to the captain," she sighed. "Poor Tommy! If he knew what had happened to me, he would be frantic."

"You know him, then?"

"Oh, you didn't know, did you? He's my cousin."

Maverick digested this in silence for a minute. It was rather startling news, in a way, but certainly nothing incredible.

"Well, I can say one thing for him—he's a man, and a mighty square shooter," Maverick said.

He was vaguely uneasy. Old Curley had twice as strong a force as he had counted on, and there were plenty of ways of making trouble, here in this sinister Pass of Dead Men. There were a lot of loose threads to be gathered up, even with the help of the soldiers. And it was possible that his message might not have gotten through to the captain.

He stirred, aware that he was tired, doubly conscious of the need for action. For a few minutes, talking with Dolores, having her at his side, he had temporarily forgotten all else. But, even with the clouds and the canyon, darkness would last only another hour or so, and it would pay to take advantage of it.

"We'll have to be traveling," he said. "Are you dressed for it, or not?"

"My shoes are here somewhere. As soon as I slip them on, I will be ready."

Maverick groped about the floor at the foot of the cot, found them and handed them to her. Then they stood up together.

"I'm ready, Maverick," she said simply.

It wasn't going to be so simple. A startled yell sounded from somewhere. Maverick ran for the door, Dolores behind him, then reeled back from the smashing blow of a clubbed gun as he reached it. He half saw, half sensed it coming, and threw

up an arm and dodged, so that the blow was glancing. Otherwise, it would have felled him like an ox.

As it was, he was momentarily dazed and sent staggering back. From outside came a fresh yell, then the sleepers were awake, swarming around the cabin. A lantern gleamed suddenly, throwing its light in at the open doorway.

Maverick heard, as from a long way off, the startled, soft little cry Dolores gave; glimpsed the play of light on that gun in the doorway, knew that it was raising. Then Dolores was between him and the gun, her arm about him, steadying him, urging him along. His brain still in a fog, Maverick followed her lead unquestioningly.

They were at a stairs, going up. He stumbled, regained his footing; his head cleared. With a new energy, he ran, Dolores beside him, and gained the top of the stairs, where a door stood closed. It opened at his touch, but men were starting up the stairs behind them.

Maverick turned, jerking at his gun, and sent a swift hail of bullets sweeping down the stairway. That had stopped them, he noted grimly—but not for long.

20. *Fox and Hounds*

MAVERICK TRIED the door, found it a heavy one, and slammed it shut, bolting it. For the moment, they were safe enough.

But that was merely the lull before the storm. Whether Curley's crew attacked now, in force, or decided to wait for daylight, the situation in either case was all in their favor. They had the house surrounded, some twenty odd of them.

Dolores was close beside him in the darkness. There was no sound from below, but that might mean that they were creeping up the stairs, massing for a sudden rush at the door. There might be enemies up here on this floor, men who had been asleep up here. They had to find out.

Prowling through the rooms, which were almost pitch-black, was not what the cowboy would have classed as fun. But they were empty. Three of them. A faint, scraping noise at a window was warning. Maverick, peering out, saw a vague form looming up. Throwing up the window, he had

reached out and shoved the ladder loose before the man on it quite understood what was happening. There was a crash, a howl, as the ladder toppled.

"Maybe they won't be anxious to try that again right away," Maverick nodded.

The fact that Dolores was with him was probably saving him some bad moments. Since Boston took such an interest in her, Curley was being careful that she should not be hurt by chance bullets. That would probably prevent an attack in force, at least until it was light enough to see what they were doing.

Before that time came, they had to be out of there. If daylight found them still prisoners, their chances of escape were as good as gone.

For the moment, following the episode of the ladder, there was a lull in the proceedings. Maverick guessed that they had decided to wait for daylight, since there was no reason for hurry on their part, and all the advantage would be with them then. Now they could merely keep watch outside, to prevent any attempt to escape.

There were four ways out. A window in each of the three rooms, and the stairway. All of them, of course, were guarded. But it had to be one of them.

To swing out a window in the night, drop, and

get away, under such conditions, would have been a risky enough business if he had been alone. With Dolores, it was just about out of the question. Yet they'd keep a couple of guards on the stair, just as a matter of course—

Maverick grinned to himself. There were no beds on this floor, but there was an old blanket in one corner. It would do nicely.

"We'll make a rope," he explained to Dolores. "Just any sort of a rope. Or will we? I haven't got a knife, and of course you haven't."

The problem was more easily solved than he had hoped, however. The blanket proved to be badly frayed around the edges, with occasional tears. It wasn't much trouble to start ripping it, and presently it was in long strips. These, tied together, made a passable rope.

"Are we going to try sliding down from a window?" Dolores asked. "Do you think we can make it? They'll be there to grab us as soon as we touch the ground."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Maverick agreed. "So we won't try it. Go into one of the other rooms and raise the window a few inches. Make a lot of noise about it, but give the impression that you're tryin' to be quiet—if you can work both jobs together."

Dolores asked no questions. Remembering that

this window had raised softly, Maverick moved it very cautiously after he heard the window on the opposite side of the house begin to screech in protest. Every watcher outside would hear that noise, and for the moment, at least, their attention would be centered on it.

Off in the east a faint glow marked the oncoming dawn. On the heights above the Pass it would be a murky grayness in which, on the plains, cattle herds would begin to stir, preparatory to feeding, and cooks at chuck wagons and in their own kitchens would be sleepily bending above smoking stoves, to a rattle of pots and pans. A sleepy bird twitter sounded somewhere as a herald to the coming day. But deep gloom would shroud the canyon for some time yet.

For all that, there was no time to waste. Dolores, acting on instructions, closed the window again, admitting it to be a hopeless gesture. Maverick waited a minute, then had her repeat the trick in the second bedroom. While she did so, he slid his own window wide open and dropped the rope out, letting it dangle, fastening one end to an old chair. He held his breath as the length of it slipped down, almost to the ground.

There was no sound. Maverick's breath seeped out in relief. It was doubly dark in this corner, which was the reason why he had chosen it. He

crept softly into the room where Dolores had opened the window halfway, and where she now crouched in the darkness, scarcely daring to breathe.

Maverick waited beside her, while he counted to a hundred. Still no sound which would indicate that a guard had discovered that hanging rope.

Beside the old blanket had been a stone, nearly as big as Maverick's fist. And a few other odd collections of junk as well. Now, leaning out the window, Maverick tossed the stone, and heard it hit fifty yards away from the side of the house.

It was just a little sound, but in the tense silence of the night it seemed big. Just the sort of sound that might be made by someone bent on going quietly in the night, kicking a stone or stumbling in the gloom.

Instantly he could hear men hurrying to investigate, and then, nearly a minute later, a yell attested that someone had at last discovered the rope hanging down from the open window. Old Curley's voice arose, soft, yet with a shrill penetration, mouthing curses in three languages—Spanish, Indian and English.

"You imbeciles would rush away from your post when one window was opened with a bang, and give them a chance to escape from the other

side of the house," he yelled, with verbal embellishments. "After them! Everybody. They can not have gone far."

Outside, for a moment, there was wild uproar and confusion. Maverick was out the door at the top of the stairs, Dolores close beside him. Gun ready in one hand, he moved swiftly to the bottom, eyes straining in the gloom. Off at the side, a lamp cast a sickly yellow light, smoking and badly in need of trimming, the acrid stench of it permeating the room. But the guards set to watch the stairway had dashed outside as well, convinced that their prisoners had escaped by the window.

They were almost at the outer door when Maverick heard someone coming on the run, yelling that it might be a trick. Several others, at that call, were turning back toward the house. Lanterns danced grotesquely as the men ran, sending shafts of light in weird patterns, flashing on the windows. There was no chance to get outside now, and in another moment the house would be swarming with men.

Maverick's questing eyes discovered another door, an open trapdoor in the floor. A moment later they were scurrying down a musty stairway to a basement, leaving the door as it had been.

Men were pounding up the stairs above them now, bursting into the rooms on the second floor.

Maverick, hearing them shout, held his breath. Would they notice that the door had not been bolted, or would they forget that in their excitement?

Apparently the discrepancy did not occur to them. The prisoners had really escaped, and evidently by the rope, as first suspected. Outside, the hunt was being taken up again.

Cautiously, Maverick explored the cellar. It was a room some fifteen feet square, dug out of the dirt and left that way, except for the foundation walls surrounding it. These were solid, offering no hope of escape that way.

The room was used as a storeroom, with various supplies—mostly boxes of canned and dried goods, and a few haunches of meat, piled or hung about—filling more than half the room. It had a slightly musty, rather pleasant odor.

"How do we get out of here?" Dolores asked.

"I'm thinking of leaving you here for a while," Maverick said thoughtfully. "I've got to get away, to try and make sure that everything is all right with the captain. But it would be twice as hard for both of us, and if they're convinced that we both have got away—as I'll be at pains to make them think, once I'm away from the house—then this is the last place they will ever think to look for you. You can stay here—hide behind some of these

piles of boxes, if anybody comes—till I get back. That may be night again, but I think it will be safest, that way."

"I suppose so," she agreed, after a moment, and he caught the disappointment in her voice. "I'd just slow you down, be in your way."

"I'm not thinkin' of that," Maverick said earnestly. "I'd like mighty well to have you along—but this looks like the best bet, all around."

It did. Had they really escaped from the house a quarter of an hour ago, they could have shaken the pursuit while the darkness still held. But now, to get out—well, that would probably mean running into gunfire, and plenty of it.

But he had to go. Not alone to try and make sure that things went all right with the soldiers, but for Dolores' sake as well. If he stayed here with her, then, with the coming of day, the searchers would be almost sure to find Midnight. Discovery of his horse would lead them to revise their opinions, and if they were half as smart as he figured Curley to be, they'd decide that the fugitives were still hiding somewhere in the house. Which would be pay-off.

If he could slip away, get on Midnight, let them have proof, later on, that he was at large, it would never occur to them that Dolores had not escaped as well.

Above stairs, things were quieting down again. It was now or never. Leaving Dolores, Maverick slipped up the stairs. He had to get away from the house without being seen, or that would spoil everything. Then, as he reached the head of the stairs, voices came from out in the night.

"Looks to me, Curley, like mebby they *didn't* get away, yet. This is a hard place to get out of—and the whole thing's sort of fishy. They might still be hidin' in the house."

"Yes, that seems a logical thing to me, too," Curley admitted. "They may be gone, but, at any rate, it will do no harm to search the whole house, now, and to do it well."

21. *Treed*

MAVERICK TENSED. Old Curley was altogether too smooth. He'd given him credit for being a dangerous opponent, but this was worse than he'd counted on. In another minute they would be back in the house, and then he'd have to make a running fight of it. In which case, all the advantages he had hoped for by the ruse would be lost, with an excellent chance of victory for Curley's gang.

For a moment, however, the two outside had stopped to call a few other searchers in to help them. Maverick knew that he could make a dash for it now, with a good chance of getting by them before they could stop him. But that would confirm their suspicions that Dolores was still in the house.

Something crashed suddenly in the underbrush, not far from the house. Instantly there was a yell, excited questioning. One man's voice arose hoarsely.

"There is somet'ing run there, yes, and hide. He go that way, or maybe she."

"Sure it wasn't one of you blundering fools?" Curley's voice rasped.

Assurances were voluminous and earnest that none of them had caused the disturbance.

"It must be them," Curley grated. "Mebby they were hidin' in the house and just slipped across to there now. Looks like it."

He broke into a torrent of Mexican which sent his men scurrying again. Maverick grinned. His luck was holding. This was the break he'd been hoping for, and he had to make it convincing.

He was halfway across the open, a dim figure in the gloom, before they discovered him. Someone yelled excitedly, and Maverick answered with a shot. That was convincing proof. Several bullets came raining back, hastily fired, falling wide in the dark, as he gained the shelter of the brush beyond.

At least, though they knew about where he was now, he had achieved his first purpose. They were convinced that that other noise had been made by Dolores, slipping across to the brush ahead of him. And now the search was centering hotly in the vicinity of this one spot.

Spurred on by Curley's bitter tirade of abuse, they were combing the brush altogether too thor-

oughly for comfort. That grayness in the east was growing, and while gloom would hold here in the canyon, under such conditions, until mid-afternoon, it would soon be light enough so that they could readily detect a moving figure. It was time to be getting out of here, if he was going to.

And now the truth of Curley's earlier remark was borne in upon him. This wasn't an easy place to get out of—especially with a couple of dozen wolves hot on his trail. Sheer ledges on two sides were unscalable, and going up or down the canyon had plenty of disadvantages.

For the most part, there were no trees here worthy of the name. Not far off, one tall pine stood, trying to thrust its head out of the canyon, and two or three smaller, stunted ones were scattered about. But the main covering was brush—rather thorny bushes growing about as high as a man's head, so unpleasant that even a fugitive couldn't crawl under them or well into their shelter, but could merely skulk around their fringes.

Which meant that he could be easily found as soon as daylight strengthened. Found, without adequate cover, he couldn't even make a good fight of it. They'd mow him down with guns from several directions at once.

The searchers were trying to go quietly now,

but Maverick's ears, tonight, were like those of a wild animal. He heard men moving, slipped ahead. Turned for different cover as others loomed at the side.

This was fox and hounds with a vengeance. Lucky they didn't have a pack of hounds to put on his trail, or to bark every time he made a move. But, here in this grim Pass of Dead Men, dogs would have been rather out of place.

Overhead, the clouds had settled to a solid mass of grayness, fighting back the growing light, dropping until they seemed to rest upon the earth. That much was all in his favor. He'd had plenty of lucky breaks—but there had been plenty not so lucky, too.

Someone yelled; a bullet cut a branch six inches from his nose. Maverick plunged ahead, and now the chase was hot on his heels again. But here again he had one advantage. They made a lot more noise than he did, confusing themselves. Still he wasn't quite able to shake them off, to elude them completely.

His ears warned him that others were closing in from ahead. They'd have him completely trapped in a minute, at this rate. Maverick quested frantically, for now the gloom hampered him, blinding him to what might have been a good

chance for a break, if he had been able to see where to go.

One chance! He slipped ahead and reached the big pine tree. Someone was panting almost at his heels. Reaching high up, Maverick clutched a big, outjutting limb and pulled himself straight up, wriggling softly into its shelter. He climbed for a few feet, taking advantage of the noise on the ground, then crouched silent among the branches as several men gathered in a group at the foot of the tree.

If they hadn't seen him, didn't suspect that he had taken to the tree—

But that hope was rudely blasted by Curley's own voice.

"He's in the tree," the old renegade informed them. "We have got him now, yes."

Curley wasn't guessing. He must have been where he could see something. At least, he had hit upon the truth. Now he was cornered.

Darkness still held, however, and the branches of the big pine were thick. And a man up a tree, especially such a man as Maverick Charlie Molloy, with whose prowess the gang was well acquainted, might prove to be a very mixed blessing.

That was demonstrated by their consideration of the next question. They had him treed, now, which meant, technically speaking, that he was

their prisoner. But all of them conceded that he might be obstinate about such a fine point of law, and the matter of getting him was something else again.

"Better that two or three of you climb up after him," Curley suggested.

There were no volunteers. Curley must have looked expectantly at someone, for Maverick heard a vigorous protest.

"No need tuh look that way at me, Curley. Not any. I signed up tuh run guns, when yuh come after me, back in Arizony, but danged if I'm going to climb up after that hombre and get a bullet for breakfast."

"But it is the best way," Curley argued. "If he shoots at anyone, we will all shoot at him."

"Yeah—which 'll do me one hell of a lot of good—afterward. No, thanks. Though, if yuh want to climb, I'll make a second, Curley."

It was a challenge, but Curley plainly had as little taste for it as the American renegade.

"Perhaps you are right. There must be some other way."

"Why not peeck him off weeth our guns, when it gets lighter, eh?"

"Won't do. Them limbs are too thick," the American argued. "Dark as it'll stay all day, he could hide up there like a squirrel, and mebby

get several of us while we was whangin' at him, once it's light."

"That is true," Curley agreed. "We should get him now, and soon. He is a slippery customer, yes, and the longer we wait, the more his chance of escaping. There must be some way."

There was a moment's silence, broken by a new voice.

"I know how to get him down. Me and Sam, here, we used tuh work in the lumber woods, up north. It's a right good joke on a tenderfoot, when he's new tuh the woods, tuh send him up a tall tree tuh look for something. Then a couple good axe-men get to work on the tree. Good choppers can cut it down before he can climb halfway to the bottom, and he goes over with it."

"And what happens to him, up the tree?" Curley queried interestedly.

The speaker guffawed.

"Depends. If he has the brains to hang tight, usual the branches protect him pretty well. If he gets nervous and jumps, or somethin', mebby he gets bunged up considerable."

"But this tree, it is bigger than you would choose for that sort of a trick, no?"

"Yeah, but that don't matter. If he wants tuh come down, let him come. Sam and me can cut it."

"It seems a good idea," Curley agreed. "Get to work, then. And the rest of you, spread out, be ready. If he tries to shoot at the choppers, you will see the flash, and can pick him out like a squirrel."

Maverick had listened with mixed emotions to these preparations. It would be a little while before they could fell a tree of this size, but they would do it soon enough. And, as Curley had pointed out by way of warning to him, firing down blindly through the branches would merely seal his own doom.

There was no other tree to which he could swing across. To climb down or surrender meant just one thing, and there would be no delay about that either. Once he got his hands on him, Curley would take no chances, and the word mercy was not in his vocabulary.

When the tree went down, if he should be lucky enough to take the drop without harm, those gunmen would be posted, ready for him. He might put up a fight, but, even so, he could hardly hope to get more than one before the rest of them riddled him with bullets.

"This," Maverick reflected grimly, "is what might be called facing a firing squad at sunrise —even if the sun won't rise today!"

22. *Puma Partner*

ALREADY, axes had been secured, and Maverick could hear the thud of the blows, coming with a steady cadence. The two ex-woodsmen knew how to use axes, there could be no doubt of that, and it would be only a matter of minutes until the tree would go crashing down.

When that happened, his best chance, Maverick calculated, would be to be higher up, where the branches were smaller, but also thicker. He began to climb, his movements muffled by the chopping below. The gray in the east was getting bigger now, taking on a lighter tinge, but it would still be quite a while before there was much daylight here in the canyon. The choppers worked by lantern light.

Maverick quickened his climbing a little. Was there a possible chance of getting out on a limb and swinging across to the top of the ledge? That would be fooling them neatly. But, another ten feet up he saw that the seeming chance was an

illusion of the light. No limb was high enough nor long enough, to say nothing of being strong enough, at that height.

From close above his head came a snarling, spitting growl. Maverick stopped suddenly, tensed. Peering up, he stared into a pair of greenish eyes, not ten feet above his head. The swish of a tail came to his ears, though he could see nothing more, save a dark outline stretched along a limb.

His scalp prickling, Maverick remained motionless. His first impulse was to retreat as hastily as possible, but instinct warned him that that would be far more dangerous than to remain where he was. It would not only betray his position and perhaps his new apprehension to those on the ground, it might cause the big cat above to go into action.

For that was a big puma, or mountain lion. Maverick had had experience with the big pussies before, and was in no doubt. From the bulk it made along the limb, it was a very big one—a huge one.

He understood, now, what had made that crashing in the underbrush a few minutes before—which the searchers had mistaken for a noise made by either Dolores or himself. The puma had come prowling up the canyon, had approached this

close to the cabin, and had, probably, been surprised and surrounded by the sudden ring of searchers.

Disliking the whole proceeding as heartily as Maverick could, the puma had thrown caution to the winds in a jump which had made the noise, but, unlike himself, it had been able to take to the tree without being discovered.

And now they were fellow refugees up the tree! The thought twisted Maverick's lips in a mirthless grin.

After the first tingling shock of surprise, he knew that he had nothing to fear from the lion if he remained where he was and climbed no higher. An arrant coward, the puma would not think of attacking him unless forced to it. Though, cornered, it would fight furiously if he came closer.

Well, he wouldn't annoy the big pussy. It would have enough to irritate it to a fighting mood very soon now. Already the tree was beginning to sway a little.

When it went down, those on the ground were due for a surprise. When the puma came leaping out, at least several of them would have their attention diverted to it for a few moments. Which would be all in his favor.

He could see now which way the tree was going to fall—out away from the cliff. That was most

logical from the standpoint of those below. Gun in one hand, Maverick clutched the limb, his arm wrapped around the trunk of the tree, poised so that he would land standing up rather than head down, if the tree fell as it was intended.

A yell sounded down below, as the big giant swayed a moment and started down with a swish which seemed to grow to a roar. The rush of it, from sixty feet up in the air, was dizzying. Maverick hung on, feeling the long, sweeping jar as it struck on the cushioning line of branches; then it came to rest, with scarcely a jar. He remained upright as the tree turned and settled.

The puma had not been prepared for that experience as he had been. With a frenzied snarl of rage and terror, it burst out of the tangle of branches as the tree crashed, heading blindly, straight for the biggest cluster of men on watch.

Startled, terrified by the onrush, two or three of them discharged their guns wildly and turned to run. Almost everyone on the ground was thrown into confusion, and, slipping out as quietly as possible, Maverick was making the most of his opportunities.

He had almost made it before someone sighted him and sent a hasty bullet which was wide of the mark. Others peppered after him, but it was mostly chance shooting now. Dodging, twisting,

he was only a dim figure in the gloom ahead as the others, with the puma already out of sight, turned to take up the pursuit.

Elation filled Maverick. That had seemed a bad spot at first, and, but for the mountain lion and the distraction it had furnished, it might have been pretty tough. Now he was ahead of them, and with any of the luck he'd been having tonight, he could reach Midnight and laugh at them.

Despite the puma, it wasn't likely that they would suspect Dolores of being hidden in the cabin. They would figure that she, too, had escaped, that Maverick had deliberately led them astray to give her a chance to get off safely.

It shouldn't be so difficult to hide out during the day and wait for the inevitable. They figured that would bring triumph to themselves, finish the hated Federals, and enable them to go ahead on this new glory road of revolution which Boston was so anxious to travel.

Instead, the captain would be ready for them, and the surprise would be a real one, doubly unpleasant for the renegades. Maverick's chief job of the day would be to make contact with the soldiers and give them any added information they needed.

The bird-song, which usually swelled even in this bleak canyon at dawn, was oddly absent now,

stilled by the gunfire which had echoed and re-echoed for the last hour. It was light enough so that one could see dimly, dark enough to be confusing.

A rabbit scurried suddenly in the gloom, giving Maverick an unpleasant moment. It might have been a searcher, returning. But he was about to where he had left Midnight. Another minute and he'd be in the saddle—

He came to the spot, stopped. Midnight was not there.

"Señor—the hands up! It would be bettair!"

Maverick acted instinctively. One of the searchers, coming farther than the others, had stumbled upon Midnight and had recognized the great black horse. Hearing the shooting and sounds of pursuit, he had guessed rightly that Maverick would be heading for his horse.

To move Midnight elsewhere and wait for him to walk into the trap was a simple matter. And now, of course, he had a gun on him.

That was the logic of the situation. Maverick had been in too many tight places in the last few days to stop and think logically. If he had, it would have brought him to one conclusion, from which there was no escape. To be made a prisoner now meant being executed within the next few minutes.

Faced by this certainty, he leaped aside, jerking at his own gun as he did so. The other man fired. He wasn't quite quick enough, nor was Maverick. The bullet burned along his shoulder, making a gash which plowed in the flesh and sent blood spurting. Another inch, and it would have been deep enough to tear his cords and shoulder muscles and cripple him seriously.

As it was, the gun almost dropped from his hand in the shock of the hit, but he knew almost as soon as the bullet had gone on that it was merely a superficial wound. But that moment had been long enough for another bullet to drive at him, and this, too, was a hit.

Not a flesh wound, this time. Something far more serious. Fired hastily, it struck Maverick's gun-barrel, just ahead of the chamber, and spun it out of his hand. And then the gunman was closer, raising the weapon for a finishing shot.

Maverick leaped. He felt the burn of powder smoke in his face; the blast of the gun, close up to his ear, was almost deafening; but the shot was a miss. And now Maverick's fist was coming, his left fist, still as good as ever and almost as fast as the gun. It caught the renegade on the point of the chin, flinging him back. There was a sharp little thud as he struck and lay, stretched limply.

He had struck his head on a small boulder as

he fell, Maverick saw, and, if the jolt to the chin hadn't knocked him cold, that crack on the skull had finished it up nicely. He'd be lucky if he woke up in an hour.

That had been short and hot while it lasted. Maverick paused a moment, his muscles trembling from the reaction, and wiped an arm across his face. His shoulder was painful, bleeding, but he could tell now that it wasn't serious, and it probably wouldn't bleed very long. At any rate, there was nothing he could do about it for the moment, and he had to be getting out of here. The others were coming up fast.

He saw his own gun, lying on the ground, and swept it up, then tossed it away in disgust. That bullet had jammed into the chamber, twisting the whole thing and rendering the weapon useless.

Maverick helped himself to his opponent's gun. In the gloom, Midnight whickered. He was standing behind a large boulder, still saddled, eager to go as Maverick swung into the saddle. Elation rose in the cowboy. They were behind him now, though several of them, hoofbeats told him, had secured horses. Well, they'd find a race on their hands, a hopeless race, with him mounted on Midnight.

The black horse swung into an open path up the canyon and settled to running in earnest. But,

judging from the sounds, there were some fast horses behind. Good thing he had Midnight.

They swept around a turn and, in the half light, Maverick's heart jumped to his throat. Coming at a headlong gallop toward him were Boston and his hopeful crew.

23. *Noose Notion*

THEY WERE CLOSE at hand before he saw them, due to the gloom of the slow-breaking day, the towering walls of the canyon and the noise of the riders coming behind. Death, ahead and behind.

Maverick was startled. It was as unpleasant a surprise as finding a rattlesnake already sleeping in one's blankets. For the time being, he had completely forgotten Boston and his worthies.

The citizens of Los Pinos had been giving them plenty of trouble when he had left, and Maverick had hoped that they'd keep them bottled up, their attention fully occupied. With such a man as Boston to lead them, that had seemed a logical enough supposition. Pancho Vargas, or someone with the ability which he fancied himself to possess, must have taken a hand.

Whatever had happened, they were coming, and they had already seen him, glimpsed his pur-

suers behind, and thus learned that he was a fugitive, one to be stopped.

"Which is a notion that don't fit in with my plans, not at all," Maverick muttered, casting a wry glance around.

He had to do something, and there wasn't much time in which to do it. On the right, as he rode, was the canyon wall—unbroken here, offering no hope of escape that way. To the left was shelter in plenty—the broken, tumbled bed of the canyon floor, ranging from fifty to two hundred yards in width here—covered with a tangled growth of brush and trees, scattered boulders and fissures. The only trouble was to reach it.

For, between those who came behind and those who rode in front, the side of the trail was a steep drop down—a drop which no horse could take.

Midnight came to a plunging stop. Before the drop was reached, Maverick was out of the saddle. Below, as nearly as he could tell in the gloom, it was twenty feet down to a secure footing, and it might be farther, for the light was deceptive. Too far to risk a drop—under any other conditions.

He swung over, holding on by his hands, his toes questing for a possible hold. Only the vacant face of the cliff met them. But, just below them, arose the tops of a bush, growing a little farther

down, clinging to some crack in the rock. Maverick let go.

The brush slapped his legs, hit against his face. His clutching hands closed desperately, finding a grip. His right held a good-sized branch, which promptly snapped off, brittle with age. The other bent, swaying with his weight, then broke as well.

But they had checked his descent momentarily, and he landed on his feet, jarred but unhurt. Already, up above, the two crews were meeting. Faces appeared at the edge of the trail; a gun blazed down.

Maverick ducked back into the cover of brush and trees. Bullets were still questing for him, but it was purely a matter of guesswork.

The trouble was that it wouldn't be so for long. Some of these renegades knew the country better than he did, and his ears told them that they were already swarming down a path, not fifty feet below where he had taken the drop. They would spread out across the canyon and beat up.

He had figured on going down, rather than up, for it seemed to offer the best possibilities. That was now out of the question. Others were riding up, looking for a place to descend, in an attempt to bottle him up. The best bet would be to cross over and out at one of the coulees on the far side.

The next ten minutes were slow ones. Twice

he had to retreat, to circle around fissures in the earth. They were dark, dank, filled with white-fronded ferns and unhealthy-seeming vegetation.

It had been uncannily quiet for a while now. Which meant that they were looking for him, going almost as stealthily as Indians. Which was far more nerve-racking than when they came in the open.

Here the traveling was better. Ahead was a narrow canyon which seemed to offer possibilities. He turned up it, finding the going increasingly easy. Sheer walls arose on either side, the bottom was carpeted with small stones, but there was little vegetation, no breaks to hamper him. Behind, someone appeared, fired a hasty shot and sent up a wild yell.

Let them come! Maverick raced around a bend and was out of sight again. The canyon still stretched ahead. And then, in the slow-gathering light of this place, he saw that he was trapped.

The canyon ended in a sheer, blank wall!

Closer inspection showed that his first guess had been correct. The only way out of here was the way he had come, and already several men were coming that way. Ahead, the walls were at least thirty feet high, so sheer and steep that there was no chance to climb up or down. In some places they were much higher—a little more

broken, but still with no chance to get more than halfway up.

This, then, was the pay-off. Maverick considered the possibilities coolly. The best that he could hope for was to put up a good fight at the finish. To hold out as long as possible. Not that the latter would do much good, for he could hope for no rescue from anyone else. But he had been in tight places before, and while there was life, there was hope.

He didn't have much hope. If there had been any possible avenue of escape, that would have been different. As far as he could see, there was none. And these wolves now baying at his heels would never be content until he was dead.

There was, however, a chance to make a good stand, to give a good account of himself. Halfway up one of the cliffs was a spot which might have been designed for making just such a stand. Twenty feet higher overhead, the rock wall reached out for several feet, forming a roof overhead. Another point of rock jutted up, behind which he could find good shelter.

To reach it took some stiff climbing, with none too good holds for hands or feet. But Maverick swarmed up in a hurry, before the raiders could round that last turn and pick him off like a spider

on a wall. Reaching his little fort, he breathed a sigh of relief.

It appeared to be as good as he had hoped for. That overhang above sheltered him, so that they couldn't circle around, get above him, and shoot down from the top. The spike of rock in front sheltered him from other bullets reasonably well. Of course, there was always the chance that some sharpshooter could find a vantage point, somewhere in or along the rim of this little side canyon, from which he could pick him off. That, in fact, was pretty nearly inevitable.

But that would take time. And as for those below, if they tried to charge up and get him, he could pick them off as fast as they came.

They seemed to know this as well as he did, without having it demonstrated. No one was making the mistake of rushing around that last bend. But now guns came poking around, cautiously; a few shots drummed experimentally off the rock. Little chips and spurts flew as the bullets hit.

So far, nothing to worry about. They were close, but he was pretty well sheltered.

Then he saw a large, flat stone which moved slowly up the canyon floor. One, perhaps two men were behind it, trying to find a good place from which to shoot. The light, even here in the depths of this canyon, was improving, so that everyone

could see pretty well. And it would be a long time until darkness again.

Maverick sent a couple of quick shots smashing against the stone. It jerked a little, and rock-dust spurted where the bullets hit, but that was all. It was too thick to be smashed, and amply big to shelter the men behind it.

Things had quieted down. Which meant that they were circling, some of them, to get onto the rim and try picking him off from up there. Maverick improved the breathing space for a better look around. If there were only some way out—

His breath quickened a little, then he shook his head. There was a possibility—with the right equipment, given the right chance. Neither of which he had.

Ten feet to the right was a fissure in the rock floor which he hadn't noticed before, since the gloom had lain thick along there, shadowed by the looming wall above. It was a dozen feet to the bottom of this fissure and, as far as he could see, it ran along down the canyon floor for a considerable distance. If he was in it, it might offer a chance to get past the guards below, make another break for freedom. Or it might not.

In either case, he couldn't hope to try it. To reach it now, he would have to climb out in the open, go down, cross over. He'd be picked off a

dozen times in making the attempt. And it would be risky business, even without any gunmen to interfere. With a rope, he could get down in there pretty well. Without one, he would probably land with a broken leg, or worse.

Still, it was too bad that he hadn't seen it before. It would have been worth trying.

A bullet smashed against the sliver of stone in front of him; rock-dust spurted into his eyes. Maverick jerked back. That one had been close.

Another followed it, and now he saw where it was coming from. Two hundred feet away, along the rim of the canyon, a gunman was lying prone, getting the range. Judging by those last two shots, he might be able to line a bullet in where it would score a hit, with a few more tries.

Maverick flung a shot back. It was answered by the wham of the rifle again. No good that way. From the opposite rim another gun cracked, and this, too, was close. They were getting all around him, sheltering themselves from his gunfire, closing the circle of lead.

It was that first rifle that worried Maverick. It had to be stopped. Maverick changed position a little, conscious of the pain in his shoulder, where that bullet had sliced across it before. It hadn't bled very much, and as a wound it didn't amount

to much, but it was a grim warning of what might come.

There was one way of getting that rifleman, he decided. If he were to stand three feet to the left, he could probably see him. But to stand out there meant exposing himself to the gunfire of the others.

But it was either that or having the rifleman get him in another try or so. Once more the wham of the rifle echoed, and this time it came at an angle that missed the sliver entirely, coming behind it, failing to hit Maverick by a fraction of an inch, as its mark on the wall behind him gave grim testimony. It was either stop that fellow or be stopped.

Maverick slipped out of his coat and thrust it suddenly out, to the right of his shelter. In the same moment he stepped to the left.

A sudden fusillade of shots spattered from half a dozen directions, but for the first moment most of them were directed at his coat. It wasn't calming to the nerves, under such conditions, but Maverick set his jaw and focused his attention on that jutting rifle-barrel. Then his own shot lined back.

Bullets were after him like hornets on the war trail as he ducked back to shelter. One clipped through his hair, sending a lock falling before his eyes; he felt another pluck at his pants' leg. But

the rifle was silent. It had wavered; then, as he watched, it slid farther into view, poised a moment, and dropped, turning and twisting, to the canyon floor below.

Other guns were volleying now—a sudden, desperate burst of lead, but no one else had attained such a vantage point as that one gunman. And, knowing the stripe of these with whom he dealt, Maverick knew that they would hesitate long before taking that man's place.

Given a few breaks, he might hold them off indefinitely. This was a better place than he had hoped for.

Something was dropping down from above—Too late Maverick saw it, tried to throw it off, to jerk back to safety. A noose in the end of a rope, already settling over his neck, jerking tight.

24. *Midnight*

IN THAT first flashing moment of incredulity, Maverick knew that he was dealing now with a man of more than ordinary ability with a rope. Since the overhanging ledge above protected him from bullets, he had been confident that it would save him from other forms of attack as well. Which seemed in a fair way to prove a fatal error on his part.

Whoever had tossed that loop down had worked on chance, for he could not see what he was doing. He would have to toss it down, with a wide swing that would send the loop back to where Maverick crouched. The chance of such a blind cast making a catch, the first time, was hardly more than one in a hundred. Yet, partly due to luck, partly to the unexpectedness of it all, that chance had worked.

It was more probable that the rope artist had made the try, not with much hope of success, but to try and startle the cowboy, to distract his at-

tention, so that one of the gunmen might get in a good shot. And there was, of course, always the possibility of a lucky throw.

Such as he had made. The swift jerk, the tightening of the noose about his neck told Maverick that the man up above had been ready to take advantage of the breaks if he got them. And he had them.

Already the rope was tight, with a strong pull from above. Such a pull that it was impossible to loosen the noose and throw it off. Having made a catch, Maverick knew just what his captor intended. To jerk hard enough to pull him out of his shelter. Once out of it, he would be a fair target for every man's gun. Swinging in mid-air, he could be held by two or three men, and either strangled, riddled with bullets, or dropped to fall a dozen feet and suffer the same fate.

With a little more warning, Maverick, caught as he was, could have evaded the last part, at least. His hands were free, and with them he could have grabbed the rope and, pulling down, feet braced against the rock, have kept himself from being dragged out. But here again the element of surprise was fatal. He was being pulled out already, and it was too late to stop it.

But, however grim the situation, Maverick's mind was still working. He might be able to add

a little to the surprise party himself. It wasn't much of a chance—hardly more than one in a hundred—but it was his only one.

With a jump, Maverick was aiding the man above in his intention to swing him out into space. That jump had the advantage of bringing several feet of slack in the rope, and as he swung out, both his hands closed on the rope, above his neck, relieving the strain and the danger of a broken neck.

The swing of the jump, the slack in the rope could have but one effect. As he came to the end, there was a terrific jerk on the rope. Unless the man up above was prepared for this—

He wasn't. Such a terrific jerk, coming when it did, was more than he had counted on. He might have let go of the rope, as he had probably planned on doing soon, and let Maverick smash downward. But, holding tight as he had been in exerting a strong pull on the rope, he was caught in his own trap.

Maverick heard a strangled yell of surprise and terror; then the man on the other end of the rope was being dragged over the edge of the cliff above. Probably he had been balanced rather precariously to start with to make such a cast as he had done. Now he was sliding over.

The drumming guns had stopped. Horror had

apparently gripped the spectators to this sudden stark piece of drama, leaving them momentarily paralyzed.

Maverick's swing had taken him out over that fissure which he had seen before. Now he was dropping into it. The momentary pull which the other man had exerted on the rope brought him to its top before his own fall began. Then he was shooting down and into it.

The man on the other end of the rope had smashed down on the rocky floor of the canyon. With a jerk, the rope tightened in Maverick's hands, unpleasantly close about his neck, wrenching his armpits. He swung in sharply against the side of the fissure wall, hanging there.

Then, as the rope slid a little with the pull, he dropped a matter of inches and was on solid footing. A moment later he had wrenched the rope loose from about his neck.

That last jerk of the rope had broken his fall, probably saving him a bad one. He was bruised from the slam against the rocky wall, but, beyond a few scratches and minor aches, it was nothing serious.

Steadying himself, Maverick gave an experimental jerk at the rope. It came tumbling into his hands, loose now. Sweeping it into a pile, he ran down the fissure. It wouldn't be long before

the bandits would recover from their surprise, and he had to be out of here—if there was any way out—before they sent more lead raining down from directly overhead.

He heard hoarse yells, but confusion reigned for the moment. He had made fifty feet, a hundred. Still the fissure wound on, a dozen feet deep, three or four feet wide here. Then, just below the turn in the canyon, it took a sharp drop of at least twenty feet.

But at least he had the rope, and a jutting point of stone was handy to tie it to. Maverick slid over the edge and dropped. Once in this deeper part of the fissure, there might be no way out, but that was the lesser of the two risks for the moment. There was no other choice.

He ran on down. It seemed to deepen here, grew so dark that he could scarcely see. Water dripped down from somewhere above.

Maverick slowed down. Nobody up above could see him down in this pit of gloom, and he knew with grim certainty that no one would follow him down here. They might trace the course of the fissure to its lower end, however, and, if there was any way out, be waiting for him when he got there.

Which made it necessary to get there before they could do it. Traveling up above, in the main

canyon, would be slow, as he knew from experience. That favored him.

Another hundred steps. Then, ahead, he saw that the fissure ended. It was still twenty feet to the top.

Here, however, it was wider, with a few bushes growing in cracks in the rock; along the sides were occasional breaks and steps. A minute later, he was once more on the floor of the Pass.

Somewhere up above, men were floundering through a tangle of trees and brush, complaining querulously, trying to get to the end of the fissure. When they got there, they wouldn't know whether he was still in it or not—not if he was careful to evade them.

In his present mood, Maverick was more than willing to go carefully, to keep them guessing. He'd had more than his fill of playing the part of the fox, with hounds hot on his trail. Besides, he wanted to get away, to turn his attention to other matters for a while.

He was hungry again. It seemed to him that he'd been hungry most of the time, lately. Meals had been irregular since he had started riding through this same long winding Pass of Dead Men, running guns into a friendly country. He had been an innocent party, with good intentions,

but he reflected grimly that hell must be receiving a thicker paving these days.

Working his way back up the big canyon again, he came to a spot where a path led back up to the trail—that same trail on which he had been forced to abandon Midnight. If he could only find Midnight again, or get any sort of a cayuse between his legs, it would help a lot. He was having to do a lot more foot work than usual. Being a cowboy, he disliked the use of his own legs to any such extent.

From the shelter of two close-crowding pine trees, he surveyed the trail warily. He could see down it for fifty yards, up it for twice that distance. It appeared to be deserted. Not quite. Just above it, where the hill sloped gently back, Midnight was placidly cropping grass.

This might be a trap, or it might not. The others might have been too busy chasing him to bother with his horse, or, trying to ride the big black, they might have become discouraged. Anyway, he had to try and get into the saddle again.

Maverick scuttled across the trail like a startled rabbit. There was no yell, no gunfire. Breathing a little easier, keeping in the shelter of trees and brush as much as possible, he worked a little closer to the feeding cayuse. Then, with fifty yards of open space ahead, he whistled softly.

At the sound, Midnight raised his head. Maverick whistled again. The big black turned toward him, took an impatient step or so and stopped.

The cowboy's eyes narrowed. So it was a trap. A rope was held in somebody's hands, and that man was waiting, gun ready. Well, he wouldn't walk into it quite that easily.

A slight sound caused him to turn. Another man on horseback was coming up the trail behind him, just swinging into sight. Whether he had been given some sort of signal or was merely coming on his own didn't matter. So far, he hadn't seen Maverick.

He saw him, a moment later, behind the muzzle of Maverick's six-gun, which loomed like a cannon, pointing straight at his midriff. Before the menace of it, the bandit's hands shot skyward with alacrity. He was, Maverick noted with some amusement, none other than the redoubtable Pancho Vargas.

"Climb down, Pancho," Maverick ordered. "Make it snappy. I want your cayuse. That's using good sense. Shuck that gun. Now, hit the trail —and keep your mouth shut."

Vargas was proving his claim to good judgment by obeying to the letter. Maverick hastily swung

to the saddle and turned up a side trail which led out of the Pass.

Behind him, the startled holder of Midnight was springing to action. He tried one hasty shot, then, rendered desperate, perhaps concerned by what remarks Curley might make to him, he swung to the saddle of Midnight and, with a yell, was hot on the trail.

Maverick, riding ahead, saw with some amazement that the big black was coming up fast, the other man still securely in the saddle. The cayuse which he had just acquired from Pancho was slow at best, and badly done up. No match for Midnight in any race.

He could shoot back, but Maverick hated to try it. There was too much chance of hitting Midnight by mistake. And, even if his black bolt of thunder was allowing another man to ride him, he was still the finest horse in the country.

The other man had no such scruples. He dug in the spurs, still yelling hoarsely, and jerked at his gun. It was at that moment that Midnight decided to go into action.

His action was swift and to the point. One leaping, twisting plunge, in which he turned end for end, adding a few fancy flourishes in midcareer, was more than sufficient for his purpose.

Then he stopped, staring down as though mildly surprised at his late rider.

The man was still lying there, staring up rather rather vacantly, when Maverick swung into Midnight's saddle and turned toward the east again. From the sound, a number of horsemen, attracted by the shooting and yelling, were hot on his trail. But with such a horse as Midnight between his knees, it didn't matter so much.

25. *Retribution*

OVERHEAD, the clouds still spread, a gray pall. They showed some signs of lightening, however, and the chances were better than even, Maverick decided, that they would finally break up without a storm.

If he could only shake those who still clung to his trail, it would help a lot. But, with full daylight all around, that didn't promise to be an easy thing to do.

He had to keep to the broken country close to the Pass. To get out into the more open land would give them too good a chance to use their rifles, bringing Midnight down. And, in this country, the advantage lay about as much with them as with him.

They had traveled a couple of miles since he had recovered Midnight. Here was somewhat more open country. Low, rocky hills, with fre-

quent steep ledges and scrub growth of brush dotting their sides like blotchy whiskers. Good country for his purpose.

Good country—only, once again, he had ridden into a trap. Horsemen were no longer just behind him. They were on all four sides. Maverick made this unpleasant discovery as a few came from ahead. He tried to turn right, only to find their lines had spread to close the gap. It was the same to the left.

That all came from their knowing the country, while it was strange territory to him. Some of them had been able to circle, taking a short cut, while the others had lagged behind, merely making sure that he went in the right direction.

Sudden guns were speaking, as though they had never been still. To try and ride through the lines was death. His only chance lay in taking to his heels again, seeking such cover as he could find, giving back bullet for bullet.

And that wasn't much of a chance. Merely postponing the end. He couldn't expect his luck to hold forever. There had to be an end.

Still, he'd keep playing it to the last card he held. They had made the discovery, long before, that he was a slippery customer, a pretty tough hombre. Which was in his favor, for they didn't care to take undue chances. Their caution was all

to the good—except that they were so grimly determined to be rid of him.

Maverick wormed through a coating of brush, finding a twin pair of boulders halfway up the easy slope of a hill. Each boulder was some four feet wide and high, set a yard apart. Not the best shelter, nor half so good as he had back in the canyon. But the best that was available.

One thing here was better. He could have a pretty good view for fifty yards in every direction, keeping them at that distance—for a while. There were ways of overcoming that sort of a handicap, and they would know them.

They had taken to the ground, too, with all the horses back out of sight. A line all around him, gradually closing in, like a tightening noose.

And this was what he got for trying to help Boston. He'd been a friend to him on every occasion, saved his life more than once. But it wasn't in the nature of such a man to feel gratitude. Instead, Boston considered him an enemy, one who had butted in on his private affairs, who was trying to take the girl that Boston wanted for himself.

Maverick's grim mouth softened a little. Dolores! She should be safe, at least. Most of the gang were being kept occupied with him. By night, the captain would be along with his men;

and after that, Boston, Curley and the others would be on the run again.

More so than ever, this time. They had burned their bridges behind them. That would never have been Curley's idea. He was too old and wily a campaigner, too cautious. But Boston, somehow, had gained the upper hand. His dreams of glory had led him to make enemies of all the friends the renegades had had. There would be no help from them in time of need. A time which would come before another dawn.

Dolores. For her sake, he had to keep on fighting. She was worth all the trouble he had encountered since crossing the border. She would want him to come back.

But the prospects of doing that, he had to admit, were slim. Off at some distance, a mesquite bush moved. It stopped, moved again. Maverick sent a shot at it, saw it jerk and fall at a rakish angle. It lay still. But there would be others.

Plenty of others. Shots were starting up again, coming from several angles. His shelter here was insufficient. The place would soon be too hot to hold him. And there was no other place to go.

The dirt here, between the boulders, was fairly soft. With a small, sharp sliver of stone, Maverick emulated the gopher for a few minutes, scooping out a hole, throwing up a barricade of the dirt on

either side. Now and then he paused long enough to throw a warning bullet or two around, to keep the others at a respectful distance. They hadn't discovered what he was up to, though, even if they had known, there was nothing much they could do about it.

Not unless they chose to make a charge at him. Which, in the face of his guns, he knew they wouldn't do. They preferred to pick him off from a distance, with a lucky shot.

His burrow occupied him for an hour. By the end of that time he had a fairly good shelter from all four sides, which was a lot more comfortable. But while he had been at work, the others had not been idle.

Boulders of a size to shelter a man—large, flat stones—were advancing toward him from two directions. It would be another hour before they could move them close enough to pick him off, for they were heavy and cumbersone. But they were bullet-proof as well.

High overhead, tiny black specks wheeled in long, lazy spirals. Buzzards, waiting for the feast. The clouds were lightening; a glint of sun came through. It would soon be getting hot here, between these rocks. Hot in several ways.

Meanwhile, they were exercising a deliberate patience which showed that Curley himself was

on the job, directing operations. That patience was a lot more dangerous than Boston's blundering haste.

It had been, in point of actual time, only a few days since he had returned to the cabin to find old Neversweat surrounded by his enemies and already beginning the last lap of the long trail west. Only a few days, yet it seemed as though half a lifetime had been compressed into the space since.

Before that, he had never known Dolores, never suspected that such a girl existed. Finding her was compensation for getting acquainted with Boston, being led by him into this country.

It had been a crooked trail, with many turnings. But always there had been some new turn, leading on ahead. There must be another turn still, if he could find it.

Midnight had wandered off to one side, where he was being left alone, grazing contentedly. The horses which the raiders had ridden were somewhere out of sight. They didn't intend that he should reach one of them.

Maverick's smile was grim. Midnight would come if he whistled. But that wouldn't help any. As far as he had been able to discover, there wasn't any way out of here.

All at once, bullets began to come with a new

regularity from several directions at once. Sheltered as he was, none of them, so far, were doing much damage, though they caromed off the boulders, smacked into the dirt, and buzzed angrily overhead, forcing him to bend low under their angry whine. The whole thing meant that they were closing in from every side now, under cover of this bombardment. And he couldn't even return it effectively.

Then, from somewhere off at the side, a six-gun spoke. Among the others it would have passed unnoticed but for one thing. One of the stones which had been gradually creeping closer to him suddenly toppled over on its side. Behind it, a man was writhing with a broken arm. A second man, who had been helping him, was suddenly exposed.

Maverick sent a quick shot, saw that it had dropped the other man with a wounded leg. Those two wouldn't come any closer.

But who had fired that extra shot? Retribution had struck—interest on the payment due from the former friends of the renegades who had been betrayed and deceived.

26. *Blood of Atonement*

MAVERICK'S PULSE was hammering with excitement. For a moment, following that new bullet and its drastic results, and his own quick subsequent shot, there was dead silence. Somewhere, off to the side, the last echoes of the guns whispered away in the grim reaches of the Pass, but, nearer at hand, the bandits had been stricken to a stunned surprise.

That was evidently the last thing on which they had figured: that anyone would come to Maverick's aid. Now the question that intrigued them and Maverick alike was: who was it, and how many were there of them?

It might be the citizens from Los Pinos, pursuing Boston and the crew who had ridden with him. If so, the tables would be rather completely turned. If not, Maverick couldn't think who it might be.

Within the next three minutes, he knew that it wasn't that crew. They had driven Boston and his men away from their town—except those who had remained, forever past riding—and with that they must have been content. There were two new guns speaking now, from points a hundred yards apart, well hidden. Guns flanking Maverick's attackers. But the crux of the whole matter was that there were only two of them.

Who they could be was as much a puzzle to Maverick as it could be to the others. But, after being close on the verge of stampede for a moment, when they had been fearful of an attack in overwhelming numbers, Curley's crew were settling down again now, a little grimmer than before, as cool as ever. Three were worse than one, but they could be wiped out.

Whoever the newcomers were, Maverick saw that they knew their business as fighters. They were forcing some of Curley's men to withdraw from positions suddenly rendered unhealthy, were working so as to join forces with Maverick—possibly to open a way of retreat for him.

Maverick joined the campaign with a few well-placed shots. He saw where one of the newcomers had stationed himself, and was firing coolly, methodically—a deadly barrage that was getting results. The outlaws, though they still outnum-

bered them at least ten to one, might find that they had a bitter bargain if they kept the fight up.

Then the man from behind the rock moved, running toward where Maverick himself crouched, scuttling for cover like a crab, and Maverick stared in amazement. The other man was hidden from sight of Curley's men, as was attested by the fact that no shots were hammered back at him. He dropped down again, fifty feet from Maverick. To cross that last fifty feet, either way, was to invite sudden destruction.

Maverick shook his head. Then, as the man, hidden again, once more took up his harassing of the enemy, Maverick knew that he had been right. This man was on his side, today. Even if he had been doing his best to kill him the day before.

For his new ally was none other than the man called Señor Mulligan—he who had the look of a Mexican, who talked like a cowboy from north of the border, and wore a name from the Emerald Isle. The man who trailed with the little, bloodthirsty gunnie, Felix, who had suggested dropping him into that old mine shaft and brusquely refused even to hear his story.

It was unbelievable, but it was so. Mulligan and Felix were fighting now on his side, fighting

with that same grimness and efficiency they had shown the day before. Felix was somewhere off to the side yet, and when he placed a shot, it was usually to good purpose.

For the next fifteen minutes it was a seesaw. Curley and his gun crew had reformed their lines, and were gradually spreading out again in an effort to encircle the three of them and flank them. And against such overwhelming odds, the chances of escape seemed nearly as slim as they had before.

Behind Maverick, a voice spoke quietly.

"Got room there for me, Maverick?"

Mulligan was almost beside him, worming his way across the ground like an Indian, a stealthy approach which had again passed unnoticed. A moment later he was behind the shelter with Maverick. His dark, swarthy face was beaded with sweat, streaked with blood from a wound, but he stuck out a hand as he came.

"Reckon me and Felix owe yuh an apology, Maverick. How in blazes yuh ever got out of that hole we dropped yuh into is more'n I can figger, but it shows yuh're quite some man. And these killers bein' against yuh shows that me and Felix made one devil of a mistake, last night. When we saw yore black cayuse here, and figgered things

out, we decided the only thing we could do was tuh side yuh. And here we are."

Maverick returned the grip in silence. Mulligan asked a question.

"Got any extra shells? I'm runnin' kinda low."

"Plenty, I guess." Maverick passed over a handful. "You got yourselves into a pretty tight place, here."

"Sorta surrounded by polecats, all right. But hell, man, after the hole we put yuh into, we got to side yuh now. Anyway, we ain't askin' nothin' better than a chance to war on these border wolves. They've got to be wiped out."

For the next five minutes, they were busied with other matters. Slipping fresh shells into his gun, Mulligan grunted a question.

"Didn't yuh say somethin', last night, about tryin' tuh reach the captain?"

"I started to."

"And we didn't give yuh a chance. Was it important?"

"It might be." Maverick recounted, briefly, the plan concocted by Curley and Boston for that night. Mulligan swore.

"I've heard uh some plenty hellish ideas, but that tops 'em all. We've got tuh get yuh out of here, Maverick, and pronto. So yuh can go on and stop them."

"I sent a message to him, just before I met you," Maverick added, explaining the details. Mulligan nodded, but his jaw was no less grim.

"Mebby he got through—we'll hope so—mebby not. Anyway, I got an idea for gettin' yuh out of this. We're about of a size, so yore clothes 'll fit me—and vice-versey. It'll be like changin' in one uh them danged upper berths on a train, but I guess we can cut the mustard. Yuh keep 'em occupied while I shed, then I'll hold 'em a spell."

Maverick asked no questions. He had seen, at their first meeting, that this man was not easily turned aside from a course, once he had made up his mind. What his scheme might be, Maverick had no idea, but changing clothes could do no harm.

A quarter of an hour later, the job had been accomplished. The clothes were a good fit for both of them, though they were sufficiently different to be readily noticeable. Mulligan grunted, lined his gun ahead again and fired—three shots in a row.

Evidently those shots were a signal. For a while, the little man, Felix, off to the side, had been sending only an occasional bullet from where he crouched behind a rough barricade. Now he suddenly went into more violent action.

Scurrying, bent over, from his shelter to a

fresh place, he was the target for several guns. Dodging, twisting as he ran he was an elusive mark at best and his own gun was thundering back. There was no question but that he took delight in this work. Hatred for the outlaws who had terrorized the country burned in him like a flame which leaped higher at every attempt to quench it.

A shot struck him, staggering him. But he had reached his objective. Three of Curley's renegades were suddenly outflanked, exposed to his fire. They got to their feet and ran for fresh shelter.

Lead was pouring at Felix now from a dozen hidden guns. Seemingly unconscious of it, he stood there, swaying on his feet, a wild, fantastic figure, his own gun still thundering at the fleeing trio. One of them was down, two—then the third, before he had quite reached the place he sought.

Riddled by bullets, Felix still stood for a moment, almost derisively. Blood poured from him as from a sieve. Blood of atonement for the mistake he had made the day before. Something clogged in Maverick's throat at sight of him. Then, his purpose accomplished, the little man sank slowly down, stretching out as though to rest.

"He had plenty nerve," Maverick muttered.

Mulligan's voice was hoarse.

"He didn't have nothin' else, cowboy. And now —my cayuse is back there a ways. A sorrel with four white feet. It happens the captain is my friend, and I want yuh to get to him. I figger yuh can make it back—now. I'll stay here a little spell tuh cover yore retreat, and—just as a suggestion —They ain't right sure whether there was two of us extra, or one. If yuh can get out without them knowin' the difference, let 'em figger yuh're still here."

"Why not toss for it—whether you go, or me?" Maverick demanded.

Mulligan shook his head.

"That wasn't the way I figgered it. Yuh go ahead, Maverick."

Maverick hesitated, then nodded. There was no use arguing with this hard-headed rannyhan. Because he had made a mistake last night, he was determined on atoning for it in his own way.

To creep back the way he had come wouldn't be easy. But he had made it once, and Felix, in his final fling, had swept away those most likely to see him there. He owed it to that gallant little fighter, to what Mulligan was doing, to try and make it as they asked.

The fifty feet seemed as many rods. All that he could do was to crawl, flat on his face, inching along. He could not look back or up. To do so

would be to invite a bullet. The ground was rocky, with sharp little stones to gouge and hinder him. Some of them were getting hot under the rays of the climbing sun. Most of the clouds had vanished by now.

Finally, with a sigh of relief, he reached the spot where Mulligan had crouched before starting that last fifty feet. Behind him, Mulligan still worked his gun, holding the others from any sudden sortie. Maverick waved cautiously before going on.

This idea of sneaking out of the fight, leaving Mulligan behind there to take his chances, while he went on to find the soldiers, didn't appeal to him at all. But it was dictated by grim necessity. As Mulligan had said, the captain was his friend —and Maverick's friend as well. With him were nearly a hundred men. They should have received warning before now, but it was more than possible that they had not. If not, they would ride unwittingly into terrible and certain death.

So he had to go on. It looked as though he could get away without their suspecting it. And he might be able to find a way to come back and help Mulligan presently.

The sorrel horse was ahead, down in a little draw, standing patiently as he had been left, reins hanging, anchored until someone came for him.

Behind arose a sudden fusillade of shots again. Maverick whirled. Sheltered by a clump of brush, he could see what was happening, and his gun jumped to his hand. Then he held his fire. The range, here, was too long to be effective for a six-gun. And, already, it was too late to help the big man any.

Maverick understood now the plan he had had in mind all along. One by which he had intended to make sure that Maverick should escape. He'd been bent on making atonement for his mistake of the day before, and determined that his little partner should not outdistance him in a final gesture of gallantry.

Evidently the other guns had gotten too close, too hot, for him to stay longer where he had been. Maverick had known, as well as Mulligan, that that would soon be inevitable.

Now the big man had stood up. Already wounded, he had stepped out into the open, as had Felix before him. Despite the thunder of guns on three sides, he had marched, with a grimness of determination which nothing short of death could check, holding death back by sheer power of will, for nearly two hundred feet. And as he walked, his twin guns had been blazing back at his attackers.

It was a splendid gesture, a successful one. He

had reached his objective before he fell. Once he stumbled and went to his knees, ten paces short of it. His guns had been empty then, beyond his power to load again. And heavy. Maverick knew how they could drag at one's arms in such a moment, a weight beyond one's power to lift.

So Mulligan had dropped them. But he had come to his feet again, made those last ten steps. There he had stood for a single moment, his face now only a bloody mask, and Maverick understood the change of clothes. Every renegade there, from Boston and Curley on down, would be convinced that the dying man was Maverick himself.

In that last minute, while he took those final steps, the outlaw guns had ceased to fire. It was an unconscious tribute, even from such wolves as they, to a brave man.

Mulligan half lifted an arm, then pitched forward. He fell straight into another narrow, dark fissure such as honeycombed so much of this country. A resting place where the circling buzzards would fail to find him. And the place he had been determined to reach from the first.

For, knowing him dead, no one would bother to climb down in such a place for another look. They would be convinced that Maverick Charlie Molloy was no more.

27 . *Untimely Fruit*

A LUMP in his throat, his eyes misty, Maverick swung into the saddle and rode quietly away. Mulligan and Felix had paved the way so that he could escape now without anyone suspecting it or pursuing. He could not spoil such a magnificant gesture by any futile one of his own now.

As long as he kept out of too open view, he could go pretty much as he pleased, for the outlaws now were convinced that he was dead. If anyone sighted him, he would be, to them, merely a cowboy, and they were not now in a mood to make any more enemies for themselves, to look for any fresh trouble by molesting anyone, at least until they had completed tonight's coup successfully.

Mulligan had planned it carefully, even to his own sorrel cayuse. The big sorrel, Maverick knew already, was of a quality to equal Midnight. But

not of a color to arouse suspicion. And anyone who rode Midnight would at least be under suspicion, since Maverick alone had ever been able to do it.

Once away from the others, Maverick rode fast, dropping back into the Pass itself. He would excite no particular suspicion, even in here, if he avoided letting anyone have too close a look at his face.

The first thing that he had to do was to get to Dolores, if possible, and make sure that all was well with her. It would probably be a little while, at least, before the raiders would be returning this way. They had several wounded men to look after, and at least a couple in need of burial.

The Pass was very quiet now, with an air of desolation. Despite the sun overhead, gloom lay in here like an everlasting blanket. And it was along this Pass of Dead Men that the soldiers were scheduled to come at about dusk, here that the final grim drama was slated to take place.

Beginning just north of the border, the Pass wound its way for a mile to the south, then swung westward for several added miles. Grim and unlovely as it was, a passable trail ran the entire length of it, the only decent trail across the border for miles in either direction, the only decent

trail from east to west through these tangled hills as well.

Because of that, it was used for various illicit operations across the border; and for the same reason it was the one logical trail for the soldiers escorting the shipment of gold to follow tonight. They would travel through it for nearly ten miles, swinging out just a little way south of the border.

Following that route would save going around the hills to the south, and thus adding at least two days to the journey. The other was an easier, safer, pleasanter route—but one which the captain would not consider now. He was fretting at the necessity of losing even two days from his pursuit of the renegades who had so impudently thumbed their nose at him, freeing Boston from his camp. He would follow through the Pass, and this they counted on.

Abruptly, Maverick sighted the cabin. Not far off lay the big pine tree in which he had taken refuge, along with the puma. Save for it as a marker, he might, even then, have passed without seeing the cabin, so cleverly was it camouflaged. No wonder that soldiers, knowing that such a place existed, had ridden up and down past here countless times, looking for it, but failing to find it.

At the moment, an air of desertion hung over

the place. Gone was the frenzied stir of activity which had marked the morning. Right now it was high noon, as the sun overhead proclaimed.

Keeping to such cover as was offered, moving cautiously, Maverick slipped up to the cabin. He hesitated a moment, then went inside. The trap door leading down to the cellar was open.

Foreboding clutching at him, Maverick went to it and called. There was no answer. He was down the stairs three at a time for a swift look around, then up and through the other rooms of the house. Empty.

But that, he reminded himself, didn't mean anything. Dolores might have taken advantage of an opportunity to get away while everyone was gone. That was more than likely. He clutched at the straw of hope.

In the kitchen, a little fire still warmed the stove; the remains of breakfast were on the table, along with unwashed dishes. A few of the crew, at least, had stopped to eat.

Among the left-overs were a dozen slices of bacon and several biscuits, all cold now. Maverick scooped them up and went outside, munching hungrily. As he reached the spot where he had left his horse, he heard voices of men returning.

There were, he saw, four men in the group, riding leisurely. One of them was Pancho Vargas,

twisting complacently at his spiked mustache, a steady flow of words coming from his lips. Maverick wondered if he ever stopped talking.

"But yes, my little ones, it is a good piece of work we have done this day," he assured them. "Now, at long last, this Señor Maverick—a fighting man, my little ones, ah, truly, such a man as I, Pancho Vargas myself—but now, and happily, since he was a thorn in our side, dead. A good piece of work. In fact, all is progressing finely, thanks to the wise counsel which I have been able to give at the proper moments, to say nothing of my ability in action."

"Yuh sure think a lot of yourself, don't you, Pancho?" someone remarked wearily.

"Of a truth, and why not, my friend? Does not the Señor Boston recognize my ability? Where, I ask you, would we all be at this moment, if it was not for the wise counsel of Pancho Vargas? There we were, in Los Pinos, surrounded by a pack thirsty for our blood, every way of retreat cut off, until I found the way out. And who but I could have done it?"

"Guess yuh did get us out—you and Boston."

"We are out. That is the proof. So make no more disparaging remarks, my little one, lest I grow annoyed at such a perverse nature. I have had no sleep nor rest for long hours, and my

temper, usually of the sweetest, grows a bit short."

"Well, how about the rest of us? When do we get a chance to rest?"

"Soon, my friends, very soon. Nothing much remains to be done until the shades of night begin to fall. When that time comes, we will deal with the captain and his host—oh, but so sweetly will we dispose of them all! Until then, save for cooking a meal and eating it—all of us, those who will soon be along as well as ourselves—there is little to do but sleep the afternoon away."

"That's a relief."

"You speak truly—it is a relief. Even such a man as myself, a fighting man of valor the most astonishing, wise in counsel as the fox, even I grow weary of too constant activity. But all moves well. This Maverick is dead. Our enemies, even those in Los Pinos, have been taught a much needed lesson. The Señora Dolores is again with her maidens, where she will remain till after tonight's foray, when she should be fresh to sing sweet songs to our so great leader, the Señor Boston, who will one day, with my counsel, be President of our great country—"

The door of the house closed behind them, shutting away his voice. But Maverick had heard enough. His sweating palms closed to fists. Dolores had been found, made a prisoner again.

There was one grain of comfort in the situation. She was safe enough, until after the soldiers had been dealt with. And when that time came, the shoe might prove to be on the other foot.

From up the Pass, the sound of approaching horsemen testified that the rest of the renegades were coming, Pancho Vargas and his companions having been sent ahead to start a meal. Which meant that, for the next several hours, all of them would stay here, eating and sleeping, resting after two hard days and a hard night, getting ready for tonight's grim business.

Maverick wished heartily that he could find a remote spot and sleep a few hours as well. His hunger appeased, he was sleepy. But there was always the chance that his messenger had not gotten through to warn the captain, and he couldn't afford to take chances.

Now they were coming in sight, Curley and Boston at their head, Curley squatted in the saddle like a mummified ape, Boston riding with a swagger. Maverick studied him thoughtfully a moment. Bad egg. There was no longer any doubt about it. He'd still hoped, against his better judgment, that there might be some way to reform Boston. It was a vain hope.

"Since that is over with," Boston was saying, "all that now remains to do is finish details for the

night. When the Federals come, we'll give them a warm reception."

"A very warm welcome, yes." Curley chuckled toothlessly. "One worth fifty thousand dollars to us."

"Chicken feed," Boston snorted contemptuously. "Once we get going, we'll have millions."

"I hope so," Curley agreed piously. "It has been done. But it takes a strong man."

"And am I not the strong man?"

"I hope so." Curley nodded again.

A horseman was coming from the opposite direction. He came up the canyon, was hailed eagerly by the others, and gave some report in Mexican. Curley listened, while Boston waited impatiently.

"What's he say?" he demanded.

"They are coming—and with the gold. A wagonload of it. At the rate they travel, they will enter the Pass an hour before sunset. Which means that they will keep going, for no one, not even them, would think of spending a night camped in it—especially with such a cargo. All goes as we have counted on."

Boston exclaimed in relief; then they all went inside to eat. Maverick frowned thoughtfully. There were three different things which might be done. Hunt up the hidden herd of cattle, with

which the bandits planned to execute their devilish scheme that night; search for Dolores and her maids; or ride to meet the soldiers.

He could do only one. There wasn't time for more than that. But which would be the most important? That depended on various things, and he lacked the answers to some of them.

The last of Curley's crew were coming into sight now—two men on horseback, leading a third horse—Midnight. They left the horses a little way off, out of sight of the cabin. Everyone was inside now, ready to eat.

Which was too good an opportunity to miss. Five minutes later, Maverick was again mounted on the big black, leading the sorrel with him. If it should come to a race, he would be the best mounted of anyone. If there were no trouble, he still wished to keep the sorrel.

He turned down the Pass, riding quietly. The trail, here, wound under a cluster of tall reaching evergreens, so thick that they blotted out the light of day. Underneath them was a perpetual gloom, in keeping with this grim Pass of Dead Men.

Pass of Dead Men! Maverick caught his breath, instinctively drawing back. Sitting in the saddle, he had almost brushed against something which protruded below the thick branches of one of the

trees—untimely fruit hanging from the boughs. The boots of a dead man.

Shivering a little, he quieted the dancing, snorting horses, left them a little way beyond and returned, peering closer. Then his blood seemed to congeal. For this man, swinging here, long dead, was the man with whom he had talked the day before—the man who had started with his message to the soldiers!

28. *Phantom Herd*

MAVERICK STARED a moment, anger sweeping over him at the sight, coupled with a nameless horror. This man had seemed a harmless enough sort of fellow, but that had not prevented him from being the victim of the renegades.

Whether they had suspected his message, or had hanged him for some other reason, the cowboy could only guess. The fact remained that he had not carried the message to the captain, that the soldiers, who by this time would already be setting foot in the Pass, were still in ignorance of the reception being planned for them.

Until now, Maverick had considered that possibility, but only as a remote one. This altered it. If he warned them now, then Mulligan would not have died in vain.

The afternoon was fast drawing to a close, shadows lengthening. Already, gloom was claiming the Pass for its own. A great owl coasted overhead on silent wings, then dropped like a bolt

into the depths of a side canyon, and a rabbit screamed as it struck. A coyote yapped querulously somewhere; a dried bone gleamed whitely beside the trail. The soft gurgle of a hidden stream seemed anything but musical in such a setting.

As he rode, the towering sides of the big canyon seemed to press closer together, to rise higher, with a starker grimness. One thing was beginning to worry Maverick. Where was the herd being held? Not all of the cattle driven away from Dolores' big ranch would be sacrified in the dynamite attack, of course, but some of the wild bunch from the hills must be ready now, held not far off.

In an hour of riding, he had caught no glimpse of them, heard no sound to suggest where they might be. Then, ahead, he had a glimpse of a shadowy horseman, caught the gleam of light on gun metal. But by now he had seen something else—the color of khaki, which the man wore. Maverick rode boldly into the open.

"I'd like a word with you, friend," he called. "You'll remember me—Maverick."

There was a moment of silence; then the soldier rode out from behind a screen of brush beside the trail, where he had withdrawn. He peered

closer in the gloom, and relief broke across his face.

"Señor Maverick, eet ees a pleasure, indeed."

"The pleasure's mutual, sergeant. Tell me, where are the others? Are they coming through here tonight?"

"Weethin an hour, yes, they should be along. I have come ahead—how do you say it?—as a scout, yes."

"That's fine. Has the captain heard of the plot to wipe you all out tonight?"

The sergeant looked startled.

"A plot? What ees that? We have had no word."

"I was afraid you hadn't." Maverick explained in some detail what was intended.

"I don't know just where this surprise party is supposed to take place — that's the devil of it. They could wipe you all out before you had any suspicion that anything was wrong, and you can't fight back. But if you warn the captain, he will know what to do. Meanwhile, I'm going to try and find out more about it, if I can."

"You weel not come back with me and work weeth us, señor? It seems it would be safer."

"I'll be all right. Better not lose any time in getting back. This whole Pass is dangerous business."

That last, Maverick knew, was an understate-

ment. Boston, Curley and their crew were probably at work now. They had not overtaken him, but that might mean less than nothing. They knew their way around in here, which he did not, knew all the side paths. Death lurked somewhere in these grim recesses, and no one knew where it would pounce next.

If he could only find the herd! He had counted on knowing all about them long before this, being able to spike the guns. But he had lost so much time, through no fault of his own, that now only a few hours were left. But his warning was attended to, at least.

Somewhere a steer bawled. Maverick's pulse drummed. That meant that they were not far off. But the sound was not repeated, and in this tangle of side passes which began and ended again in blank traps, the sound might have come from almost anywhere, on either side of the Pass.

It was a natural setting for deviltry. These side canyons, narrow and brush-choked, led off from the main canyon like the spokes of a wheel. Ledges towered up like thrusting shoulders, perfect settings for what was planned.

On those ledges would be placed the dynamite bombs, with ropes running down to wire netting stretched across the mouths of the side passes. Cattle would be held in a number of them, and

when the caravan was in the proper place, the cattle would be stampeded. Plunging into the netting in the gloom, they would catch their horns on it as they rushed out upon the Federals, converging on them from three or four sides at once.

The ropes would be jerked, throwing the bombs down on top of them all indiscriminately. A scene of hellish confusion, of grim death, a trap from which, once sprung, there could be no escape.

More or less at random now, Maverick started to investigate the mouths of these canyons which led into the main Pass. But it would be an endless job, that way, unless luck was with him. The traps might not have been set yet, and there was the danger of stepping right into the jaws of a trap himself at any time— He might meet men placing a net, or, if his horse ran into a net in the gloom, one of those bombs might be jerked down on top of him before he knew it.

Here the edge of the hill was not so sheer; a path of sorts led up. Maverick climbed, leading his horse. Even outside the Pass, dusk was deepening. There was no moon, for it would not be up till late, but an early star floated, like the ghost of slain men, over the edge of the canyon's rim.

Then, faint as a star itself, far up a side pass, he saw a fire glow, glimpsed, farther down the

coulee, a dark, restless mass which he knew was the herd or a part of it.

Taking a path which led him a little way above the herd, Maverick worked his way up this side coulee. The fire glow brightened as he rounded a bend, revealing itself as a big bonfire, with several men clustered around it. As he came closer, he judged that most of the renegades were here.

On the far side of the fire were the women—the maids and housekeeper, made prisoners at the same time as Dolores; then he glimpsed Dolores herself, standing disdainfully, facing Boston. Even as he came in sight, Boston's long arms reached out suddenly. In the silence, the resounding slap of her hand on his face rang out like a shot.

29 . *Signal of Death*

IT WAS CURLEY, materializing out of the shadows, who checked Boston's sudden flare of anger. His voice, as always, was soft, slightly mumbling, but there was something about it which caused the bigger man to hesitate.

"Now is no time for this, Boston. Have but a little patience, for all goes well with us, is it not so? And very soon we have some work to do. Word comes but now that the caravan approaches—weeth fifty thousand dollars in gold!"

Boston's clenched hands dropped to his sides, and he permitted Curley to lead him to the other side of the fire.

"Fifty thousand," he repeated, thick lips working. "Yuh know, I was just thinkin', Curley—if a lot of them bombs go off, won't they blow the gold all to bits, so that we'll lose it? That wouldn't do."

"The gold," Curley said comfortably, "is in a wagon. Also, it will be placed in a heavy iron chest—I know how they handle it. They figure that it is not so easy to steal and get away with, in a heavy chest of iron. But tonight it suits our purpose very well. There will be no danger of losing it."

"That helps. We couldn't afford to lose it, just when we're gettin' our hands on it."

"Have no fear. It shall be ours. And now, remain here and watch for my signal. Be ready, and do not be fooling with the women."

Curley was gone, slipping away in the gloom. Boston stood staring after him, muttering under his breath. Suddenly another man was beside him, and the voice of Pancho Vargas reached Maverick's ears.

"You do not like Curley too well, is it not so, eh, my general?"

"I'm tired of bein' treated like I was a child," Boston growled resentfully. "What business has he to tell me what I shall do, or what I shan't?"

"Exactly, my general. He has no business to tell you. None at all, surely. It is you who are the general, you who will be President."

"You bet it's me. He's got to mind his own business, too. I'm gettin' sick of it."

"At that I do not wonder. You have exercised

the patience of the most admirable. Long have I wondered at your restraint. But Curley—he is old, he thinks in little ways. He who would travel fast must travel boldly, not being hampered."

"Yuh mean—?" Boston's voice was thick.

"Curley wants to be boss, but that is for you. With him around, there is sure to be trouble. It cannot continue that way. And it would be so simple, tonight—for him to be caught in his own trap, eh?"

Boston was breathing heavily, his eyes glowing in the reflected light of the fire.

"That's an idea," he nodded. "Could you manage it?"

"But of course, if it is your wish. Are you not the general?"

"I guess I am. Sure I am. You tend to it, then, Pancho—and I won't forget about it."

"I go now. I wait for Curley to give the signal, and then—it is the signal for his own death he gives, too, even if he does not know it. It is the great jest, eh?"

Pancho Vargas moved off, chuckling. He called his companion and murmured a few words to him. Maverick caught the answer.

"But if we get rid uh Curley—he's the only one with any brains in this bunch. Boston don't know anything."

"You are right, my little one, except that you forget Pancho Vargas. Have I not told you that, if you followed him, you would have more gold than you could spend?"

"Guess you did. But Boston, he'll want all of it—"

"What he will want, my little one, and what he will get—that will be the horses of a different color, eh? We dispose now of Curley. A little later, of Boston. They are tools to use, but when they grow dull—pouf!"

They were beyond earshot then, following in the direction taken by Curley. Maverick shivered a little. A nice collection of playmates Boston had found for himself. But his attention was jerked back to Boston.

He had stood a moment longer, staring after Pancho, then had turned purposefully and swung around the blaze to where Dolores still stood. Guards were stationed at a little distance, so that there was no hope of escape.

Boston's voice now held a new, throaty quality. He was almost playfully genial.

"Now we can talk," he said. "And, stop to think about it, I know that's what you want. That little pat yuh give me was just a sign of yore affection, wasn't it, now?"

"Would you like a few more such signs?" Dolores demanded.

"I can get along without them. Just so I know yuh love me is plenty."

"I hate you."

"That's what they all say, but they don't mean it."

"I mean it, all right. Of all the contemptible cads, I think you're the prize one."

Boston's face reddened; his voice grew a little thicker.

"I'm tryin' tuh be nice," he snarled. "But yuh don't seem to appreciate that sort of treatment. Better talk nice. Curley won't stick up for yuh any more, and as tuh thinkin' that Maverick 'll rescue yuh again—he won't. We got him this afternoon. Filled him so full of lead he'd sink."

"You told me something of that sort before. You're just a cheap liar, Boston."

"Liar, am I? It happens, this time, that I'm tellin' the truth—and I've stood all I'm going to from you—"

Once again he sought to grab her, and again her hand made a white mark across his cheek. At the blow, Boston went berserk. Dolores evaded his rush, stepping nimbly to one side, and slapped him with her other hand.

Maverick had watched from the shadows, un-

suspected, tense. Now, regardless of the enemies scattered all about, he stepped swiftly forward, for there was a sheer devil in Boston's eyes. His hand closed on Boston's shoulder, spinning him about.

Boston turned, fresh fury mounting at the touch, then stared, suddenly white-faced and shaking. His rage was gone like mist in the sun.

"M-Maverick!" he quavered. "Y—you—"

He tried desperately to break away. This was a place of superstition, and Maverick could see the same fear written on the blanched faces of the other men, as they got to their feet, staring, and drew away from him.

They had seen him die, riddled by a dozen bullets, had been convinced in their own minds that he was forever past bothering them again. Now he stood before them— Yet this could not be the man they had hunted that morning. That was the thought in Boston's mind, as well as in the minds of his henchmen.

Dolores, too, had stared for a moment, then had given a sudden, glad little cry of relief.

"Maverick!"

"It's me, all right," Maverick nodded. "You thought you had killed me, didn't you, Boston? You've been a dirty yellow cur from the start, and I know Neversweat, if he was here, would want you strung up to the nearest tree. He'd hoped

there was some manhood somewhere in you, but there never was. And now you've come to the end of the trail, Boston. Draw your gun!"

Boston was still staring. The first shock of terror, the fear that he stared at a ghost returned from the grave, was gone, but the cold menace of the man who stood before him seemed to shake him worse than the other. He passed a rasping tongue across suddenly dry lips.

"We—we ain't going to quarrel now, Maverick," he gasped. "We've always been good friends."

"We've never been friends. Get your gun!"

"I—you can't do that, Maverick. You—you promised Neversweat—"

"I promised him, and I kept my promise. But there's a limit, and you've long overreached it. If you don't draw, I'll—"

From the distance, up the Pass, a new sound came, and the staring group stirred to sudden activity.

"They're comin'," someone yelled. "Get ready to jump the critters, pronto! Curley'll be givin' the signal any minute now!"

30. *Dynamite*

MEN WERE RUNNING everywhere, ignoring Boston and Maverick for the time being, in this moment of crisis. Their orders had come from Curley, and those were orders to be obeyed. The sounds from up the Pass came again, clearer, closer now.

A cold sweat broke out on Maverick's forehead. If his ears could be trusted, then the soldiers were riding straight into the trap, were almost in it by now. Everything was in readiness for springing it. Had the sergeant, too, failed to deliver his message, riden into a trap?

There was no mistake about it—they were coming—and it was too late to warn them now. His only chance lay in doing something here. But first he'd finish with Boston. The renegade was trying to slip away.

"Get your gun, Boston. Draw, I tell you. This time, I'm going to kill you!"

For a moment Maverick almost believed that Boston, made desperate by the press of events, would accept the challenge. He whirled, his hand half dropping toward his hip. Then, meeting Maverick's glare, he checked the motion, confident that the big cowboy would not shoot while he was still empty-handed. At that moment, from somewhere, came shots—three together, a momentary pause, followed by two others. The signal!

"Yuh and me ain't going to quarrel, Maverick," Boston gasped. "We been too much together. Besides, I ain't got time—"

"The signal, Señor Boston, the signal," one of the other men was imploring. "Did you not hear Curley's signal—the shots?"

Someone bawled an order from the darkness. No one was paying any further attention to Boston. Men shouted; cattle were suddenly pouring out of a pen just above them, streaming down the coulee bottom, almost sweeping over them.

Boston leaped back, as several head plunged between himself and Maverick, ran to a waiting horse and pulled himself into the saddle, yelling hoarsely. Maverick reached his own big black and spurred. The trap had been sprung, despite him.

But now, at least, Boston wasn't going to get away. He couldn't shoot him down in cold blood, but he didn't need a gun. Getting his hands on him would be enough.

Cattle, temporarily halted by something, milled ahead, blocking the path. The hoarsely chuckling voice of Curley rasped behind him.

"Up with the hands, Señor Maverick. High. Or is it that I should shoot?"

Ahead, Boston had checked rein now and was riding back, his terror suddenly gone as he saw that Curley held a gun on Maverick from behind. Striving to get through the cattle to reach him, Maverick glimpsed Dolores, mounted on his big sorrel cayuse, striving to get to him and help.

"So yuh want a settlement, eh, Maverick?" Boston snarled. "Well, that's fine with me. We'll have one, right now—"

There was a rope in Boston's hands now, as on that first night in the Pass, twirling. It lifted like a shadow of death, swinging ominously as the weaving head of a rattlesnake. The cattle were surging between them now, with riders whooping along behind, urging them to a wild run, the barricade ahead removed.

Dolores gave a strangled cry of warning, trying frantically to move her horse closer.

Already the rope was shooting out at Maverick.

The whole thing had taken but a second or so, since he had first glimpsed it. Maverick knew the scheme seething in Boston's mind—to settle the loop about his neck, then toss a loop in the other end of the rope over the horns of one of the steers surging by, and let them lead him in the middle of that wild stampede to hell!

With Curley's gun still on him behind, half his senses intent on why the captain had not been warned, Maverick had small chance to ward off the shadowy rope. But even as it came, Dolores had forced her horse between them and her warding arm threw the rope back.

What happened then, in the scant light of the gloomy canyon, was almost too fast to see. Curley, swearing in panic, had been sucked into the surging tide of stampeding cattle; the avalanche of death was broadening in its rush, enveloping Maverick and Dolores as well. Maverick's gun caught in his holster as he jerked at it. A long-horned steer tossed its head high, and one horn snagged the cast-off loop which had been intended for Maverick and jerked it tight. Then, bawling wildly, the steer was charging on with the others.

Above the bellowing of the cattle and the thunder of hoofs rose Boston's shrill howl of terror. The other end of his rope had tangled, was twisted

tight now about his own wrist, even as Maverick had warned him that it would do some day.

Nothing could stop the herd now. Spurring hard, Maverick fought his way to Dolores, his gun crashing. Her horse had caught the wild infection of terror.

Swept alongside, Maverick's long arm swept out and his fingers caught the bridle of the sorrel close up to the bit, wrenching its head around. He shot another steer in their path; then, together they managed to hold their position as the last of the stragglers swept past them.

Like a whisper when someone shouts, the thundering roar of the stampede was lost in a new, crashing inferno of sound. The whole world seemed to rock to the blast of detonating dynamite, there ahead in the Pass of Dead Men. Even where they were, débris came raining down out of a midnight sky; the canyon below bloomed to a crimson inferno.

For a minute it lasted — a confusion which blasted at Maverick's ear drums, which tore at his heart. In spite of him, they had succeeded in their scheme, even if Curley and Boston had been caught in their own trap.

Darkness followed again, and out of this arose a gigantic dust cloud. And then silence at last, a silence in which strained ear drums still rang.

Maverick was on the ground, and Dolores, trembling convulsively, was in his arms. Off a little way, where the bonfire had been, two maids and the housekeeper, whimpering, tried to console each other.

Presently, still wordless, Maverick kicked a few of the smoldering brands together and added more wood, until the fire blazed up again. It was a purely mechanical gesture, an effort to keep busy, to avoid thinking.

From somewhere came the sound of horses' hooves, the voices of men, many men, approaching. Maverick whirled, staring, jerked his empty gun and began to slip fresh shells into it. He hadn't expected more trouble, after this—

Dolores gave a little cry. Maverick exclaimed hoarsely as, into the fire glow, rode the captain, several of his own men behind him. More were coming, escorting a thoroughly cowed bunch of prisoners. Maverick stared; then he was gripping the captain's hand hard.

"You weren't caught, then—I've been blaming myself—"

"But no, Señor Maverick," the captain agreed. "We were not caught. Why should we be, when you sent us warning of what awaited us if we blundered?"

"But we heard you coming — then the stampede, the dynamite—"

The captain chuckled.

"Ah, yes. A little ruse. I merely improved upon your warning, my friend, by sending a few blind old burros ahead, to let them set off their little trap, yes, while we prepared to take them by surprise. It was magnificent, thanks to you, and none of my men are hurt. None, that is, save Corporal Tomaso, whose horse ran away with him and fell in the darkness. But what would you when the whole world seems to explode?"

Maverick's eyes ranged over the prisoners. Pancho Vargas was there, silent for once, but neither Boston nor Curley. The captain asked about them; then, hearing the story, he nodded.

"It was the whim of a madman," he said soberly. "Calamity, averted from us by the action of a brave man. And now—" his eyes twinkled again in the fire glow as he glanced from Maverick to Dolores—"now, I suppose, you will not be so anxious to get out of Mexico, eh, señor? Ah, well, it is fortunate that I am your cousin, Dolores mia. Now I shall be certain of an invitation to the wedding."

THE END

Dakota Marshal

By

LYNN WESTLAND

Author of

"SON OF THE SADDLE,"
"POWDERSMOKE PASS"

»»»«««

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