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Ace Tall Twin Western



BRAND OF THE GUN

BY BRIAN WYNNE

HE'D NEED ALL HIS LAWMAN'S SKILL TO STOP THE MOB



Arizona Territory was rough country, especially when the cattle barons were waging private wars. And now Wade Cruze and Travis Canaday were bringing their beeves and their range war right into Spanish Flat.

The badge and gun of Jeremy Six were the only things that stood between the town and a bloodbath on Main Street, but Six couldn't act until the law was broken, until the first shot had been fired—that was the code of his badge.

Sooner or later, he knew, there would be hell to pay . . . and he intended to see that the innocent citizens of Spanish Flat didn't end up paying it. But a gun couldn't answer all the questions the cattle dust was raising.

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BRAND OF THE GUN

GUNDOWN

BRIAN WYNNE
BRAND OF
THE GUN

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BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

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I

JEREMY SIX looked out past the swinging doors at the mother-of-pearl drizzle. It had been misting down since dawn, mucking the dirt streets of Spanish Flat and fogging visibility until it was hard to see across the street. Oilskins flapping, hatbrims lowered, men went by with their shoulders hunched, their faces as gray as the rain.

He stepped back to let a tall man enter—a big horseman with mud on his boots. The cowboy flapped off his hat and batted it against his waterlogged chaps, drenching the floor. “Howdy, Marshal.”

Jeremy Six acknowledged the greeting with a dip of his head, but the cowboy did not walk by; he rearranged the creases in his hat and put it on, and said, “I saw Wade Cruze and his crew a few miles out on the flats. Headed into town.”

“Been expecting that,” Six said. “There’s an Army cattle buyer in town from Fort Dragoon. Thanks for the word, Jimmy.”

BRAND OF THE GUN

"It ain't just that," Jimmy said. His eyes flicked up speculatively. "Cruze has got his whole crew and a couple of toughs with him. But no herd."

"No herd?"

"Not one single cow," the cowboy said. "Thought you better know, Marshal." He turned toward the saloon bar.

Six muttered his thanks and went back to the front door to look out. Creases bracketed his mouth and a frown brought his eyebrows down. He reached for his slicker, tipped it off the wall peg and shouldered into it. He was reaching for his hat when he felt weight behind him and turned.

Clarissa Vane, who owned the place, looked him up and down and made a little smile with her pretty mouth. "Lots of weather we're having."

"Uh-huh."

"Drink?"

"No thanks. If I took a drink every time I wanted one I'd be drunk by noon every day."

"Job getting you down, Jeremy?"

"It's a gray day," he said. "Guess I'm just in that kind of mood."

"Something's wrong," she said. "I can tell by your face."

"No, nothing's wrong."

"You're a bad liar."

It made him smile—a brief flash across his craggy face. "You're a hard girl to lie to."

"What's the trouble?" Her voice was low, close to a whisky baritone, but she was a slim woman with no brassy surface; there was concern in her eyes.

"Might not mean trouble," he said. "Jimmy tells me Wade Cruze is coming into town with his crew and one or two gunslingers—and no herd."

"No herd?"

"Exactly," he said, and clapped his hat on. "Hold the fort."

"I'll keep some coffee warm for you."

BRAND OF THE GUN

He smiled, briefly again, and swept out of the Glad Hand. The drizzle hit him in the face like a prickling of cactus needles. Under the flapping lapels of the rain slicker his badge of office flickered dully at intervals as the wind pulled the oilskin back. He was a big solid man with a blunt chin and blunt, heavy hands. A single short-barreled revolver swung with his hip as he walked, tied down in a drab holster of old leather.

The streets were sparsely scattered with those few pedestrians who had to make their way from place to place in spite of the rain. As Six passed them, each made a greeting of some kind—some friendly, some only properly courteous. Six had a full complement of close friends, he was not a lonely sort of man, but beyond his circle of friends he had the acquaintance and respect of every citizen of Spanish Flat: Arizona Territory, in these days uncomfortably close to the recent Indian wars, was a country still on the verge of lawlessness—and the badge and gun of Jeremy Six were the dike that stood between the town and a flood of violent outlawry. Lonely or not, a man who stood such solitary sentinel duty had to live as if he stood always on the brink of a precipice—alert every moment of the day, watchful of his back and the looming mountains yonder.

He walked into the main street, glanced both ways, and turned toward the Drovers Rest, striding through the drizzle like a heavy-headed lion. The steady light downpour had made a quagmire of the street, and when he stepped down to go across, his weight pushed his boots down ankle-deep into sucking mud. He climbed the porch of the Drovers Rest and paused there to kick soaked clods from his boots before he went inside.

The atmosphere inside the big low-ceilinged bar room was steamy and close. This was ordinarily dry country, swept by the hot winds off the desert just to the west; the men of the town were outdoor men and the infrequent rains that drove

BRAND OF THE GUN

them indoors made them restless and irritable because they had nothing to occupy them inside a building. The Drovers Rest was uncommonly busy, considering that it was still short of noon; the cowhands and teamsters and carpenters and dairy men who lined the bar were talking loudly and angrily about whatever came to mind.

A fat man in a clawhammer coat accosted him just inside the door. "Morning, Marshal."

Six nodded with reserved courtesy. "Mr. McQuarter."

"There's a rumor going up and down the bar that Wade Cruze is on his way in."

"So I hear."

"About time," McQuarter said. Six grunted something and began to go past. He tolerated McQuarter because duty required of him that he tolerate everybody on the right side of the law. But he had no liking for the fat cattle buyer. There was something slovenly about Owen McQuarter, in spite of his good clothes and jeweled stickpin.

McQuarter wasn't ready to let Six pass. He held out his flaccid arm. "Somebody said something about Cruze not having any cows with him."

"News gets around fast," Six observed.

"I made a miserable trip down here to make a deal for that Terrapin herd. The Army needs beef. What's Cruze doing riding in here with a crew if he hasn't got a herd to sell?"

"Maybe you'd better ask him that," Six said. "I'm a marshal, not an oracle." He was about to go on when the urge struck him to needle McQuarter. "Besides, I thought you came down here to meet your daughter."

"My ward, not my daughter. But I expected to conduct some business as long as I was making the trip."

"It won't be a total loss then, either way, will it?"

Some secret amusement flashed momentarily behind the screen of the fat man's expression; he said, "No, I guess it won't at that." And Six went on to the bar.

He passed a few desultory words with Hal Craycroft,

BRAND OF THE GUN

bartender and owner of the Drovers Rest, and selected a cigar from Craycroft's stock. He bit off the tip and lit the cigar, and barely had it going to his satisfaction when a lanky cattleman came into the place and made a path straight toward him.

Six squinted through the rise of cigar smoke. The cattleman, Larry Keene, was a local man, a friend of Six's and one of the more rough-hewn pillars of the community; and Keene looked as if he had something on his mind.

He didn't waste any breath with preliminaries; he plunged right in. "Cruze is coming in with Candy Briscoe and Fred Hook and a crew that looks like it's primed for trouble, Jeremy."

"But no cows," Six murmured. "That right Larry?"

Keene's eyebrows went up. "Yeah. That's right. I guess you already got word, then."

"I didn't know the toughs were Briscoe and Hook. That adds a piece to the puzzle."

Owen McQuarter had edged up closer; he tugged at his fat cheek and said, "Those names mean something to you, Marshal?"

"Could be," Six said.

Larry Keene glanced at the cattle buyer. "Candy Briscoe would slit your throat for a peso. And Hook's made a little gun reputation for himself along the border."

McQuarter said, "How good is he?"

"Good enough. You don't get deader than dead." Keene shrugged and turned back to Six. "For all that, they're all worthless, 'cept Briscoe. I hear he's worth five hundred to some sheriff in Wyoming."

"Hardly seems worth that much, does he?" Six murmured. "Anyhow, I haven't got any extradition papers on him."

McQuarter was puffing up, rearing back on his dignity. "You mean you won't touch them, Marshal?"

"Not unless they commit a crime."

"Haven't you got authority?"

BRAND OF THE GUN

"I've got complete authority," Six said, "to follow the law to the letter. Don't heat up so fast, McQuarter. What's bothering you?"

"If you knew Wade Cruze you'd know what was bothering me."

"I know him," Six said.

"Then you know what kind of man he is. They say there's moss growing down his north side. He may own a big ranch but he's still a common tough when you get right down to it. Maybe he's decided that he doesn't need to trail a cattle herd in here, because he figures I'm waiting with the money to pay for it and he can just as easily rob me of the money and keep his cows."

"He's not that stupid," Six said. "Nobody pulls off that kind of thing in my town, and Cruze knows it."

"Then what's he up to?"

"I reckon we'll find that out when he gets here."

McQuarter said, "You take this all mighty easy, Marshal, considering that I'm sitting on quite a few thousand dollars of Government scrip waiting to pay for that cattle herd."

"You just leave that scrip where it is in the Wells Fargo safe," Six said, "and you won't have any trouble."

"Sure. And what if Wade Cruze decides he wants to make a bone orchard out of this town, just for the all-fired hell of it?"

"All right, McQuarter," Six said. "That'll be enough."

He turned his back deliberately to the fat man, indicating that the discussion was ended, and after a flustered moment McQuarter waddled away toward a card table.

The close air made streaks of beaded steam on the saloon windows. Larry Keene bellied up to the bar beside Six and said, "I never did like that toadstool McQuarter. But he's got a point. I reckon Wade Cruze is the only man I ever knew to get thrown out of Fat Annie's cathouse for insulting a girl. Wade was born with the hair-side out, that's for sure, and you never can tell what he's likely to do."

BRAND OF THE GUN

Six pointed toward the door. "Looks like we'll be finding out soon enough. Sounds like them."

Muffled by the muddy bog of the street, the dull thudding of hoofbeats subsided to a halt outside the big saloon. Six turned around and cocked his elbows over the bar behind him. Face wreathed in cigar smoke, he watched the doors unblinkingly. It did not escape his notice that conversation inside the saloon had been suspended; no one spoke. The men nearest the door drifted away from it to clear the front of the room, leaving a wide empty swath between Six and the door. Larry Keene ranged himself alongside Six and picked his teeth with a splinter; a reckless grin flashed across Keene's lantern-jawed face.

A wolf-throated roar of laughter preceded Wade Cruze's entry into the saloon, and those who did not know Cruze were surprised to see that the owner of that loud gravel voice was in fact a little bandy-legged man, narrow as a plank, with a brown beard down to his second shirt button. He looked as small as a young boy who had not yet attained his full growth; but Wade Cruze was all whipcord and steel, a raggedy-edged rawhider who had hewn a cattle empire out of tough Indian country and held it by the power of his fist and gun.

He entered laughing. Six recognized the man behind him as his foreman, Sid Arklin; Arklin was chuckling and it was clear he had just made a remark his boss thought uproarious. Behind these two, a cluster of hats appeared outside the doors. Cruze and Arklin stopped and looked around the wide open space that had been left for them by the saloon's inhabitants.

Cruze stopped laughing and elevated his brows in surprise. His glance swept the crowd and came to rest on Jeremy Six. "What in the hell is all this?"

Larry Keene drawled, "The boys weren't sure which way you'd buck, Wade."

Cruze howled with laughter. He slapped his knee and

BRAND OF THE GUN

punched his foreman on the arm hard enough to make Arklin cringe and step aside. "Hear that, Sid? Hell, I got this whole town buffaloed and I ain't even done a thing."

"Not quite," Jeremy Six said. He took the cigar out of his mouth and waited for the smoke to lift away. "We're a mite curious, though."

"Curious? About what, Marshal?"

"You didn't saddle up your whole crew and ride a hundred and fifty miles just to see the sights of Spanish Flat," Six said.

Owen McQuarter pushed himself out of the crowd in the back of the place. "Where're my cows, Cruze?"

Cruze's beard turned like a prow in a heavy sea. He sought out the owner of the new voice. "If it ain't my old friend McQuarter," he said, with no show of friendliness in his voice.

"Where're my cows?" McQuarter demanded again.

"They ain't your cows till they're delivered and you pay for them," Cruze said. "What's your bellyache?"

"I want to know if I made the trip down here for nothing," McQuarter said. "I don't hear any cattle out there. I don't even smell cows on you gents."

Jeremy Six pushed away from the bar and went across the room. "What about it, Cruze? Where's your herd?"

Cruze glanced at Arklin. Both of them started to chuckle; they seemed to find some private joke that amused them greatly. Cruze said, "The cows'll be along, Marshal. Don't you fret."

"When?" McQuarter snapped.

"Maybe four, five days."

"Walking all by themselves? You've got your whole crew out there."

Cruze's beard chopped up and down when he talked. "Fat man, I don't like repeating myself. Your cows'll be here in Spanish Flat by the end of the week—take my word on it."

BRAND OF THE GUN

Now God damn it, you people are cutting into my drinking time. What in hell's the matter with this town?"

He started to walk forward but Six barred his way. Two men stepped inside through the batwing doors and it didn't take Six much of a glance to identify them—the gunslingers Fred Hook and Candy Briscoe. Six indicated the two of them with a cool glance and a dip of his head. "What about these two?"

Cruze looked over his shoulder. Hook was staring malevolently at Six; Briscoe's face was flushed. Wade Cruze said, "All right, what about them?"

"You always hire gunslingers to drink with you while you're waiting for a herd of steers to deliver itself?"

Cruze said, "I like you, Marshal. Always did. You've got a sense of humor, which is the only thing separates a man from a razorback pig."

Six talked to Cruze, but his words were plainly meant for the two gunslingers. "If anybody makes trouble in my town, Cruze, I sit heavy on them. And that's a promise."

Cruze chuckled. "Look, Marshal, let's you and me make a little deal. Let's say—"

"No deals," Six interrupted. "No gentlemen's agreement. I don't intend to have your hired toughs drive any wedges into this town. I don't know what you hired these boys for, Cruze, but I can tell you this much: borrowing trouble's one thing, lending it to your neighbors, that's another thing. Whatever your private scheme is, you had better not pull it off in this town."

"I haven't broken any laws," Cruze said. He took a deep breath and lifted his banty bearded face to look directly up at Six. "I aim to have myself some drinks and then get into a hot tub and try to soak some grit and mud out of me. Ain't going to be any trouble for your good citizens, Marshal. I'm just here to make a dicker for some cows with the Army—meaning Mr. McQuarter over there."

"Just see it stays that way," Six said flatly, and stood

BRAND OF THE GUN

aside to let the tough little cattleman march over to the bar. Arklin went along after Cruze, but Hook and Briscoe lingered a moment to stare hotly at Six as if to burn his image indelibly into their memories. Then they went on to the bar, and the fourteen cowhands of Cruze's Terrapin crew trooped in after them.

Larry Keene drifted over to Six's shoulder and muttered, "It doesn't look good, does it? That cocky little rooster's up to something, that's for sure."

Six clamped his jaws down on the cigar and sent his glance prowling shrewdly along the bar at the Terrapin men. "Do something for me, Larry. Keep an eye on that wolf pack while I go on down to the office and pick up a little hardware."

"Shotgun?"

"Yes," Six said, and on his way out added, "Let's hope there's no call to use it."

II

THE TOWN gunsmith of Spanish Flat was a softly handsome man of thirty-one named Gene Lanphier. He was a good craftsman and a self-contained man, shielded from social relationships by one overriding passion: he was so much in love with his wife that he had little time for any other friendships.

There was no denying Sheila Lanphier was a beauty. She was a full-breasted redhead with sparkling green eyes and a great flowing mass of fine hair; her manner was

BRAND OF THE GUN

laughing and flirtatious, but all her coquetry was directed at her husband. They were very much in love with each other.

She came into the gun shop at noon, folded her parasol and slipped out of her raincoat. Lanphier kissed the tip of her nose and went to hang her coat by the door. She said, "I'm told the way to a man's heart is through his stomach. I made you a sandwich." She unwrapped an oilskin pouch and put it on his workbench.

Lanphier said, "Slices of last night's dinner, I'll bet," and laughed gently. "That's all right. We don't need money, do we?"

"We've got our love to live on," she answered, eyeing him brightly past the tumbling fall of her hair.

"Well, I'm still sorry we don't make much money," he said. "I'd like to buy you everything there is."

"You'd be unhappy doing anything but this," she said wisely.

"Sure, darling. I'm a tinkerer, always will be."

"I never expected anything else," she breathed; close to him, she pressed herself against him and turned into the circle of his arms. He kissed her with the easy tenderness of unhurried love, then he said, "You're funny. You and—your freckles."

"I do not have freckles!"

"Three of them. On your nose. Right on your nose."

"I do not." She pouted, and kissed him again.

The door slammed open and two hardbitten men stamped in, drenching the floor with rain. Lanphier unhurriedly unwrapped his arms and his wife stepped aside.

"Something I can do for you gents?"

Both of the toughs were big, but one outsized the other by a good fifty pounds. The smaller one had a dirty moustache; the bigger one had little button eyes that darted wickedly around, taking in the disorder of tools and metal gun parts, holsters and ammunition and weapons of all sizes

BRAND OF THE GUN

that cluttered the walls and counters of the shop. The bigger one's face was mottled with red blotches; he was a thoroughly disagreeable sort, stuffing pieces of hard candy into his mouth and chewing bovinely. His smaller partner twisted the points of his moustache and hitched up his gunbelt; he had the look of a would-be dandy. He said, "Look at these two, now, Candy. What do you think of that? Ain't true love sweet?"

"What do you want?" Lanphier said sharply.

"Fix guns, don't you?"

"That's what the sign says."

"I got a gun needs fixing," said the smaller one. "I'm Fred Hook. Maybe you heard of me."

Lanphier studied his face. "I know who you are," he remarked. "Darling, you go on home now. I'll be along for supper."

Sheila gave the two toughs a contemptuous look, walked wide around them, took her raincoat and parasol and went out. Fred Hook turned on both heels and kept his hungry glance pinned on her until she was out of sight in the rain. Hook reached out and closed the door, and only then walked over to the gunsmith's counter. He took the revolver out of his belt holster and laid it on the workbench.

Lanphier said, "What's the matter with it?"

Instead of answering, Hook glanced back at the door, where his candy-eating partner stood solemnly chewing. "Pretty wife you got. Real Sunday kind of woman."

"You want this gun fixed or don't you?"

"Sure. Gentle down, friend." Fred Hook picked up the six-gun and drew the hammer back to full cock. He held it up under Lanphier's nose. "See that? The cylinder sometimes doesn't line up straight when you cock it. Doesn't lock into place. Man could be in powerful trouble if that happened when he needed his gun to work fast."

"Probably needs a new locking bolt," Lanphier said. "Let's have a look."

BRAND OF THE GUN

Hook uncocked the gun slowly and grinned; and shoved the gun across the counter. "You do that."

Candy said petulantly, "I'm getting hungry, Fred. When're we going to eat?"

"Soon as we're done here."

"I saw some good-looking chocolate cream pie in that Chinaman's cafe up the street."

"Hell, will you quit whining about your belly for just a minute?" Hook said. "You aren't going to starve to death." He explained to Lanphier, who was taking the gun apart with a screwdriver, "Candy's got a sweet tooth. That's how come they call him Candy. Candy Briscoe, maybe you heard of him too, hey?"

"Can't say as I have," Lanphier muttered. He was squinting into the innards of the six-gun; he poked the screwdriver up into the interior of the dismantled frame and began to unscrew a spring.

Fred Hook chuckled. "Hear that, Candy? He ain't heard of you, but he's heard of me all right. Ain't that right, friend?"

"Didn't say I'd heard of you," Lanphier said. "I said I know who you are." He glanced at Hook briefly and returned his attention to his work. A handful of small parts, removed from Hook's six-gun, lay scattered across the surface of the workbench. He picked up one of them and held it up to the light.

Hook said, "What do you mean? What's the difference? How can you not have heard of me and still know who I am?"

"I used to live in Silver City," Lanphier said. "Saw you around there from time to time. Your name wasn't Fred Hook then."

Hook's eyes had narrowed down. "I think that's about enough out of you, friend."

"I'd be obliged," Lanphier murmured, "if you'd quit calling me 'friend.' I'm no friend of murderers."

Candy Briscoe laughed coarsely through a mouthful of

BRAND OF THE GUN

peppermint stick. "He's got you pegged, Fred. How about that."

"Yeah," Hook breathed. "How about that."

Lanphier held out his palm with the small part in it. "That spring's just about to break off the tail end of this bolt. That's your trouble."

"I don't want no speech," Hook said. "Just fix the thing."

"A man ought to know how his gun works," Lanphier said, "especially if he lives by it. Not knowing how your gun works, that's a mistake that could get you killed."

"Shut up," Hook said. His lip curled back in a snarl. "Any more jaw out of you and I might just take a notion to see about that pretty woman of yours. Hey, Candy, what you think about that? That redhead woman sure brings it all with her, doesn't she?"

"I reckon," Candy agreed amiably.

Hook said, "So maybe you ought to forget you ever saw me around Silver City, friend. Maybe you ought to just do that, if you want your pretty redhead woman left alone."

Lanphier made no immediate answer. He pulled up a high stool and sat down at his workbench, picked up a box of new gun parts and selected a small dark metal part. He reached for a file and bent close over the work, filing the spring to fit Hook's gun. He finally spoke, without heat.

"If you lay one finger on my wife, Hook—"

"If I do, you won't forget it easy," Hook cut in. "Remember that, friend, and keep your mouth shut about me and Silver City. Otherwise I could take a powerful shine to that wife of yours. Might shine her up a bit, too, kind of. You know what I mean?"

Lanphier's hand reached along the workbench and picked up another piece of metal. The file scraped back and forth, making a light rasping sound that cut across the hoarse sawing of Hook's breath. Lanphier said mildly, "I'm a gunsmith, not a bounty hunter. Leave me and mine alone, that's all. You hear me?"

BRAND OF THE GUN

"You threatening me, friend?"

"No," Lanphier said. "Just telling you. Touch my wife and you're dead, Hook."

Hook's brittle laugh, wholly without humor, erupted across the cluttered shop. "Real tough, ain't you, friend?"

"If I have to be," Lanphier answered evenly.

Hook kept laughing for a while. Lanphier didn't pay much attention. He put the six-gun back together, put a few drops of oil into the mechanism, and unloaded the gun. When he was sure the chambers were empty he pointed the gun at the ceiling and cocked it and pulled the trigger. He did that about a dozen times before he handed the gun to Hook.

"Here, you try it. I think it's all fixed now."

Hook dry-snapped the revolver half a dozen times. "Works fine. Didn't slip once. You're a pretty good gunsmith, you know that?"

"Dollar for the new part," Lanphier said coolly.

Hook laughed. "Take it out of my hide—if you've got the guts. Come on, Candy." He strode to the door, and paused as he opened it. "Remember what I said about your woman, friend. Remember it good—and keep your lip shut. Understand?" He laughed again and went outside.

Candy Briscoe poked a peppermint stick in his mouth and went out after him. The door slammed. Lanphier sat at his workbench running his thumbnail up and down the file he had been working with. It made a soft scratching sound. He shook his head slowly and got up, moving heavily, as if a burden had descended on him. Before he left the shop he buckled a worn gunbelt around his hips and took out the revolver to check its action and its loads. It was a long-barreled forty-five.

The rain began to let up toward evening. At suppertime Jeremy Six went into the Glad Hand Saloon, threading the tunnel-like doorway through its thick adobe wall. The house

BRAND OF THE GUN

professor, Nimble-Finger Buchler, sat gauntly hunched over the keyboard of the battered piano, pecking at the keys. Six threaded a path through the rain-sodden crowd to the back door. He banged his big knuckles on the door and when it opened he took his hat off. "Howdy."

"Howdy," said Clarissa Vane. She gave him her warm smile and stepped back to admit him.

She had supper prepared—dinner for two; it had become a ritual, three nights a week, and this was Monday night. Ledgers and an open cashbox littered the open rolltop desk that was Clarissa's office, but the rest of the room was entirely her private domain, furnished and curtained as her feminine tastes wished. This was the haven to which Clarissa Vane retreated from the realities of the eye-and-tooth life that took up the hours of her business day.

The meal was laid out with polished silver and elaborate china and a decanter of wine. Six held Clarissa's chair and then went around to sit down. "It always amazes me how you do this," he said.

"You mean here on the wrong side of town?"

"I didn't mean exactly—"

"We don't have to waltz around with each other, do we, Jeremy?" She once again gave him that curious smile of hers, part quizzical, part faraway, part secret. "We never ask each other questions very much, do we?"

"Do we need to?"

She made an indeterminate gesture. "I carry all this with me because it's all I've got left of what I started with. I grew up in New Orleans. We were pretty well off until the panic of 'Seventy-three. My daddy was in the cotton business and even the Civil War didn't cripple us, but when the panic came we went broke on three-cent cotton and my daddy just couldn't face any of us, I guess. Somebody said he shipped out on a tramp or a Horn clipper. I never really did find out what hapened to him. My mother died that winter and I thought I'd go to California and see if

BRAND OF THE GUN

I could find my father. I packed up everything I still had—there wasn't much; you see it all in front of you. Tried to make my way from place to place by gambling. This was as far as I got. I played cards in this room with the man who owned the place and Hal Craycroft and a few others. Maybe it was just that he'd never played cards with a woman before and got flustered, but the owner of this place had a losing streak like I'd never seen before. Before I knew it I was the owner of the Glad Hand and everything in it. Which wasn't too very much."

Six didn't speak, and after a moment she added, "That's about all there is to tell. A little while later you came along. They hired you to clean up the town. I remember it took six months before you unbent enough to take your hat off for me."

It made him laugh. "That was a little while ago. You've got the damndest memory for things that embarrass a man."

"As far as you were concerned, I was the wrong-side-of-the-tracks type and that was that."

"Maybe," he said. "My book of rules is pretty thin, but that makes what little's in it all the more important. Takes quite a while for me to admit there's a loophole in one of my rules."

"I'm glad you're like that," she said. "The world's too full of men who'll change their rules at the toss of a coin, Jeremy. You stay the way you are."

He smiled. "I was about to warn you that I wasn't about to change any. You've just got to put up with me the way I am—hidebound and crotchety and stubborn as a long-ear jackass."

He lifted the decanter and poured the wine.

Afterward he sat back with the loose heaviness that followed a good meal; he clamped a cigar in his mouth but in deference to Clarissa—and the small confines of the room—he did not light it. A worried frown settled slowly on his

BRAND OF THE GUN

face and prompted her to say, "You're still troubled about Wade Cruze."

"Can't help it. The little fellow's up to something strange and I can't put my finger on what it is. Until I find out, I won't know whether it means trouble or not."

"Hasn't he said anything about what he's here for?"

"Not a thing that means anything. He's having fun playing a little game, trying to puzzle the whole town. It's his idea of a good joke. But there's something more behind it than just a bad little joke. Cruze didn't pack his crew this far from home just for the fun of starting rumors."

"And you can't force him to talk or leave town unless he does something to break the law. One of your hidebound, crochety, jackass-stubborn little rules."

"That's about how it is," he agreed.

She brought coffee and they sat across the table from each other, not talking, enjoying the ease of not needing to talk. But the irritation of Wade Cruze's mystery kept nagging Six's mind and he got up sooner than he usually did; he gathered his hat and rain slicker, walked around the dinner table, and tipped Clarissa's grave face up with one finger. He let his kiss lie against her lips for a languorous moment before he straightened and said, "Got to see about keeping the lid on things," and went out brusquely.

It was not exactly raining outside, but tiny droplets of water hung in the air like mist, drifting around on cool currents of damp wind. The rainy season down along the border country here was usually a predictable matter: sometime between August and October the skies would start clouding up every afternoon in the west, and late in the afternoon every day for two weeks a sudden downpour would come smashing down onto the mountains and the desert, flash-flooding the arroyo ravines and bloating the desert cactus with enough storage-moisture to keep them until the January sprinkles. But this year was an odd one; here it was almost the middle of October and there hadn't

BRAND OF THE GUN

been any real thunderstorms yet, but just this steady misery of a drizzle all day long for three days running.

It was enough, for sure, to put a gray blanket on a man's good spirits. And to top it off, there was Wade Cruze and the close-mouthed Terrapin crew to think about.

Six turned his oilskin collar up around his jaw and stalked through Cat Town on his first rounds of the evening. He put his head into the various saloons and dance halls of the back streets, mainly to remind the drinking folks of his presence; usually that was all that was needed to keep the lid on things, but after three straight days of rain that kept them indoors, a good many men were getting restless. Restlessness could mean trouble, when it was fueled by a few too many belts of red-eye whisky.

So far, the town was quiet enough. He made his circuit through Cat Town and crossed over to the respectable side of town, where the only nighttime establishment other than his own office was the Drovers Rest. The Drovers Rest catered to the Brahmins of Spanish Flat—the important cattlemen and the owners of the town's major businesses. In keeping with its function, it was decorated simply but elegantly, and was not the sort of establishment that tolerated rowdy behavior. If trouble started in Spanish Flat, it rarely had its beginnings in the Drovers Rest. But tonight was different: Wade Cruze was in the Drovers Rest, although most of his crew had scattered to the lower priced dives of Cat Town.

On his way there, Six crossed the porch of the hotel and paused to glance into the lobby. A willowy girl, not beautiful but certainly attractive, stood by the hotel registry talking with the fat cattle buyer, Owen McQuarter. Curiosity turned Six's steps inside and he went toward the desk, removing his hat.

McQuarter spotted him coming. The fat man swiveled heavily—he had none of the nimble grace that was often erroneously attributed to fat men—and greeted Six as he came

BRAND OF THE GUN

up, and added, "Marshal, this is my ward, Miss Marianne Holbrook."

The girl flashed a shining smile that changed the half-plain surfaces of her face and made her suddenly vivacious and pretty. She had soft, cornsilk-blond hair and a tall slim figure clothed fashionably in a high-necked print dress. She said, "You don't need to be so formal, Uncle Owen." To Six she explained, "I'm just an Army brat, Marshal, on my way to visit with Uncle Owen at Fort Dragoon."

"My ward is on her way to San Francisco," McQuarter said. "She'll be schoolteaching there."

"Tutoring," the girl corrected him. "I'm a tutor."

"Same thing," the fat man said. "Isn't it?"

She laughed again and tossed her head toward Six. "I'm sure the marshal isn't interested in the subtle distinctions between schoolteaching and tutoring."

"I reckon," McQuarter growled.

"That's quite all right, Miss," Six said. "I hope you enjoy your stay in Spanish Flat. Maybe the weather will cheer up some, now that you're here."

"Why, thank you for the compliment, Marshal." The girl curtsied prettily.

McQuarter asked, "You heard anything more about what Cruze has got up his sleeve?"

"No. I came in here to ask you the same question," Six said.

"Well, I haven't heard a word out of Cruze, but there's something else come up that's damned curious. You heard of a gent calls himself Travis Canaday, maybe?"

"I think so," Six said. "Texas cattleman, isn't he?"

"Used to be. I understand Canaday went broke in the drought two summers back, had to sell his outfit. Now I hear he's bought a little ranch not too far from where Wade Cruze comes from. Outfit called the Warbonnet."

"And?"

"A rider came through about an hour ago, said Travis

BRAND OF THE GUN

Canaday had a big herd of cattle road-branded Warbonnet. Said there were three, maybe four thousand steers in the herd. Said Canaday's driving that herd here to Spanish Flat to sell it to the Army. Now, what do you think about that?"

"I don't know," Six answered. "What do you think about it?"

"Ain't no other Army cattle buyer in these parts but me," McQuarter said. "This rider, he said Canaday's about four, five days out of town with that herd. You figure maybe Canaday and Cruze have gone partners or something?"

"Could be," Six said, and added privately, *I hope so*. It would explain a great many things, and it would reduce the Wade Cruze mystery to a harmless, if tasteless, joke. "Suppose I ask Cruze about it."

"You do that little thing, Marshal," the cattle buyer said.

The desk clerk appeared, signed the girl in, and came around to pick up her luggage. The girl said good night to Six and went upstairs with her small retinue—the desk clerk and the fat guardian. Six watched until they went out of sight at the top of the stairs. *Pretty girl*, he thought mildly, and observed that she'd had poor luck in finding a guardian. He had little use for Owen McQuarter—he had the feeling McQuarter was the kind of man who would sell his own mother if he could get a good price for her.

He left the hotel and braved the drizzle as far as the Drovers Rest, where Wade Cruze was holding court behind a poker table with a half-empty whisky bottle at one elbow.

Unasked, Six drew up a chair and sat. Cruze gave him a shrewd glance; Cruze was a little drunk but there was nothing wrong with his eyesight or his brain. His brown beard pointed straight at Six and chopped open. "Evenin', Marshal."

"Travis Canaday's driving a herd of steers this way, a few days down the trail. You know anything about that?"

"Sure I know about it," Cruze said. "Take me for an

BRAND OF THE GUN

idiot?" He was a tough, irascible little man with a thin-lipped mouth half-hidden behind his whiskers. He shoved the bottle toward Six. "Have a snort. But I ought to warn you, they ain't puttin' big enough snakes in this whisky like they used to any more."

"No, thanks," Six said.

Cruze looked at him shrewdly. "Something on your mind?"

"That Warbonnet herd."

"Warbonnet," Cruze said, and snorted with contempt. "Two-bit greasy sack outfit."

"I hear he's driving some cows. A few thousand head."

"My cows, Marshal."

"That's what I wanted to know. You've gone partners with Canaday, then?"

"Partners?" Cruze's eyes fixed themselves on Six. He roared, "*Partners?* With that moonlighting long-looping ring-tailed son of a bitch Canaday?"

The ring of onlookers was watching with eager fascination, like camp dogs waiting for tossed scraps. Both Six and Cruze ignored them. Six sat back and hitched one arm across the back of the chair; he crossed his legs and turned the cigar in his teeth and said mildly, "I think maybe you'd better spin out the whole yarn now. The joke's gone far enough."

"Joke?" Cruze's eyes mirrored amused innocence. "What joke?"

"Whose herd is that, Cruze?"

"Mine."

"Then how come you're not driving it?"

Cruze chuckled. "Maybe I figured Travis Canaday didn't have nothin' better to do than drive my herd to market for me."

"You can do better than that," Six said.

"Why should I?"

"Because I'm the law talking to you," Six told him, "and because if I don't get some answers out of you right

BRAND OF THE GUN

away I'm just likely to start leafing through some old law books and find some forgotten misdemeanor I can lock you up for. You and your whole pack of coyotes."

Cruze's eyes narrowed down and he eased himself lower in his chair. "Ain't no need to throw raw meat on the floor, Marshal," he grumbled. "I'm not hoorawing your town, am I?"

Six explained it to him candidly. "Cruze, I'll show you how it is. I've got to ride herd on this town the way you ride herd on a cattle drive. This steady rain's got my town as spooky as a trail herd after a long dry. It won't take much to set off a stampede. If this was another time and another place I might not give two hoots and a holler about your little joke. But right now that's all it may take to set this town back on its hind legs and baying at the moon. It's my job to keep the peace and I don't aim to see anybody killed by stray ammunition."

He found his cigar had gone out; he held a match to it and squinted at Cruze. "That's how it is. Now, do you spin the yarn or do I lock you up?"

Cruze squirmed uncomfortably in his chair. He dragged the bottle toward him and hoisted it, belting down a stiff swallow. He coughed and rubbed the back of his sleeve across his bearded mouth. Across the table, Six caught the glance of Cruze's hard-jawed foreman, Sid Arklin. Arklin was a hard one to read; it was hard to tell what he was thinking. He was no gunman, but he was as tough as any Texan who came down the pike.

Cruze said, "All right, Six, we'll talk about it. But not here."

"My office, then." Six uncrossed his legs and stood. "Coming?"

"Don't be in such an all-fired hurry." Cruze reached out and got a good grip on the bottle, stood up and waved his hand in an expansive gesture. "Lead the way."

Arklin was getting up, but Cruze's eyes pinned him back

BRAND OF THE GUN

down in the chair. "This here's private, between me and the marshal. You stick around and have yourself some fun."

"You sure?" Arklin said, frowning.

"Hell, we've got to trust this law dog, Sid. You sit tight. I'll be back. Ready, Marshal?"

Six led the way. The saloon crowd opened to make a path for them. Cruze carried the whisky bottle as if it were made of precious stones. His bantam figure bobbed cockily through the crowd and out the doors. He tugged his sweat-stained hat down, disdaining a raincoat, and fell into step beside Six on the boardwalk. Cruze had to take almost two steps for every one of Six's long-legged strides. "You're putting a dent in my drinking time," he complained.

"Not so's you'd notice it," Six replied, glancing at the bottle in Cruze's fist. They waded across the intersection and tramped down the mud-caked walk to the Marshal's Office; Six went inside and turned up the lamp. Cruze shut the door, found a safe spot for his bottle on Six's desk, and dragged up a chair. He sat down, propped his feet on the corner of the desk, and pushed his hat back on his head. He looked around the place with a proprietary air and nodded as if in approval.

"All right," Six said. "Let's hear it."

III

"THOSE ARE my cows Canaday's drivin'," Wade Cruze said.

"You already said that."

"Canaday thinks they aren't my cows," Cruze murmured. A glint of devilry sparkled in his shrewd eyes. "He thinks they're his cows, free and clear."

BRAND OF THE GUN

"Go on," Six said, frowning through the diaphanous blue cloud of cigar smoke.

"I don't want word to get around about what I'm fixing to do about Canaday. That's why I want to keep this private, just you and me and my boys. They all know enough to keep their mouths shut—they drop one word in this town and I'll have their guts for guitar strings, and they know it. Look, Marshal, I'll lay it on the line for you. All I want is your word on it that you won't go sending somebody to warn Travis Canaday what I'm up to. Can I trust you?"

"You've got no choice," Six reminded him. "I told you before, I don't make deals. No promises. But I've never met Canaday and I've got no reason to do him any favors unless the law calls for it."

That didn't seem to make Wade Cruze too happy. He tried to disguise the fact that he was stalling for time by lowering his boots to the floor and reaching out to grab his whisky bottle; he held it in his lap and levered his legs back up to the desk corner, one at a time, and spent quite a while adjusting one ankle across the other until he was comfortable. Six watched him with bemused patience.

Finally Cruze said, "All right. Just to make you easy in mind. I'll tell you how it happened. I let Travis Canaday make a damn fool out of me." His eyes shot up, as if to catch Six nodding in agreement, but Six only watched him evenly.

Cruze said, "My weakness has always been two things—whisky and cards. I'm no drunk, mind you, but I make the mistake of drinking too much when I play cards. I know it's a mistake and I don't figure to make the same mistake again, but I made it a few weeks back and Travis Canaday figured he had me beat and crawling. I aim to prove he was wrong."

"You're getting pretty windy," Six suggested mildly. "Come to the point."

"I got into a card game down in Lochiel. Three local gents and two strangers I didn't recognize. Reckon I got

BRAND OF THE GUN

pretty smashed up with red-eye. Come morning, I woke up and the fella who owned the cantina told me I'd lost a passel to those two card playing strangers—told me I'd signed over my whole cattle herd to pay my losses. I was fit to be tied. I went around checking up. Story I heard was that the two strangers, not being cattlemen, had sold my herd to the first rancher they come across."

"That being Travis Canaday," Six murmured.

"You see the picture," Cruze agreed. "Only I didn't stop there. I wasn't satisfied. I kept on checking, and I found out a few things. Sid Arklin went over to Canaday's place and got to jawing with one or two of Canaday's cowhands he knows. It seems the same two gambling men had showed up a few days earlier on Canaday's doorstep, looking for a handout. They didn't have two pennies between them to rub together. But two days later they get into a card game with me, and they're bankrolled fit to stuff a grizzly bear. They must've had five thousand in greenbacks between them, easy. Now, where d'you suppose they drummed up that kind of stake in two days' time? I checked some more and found out there hadn't been any other high-stake card games around the valley."

"Go on," Six said.

"The county sheriff down there's a friend of mine. I got him to send out a few telegrams, making inquiries. Word came back pretty quick. Seems those two card playing strangers'd been run out of two dozen boomtowns for running a shill game. They're professional cheats. Card-sharks. I was cheated out of my herd by two professionals, Marshal—and it was Travis Canaday who hired them to steal my herd at that poker table. Hell, he didn't 'buy' that herd from those two, no more than I could fly to the moon. Canaday was broke when he came into that country and he sure as hell didn't have enough spare cash lying around to pay for four thousand head of prime two year olds, even at rock-bottom prices. Probably that five thous-

BRAND OF THE GUN

and in greenbacks was all the money he had in the world. He gave it to the cardsharks in exchange for my cows."

"You can't prove that," Six said.

"That's where you're wrong," Cruze said grimly. "I went after the gamblers. Found them in Nogales and showed them the light of day."

"At the point of a gun?"

"Sure. How else was I going to do it?" Cruze reached inside his shirt and drew out an oilskin pouch. He untied the drawstring and removed a folded document, opened it and passed it across the desk to Six. "They signed this here confession of the whole thing."

Six frowned, picked up the document and read it with care. Afterward he handed it back to the cattleman and said, "Why didn't you go to the sheriff with this?"

"It'd take months to get it through the courts," Cruze scoffed. "By that time Canaday'd have sold my cows and lit a shuck for other parts with the money. Besides, I figure he's got a lesson coming."

"And you're just the gent to teach it to him?"

"Sure enough." Cruze chuckled, put the confession away in his pouch and replaced the pouch in his shirt. "I've got him by the short hairs, Marshal. I figure to let Travis Canaday have all the trouble and expense of driving a cantankerous herd of bawling cattle all the way up here to Spanish Flat. Hell, why should I wear out my own crew?"

"And when Canaday brings that herd in—then what?"

"Then I wave this confession under his nose and take the herd away from him," Cruze said bluntly. "I've got the legal right to do that, and neither you nor anybody else can keep me from it."

"Canaday might," Six muttered. "Ever think of that? Do you really think you can just walk up to him and wave that paper under his nose and expect him to hand the cattle over to you without an argument? If Canaday's the kind of man who'd hire card cheats to steal your cattle from you, he's

BRAND OF THE GUN

not the kind of man who's likely to give up without a fight."

Cruze said in a soft way, "Why do you figure I brought my whole crew and the two hardcases with me, Marshal?"

"Then that's what it comes down to." Six got to his feet and planted both hands flat on the desk. "Now you listen hard to this, Cruze, because I only intend to say it once: This town is not a battleground for your private war with Travis Canaday. If you want to get your herd back, you take that confession to the circuit judge and persuade him to give you a court order delivering those cattle over to you. Then you send a rider up to the county seat and have the sheriff serve the court order on Canaday."

"I ain't got time for such truck, legal fooforawing and the like. Hell, Canaday'll have that herd in here in four days and I sure as hell can't get a court order and find me a sheriff in that length of time. Now you hear me out, Marshal. Those cows are all I've got in this world, and at my age I'll be damned if I'll go back to breaking horses for six bits a head. If I have to do it I aim to string Travis Canaday up to dry in the sun, but by God I'll get my cows back, and you can put that in the bank!"

"There's a legal way to do it, Cruze, and if you don't take the legal way then it's your own loss."

"My way," Cruze answered stubbornly. "I'll do it my way, Marshal."

"Not in my town. I won't let you do it."

"Marshal, you can't stop me. I haven't broken a single law. I ain't even spit on the sidewalk!"

Six spoke without moving his lips. "You've got short brains, Cruze. You start a gun battle with Travis Canaday and this whole town will come unhinged, and I don't intend to have that."

Cruze got up and headed for the door, carrying his bottle. He swigged from it and said, "Any shooting starts, it won't be me that starts it. It'll be Canaday."

BRAND OF THE GUN

"That's not good enough," Six said.

"Well, then, you tell me what is good enough?"

"Take your crew out of town. If you've got to have it out with Canaday, do it out on the prairie."

"And stampede that whole herd from here to breakfast?" Cruze snorted. "Like hell I will." And he swung outside, slamming the door behind him.

Six stared sightlessly at the door. The damnable thing was, there was nothing he could do, not until the trouble actually started. Constrained by his iron-bound sense of duty, he saw no way to stop Cruze. Cruze was right: he had not broken a single law.

It might easily take the whole town apart.

The Coronado Springs relay station squatted dismally amid a few stunted gray trees, surrounded by misty leagues of desert flats. Eddie Hanratty arrived at nine-thirty that night, four hours out of Spanish Flat on a sturdy gelding saddle horse, but Eddie Hanratty was no horseman. He had a blunt square head and the striped gray railroad cap he wore did not conceal the tufted thatch of brick-red hair that crowned his pitted face. Eddie Hanratty, it was said, was so Irish that in some lights he appeared to have green hair. Sometime in his checkered past he had been a railroad man, but now—although everybody in the Mogul country knew him by sight—nobody was quite sure what Eddie Hanratty did to justify his existence.

Drenched to the skin, Eddie Hanratty dismounted in the stable barn, loosened the cinches, and trudged across the relay station yard to the main building. It was a sprawl of adobe wings, tacked onto the original square structure at various intervals over the years; the Coronado Springs station had become not only a relay depot for twice-weekly stagecoaches, but also a minor headquarters for surrounding cattle ranches. Part of the place was a gambling saloon with a plank-on-keg bar; and the rest of the building was

BRAND OF THE GUN

partitioned off into bug-infested, flyblown rooms for transient guests.

The station lay in a miserable squalor of mud after the continuing drizzle. Eddie Hanratty kicked his boots against the adobe doorjamb, dislodging a crumbling piece of plaster; he gave up in disgust and tramped inside, trailing lumps of mud. The owner of the place, whose name nobody ever remembered, was behind the plank bar serving beer to two stranded *vaqueros* who were obviously waiting out the rain. Hanratty went over to the bar and said, "Cort Danziger been here lately?"

The innkeeper gave him a bleak look. "Does this look like a boarding house? I don't keep no register."

Hanratty plucked a silver dollar out of his jeans and tossed it on the bar. It twirled and rang. He didn't say anything, but when the innkeeper's hand began to rise, Hanratty clapped his palm over the silver dollar. "I heard somebody saw Danziger up this way."

The innkeeper jerked his head toward a closed door. "Playing cards in there."

Hanratty took his hand off the silver dollar, nodded a brusque thanks, and tramped over to the door. He opened it without bothering to knock.

A traveling tinhorn sat behind the faro box; his voice was droning across the thickness of tobacco smoke: "Jack loses, five wins."

Hanratty shut the door and put his big-rumped back against it. He studied the four card players individually. They all glanced at him when he came in, but nobody paid much attention to him.

Two of the players were Mexican cowhands. The third was the traveling tinhorn. The fourth man, that had to be Cort Danziger. Hanratty had never met Danziger but he had heard of him often enough. The trouble was, this down-at-the-heels card player didn't fit the image Hanratty had in mind of Cort Danziger. Maybe the innkeeper had

BRAND OF THE GUN

made a mistake, or maybe Danziger had slipped out back to the outhouse.

Hanratty said, "Are you Danziger?"

The card player looked up. His eyes were half-lidded and weary. A gray stubble of whiskers slurred his gaunt cheeks. He wore the faded, worn-at-the-cuffs remnants of what had once been expensive clothes; his string necktie was askew and one vest button hung by a thread. He was long-boned and lean, hollow-cheeked and pale; he stared dully at Hanratty, his eyes fiercely blue against the white skin.

"I'm Danziger."

"I'm Eddie Hanratty."

"I don't know you," Danziger said.

"You will," Hanratty said dryly. "Come up front and have a drink with me,"

Danziger looked him up and down. Something, perhaps a muscle spasm, curled up one corner of Danziger's long-lipped mouth. "I'd sooner be found dead," he said contemptuously, and returned his attention so completely to the faro box that it was as if he had totally forgotten Hanratty's existence.

Hanratty said in a very soft, very gentle way, "Would you be giving us a moment here, boys? Mr. Danziger and I have a little business to discuss."

The faro dealer gave him an impatient glance. "This ain't no business office, mister." One of the Mexicans just then put a handful of coins on the table and the dealer took a leather wallet out of his coat and put the wallet on the table; he said to the Mexican, "You're covered."

Danziger's lip curled up wryly; he reached down and took off his low-top boot and put it on the table in front of him. "If you're betting leather, count me in."

Angrily, Hanratty spun back to the door. "I've got some money for you, Danziger. If you don't want it that's your hard luck. I'll be out at the bar for five minutes. After that

BRAND OF THE GUN

I head home." He went out and yanked the door shut behind him.

He went to the bar and shook his head when the innkeeper looked at him inquiringly; he glanced at the Seth Thomas clock behind the bar, and reached for a soda cracker in the open bar barrel. The cracker was soggy and tasteless. "Gimme a beer."

He was halfway through the beer when Cort Danziger appeared beside him. "What's on your twisted little mind?"

Hanratty looked at him without friendliness. "Meet me out back of the stables," he said under his breath; he tossed off the beer and turned away.

Danziger's pale, thin hand whipped out and grabbed him by the sleeve. "I don't take orders from your kind," Danziger said coldly.

Hanratty only glanced at him. "You're about to get yourself a busted arm, mister."

Danziger's eyes lay against him and Hanratty stared unblinkingly back at him until Danziger's glance broke away and Danziger lowered his hand.

"That's better," Hanratty said, and turned away. He went outside, turning his collar up against the drizzle; his stomach was lurching and chugging and he thought, *You take some dumb chances for a fact, Hanratty.* He went into the barn and got his horse and led it out around behind the stable, and stood there for the time it took to smoke a cigarette down to a stub. As he was crushing it out in the mud under his heel, Cort Danziger's vague shape appeared in the darkness at the stable corner.

"Right here," Hanratty said. "It ain't an ambush, if that's what you're worried about."

"You said you had some money for me."

"If you do me a job of work."

Danziger moved closer in the darkness. "What kind of work?"

BRAND OF THE GUN

"I'd be wanting you to use that gun of yours," Hanratty murmured.

"Thanks kindly," Danziger said, "but I don't do that kind of work any more."

Hanratty laughed harshly. "When a gunslinger gets polite, I figure it means either he's lost his speed or he's lost his guts. Looks to me like you've lost both. Your hands were shaking so much in there you couldn't even hold that shoe steady on the table."

Danziger snarled at him. "Ten years ago you couldn't have shined my boots."

Hanratty laughed again, very low in his throat. "Hardly a man who's now alive remembers back that far, friend. Ain't it about time for you to be putting your pride away in your pocket?"

"I'm getting soaked through," Danziger said. "Say what you came to say."

"Sure. Today's October thirteenth. I want you to do a job between now and October eighteenth. Any later than that, and the business is forfeit."

"Who do you want killed?"

"A girl name of Marianne Holbrook. You'll find her in Spanish Flat and I'm thinking you maybe ought to—"

"Hold on," Danziger interrupted. "I'm a little fuzzy tonight. I thought I heard you say it was a girl."

"That'd be precisely what I said."

"What do you take me for?" Danziger hissed.

"Well, now, that's one of the things I rode out here to be finding out," Hanratty said. "There'd be a good bit of money in it for you. I'm minded seven thousand dollars can take a man a far way from his bad memories."

"The customary thirty pieces of silver," Danziger observed.

"Then how about it?"

"I'd sooner herd sheep," Danziger said, and began to turn away.

BRAND OF THE GUN

Hanratty said softly, "I didn't ask if you were selling, Danziger. I told you I'm buying."

"Go away," Danziger said. "You don't interest me any more."

"You're refusing my terms, then?"

"Wouldn't you?" Danziger said wryly.

"Well, I might," Hanratty admitted, "only I ain't in the fix you're in. You've got no choice, Danziger."

"Certainly I've got a choice. I've just made it. Good night to you, Hanratty."

Danziger was halfway to the corner of the stable when Hanratty said, "I'll just speak a name to you, then. Steve Boat. The name Steve Boat, and the name Sally Jenkins. They mean anything to you, Mr. Danziger?"

It stopped Danziger in his tracks as if he had been jerked around by the arm.

Hanratty said quietly, "I hear Steve Boat has a way with a gun. I hear there ain't nobody who's a match for his gun."

"What of it?"

"What happens if I send a wire to Steve Boat telling him where to find you?"

Danziger made no answer. In the darkness he seemed so still that he appeared to have stopped breathing. Hanratty laughed softly. "You're afraid to die."

"Only afraid to die badly," Danziger said, talking with hollow abstraction as if he were discussing the time of day or the rain.

"How about it, then?" Hanratty said insinuatingly.

"I'll think it over."

"You already have."

"You're out of your mind," Danziger said fiercely.

"And you're out on a limb, Danziger."

Danziger wiped a hand on the front of his coat; he said in a vague tone, "This girl, who is she? Why's she worth so much to you dead?"

BRAND OF THE GUN

"That ain't included in the price of your ticket."

"Why don't you kill her yourself if you're so anxious to get it done?"

"I've got to live in these parts," Hanratty said. "You don't. You can clear out, soon as it's finished. Listen, friend, I've got you pegged—you're a washed-up ex-gunfighter down on your luck, you've lost your stake and your nerve. And, like I told you, it's time for you to be putting your pride in your pocket. You can't afford it any more. Now, would you be giving me the answer to my question?"

Danziger said, in a voice close to a whisper, "Tell me how you want it done."

"That's better. Marianne Holbrook is the girl's name and you'll find her staying at the hotel in Spanish Flat. It doesn't matter a fig to me whether you use a gun or a knife or your bare hands, but I want her dead. D-E-A-D, dead. You'd be understanding my meaning?"

"What about the money?"

"Here's fifty dollars for expenses." Hanratty stepped forward and held out a handful of coins that shone ever so dully in the darkness—gold eagles and half-eagles. When Danziger made no move, Hanratty shoved them down into the frayed pocket of Danziger's vest, and stepped back quickly as if trying to avoid contamination. Hanratty said, "When you've sized up the job and you're ready to make your kill, saddle your horse and leave it out behind the ice house. When I see your horse there I'll know you're doing the job. You get it done and get to your horse, and you'll find seven thousand dollars in greenbacks in your saddlebags. After that you'll be on your own."

"How do I know I can trust you?"

"What choice have you got?" Hanratty said mildly. "I'll be giving you my word on it, if that's any help."

Danziger laughed coarsely in the night. The drizzly breeze picked up the harsh sound and rang it back against the stable wall in mocking echo.

BRAND OF THE GUN

Hanratty said, "Do it soon, friend."

"I'll do it when the right time comes."

"It had better come within the next four days. I want the girl dead by Saturday midnight. If she's still breathing I'll be sending out a telegram or two. You be studying on that, Danziger—if Marianne Holbrook's still alive Saturday night, I know right where to put my finger on Mr. Steve Boat. And once Boat knows where to find you, there's not a thing on this earth that'll save you from that gun of his. I leave you with that thought. It ought to keep you from getting bored."

Hanratty swung up on his horse, tugged his hat down, and hurried away. The horse's hooves kicked back mud clods that splashed against Cort Danziger's chest.

IV

IN THE MORNING Gene Lanphier, the gunsmith, kissed his wife—at considerable length—on the front stoop of their little house; he went down the street nonchalantly, forming his lips in a soundless whistle, listening to a silent tune in his head. But he was wearing a gun, something he was not in the habit of doing. He had been wearing it ever since the gunman Fred Hook had made threats against his wife.

This particular morning, Lanphier did not go directly to his gun shop. Instead he turned the corner a block short of the shop and went back to Hanson's Livery Stable. He dickered with Hanson for the morning's rental of a saddle horse, and waited while the stable boy went back to cut him out a mount and saddle it.

BRAND OF THE GUN

While Lanphier was waiting, the marshal walked into the stable to see to his horse. Six always dropped around at least once a day to groom the horse, although as town marshal he spent most of his time on foot.

"Why," Six said, "good morning, Gene." He seemed a little surprised to see the gunsmith here.

Lanphier nodded without smiling. The stable boy came in leading a piebald horse that looked a little down-at-the-fetlocks; Lanphier said snappishly, "Haven't you got a better horse than that spavined hunk of dog meat?"

Hanson, the owner, looked up from his rolltop desk. His eyebrows went up. "You've rented that horse half a dozen times and never complained before."

"Sorry," Lanphier said. "Hell, all right. It doesn't make any difference. I'm not going far out of town anyway." He glanced at Six. The marshal was studying him curiously and Lanphier noticed that Six's glance flicked several times to the long-barreled forty-five at Lanphier's hip. The gunsmith said, "I like to go out in the desert now and then and get in a little target practice."

"I never knew you to be a shooting man," Six said.

"I used to be target pistol champ of the Fifth Cavalry," Lanphier said, with a touch of pride in his voice. "I like to keep my hand in. Ever done any target shooting, Jeremy?"

"Not lately. There was a time when I guess I smashed every empty bottle on the trail between El Paso and Denver."

"Sure. I don't reckon you get to be a gunfighter without plenty of practice."

The stable boy was prying the piebald's mouth open to get the bridle-bit into place. Lanphier lifted the long Colt out of the holster and sighted along the barrel, aiming the weapon at a lantern hanging down at the far end of the stable aisle, a good hundred feet away. "Always did like this gun," he said. "Nice long sight-radius. That's what a ten-inch barrel gives you. You ever know that, Jeremy? The length of your pistol barrel has nothing to do with the ac-

BRAND OF THE GUN

curacy of your gun. A short barrel will shoot out a bullet just as straight as a long one. But if you've got a long barrel it means your front sight's farther away from your rear sight. You can aim more accurately that way. That's the difference."

Six said abstractly, "I don't ordinarily get much time to use the gunsights in my line of work. Just point and shoot, that's what it comes down to."

"You might be making a mistake, there," Lanphier said. "What if you got into a hard place where you had to make your six-gun work for you at long range? One or two hundred yards, say."

"A handgun's for short-range work," Six said. "Anything over fifty feet and I use a rifle."

"But suppose you didn't have a rifle?"

Six said gently, "In my line of work a man makes it his business to have a rifle when he needs one." He walked over and nodded his head at Lanphier's pistol; the gunsmith handed it to him and Six examined the weapon with interest. It'd be pretty awkward if you had to drag all that out of a holster in a hurry."

"I'll grant you it's too big for speed. But speed isn't everything. I'll tell you what, Jeremy. One day when you haven't got anything else to do, you come on out to the desert with me and I'll show you a thing or two that might surprise you. I had a topkick in my Cavalry troop who taught me stuff about six-guns I'd never have believed until I saw it."

"I didn't know you'd been in the Army."

Lanphier said, "I just did one hitch." He smiled with a touch of shyness. "That was when I met Sheila. We wanted to get married and I knew damn well I couldn't support a family on my trooper's pay of twelve dollars a month. I never had the urge to shoot anybody—I'm afraid you'd never make a gunfighter out of me; I won't even shoot jackrabbits for sport. But I like guns and I like to tinker,

BRAND OF THE GUN

and I'm a pretty damn good shot. Especially at long range. That's one thing I learned. You're underestimating your gun if you think it's no good at more than point-blank range. Hell, Jeremy, a man who knows how can knock down a tin can at two hundred and fifty yards with one of these thumb-busting six-guns."

"I'd have to see that to believe it," Six said skeptically.

"You think I'm fooling you?"

"I just think a man would have to be a whiz to do that kind of shooting with a single-action hogleg."

"Just about anybody can do it, if he knows how and does some practicing," Lanphier said. He walked over to one of the horse-stall partitions, lifted the six-gun and braced it—holding it in both hands—leveling his arm along the solid support of the wooden bracings. "You steady your aim like this. Use both hands and rest your arm against something sturdy. A rock or a tree will do. You sight just the way you'd aim a rifle, only you've got to remember to allow some extra elevation because your trajectory's different. Just squeeze off your shot nice and easy, and you'll hit what you aim at. In a pinch you can even do it out in the open, with nothing to rest your arm on. Just sit down with your feet spread out, bend your knees up and brace both elbows against your knees. Lock the gun down in both hands and blaze away. You'd be amazed what you can hit. Sometimes you can hit something you can hardly see."

The stable boy brought the piebald over, saddled and cinched up. Lanphier looked enthusiastically at his long six-gun, shoved it into the holster, and gathered the reins to mount. Six stepped back to give him room, and said, "That's mighty interesting, Gene. One day I'll tag along with you. Might learn something new about shooting."

"You might find it'll come in handy," Lanphier agreed. "Just let me know any time you've got a couple of hours." He grinned down at Six and rode out of the stable.

Six glanced at the stable boy, who threw up his hands

BRAND OF THE GUN

and made a circling motion around his temple with one finger, indicating that he thought the gunsmith was absolutely crazy. The stable boy went away to collect his pitchfork, and Six turned into his own horse's stall to curry the gelding. While he worked, he thought about Gene Lanphier. Get the young gunsmith talking about sharpshooting, and he warmed enthusiastically to the subject. But lying in back of Lanphier's enthusiasm this morning had been a nagging, troubled feeling that had traveled from Lanphier to Six and made Six feel uneasy. There was grief on Lanphier's mind, that was sure. Six wondered what was behind it. A fight with his wife, perhaps? Gene and Sheila had a storybook sort of marriage and it just might be that they would get all unstrung by the minor kind of argument that most married couples would take in their stride.

He didn't spend too much time worrying it around. He had other, and bigger, problems. Neither by occupation nor by inclination was Jeremy Six a father-confessor; he believed strictly in minding his own business and leaving other people's troubles alone, except when they came under the heading of line of duty. And Jeremy Six's concept of duty was sharply outlined and exact. It did not include meddling in anyone's private affairs.

He left the stable and cruised into the center of town, feeling the pulse of the town. It had stopped raining but the sky was matted with slate-gray clouds and the air hung heavy with mist; the weather had not turned much for the better, and the present relief was obviously temporary. Within an hour it would likely start to drizzle again. Some of the cowhands had ridden out of town, going home to their ranches to take advantage of the few comparatively dry hours the morning offered. But none of them would be likely to get much work done, except the vital chores like hauling trapped steers out of rain-swollen bogs. Steady rain made a quagmire of the entire plain, and saddle horses had too much of a struggle just getting from place to place when

BRAND OF THE GUN

the terrain was turned to half-quicksand. Unless the sun came out hot and clear for a few days running, there wouldn't be anything but continuing frustration for the ranchers. And that, Six knew, could spell trouble for Spanish Flat—especially with Wade Cruze and his angry crew hanging around town just waiting for Travis Canaday to ride in with his Warbonnet crew.

Cruze was making his headquarters in the Drovers Rest, where he spent the time playing cards desultorily with his foreman, Sid Arklin, and a few saloon hangers-on. The rest of the crew was scattered around Cat Town somewhere, ready to form up on signal. Six had seen two of them ride out of town last night, probably to keep watch on the trail so that they could give Cruze plenty of warning when Canaday approached town.

He had spent several hours poring over the statute books, but there was no legal loophole that would allow him to jail Cruze or run him out of town. And it was not part of Six's lexicon to go beyond the limits of the law. His job was to keep the peace, but only within the framework of the system of laws; and there wasn't a thing he could do about Cruze as long as Cruze sat peaceably playing cards in the Drovers Rest.

Sooner or later, he had no doubt, there would be hell to pay. And the main thing was, Jeremy Six intended to see to it that the innocent citizens of Spanish Flat didn't end up paying it.

He stood on the hotel porch, testing the temper of the town, frowning up the street. Cruze's two hired gunmen, Candy Briscoe and Fred Hook, were banging on the door of the gun shop. Lanphier was still out of town, somewhere on the desert banging away with his long-barreled revolver, and the shop was locked up. That didn't seem to discourage Briscoe and Hook, who kept pounding on the door. They were laughing crudely and boisterously, obviously more

BRAND OF THE GUN

than half-drunk. That would give Six a legal excuse to jail them, but this wasn't the time to do that. Canaday's herd was still three or four days out of town. If he threw the two gunmen in jail now, he couldn't hold them on a drunk-and-disorderly charge for more than forty-eight hours. He would have to release them in plenty of time for them to raise hell when Canaday arrived.

Their drunken performance outside the gunsmith's shop did give Six room for hope. If they kept behaving like this, he could clap them in jail in a day or two and have them safely out of the streets when Canaday's crew came in. That wasn't much help, but every least bit counted. It gave Six an idea, and he turned abruptly toward the back of town, stalking the sagging boardwalks of Cat Town until he reached the Glad Hand.

He had to duck his tall head to clear the low doorway. Inside, he paused to accustom his eyes to the dimness. Two teamsters, temporarily at leisure because the roads were too boggy for their heavy freight wagons, sat at a back table drinking beer and regarding Six sleepily. At the bar stood one of Cruze's Terrapin cowhands, nursing a cup of coffee, obviously bored and restless; the cowboy's eyes came up and laid a hard challenge at Six, daring him to pick a fight.

Six ignored him. He stopped at the corner of the bar and said to the bartender, "Miss Vane up and around yet?"

"Sure, Marshal. Go on back."

Six nodded and stepped away from the bar. He walked around the Terrapin cowboy, but as he went past he paused and glanced at the cowboy. "Morning," he said courteously.

"Marshal," the cowboy acknowledged reluctantly.

"It's stopped raining," Six offered.

"That a fact?"

"Thought you might want to stretch your legs before the rain starts again. A man gets pretty cramped up staying indoors all the time."

"That's for damn sure," the cowboy agreed emphatically.

BRAND OF THE GUN

"Much obliged. Reckon I'll take you up on that idea." He threw his head back to finish his coffee.

Six said casually, "By the way, any word on how far the Canaday bunch has come?"

The cowboy shrugged. "Due in sometime Saturday, I reckon."

"Uh-huh," Six said. "Well, have yourself a good time, cowboy. The town's open to you."

The cowboy looked at him in surprise. "Why," he said, "sure, Marshal. Much obliged again."

Six smiled amiably, turned and went back to Clarissa's door. He rapped and removed his hat.

She was dressed in a simple green skirt and white blouse. The skirt showed off her slim waist. She smiled up at him. "This is a surprise, so early in the day."

"I'd like to ask a favor." He glanced over his shoulder. The Terrapin cowboy was on his way out of the saloon. He stepped inside and closed the door.

"You sound *terribly* serious," she said, half mocking him.

"Might be," he answered. He grinned at her. "Might even cost you a few dollars out of your profits."

"My goodness," she said. "It *must* be serious. You'd better have a pretty good argument—I'm a very shrewd business-woman."

"For a fact," he acknowledged. His elaborate nod of the head made her laugh.

"Well, then, Mister Chief of Police, what's it all about?"

He explained, "Things are building to a head. Wade Cruze is waiting for a man named Canaday to arrive Saturday with a crew. Unless I can head it off, there's likely to be a bloodbath in the main street."

"It is serious, then."

"Yes. As far as the law's concerned, I can't stop the fight until somebody makes a move. And nobody's likely to do that until it's too late to stop it."

"What do you want me to do?"

BRAND OF THE GUN

He smiled at her. She was like that; she didn't badger him with questions or expressions of worry. Just, "What do you want me to do?"

"I saw a couple of Cruze's gunmen a few minutes ago, half-drunk and making some noise in the street. It gave me an idea. I can jail anybody for forty-eight hours on a drunk-and-disorderly charge. Now, if Canaday's coming into town sometime Saturday, I'd like to get as many of Cruze's men out of the way as I can. If he's only got a handful of men left when Canaday comes in with his big crew, Cruze may think twice about starting a free-for-all gun battle."

"And?" she said.

"Today's Wednesday. Starting about Friday afternoon, I'd like to have a good legal reason to start taking some of Cruze's hired men out of circulation."

"In other words, you want to get them drunk and disorderly."

He nodded. "If we can get them drunk the disorderly part will take care of itself. They're already getting tired of sitting around and waiting."

"How do we do that?"

"Be friendly to them," he said. "I'm going to spread the word around all the saloons in town. I want everybody to make Cruze's men feel at home. Make them feel welcome and get them sociable. Set up drinks on the house if you have to. I want them to get used to the idea that we don't mean them any harm—that we're all happy if they're having a good time. Let them get drunk tonight and tomorrow night. Unless they start busting things up, I won't lay a finger on them. They'll get the idea the town's wide open. If it works, by Friday night I should be able to clap just about the whole pack of them in jail."

"If it works—and if they don't gang up on you when you start arresting them."

"I reckon I've got to take the chance," he said. "It's the only possibility I see."

BRAND OF THE GUN

"It just might work," she observed. "Anyhow, it's worth a try."

"Thanks," he said gravely. He reached for the doorknob but paused, grinned, and turned back to touch her lips with a brief kiss.

He made the rounds of Cat Town, passing the word to all the barkeepers and saloonkeepers. Once they knew the danger that waited for Saturday, they agreed to a man. By the time Six came back to the main street, every saloon in town was racking its bottled stock to show the Terrapin hands a good time—and to put them off guard.

Six made his way to the Drovers Rest, cautiously eyeing the lowering sky. Any minute now it would start raining again. He shook his head angrily—this weather could get to anybody. Turning into the saloon, he found Hal Craycroft, the owner, tallying ledgers at the far end of the bar. He got Craycroft's ear and spoke in a low voice calculated to carry no farther than Craycroft, who finally nodded and said, "Will do, Jeremy," and gave him a grim, reassuring smile.

Six went back to Wade Cruze's table and stood overlooking the matchstick game of poker that Cruze was playing with Arklin and two teamsters. Cruze looked up warily. "I haven't broken any laws yet, Marshal."

"I reckon you haven't," Six said. "I went through the law books last night and it might please you to know that I can't touch you."

"I could have told you that much."

"I'll have to lay down this warning, though," Six told him. "I can't touch you until you start a donnybrook, but once it starts, don't count on me to turn my back. If I have to, I'll gun down the first man who draws a pistol."

"I'll be expecting you," Cruze said in a monotone. "That's all, Marshal?"

"I guess it is," Six replied. "In the meantime there's nothing I can do to stop you, so I'll have to tell you the

BRAND OF THE GUN

town's open to you and your men. They may as well enjoy themselves while they're still alive to do it."

"Anybody gets killed, it won't be me to blame," Cruze said. "If there's any fighting it'll have to be Travis Canaday who starts it. All I want is my herd back."

"Well, then," Six said, feigning optimism, "maybe there won't be a fight at all."

"Sure enough," Cruze said. "I keep telling you, you're getting all het up over a no-count little private disagreement that most likely won't come to anything at all."

"Let's hope you're right," Six said. He nodded amicably and turned away. On his way out, he caught Hal Craycroft's eye. Craycroft nodded and glanced meaningfully toward Arklin and Cruze.

Feeling better than he had before, Six stepped out onto the porch, hooked his thumbs in his gunbelt, and surveyed the street. His glance started at the foot of the street and worked its way casually uptown, past his own office and the smithy and the hotel, and finally up the street to the farther end. That was when he stiffened.

A single rider was threading his way through the rutted mud of the street, coming into town at a slow walk. His hat shaded his features and a loose, flapping rain slicker concealed most of the rest of him, but for Jeremy Six there was no mistaking the oddly military carriage of those narrow, bony shoulders and the thoughtful droop of the man's head.

That was Cort Danziger, riding into Spanish Flat.

V

SIX WATCHED with a steadily narrowing frown. The horseman came forward at a gait so slow it seemed reluctant. Danziger reached the front of the hardware store, a half

BRAND OF THE GUN

block distant, and lifted his head to survey the boardwalks. His glance swept past Six, went on, and flicked back to Six; his hatbrim lifted another inch in recognition, and he reined the horse toward the Drovers Rest.

The rain started up again, a pinpoint drizzle that misted the street with a scatter of steamy puffs. Danziger halted below the Drovers Rest porch and sat his saddle, oblivious to the rain, scanning Six's face with a hollow expression.

"Hello, Jeremy."

"Howdy, Cort."

"This your town?"

"Yes."

"I didn't know that. Hadn't heard."

"It's been my town for quite a while now," Six said.

"Yeah. Well, I've been out of circulation."

"You look about a hundred years old, Cort."

"That's strange," Danziger said, "because I don't feel a day over ninety-five." He tipped his head slightly to the side. His face was the same as Six remembered it, only older—gray and gaunt and tracked with tired creases. The casual elegance was washed out of Danziger's face just as it was frayed and worn out of his once-expensive clothes.

Danziger said, "I hope you don't mind my noticing, but you don't look happy to see me."

"Afraid I'm not," Six replied.

Danziger nodded. "Can't say I'm too surprised. It used to surprise me, but it doesn't any more."

"What doesn't?"

"A man runs out of friends awfully damn fast," Danziger said. "I don't suppose there's any reason why I should've expected you to be glad to see me." He shook his head vaguely. "Hell, I didn't expect anything. Didn't even know this was your town. I haven't been paying attention to things lately."

He puzzled Six; Six remembered him vividly—an alert and quick-witted man, known up and down the circuit

BRAND OF THE GUN

as a top-string, high-rolling gambler with the elaborate elegance of background that marked the New Orleans breed: impeccable clothes, courteous and gallant manners, and an aura of high style left over from the gentlemanly days of the antebellum South. But all of it seemed to have weathered and chipped away. Danziger wasn't old, but he looked old—tarnished and beaten down and careless.

Danziger said, "Don't look at me like that, for Christ's sake. I'm the same man you used to know."

"Are you?"

Danziger rubbed his fist awkwardly. "Everybody changes a little."

"I've got to ask you this, Cort. Are you on a job?"

"What kind of job?"

"Gun job."

"Maybe," Danziger said. He seemed to wince. "Maybe not. Why?"

Rain drifted down between them in diaphanous waves of tiny droplets. Six said, "It might be too much of a coincidence for you to show up right now. We've got a fight shaping up."

"Range war?"

"Not exactly. Something like that."

"Then I'm not in it," Danziger said. His mouth twisted. "Nobody hires me for that kind of thing any more, Jeremy, or hadn't you heard?"

"The word is you're off the circuit," Six said. "That's all I've heard."

"Yeah," Danziger said. "That's right. I'm off the circuit." His hooded eyes drifted across the street and he said abstractly, "That hotel any good?"

"As good as you might expect."

"Uh-huh." Danziger's hand slipped into his coat pocket and jingled coins there; his glance went up to the top of the hotel's false front and back down to its porch. A young woman came out of the lobby and stood on the porch for

BRAND OF THE GUN

a moment looking at the rain; she shook her head in a slight gesture of feminine disgust and turned back inside. Danziger said, "Who's that girl, Jeremy?"

"I believe her name's Marianne Holbrook. Why?"

"I, uh, thought I might've known her somewhere."

"Doubtful," Six said.

"I imagine it would be, to you." Danziger smiled briefly; his smile was like a knife turned toward his own chest, bitter and full of self-contempt. "Well," he said, "it's been a long ride and kind of wet. Think I'll hire a room and get into a hot bathtub."

Six said, "Two names, Cort. Wade Cruze and Travis Canaday."

"So?"

"Either of them mean anything to you?"

"I've heard both," Danziger said. "What of it?"

"Are you on the payroll for one of them or the other?"

"No," Danziger said. He wasn't looking at Six. He added vaguely, "Not that I know of."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means what it sounds like," Danziger said irritably. "I'm getting drenched, Jeremy. I'll see you sometime." He reined his horse around and trotted up the street—a haunted man, driven by some torment inside him. Six's frown lowered and he kept his attention on Danziger until the seedy gun-fighter's ghost disappeared into the hotel stable.

Fred Hook twisted his dirty moustache between tobacco-stained fingers and glanced petulantly at his big partner's beady eyes. Candy Briscoe was eyeing the storekeeper's stock of jawbusters and penny candies. "Jesus," Hook said, "don't you ever get sick of that stuff?"

"I can't help it if I got a sweet tooth, Fred. I always did, ever since I was a kid. Hell, quit bellyaching—at least I'm not a drunk. I'll bet I'm the most dependable partner you ever had. I've never passed out on you."

BRAND OF THE GUN

"Maybe. But it makes *me* sick to watch you cram all that junk down your throat."

"Don't watch, then," Briscoe said reasonably.

Hook said, "Aagh," in disgust, and wheeled away toward the front of the place. He stood by the door looking out. "Ain't this puking rain ever going to let up? Christ."

"I don't mind," Briscoe said. "I never had such an easy time in my life. Just drifting from one candy counter to another. No work all week, and we're getting paid gun wages just to sit around and loaf."

Hook whirled and seemed ready to lash out at him. Then his shoulders slumped and he wagged his head back and forth, throwing up his hands. "Haven't you got any nerves at all?"

"Huh?"

"Never mind," Hook growled, and turned back to his vantage point. His waspish expression settled in sour and aggravated; his glance whipped restlessly up and down the visible portion of the street outside. And then his whole body became still and his eyes narrowed down.

Seeing his partner's sudden concentration, Briscoe said, "What's up? Canaday coming into town?"

"Naw, you idiot. It's that Lanphier girl. The gunsmith's wife. Look at the way she jiggles it along the walk there."

"Maybe you ought to ease off talking the way you do, Fred. I don't know a hell of a lot about women, but I know this much—they can get you in more trouble than a whole gun-armed posse."

"Shows how much you know," Hook grumbled, and stepped closer to the door. He whistled. "That is some woman, there."

"She's spoken for," Briscoe said. He was beginning to sound genuinely worried. "Hell, Fred, there're plenty of women down at Fat Annie's and all around Cat Town. You ought to stick to what you can—"

"I told you before," Hook snapped, "I don't like to pay

BRAND OF THE GUN

them hags. I never could stand the store-bought kind." He laughed coarsely. "The homemade kind's always a lot better."

"But listen, Fred—"

"You just shut your mouth," Hook said. "I'll tell you something, Candy—I aim to have that woman. You hear me? I aim to have her."

The day dragged on like a freight train highballing uphill: on the grade the afternoon seemed to slow to a crawl and for a while it was hard to tell if it ever would make it to nightfall. Six kept tabs on Wade Cruze and the Terrapin crowd, making his rounds of the saloons and seeing to it that the cowboys had anything within reason that they desired. He kept an eye open for Cort Danziger—he was not satisfied with the answers Danziger had given him, and Danziger had too much of a past to allow Six to feel easy. Danziger and trouble were like Mary and her little lamb: wherever Danziger went, trouble was sure to follow.

But the gunfighter did not reappear all afternoon. The desk clerk told Six that Danziger had ordered a tub and hot water sent up to his room; he had not communicated with anyone after that. At sundown he still had not come down. Six had supper at the Chinese cafe and was on the street at nine when Eddie Hanratty drifted into town on horseback—an event curious enough to draw Six's attention; Hanratty was no horseman and he sat on a saddle like a sack of potatoes. Hanratty was the valley's mystery—no one knew what he did for a living, but he always seemed to have spending money. He drank regularly but did not play cards or make trouble. From time to time Six suspected that Hanratty might have come across a skeleton in somebody's closet; Hanratty might well be living off a blackmail dole. But if he was, no one had complained about him, and he did not seem to have enemies—or friends. Hanratty was

BRAND OF THE GUN

jovial enough in saloons, but otherwise he kept pretty much to himself.

Hanratty disappeared into the livery stable, and Six continued into Cat Town on his evening rounds. At intervals the rain would quit and start up again.

To all outward appearances Spanish Flat was quiet enough. But like all towns of whatever size, it buzzed continuously beneath the surface. The stage depot readied itself for the midnight jackass mail coach. The newspaper went to press for the morning's weekly edition. Saloons hummed with an average trade, buoyed up by the addition of Wade Cruze's riders. The dance halls and Fat Annie's turned on their lamps and went to work. A high-stakes game started up in the plush back room of Craycroft's Drovers Rest. Cattle country was early-to-bed, early-to-rise country, but Spanish Flat had its night people too.

The gunsmith, Gene Lanphier, came riding into town after a long afternoon's ride up to the Pyramid Mine in the Yellows, where he had delivered a fancy sporting rifle to the owner and stayed for brandy before mounting up and braving the rain back to town. Lanphier reached Spanish Flat just after ten, stabled his horse and walked down the street toward home. He was thinking of his wife, and that made him smile.

He turned the corner and almost bumped into the marshal, who exchanged greetings and weather talk with him and said, "Been practicing your long-range pistolry?"

Lanphier gave him a puzzled look. "Not since this morning. Why?"

"Good Lord, was it just this morning?" Six inquired. "I had the feeling a week had come and gone, at least." He touched Lanphier amiably on the shoulder and went on his way, a big man with the solitary aura of loneliness—no, Lanphier decided, it wasn't loneliness; it was just self-assuredness. Six wasn't a lonely sort of man but he was completely self-contained. Lanphier envied him a little for

BRAND OF THE GUN

that; he knew that he himself couldn't live a solitary existence. He needed the steadying knowledge that he was part of something, that he wasn't a lone soul on the face of the planet. He and Sheila were two halves of something—something he couldn't put a name on, but it was more than he could sum up with a word like "marriage."

He watched Six's tall figure move away up the street, growing indistinct in the rain. Lanphier smiled gently and wended his way home.

The little house sat behind a green strip of rye-grass lawn that was bordered by a picket fence overcrawled by rose bushes. Yellow lamplight splashed out of windows along the street, showing him his way. When he reached the house he stopped and frowned: the front gate yawned wide open, and that wasn't like Sheila. The house was dark, not a single lamp was lighted.

Worry grenaded into him and he reached under his slicker to touch the reassuring handle of the long-barreled Colt in its holster on his hip. The pistolgrip seemed cold and slick. He climbed the three wooden steps to the porch and felt his way to the door; he found the latch and hesitated. His mouth opened but he did not call out; something silenced him, and he pushed the door open without speaking.

He stood in the dark opening with his hand locked around the cold butt of the revolver, keening the obscurity with his eyes and ears. The faintest of gray light filtered inside through the windows, but he could not pick out shapes or colors. He turned his head slowly, to pick up any stray sounds on the flats of his eardrums—and heard a faint noise, the sound of a voice. He could not pick out words, or even determine whether the voice was talking or muttering or moaning. But something about its timbre convinced him it was Sheila's voice.

The darkness, the unexpected strangeness of the situation, the mystery before him made Lanphier afraid. He lifted the

BRAND OF THE GUN

six-gun free of his rain slicker and pressed forward across the little parlor, moving softly, uncertainly. He reached the kitchen door and paused, but he heard nothing until a moment later the sound of a moan came to his ears, and it did not come from the kitchen. The bedroom door was closed, up the brief hallway behind the parlor. He moved that way with four long strides and lifted the revolver. He felt the tendons of his right thumb tauten over the hammer of the six-gun; he flattened his ear against the door.

He could hear the sobbing intakes of her breath, the unsteady groans of her voice.

What the hell? What the hell is going on? He grasped the latch and depressed it; and shoved the door open.

The room was dark; he could see nothing at all—the shade must be drawn. He wheeled aside to avoid silhouetting himself in the slight gray dimness of the doorway. He called fearfully, "Sheila—Sheila?"

"Gene!" she cried. The voice burst out of the black room like a shriek of terror, and he snapped the gun up before him expecting anything at all, not knowing what to expect.

"Sheila—for God's sake, what is it?"

Her voice choked in the darkness. The room heaved with sobbing. "Jesus God," Lanphier breathed. "Sheila, Sheila—are you alone in here?"

"Gene," she muttered; it was all she could say. But he heard no other sound and in the crush of fear and blackness he fumbled in his pocket with a rough, uncaring need to know; he struck a match across the crosshatched grain of the gun grips and squinted his eyes against the sudden flare.

In the flickering brown-yellow light he saw the room in havoc—furniture overturned, the lamp shattered, the mattress half-tumbled off the bed. And he saw his wife, huddled in the corner, in the darkness like a wounded animal.

She wailed, "Please, Gene—put out the light."

BRAND OF THE GUN

He could not move. The match burned down to his fingers and he let it fall; it hit the floor and went out. In darkness again, he felt his way forward. His shin rammed an overturned chair and he cursed at the top of his lungs. He kicked the chair away savagely and stumbled forward; he found her in the corner and reached out to touch her, and felt her draw away, moaning.

"Sheila—my God!"

"Don't light another match," she murmured. "I don't want you to see me."

"Are you hurt?" he demanded. "For God's sake, what happened?"

"I—" She drew in a racking breath; she began again: "I'm all right, Gene. I'm all right. I'm all right. Just don't make a light just yet."

"Sheila—please, what was it? What happened? Who did this?"

"I'm all right," she said again. He felt her hand reaching for him; she caught his sleeve and found his hand and squeezed it. "He didn't—*hurt* me. Do you understand, Gene? I'm *all right*. My face is bruised, God I must be a mess, I don't want you to look at me—please, Gene."

"All right, darling," he said, trying to sound as soothing as he could. But his heart raced, the pulse banging in his head and his chest. He gathered her against him and crouched in the black corner, holding her warmth to him, circling her in a tight embrace and trying to flow strength into her. He stroked her hair and felt useless and hot with boiling rage.

"Who was it?" he said, in a wickedly calm low voice. "Tell me his name, Sheila."

She spoke in a dull monotone; he realized then that she was suffering from shock, that she was half-dazed by it. She said, "He said if you didn't keep your mouth shut and leave him alone he'd kill both of us. He told me he'd kill you if I said anything."

"Who?"

BRAND OF THE GUN

"He'd kill you, Gene," she droned helplessly. "He'd kill you if I told you, because you'd get right up from here and go after him, and he's waiting for that, he said he'd be waiting to see if you came after him. He said he'd kill you and he'd come back here for me and when he was done with me he'd kill me too. He smelled of whisky and he was laughing and he meant what he told me, I could tell that. He'll kill you if I tell you his name."

Lanphier squeezed his eyes shut very tight. He drew in a deep and ragged breath and let it out slowly. His hand found the holster beneath the slicker and put the six-gun away—for the time being. He reached out with both arms and said. "Can you walk?"

"I'm all right. Honestly I am."

He found her hand, the one she had touched him with, her left hand. He reached for her right hand and felt the startling cold of steel.

"Knife?" he said. "What's this?"

"I cut him," she muttered. "He knocked me down on the bed and I grabbed this knife. It was in the top of his boot. I don't know how I grabbed it but it was in my hand and I cut him across the back. He jumped back off the bed and knocked the lamp down. It went out—I could hear his breathing when he wasn't cursing me. I crawled back in the corner and didn't make a sound. He told me he'd kill both of us if I ever said a word. I must have hurt him. He sneaked out of the house. He didn't *hurt* me, Gene. We've got to be thankful for that—I cut him with the knife before he could do what he wanted to do; I cut his back, you know. I can still feel the blood on my hand and I hated that, I hated the—"

"Gentle down," he said. "Gentle down, darling. Come on, let's go out front and get out of this mess for a minute. We'll just go out into the parlor, all right? Come on, now."

He helped her to her feet and slowly went out of the room, half carrying her. They reached the parlor and he

BRAND OF THE GUN

let her down gently on the divan. He tried to talk soothingly to her but the white-hot anger in his chest kept getting into his voice and making it crack and roar. He said, "I'm going to light the lamp. Just take it easy."

"No," she cried. "I don't want you to see me. He hit me—"

"Quiet down," he said, more roughly than he intended; he immediately bent down and said, "I'm sorry, darling," and kissed her lightly on the forehead. "I won't mind. But if you're hurt we've got to clean up the bruises."

"I wish you wouldn't," she said, but he could tell from her voice that she wouldn't fight any more. He turned and touched a match to the lamp wick.

When he turned to look at her, she had averted her face. Her eyes were closed. He took in a deep breath and touched her chin. "Turn around, now. Let's have a look."

Reluctantly, she let him see her face. Dark welts were beginning to swell on her cheek and brow. Lanphier forced himself to grin. "You look beautiful."

"I don't either."

"It's not nearly as bad as you think" he said. "A couple of bruises, that's all. Maybe you'll have a black eye for a few days. It'll all pass." He was lying to her, lying to himself: the surface evidence would disappear within a few days, that was true; but nothing would pass, nothing would be all right again, until he found the man who had done this.

And so he said, in as casual a tone as he could muster, "It was Cruze's gunman, wasn't it? The one they call Fred Hook. The one we used to know in Silver City."

She didn't say anything at all. But she didn't have to. Her silence was answer enough.

He saw fright quivering in her eyes and he tried to smile reassuringly. "I'll heat up some water and make some compresses," he said. "Hot and cold ones. Maybe we can keep the swellings down."

BRAND OF THE GUN

"You won't go after him, Gene?"

"He's a mad dog," Lanphier muttered. "He's got to be stopped before he tries it again."

"No!" she cried.

"What do you want me to do? Leave him alone?"

"Please, Gene. Yes, leave him alone. We can forget it, can't we?"

"Can he?" Lanphier answered. He went out to the kitchen and put water on the stove; he soaked a cloth in cold water and brought it back and held it against her face. All the while he was trying to compose his thoughts. He said, in a cooler way, "We'll never know we're safe as long as he's here, Sheila. I can't just leave him alone. We'll never be able to sleep at night—I'll never be able to set foot out of town, knowing he's around here waiting for another chance."

"Can't we just wait for him to leave town?"

"And suppose he doesn't? Or suppose he comes back before he leaves, to finish what he started?" His face turned sour and cruel with distaste. "We can't live that way, scared of every shadow—not for a week or a day or even an hour."

"He'll kill us," she said hollowly. "He said he would."

"There's one or two things Fred Hook doesn't know," he said cryptically. "We're in less danger than you think—as long as I can get to him before he licks his wounds and decides to—to do that again."

He stopped every passerby on the street, describing Hook and asking questions. It was quite some time before he found someone who had seen Hook. By then Lanphier was at a pitch of rage, so overheated that a strange supernatural sort of calm settled over him and he moved coldly and awkwardly, like a mechanical man.

"Yeah, I saw him," the teamster said. "Comin' out of the doctor's office a few minutes ago. Looked like he was headed back to Cat Town. He bunks at the Latigo Boardinghouse."

Without pausing to thank the teamster, Lanphier lunged

BRAND OF THE GUN

into Cat Town and plowed through the drizzle toward the Latigo Boardinghouse. He went past Fat Annie's, oblivious to the half-clothed girls who sat in the windows, and passed the Glad Hand, not even hearing the barrelhouse roar of Nimble-Finger Buchler's piano. He went by the Nugget Saloon and the Tres Candelas Cantina and the billiard parlor, and rammed around the corner in front of the boardinghouse just in time to see Fred Hook's squat figure turning in at the gate.

"Hook," Lanphier said. His voice caught and trembled. "Turn around, Hook."

The gunman stopped; his shoulders lifted defensively. He turned slowly, apprehensively, until his face came around and he saw that Lanphier didn't have a gun in his hand.

Lanphier had discarded his coat and rain slicker. He stood in drenched shirtsleeves, his hand hanging by the grip of his long-barreled Colt. Across the street three men were walking by; something about the taut, frozen postures of Lanphier and Hook made them stop and stare.

Lanphier said, "For what you did to my wife, Hook, I'm going to kill you."

Hook started to grin. "You ever drawn a gun against a man before, sonny?"

"No. But that won't save your life. Nothing will. You're going to die tonight, Hook. Right here, right now."

"I'm all bandaged up across my back," Hook said. "Kind of stiff. Gives you a little advantage, sonny, but not near enough to beat me. You know how many men I've killed with six-guns?"

"You've killed your last," Lanphier said, "That's all I need to know. Draw your gun, Hook. Draw and die."

The three men across the street stood openmouthed and paralyzed while Hook's brawny hand slapped his holster with a clap that echoed through the rain. Lanphier seized the handle of his long gun and dragged it up out of the holster. Hook was laughing; his gun whipped up and settled,

BRAND OF THE GUN

and a fragment of reflected lamplight raced along the blued barrel.

It was clear to the onlookers that Lanphier didn't have a chance. One of them began to avert his glance; he couldn't stand to watch. But then a strange thing happened. A dull steel click snapped the air, like the brittle sound of a coin hitting the earth. Fred Hook roared with shock and rage. His thumb curled up to cock the revolver again, and Lanphier's long gun settled and roared.

A lance of orange-yellow muzzle flame licked out of the barrel; the single gunshot was an earsplitting boom in the rain-sodden night. The big gun kicked up in Lanphier's fist. And Fred Hook slammed back against the boardinghouse fence, careened off the post and fell asprawl in the gateway.

Lanphier held his cocked gun at arm's length, ready to fire again, but Hook didn't move. With ice-cold eyes, Lanphier walked forward and knelt down. He reached out and rolled Hook over. Hook stared sightlessly at the sky; raindrops did not make him blink. He was dead.

Lanphier put the gun away and stood up. The three men came cautiously across the street. One of them was Larry Keene, the rancher. Keene said in awe, "His gun misfired. It saved your life, Gene."

"Yeah," said Lanphier in a dull voice. "I guess it did, Larry."

VI

HELPED ALONG by friendly bartenders, Cruze's Terrapin men were getting themselves liquored up in saloons all over town. Six kept a close eye on them, but treated them with amiable,

BRAND OF THE GUN

backslapping courtesy, letting them know he was all in favor of their having a good time. He cruised the rounds of the town's nightspots, getting the Terrapin hands used to seeing him around.

He was coming out of the Tres Candelas when he heard the boom of the gunshot. It wasn't far away. He got up on his toes and sprinted for the corner, and went around with his gun up. It was probably just some drunken cowboy overenthusiastically shooting at the sky, but in Six's line of work it did not pay to take things for granted.

The first figure he recognized was Larry Keene's; the second was Gene Lanphier's. When he came up to the boardinghouse he saw the corpse sprawled on the walk in the open gateway.

A quick glance was enough to tell him that whatever the danger was, it was past. He put his gun away and pushed past the two onlookers at Keene's shoulder.

"What happened here, Larry?"

Keene glanced over his shoulder. "Jesus, Jeremy, you showed up fast as the telegraph, didn't you?"

"What happened?" Six said again.

Gene Lanphier said, "I killed him, Marshal."

Shock set Six back on his heels. "You killed him?" He knelt by the corpse and the dead man's features became recognizable in the rain. "Fred Hook."

Larry Keene said, "Hook drew first, Jeremy. We all saw it. He drew first and pulled trigger first, but his gun misfired. Before he could get it cocked again, Gene shot him."

Six got to his feet. He tugged his hat down and looked from face to face. "You two boys agree with what Larry saw?"

"That's just what happened," one of the men said, and the other nodded his head.

Six turned to the gunsmith. "What about it, Gene? Why'd this happen?"

BRAND OF THE GUN

Lanphier's eyes were averted. "I'd rather not talk about it right now. I've got to get home."

"Not before you tell me what it was all about, Gene."

"Now look," Lanphier said, "my wife needs me and I've got to get home. If you—"

Larry Keene said softly, "Before the shooting started, you told Hook you were going to kill him for what he'd done to your wife. Something happen to Sheila, Gene?"

Lanphier's eyes, dull as slate, turned toward him. "Yeah," he said. "Something happened. Hook tried to rape her."

There was a silence, as abrupt as an intake of breath; it stretched across the pelting drizzle until curious people started to appear and drew closer to find out what had happened.

Lanphier turned to Six and said, "He didn't get it done because she got hold of his knife and sliced him across the back. I reckon you can check with the doctor, or look under his coat there if you've a mind, but I'd take it unkindly if you came around badgering Sheila with any questions right now."

Keene murmured, "The unwritten law, Jeremy. I'd say it was as clear a case of justifiable homicide and self-defense rolled into one as I've ever heard of."

"It looks that way," Six agreed. "But I wasn't exactly expecting trouble to come from your quarter, Gene."

"I did what I had to do," Lanphier answered. "Throw me in jail if you want, or let me go home. But make up your damn mind."

"Simmer down, fella," Six told him gently. "There'll be a coroner's inquest into Hook's death, but right now I don't see any reason why you shouldn't go on home. Anything any of us can do for Sheila?"

"Just leave her be and don't pester her with questions until she's had time to get over this," Lanphier said, and walked away, shoulders bent.

He dissolved into the misty darkness, and Larry Keene

BRAND OF THE GUN

said, "Reckon he's in worse shape than she is right now. Gene ain't no killer. I don't guess this sets too well on his stomach."

Six nodded wearily. "All right. Maybe a couple of you boys'll give us a hand getting Hook off the street."

Danziger was tying his horse up behind the ice house when he heard the single shot across town. His head reared back and he stood listening for quite a while, but when there was no further sound of ruckus, he went on doing what he was about. Hanratty had told him, *When you've sized up the job and you're ready to make your kill, saddle your horse and leave it out behind the ice house. When I see your horse there I'll know you're doing the job. You get it done and get to your horse, and you'll find seven thousand dollars in greenbacks in your saddlebags. After that you'll be on your own.*

Danziger tied the horse and glanced around at the deserted alley. He might as well get it over and done with. The sour green taste on his tongue, like bile, was bound to sit there for a long time to come, but it would get worse if he stopped to think about it. He didn't care about the seven thousand dollars. It was the threat of Steve Boat, which Hanratty had used against him, that had stirred him to do the Irishman's bidding.

There wasn't any reason to stall. Jeremy Six had pointed out the girl to him this afternoon, and he'd found out her room number when he'd signed the hotel register. It was better not to know any more than that. All he had to do was kill Marianne Holbrook and get on his horse and run. The seven thousand would be enough to take him to South America and keep him drunk for a good long time. By the time the money ran out, maybe somebody would kill him.

Cort Danziger left the horse in the alley and trudged through the mud toward the street. Before he reached the

BRAND OF THE GUN

lamp-lit area he stopped, pulled a hip-flask from his pocket, and drank deep. The raw whisky seared his tongue and scorched his throat and charred his belly. It rocked him and made him blink. He drank again, and then the flask was empty. Meticulously he lidded the flask and slipped it back into his pocket, arranged his raincoat, and stepped out onto the boardwalk.

He went slowly up the street—slowly, so that he would not stagger; he was pretty well drunk. His vision, less than fully clear, swept along the far side of the street and came to rest on a squat figure of a man in a railroad cap. The bill of the cap lifted and turned, displaying Eddie Hanratty's interest in Danziger's passage. The red button-tip of a cigarette in Hanratty's fist lifted from waist-level to mouth, brightened and dimmed, and dropped away.

Danziger went past and continued toward the hotel. Before he reached it he looked back, and saw Hanratty disappearing down the street, walking fast.

With no expression at all on his face, Danziger turned into the alley beside the hotel and backed against the shadows. He felt sick and it took an effort of will to keep from bending over and retching in the mud. He touched the gun under his coat and rehearsed what he was about to do: go back to the girl's window and take aim through the glass, shoot once, and run for the end of the alley. He would come out on the farther street and walk, not run, two blocks to the freight yard, where he would turn the corner and go one block and turn another corner, and in that manner make his direct way to the horse behind the ice house. There were two full bottles of whisky in the saddlebags—or there would be, if Hanratty didn't steal one or both of them while putting the money there.

And suppose Hanratty didn't pay off? Suppose he just walked into a saloon and laughed to himself? You couldn't put that kind of thing past a man who'd hire a gun to kill

BRAND OF THE GUN

a girl. You couldn't put anything past him. And what if Hanratty did that?

Danziger thought about it, standing hunched in the rain. Pedestrians hurried along the walk, up at the street opening of the alley; their shadows flitted past.

Hanratty wouldn't be likely to be that stupid. He had taken one or two chances with Danziger the other night, possibly to test Danziger and find out how much sand he still had left in him. But Hanratty wasn't likely to take the chance that a blooded killer like Cort Danziger would be willing to leave him scot-free if he didn't come across with the promised payment. Danziger might be rum-sodden, worn out and seedy, but he still had a certain cleverness that Hanratty wouldn't underestimate. Hanratty knew that nobody, Danziger nor anyone else, would set up a woman for a kill without making some effort to cover his own tracks. Danziger wasn't likely to stand out in the street in broad daylight and gun her down. He'd do it silently in the dark, or unseen from ambush; he'd do it in such a way that he wasn't likely to get caught or fingered right away. And if nobody knew who had killed the girl, Danziger wouldn't have to run. Not right away. He'd have plenty of time to hunt down Eddie Hanratty if Hanratty double-crossed him.

Hanratty would know that. No, he wouldn't be fool enough to renege. The money would be there in the saddlebags when Danziger went for it.

All he had to do was kill the girl first.

He started back alongside the hotel's outside wall, moving one step at a time, reluctantly threading the alley. Voices behind him made him freeze; he turned cautiously, one shoulder against the wall, and peered back through the darkness. Two of Wade Cruze's Terrapin cowhands were standing at the mouth of the alley, swaying drunkenly and talking in loud, coarse tones. They didn't seem to present any danger, but Danziger couldn't make his move

BRAND OF THE GUN

until they went away. He waited where he was. He picked up some of their talk—it seemed the town gunsmith had killed one of Cruze's hired gunslingers in a fair fight, and the two drunk cowboys were discussing it with vast gestures of their arms and highly amazed expressions of disbelief.

One of them had a bottle. They stood stubbornly right there in the alley, not moving. Why didn't they go away? They didn't have sense enough to get in out of the rain. Danziger swore paragraphs of bitter oaths—silently. They couldn't see him in the dark heavy shadows, but they could hardly fail to miss seeing him if he went back and fired a shot into a window. God damn it, why didn't they leave? He licked his lips and shook his head. The effect of the whisky he had drunk was already beginning to wear off, and he didn't think he could face the idea of shooting an unarmed girl from ambush, not sober he couldn't. It was hard enough to do it drunk.

The secret was not to think about it. Don't think, just do it. But what else was there to think about? The future? The rest of his life on the run, maybe forgetting his troubles now and then when he got so drunk he couldn't think at all. Nights of staring sleeplessly at some dark flyblown ceiling and days of staggering from cantina to cantina, trying to drink the tequila production of Mexico dry. No good thinking about that. The past? All he could think of was the night that had finished him, the night when his life had blown up in little pieces, the night that had never ended: it was that night that had put him where he was right now. There'd been a time when he'd been a man to reckon with. No more. Now he was just a fading drunken tramp seizing his last thin chance to make enough money to drink himself to death.

He couldn't remember when he had last slept without first drinking himself into a stupor.

That night. He couldn't get his mind off it, now that he'd reminded himself. It was a woman that night, too—a young and pretty woman going down with a bullet in her.

BRAND OF THE GUN

Steve Boat's woman, he thought bleakly. Her ghost would trail him to his grave—and her ghost took the shape of Steve Boat with a gun in his hand. He had a vivid picture in his mind of Steve Boat—a tall young man with prematurely white hair, even white eyebrows. A fancy black coat thrown back to expose the mother-of-pearl handles of a matched pair of wicked six-guns in a cross-belted black gun rig. Steve Boat was a killer, but there was a time—*before that night*—when Danziger could have faced him, faced him and drawn faster and walked away the victor.

Not any more. Steve Boat had his own righteousness, and the never-dying, smoldering burn of Danziger's conscience, on his side. Danziger knew he could never face Steve Boat and draw against him. If Steve Boat caught up with him, he'd just stand there and take it without lifting a finger while Boat pumped twelve .44 slugs into him.

How could you fight the man when you'd killed his wife?

It seemed forever. Finally the two drunken Terrapin cowhands wandered away into the street. The alley was empty, steamy and wet, clammy with a listless current of air that chilled Danziger's cheeks and raised goose bumps on his flesh.

He stepped away from the wall and walked back along the side of the hotel. He passed the lobby window, intending to go by and continue back to the girl's bedroom, but a glance through the lobby window halted him in his tracks. The window was open a crack, enough to admit air but not wide enough to let the drizzling rain inside. Beneath the inverted vee of the curtains he could see across the length of the lobby. A girl was sitting with her profile to him, sitting in a lounge chair reading a week-old Tuscon newspaper . . . Marianne Holbrook. Not fifteen feet away from him. She made a perfect target—motionless, unsuspecting, fairly well lighted by the reading lamp that stood behind her shoulder.

BRAND OF THE GUN

Danziger clenched his jaw to keep his teeth from rattling. He looked both ways along the alley. It was risky. From here it was a forty foot run to the back end of the alley. If he shot her now, he'd have to make that run afterward. Suppose somebody was passing on the street and heard the shot? He might be spotted before he could get to the far end of the alley. He looked down the length of it again. It was pitch dark. The only lighted window was the one by him. Once he passed beyond its swath of illumination, he would be in total blackness. Someone at the mouth of the alley might conceivably see a running shape, but no one could possibly recognize him once he left the lighted window. But suppose somebody on the farther street saw him coming out of the alley?

He shut his eyes tight and told himself that he could make any number of elaborate plans and still find something that might possibly go wrong. *Don't think about it. Just do it. Do it and get it over with.* If they caught him they'd shoot him or lynch him or put him on trial and hang him. He'd seen a few men hang. They flopped around like decapitated chickens. To hell with it. If they caught him and killed him then he wouldn't have to worry about anything any more. Let them catch him.

He reached under his coat and wrapped his fist around the gun. Lifted it clear of the holster and curled his thumb over the hammer. But he didn't lift the gun out of his coat. Not yet. He had never intentionally killed a woman. Even Boat's wife—that wasn't deliberate. And this was from ambush, from the dark. The coward's way.

Danziger caught himself. What was he if not a coward? If he could do it at all, this was the only way.

Don't think. Do it.

There was, at last, that final twinge in him—not conscience, not righteousness, but the overriding last-ditch grip of a man's inborn sense of self-preservation. A man could pretend

BRAND OF THE GUN

he had resigned himself to death, but when the moment came he was never willing to accept it.

And so his hand paused, only briefly, while fear touched him and told him that he was not beyond fear for his life, that at rock-bottom he did not really want to commit this act that was likely to condemn him to death.

It didn't last long; he didn't let it. He was lifting the gun, cocking it, readying his aim, when a man walked into the frame of his vision—Jeremy Six, walking into the hotel lobby and stopping to talk to Marianne Holbrook.

Danziger's mouth opened and closed. He eased down the hammer of the six-gun. It was dangerous here in the light of the window; he stepped aside, out of the illumination, and stood in darkness beside the window sash. He could no longer see into the lobby, but he could hear their voices through the two-inch opening at the bottom of the window. Six had said good evening and the girl had replied in a friendly way, and they had started to discuss the weather and then to talk about the girl. Six evidently had stepped inside to dry out for a moment before continuing his rounds in the rain. It was one of those crazy accidents. If Danziger hadn't hesitated momentarily before cocking his gun, he'd have shot the girl before Six appeared—and Six probably would have caught him within a block.

Six was saying, "McQuarter tells me you're having a birthday soon."

"Sunday," she answered. "I feel terribly old. I'll be twenty-five, you know."

"One foot in the grave," Six agreed dryly.

"That's a strange look you're giving me," the girl's voice said. Danziger listened closely to the tones of her voice—mellow, easy flowing, not fluttery or giggly. She said, "You're wondering why I'm not married, is that it?"

"A man can't help wondering little things like that about a girl as attractive as you."

"Thank you," she said, with a small laugh in her throat.

BRAND OF THE GUN

There was a dusty, husky edge on her voice—woman, not girl. Danziger began to sweat. He wished he'd never heard her speak. It would make the job harder.

The girl said, "I was married, Marshal. My husband was killed at Wounded Knee."

"I'm sorry," Six said. "I'm afraid I put my foot in my mouth, didn't I? I do remember you told me you'd grown up with the Army."

"An Army brat, yes. I married a Cavalry officer. He was a young lieutenant. I hardly remember him now—isn't that stranger?"

Danziger faded back along the wall until he was out of earshot. He didn't want to listen any more. He wished Six would get the hell out of there.

What was it she'd said—her twenty-fifth birthday, this coming Sunday? He remembered what Eddie Hanratty had told him, out by the Coronado Springs relay station: *I want the girl dead by Saturday midnight*. It couldn't be coincidence; there had to be a connection. It looked obvious. The girl would probably come into an inheritance on her twenty-fifth birthday. Somebody didn't want her to get it. She was worth seven thousand dollars to somebody, dead. Not Hanratty—Hanratty was very clearly somebody's errand boy. Somebody who could afford to pay seven thousand dollars to see that the girl didn't live to become twenty-five years old.

It was now, for the first time, that it occurred to Danziger—even in the dismal, whisky-fuzzed state of his mind just now—that it might be worthwhile to learn how much Marianne Holbrook was really worth. Alive.

And when he thought of that, he put the gun away in the holster and walked away from the hotel. He still had three days to go. He could use a good part of that time to find out what was really going on here.

He knew he was stalling, fooling himself, making excuses. It didn't really matter whether or not he found out what

BRAND OF THE GUN

was behind the plot against the girl's life. It didn't matter at all, because nothing would change. He'd still have to carry out the murder and he'd still have to grab his seven thousand dollars and run hell-for-leather over the border. He didn't have any choice. If he didn't do it, Hanratty would sic Steve Boat on him.

He thought briefly of killing Hanratty, but that wouldn't help. Whoever had set this up knew about Steve Boat. Killing Hanratty wouldn't do any good—it would just insure that Steve Boat would be brought after him.

But he still had three days. Maybe something would happen. Maybe the sky would fall in.

He knew what the real trouble was. He'd known as soon as he'd seen the girl through the window and heard her voice talking to Six.

It was simple. He just didn't want to kill this girl.

VII

ON HIS FIRST rounds of the day, Six stepped up onto Fat Annie's porch. This was where the girls usually sat and sunned themselves, wagging their fleshy legs at passers-by. With the continuing, never-ending drizzle, they had retreated indoors. A red railroad lantern hung underneath the porch eaves.

Fat Annie opened the door with a sleepy grunt; her enormous nose thrust toward him inquisitively and when she recognized the marshal, her loose chins shook. "The minions of the law," she announced loudly—it was her stock opening

BRAND OF THE GUN

line with him. Six stepped into the deeply carpeted room and glanced without interest at the soft, plush furniture—all of it empty at this hour. The smell of the place was stale, mingled of the dregs of tobacco smoke and beer and whisky and cheap perfume.

Six said, "How does it tote up, Annie?"

"Can't speak for all of them. I got five of Cruze's hands upstairs, sleeping it off. Ain't it funny how like a little kid a big tough man can look when he falls asleep?"

"They have a good time last night?"

"Either that or they did a powerful good job of pretending. I had a little trouble keeping the roof on the place."

"Nobody hurt?"

"You know better, Jeremy. My girls know how to take care of themselves."

He tipped his hat back. A runnel of water drained down the back of his slicker. He looked down and said, "Didn't mean to track up your rug. Sorry."

"It's suffered worse," Annie commented. Her belly jiggled with laughter over some silently remembered deviltry. She scraped the back of a fat wrist across her mouth and snorted to clear her nose, and said, "You aim to sit heavy on them tonight?"

"Today's Thursday. Tomorrow night. Think you can put up with them until then?"

"Don't worry none about that," Fat Annie said. She glanced conspiratorially toward the bannister of the upward-winding staircase. "I got a new redhead girl in this week. You seen her yet?"

He gave her a grin to match her own, tugged his hat down, and went outside, still smiling over Annie's veiled invitation to partake of the delights of her miniature Gomorrah. She always invited him, and he never accepted, but she would never quit trying.

He continued his rounds, taking in the various establishments throughout the scrawly streets of Cat Town.

BRAND OF THE GUN

During the night the rain had quit for five or six hours, enough to turn the streets to caked mud; now it was drizzling again and the streets were awash with loose clots of clay. If and when this dismal rain ever ended, there would be one hell of a chore scraping the streets flat again. They were beginning to look like the washed-out cutbank beds of flooded arroyos. The weather had brought all wheeled traffic to a virtual standstill; not even the lightest buggy could negotiate the boggy ruts. The night mail coach hadn't reached town last night, and Six was surprised.

Larry Keene met him outside the Drovers Rest and held up a hand in signal. Six stopped and the lanky rancher said, "I didn't want to talk to you inside where Cruze could hear us."

"Anything wrong?"

"No more'n before. I told you I'd sent a rider out to keep tabs on Travis Canaday and that Warbonnet outfit of his."

"Uh-huh."

"My rider came in this morning and reported to me. I sent him home to the ranch and sent a new man out on the trail to take his place."

"What'd you find out?"

"They're still on the same schedule. It looks like they'll hit town day after tomorrow—Saturday. Afternoon or maybe after dark, if this rain keeps up. There're two Terrapin boys out there huddling in the rain, keeping watch on them too. My rider didn't let them spot him. Canaday's got a sizable crew, about the same size as Cruze's. Billy told me he thought at least one of Canaday's men looked like a hired gunfighter—two fancy six-guns and all that—but it was hard to tell from long distance and he couldn't swear to it."

Six nodded. "I'm much obliged, Larry."

"Better keep an eye on the sky," Keene advised. "If it quits raining today, Canaday may be able to get in earlier

BRAND OF THE GUN

than we figure. That herd's plowing through the mud at a crawl right now. And you can pretty much figure out what kind of a mood Canaday's cowboys'll be in by the time they hit town. All het up by all this rain and mad as hell from a week of muscling steers out of bogged mud."

"I know," Six said, and watched him move away up the street. One of the greatest gratifications of the marshal's job in this town was the way the town and the ranchers from the outlying areas banded together in time of trouble. Spanish Flat wasn't the kind of town to shrink behind the marshal's skirts. This wasn't the first time Larry Keene and others had pitched in to help.

He stepped inside the Drovers Rest and paused at the bar for a cup of coffee. Wade Cruze was at the same table—he'd been there just about all the time since he'd arrived in town. This morning he had an added bit of company. His foreman, Sid Arklin, wasn't there, but somebody else was: the cattle buyer McQuarter, who was Marianne Holbrook's guardian. Six had talked with the girl last night. She was a likable girl; he glanced at McQuarter over the rim of his coffee cup, and thought again that she might have had better luck when it came to a guardian. He didn't like McQuarter. Maybe it was just simple prejudice—McQuarter had never done anything that you could pin down. But you could never get the man to meet your glance.

Six took his coffee over to that table and made a brief, reserved smile of exact courtesy. "'Morning, gents."

Cruze nodded brusquely. McQuarter glanced quickly at Six, and quickly away. Cruze grinned up at the marshal and said, "We were just haggling over the price of that herd of mine. Always trust a government cattle buyer to try to shave every nickel off the ante."

"I've got my orders, damn it," McQuarter muttered. "I'm not bargaining with my own money, you know. It's the Army that's paying for that beef."

Six said, "Seems a little premature, doesn't it?"

BRAND OF THE GUN

Cruze said, "What's that mean?"

"First you've got to establish your claim to that herd."

"Don't you worry about that, Marshal. It's my herd and Canaday's not going to get far arguing about it. Don't forget I got this here gambler's confession in my pocket."

McQuarter said dryly, "Suppose Canaday can't read?"

"In that case," Cruze said, "he's likely to find out that the gun is mightier than the word, McQuarter. Don't you fret none. You neither, Marshal."

Six didn't reply. He went back to the bar, left his coffee cup, and went out, unconsciously hunching his shoulders against the rain that he knew was going to be there. It was as certain as death and taxes—and Cruze's brewing fight with Canaday, unless he could pull Cruze's sting.

Candy Briscoe was feeling very low. He had not slept all night. He had sat in a dark, candle-lit corner of the Tres Candelas cantina with a bottle of raw whisky—"Six months old, mister, that's *aged* whiskey"—going over and over in his mind what had happened to his partner. It didn't make any sense at all. Sure, a man might get shot up on a job, working as a hired gun for some big mogul or other, but that was part of the game. A man didn't just walk down a street and get killed by some baby-faced town gunsmith. It just didn't happen.

But it did. It happened to Fred Hook. And Fred had been Candy's partner. At times, Fred hadn't been too all-fired good to him; he insulted him and ragged him about this sweet tooth and all. But Fred was a good man. Fred had pulled Candy's iron out of the fire a time or two when the fire got too hot for him to handle all by himself. Hell, there was that time just last July over in the White Mountain country when Fred had unloaded two barrels of double-ought buck-shot into that bounty hunter who'd got the drop on Candy and had him dead to rights. A man could hardly forget that kind of friendship.

BRAND OF THE GUN

It wasn't to say that Candy always thought he understood Fred Hook. There were times he didn't understand the man at all. Like the way Fred liked to beat up on women. Always women, with Fred. He couldn't get them out of his mind for an instant. Candy couldn't figure that out. *Women are trouble*, he always used to tell Fred. *You got to look out for them, women, you never know where they're at. Can't trust no woman ever born, Fred—you leave one behind like a good hat, and if you come back looking for her she's likely to be gone.* And hell, the way Fred used to beat the living daylights out of every woman he ever had, it was no wonder they never stuck with him for long. Pretty soon they'd be bound to run out of places to bruise. Candy remembered that cat house in Denver where Fred had come roaring down the stairs yanking his pants up, with a big floppy girl after him full tilt, not a stitch of clothes on. She had big red welts all over. Fred had been laughing like mad. The girl had reached for a poker from the fireplace and threw it right at Fred's head. Fred ducked and yelled at Candy and ran out of the place, still laughing his head off.

Fred wasn't laughing any more. Candy reached out, almost upsetting the whisky bottle when he made a grab for it. He cursed and upended the bottle to his mouth. The damn thing was empty. He hurled it away with a huge heave of his brawny arm. The bottle crashed against the edge of the bar and shattered all over the floor.

"Hey," the bartender said. "Cut that out, damn it." He reached down behind the bar and lifted a bung-starter threateningly—the sawed-off heavy end of a pool cue.

Candy snarled at him. Fred was dead and Candy wasn't in any mood to take any lip from the barkeep.

The bartender came around the end of the bar and lifted the bung-starter. "Mister, I think you better get on out of here."

A growl formed low in Candy's throat and worked its

BRAND OF THE GUN

way out his mouth. It grew into a roar and suddenly with all the night's rage in him, he launched himself out of his chair, straight at the barkeep's belly. He butted the barkeep with his head before the barkeep could bring the pool cue down. The barkeep let out a painful whoosh of air and stumbled back into the edge of the bar; it caught him across the kidney and he rolled aside, trying to keep his grip on the bung-starter.

Candy felt the haze of alcoholic fumes slowing him down, but he was too mad to worry about that. He batted the bung-starter contemptuously aside and grabbed the barkeep by the scruff of the neck. He yelled something—he didn't know what he was yelling at the time, and never remembered afterward. He jerked the bung-starter out of the barkeep's fist and started beating him about the head with it.

The cantina was empty and there was nobody else around to stop the fight . . . if that was the right word for it. The barkeep crossed his arms desperately over his head and tried to retreat down the length of the bar. Candy's anger swelled up to a thundering crescendo. All he could think about was Fred Hook. Fred was dead. "God damn you, you'll pay for it!" That was what he was shouting, only he didn't hear himself. He brought the bung-starter smashing down cruelly; he heard the sharp pop of the bones of the barkeep's arm. That arm fell away and Candy smashed the other arm and then he kept smashing at the barkeep's head until it turned to pulp. The barkeep fell all over the floor and lay there with no top on his head, but not dead. He was groaning terribly. A great roar welled in Candy's chest but died there aborning. He cursed wildly and flung the bung-starter away from him and lurched out of the cantina.

Candy was sick, violently, in an alley a block away from the cantina. Afterward, with the sick taste of thrown-up whisky in his mouth, he staggered out to the street and tried to haul himself together. They'd find the barkeep. May-

BRAND OF THE GUN

be dead by now, maybe still alive. If he wasn't dead, he'd tell them who'd done it.

Better get out of here. Out of town. Get a horse and clear out. Candy peered through bleary eyes up and down the winding Cat Town street, but there wasn't a horse in sight at any of the hitch rails. Not in this rain; all the horses would be stabled. He'd have to find a livery stable.

He shook his head, trying to clear it. Where in hell was that livery stable? Might as well get his own horse. At least that way they wouldn't be able to hang him as a horse thief. Not that that mattered much now. He giggled slightly and almost lost his balance on a wet plank in the boardwalk. Looking down at his feet, he saw a rain puddle beside the curb. When he leaned over it his shoulders blocked the rain and the surface of the puddle smoothed out. He had a glimpse of his reflection in the pool. He looked awful. He got down on his knees on the edge of the boardwalk and reached down with both hands to scoop up water and splash it in his face. He scrubbed his face with the muddy water and lurched back from the curb, and got to his feet with the aid of the building wall there.

The cold rainwater revived him slightly. He looked both ways along the street. There was no uproar from the direction of the cantina—yet. No telling how much time he might have, but it wasn't likely to be too long. He tried to compose himself and look casual when he walked around the corner into something that looked a little more like a major street. He remembered the street—a row of dance halls and cat houses. He remembered it because there was a candy store up at the end of the street where it intersected with the main street of the town.

The stable was up there, maybe a block beyond the candy store. Now that he had his bearings, he set off up the street, trying to look as if he wasn't hurrying.

At the first corner there was an overhanging cupola-roof over the boardwalk, and under this porch-like shelter a knot

BRAND OF THE GUN

of men were gathered, deep in conversation. Candy began to inch his way around them but then his ears picked up something one of the men said:

"No, that ain't the way it was neither. I heard it from Will Cox and he was there, he ought to know. He saw it happen. That Hook fella had his gun clear first and had his trigger pulled first. His gun misfired. Maybe a dud cartridge, maybe something wrong with the gun. But it didn't go off, and that's the only reason Lanphier killed him."

"That ain't so," somebody else said. "I heard it altogether different. Lanphier beat him to the draw so fast Hook never had a chance to get his gun clear of leather. I'm telling you, boys, we've got a top gun right here in town and never even knew it before. Why, I'll bet Lanphier could outdraw Jeremy Six himself."

But Candy wasn't listening to the last part of it. He'd heard enough to send him hurrying on up the street. Cold hate, the imitation-calm of vengeance, filled his big chest and made it hard to breathe. He should've known it had to be like that. No damnfool gunsmith was likely to beat Fred Hook to the draw, not in any fair fight. No. It must've been a cheat. But just to make sure, he'd find out. He'd find out right now.

He turned into the main street, walking as fast as his thick legs would carry him. There still hadn't been any outcry from the direction of the cantina. Nobody had found the barkeep yet. He still had a little time. He reached the Marshal's Office and banged on the door.

The marshal wasn't inside. Nobody was there. But the door was unlocked, and Candy wheeled inside. His bloodshot eyes swept the office quickly. Over on the far wall was a gun rack, all the guns locked up with chains and padlocks. Those would be the marshal's own guns. That wasn't what he was looking for; he had a gun of his own. He tramped across to the scarred-up desk and pawed through the litter of papers on top, but there wasn't anything there but a big

BRAND OF THE GUN

stone ash tray that bruised his hand when he batted papers away. He cursed and began wrenching drawers open.

He found Fred Hook's gun and gunbelt in the bottom right-hand drawer. It was Fred's, all right. He recognized the gunbelt and the worn-down grips of the six-gun.

He glanced at the door, still ajar. Nobody was in sight. He picked up Fred's gun and snapped open the loading-gate, half-cocked the hammer to let the cylinder spin free, and emptied all six chambers into the palm of his hand. All six were loaded—Fred always kept his gun fully loaded and left the firing pin down between two cartridges. It gave a man just that much more of a chance, if he got in a shooting spree, than a man had if he only kept five chambers loaded.

All six cartridges looked brand-new. None of the primers were dented, as one should be if the firing pin had been snapped on it. But that didn't prove anything. Maybe Six reloaded it.

Candy frowned, reloaded all six cartridges into the gun, and cocked it several times. It cocked solid and neat, the cylinder lining up just the way it was supposed to. Everything seemed to be working perfectly. The sharp point of the firing pin was bright and silvery, the way a firing pin gets when it's been fired often enough to knock all the surface blueing off the steel.

There was no time to fool around hunting for answers, and there was only one quick way to find the one answer he wanted. He cocked the gun and pointed it at the floor and pulled the trigger.

Click. Nothing happened. Dumbfounded, Candy cocked it again and pulled the trigger again.

Nothing, *Click, click.* He fanned the gun steadily at least a dozen times. It didn't fire at all, not once. He took another six new cartridges out of Fred's gunbelt, loaded those into the gun, and tried again. Same result: everything worked just the way it was supposed to, only the gun didn't fire.

BRAND OF THE GUN

"So," Candy muttered. He unlimbered his own gun and cocked it. He cocked Fred's impotent gun. And he held the two cocked guns right beside each other, lining them up parallel. He held them up in front of him, crosswise to his face with the barrels pointing off to his left, and squinted across the open hammers.

That was it, plain as day. Fred's firing pin was a good eighth of an inch shorter than his own.

A cold lump settled into the pit of Candy's stomach. Quietly, moving with deliberate method, he put Fred's gun away where he'd found it, shut the drawer, holstered his own gun, and went out of the Marshal's Office. Nobody seemed to notice him. There was no hue and cry anywhere. They hadn't found the barkeep yet. He went up the street to the stable and tossed the stable boy a dime and brought out his own horse. He saddled it, moving quickly with no waste motions, but he was moving calmly now, like a machine, as if there were no skull-smashed bartender down in Cat Town, no hurry in the world.

Fred Hook had been a friend of Candy's, and Candy didn't forget his friends. He cinched up, mounted, rode out of the stable and trotted down the muddy street as far as the candy store. He stopped there to buy a pocketful of peppermint stick candy, came out and got back on the horse, and rode up the street to the gun shop.

The place was locked up. Nobody was inside. Candy didn't show any outward sign of irritation. He asked a pedestrian where he might find the gunsmith's house. The pedestrian gave him directions, and Candy got back on the horse and pointed it toward the edge of town, where Gene Lanphier lived. A knotted muscle rippled at his jaw line.

BRAND OF THE GUN

VIII

LANPHIER sat on a corner of the bed, fiddling aimlessly with the long-barreled forty-five. Sheila watched him silently until his face flashed toward the window and he said crankily, "I wish that damned rain would quit."

"Stop torturing yourself, darling."

"Easy to say," he snapped. He slipped the center pin out of the six-gun and let the loaded cylinder roll out into his cupped palm. A fully loaded .45 was big, blunt, and heavy; a steel cylinder full of them weighed a couple of pounds. He bounced the weight in his fist, as he muttered, "Anyhow, now I know what it's like to go through hell. I've been there. And I guess you do too."

He looked at her; and although she smiled for him, he knew that things would never be quite the same between them as they had been before.

She seemed to sense what he was thinking. She said, "We couldn't have gone on forever, could we?"

"Gone on doing what?"

"Acting like two moonstruck kids. We're grown up—and I suppose sooner or later something was bound to happen to make us act like it. It didn't have to be Fred Hook. It might have been just a little thing." There was a faraway regret in her voice.

He didn't like it; he didn't like to hear her say it. But he knew it was true. It was time, he thought in a melancholy way, to put away childish things.

BRAND OF THE GUN

He snapped the loaded cylinder back into the Colt and drove the center pin home. Hefting the revolver in his fist, he looked at it curiously and said, "You know what some of the boys are saying? I heard somebody this morning when I went up to the store. They're saying there's something magic about this gun of mine. They're saying no ordinary gunsmith could outfight a professional like Fred Hook unless he had some trick up his sleeve. Nobody pays any attention to the fact that Hook's gun didn't go off. Maybe nobody heard. They all think I've got some special sort of gun. Some trick."

His face turned sour in the slanting light from the window. "It was a trick, but not in my gun."

"Don't," she murmured.

He'd told her before. He'd been telling her, all night long. But he couldn't stop. He had to keep saying it.

"I fixed Hook's gun," he muttered, in a mausoleum tone. "That day he came into the shop and threatened me. I knew he'd come here to get into a gunfight. I didn't know it would be with me, but I knew he'd be in a fight. I knew what I was doing. Back in Silver City when I saw him force that no-account deputy to gunfight him when he knew the deputy didn't have a prayer. That was when I told myself Hook didn't deserve to live. And I never forgot it. . . . When he came into the shop I knew I was going to stop him from killing any more innocent people. I knew he'd be getting into a gunfight sooner or later, and I fixed his gun so it wouldn't go off."

He stared dumbly at his own six-gun. "I murdered him."

"Stop," she pleaded. There was a catch in her throat. She reached out a pale hand toward him. Her face was mottled with bruises. "There's nothing we can do now, darling."

"I'm not saying he didn't need to die. He deserved what he got."

"Yes," she said. "He deserved it. Gene, don't—"

BRAND OF THE GUN

"But it wasn't my right to do it," he said. "It wasn't up to me. I had no right."

She cried, "Stop it, Genel You can't bring him back to life!"

"I don't want to," he answered bleakly. "He's dead and it's right that he should be dead. He should never have been born. It's not his crimes I'm worried about—it's mine."

He glanced drearily past her, through the window behind her. What he saw stiffened him momentarily. Sheila saw the look on his face; her eyes went wide and she said quickly, "Darling—what is it?"

"Stay put," he murmured. "Don't move a muscle." He got quickly to his feet and rushed out of the bedroom, crossed the parlor with long strides and flung the door open. He still had the long gun in his fist. He lifted it at arm's length.

Candy Briscoe was half a block away, riding forward unhurriedly.

Lanphier aimed the gun at him and said, "That's far enough!"

Candy lifted the reins, halted the horse, and planted both hands on his saddle horn. His pockmarked face was expressionless. "Going to shoot me down just like that, friend? In broad daylight with all these folks watching out of their windows?"

Lanphier looked around. It was true. His shouted challenge had brought half a dozen people to their windows; they were peering out through the rain.

"Like you shot down Fred," Candy said. "Without a prayer. You filed down his firing pin. You had him playing Russian roulette with every chamber loaded, only Fred didn't know that. But I'm here to tell you something, friend. Your hill's just got higher to climb right now. You haven't had a chance to fool with my six-gun like you did with Fred's. I'm going to kill you, mister, one bullet at a time. Sure as you're born."

BRAND OF THE GUN

There was no point in asking Candy how he'd learned about the filed firing pin. He knew about it, that was all that mattered. The secret was shattered. It would have happened anyway—sooner or later somebody would have tried to fire Hook's gun.

Lanphier's arm was getting tired with the six-gun leveled out in front of him. He lowered it to waist-level, still pointing it at Candy.

Candy said, almost gently, "Put it away in the holster and draw fair with me, friend. I'll give you a chance you never gave Fred. I'm going to let you draw first, just so nobody'll have any complaints afterward."

There didn't seem to be any choice. He couldn't stand there and blast Candy out of the saddle, not while Candy had both empty hands folded in front of him. There was only one way out.

Lanphier slid the gun away into his holster. Candy lifted his reins, but Lanphier held up his left hand. "Don't come any closer."

"What?"

"We'll do it right here," Lanphier said, his voice unsteady. He licked his lips and tried to measure the intervening distance with his eyes. The range was maybe a hundred and fifty feet.

"You're loco," Candy said. "Mister, I'll put six holes in you before you get your gun drawn." Casually, he giggered the horse forward at a slow walk. The dull grin was a steel bar across his face. "This is it, friend. You take no walks from this."

"Hold it," Lanphier said. "Right there will do."

"You're in a real sweat to die fast, ain't you? Can't even wait for me to come in range. Maybe nobody told you, friend—the closer they come, the harder they are to miss. Way out here you'd spend all day wasting ammunition."

"It'll do," Lanphier said. His palms were sweating. "You can start your draw any time, Candy."

BRAND OF THE GUN

"Not till I get where I can expect to hit something." Candy answered, and kept walking the horse forward.

Lanphier's brow burst out with beads of oil-sweat. And it was then that he heard a sharp intake of breath behind him. He whirled and saw Sheila in the doorway; her mouth was covered by the back of her hand and her eyes were round and wild.

Lanphier rammed into her. "Get out of sight!" He thrust her inside, yanked the door shut, and wheeled again, back toward the street.

Candy had taken advantage of the distraction. His gun was out, in his fist, hanging casually in Lanphier's direction. "I'm all through stalling," Candy said. "This is for what you done to Fred, by God!" And he snapped the gun up and fired.

An instant's terrified paralysis seized Lanphier; he seemed unable to move. He heard the solid thwacking thump of the bullet slamming into the wall behind him; the ever-so-slight vibration of the porch under his feet seemed to shake him loose and he pawed madly at the handle of his long gun.

Candy, impatient with delay, was still more than a hundred feet away; he flung his gun forward to cock it and jerked off a spray of shooting. Lanphier was down on one knee now, elbow on knee, making a brace of his left arm; he dropped the long-barreled six-gun across his left hand and his steady, easy pressure on the trigger made the gun go off. He seemed almost unaware of the three bullets that smashed wildly by him. When his gun went off it caught him almost by surprise, as it should. This was what he knew best: he was shooting at a target, and he had never let the sound of other guns disturb his concentration on the firing range.

It only took one shot. Candy had fired four times and missed four times. Lanphier's single, calculated shot caught him dead center. Candy's arms flung up and out and he pitched from the saddle into a heap in the mud. The gun landed six feet away from him.

BRAND OF THE GUN

The baker's wife came over from next door; Lanphier left Sheila in her care, squared his shoulders, and went outside. A crowd, disregarding the steady drizzle, was gathered in an open circle around Candy Briscoe. Jeremy Six was down there. Lanphier went down from his porch, where he had squatted on one knee to shoot Candy out of the saddle. He walked down into the mud of the street and tramped up the block until he reached the edge of the crowd. Men gave him strange looks and stepped back to let him pass.

Lanphier was in time to see that Candy wasn't dead. Six was talking to him.

Candy coughed. He looked up at Lanphier; a glaze was beginning to form over his eyes. "Where'd you learn to shoot like that?"

"I practiced some," Lanphier said, in a dull tone.

"Why?" Candy said, in a quiet, desperate sort of way. Lanphier shook his head mutely.

Six reached out and touched Candy's cheek. "Feel that?"

"No. I guess I'm cashing in."

"You've got blood all over the front of you," Six said. "It didn't come from that bullet in you. They just found the bartender at the Tres Candelas with his head smashed in. That where the blood's from, Candy?"

"Why not?" Candy said. His eyebrows shifted up and down. "Sure, I got mad, I pushed him around some. Yeah, you can add that to my score, Marshal."

Candy's eyes, filming over now, shifted toward Lanphier. "I wish I'd killed you," Candy said, and stopped breathing.

Lanphier was muttering oaths in a monotone. Somebody said, "He's dead, Gene. Cussin' won't help."

A man knelt beside Six and reached out to put copper pennies on Candy Briscoe's eyelids. The man looked up briefly at Lanphier, and his eyes roamed from face to face until they reached Six. "Gene did everything he could to stop the fight, Jeremy."

"He stopped it, too," Six muttered, looking at Lanphier

BRAND OF THE GUN

with a hard glitter in his eyes. "Gene, you take some pretty dumb chances."

"He came after me," Lanphier said. "On account of Hook."

Six nodded. Two men picked up Candy and put him across his horse. Six turned and said, "Walk off a piece with me, Gene," and went over the street toward Lanphier's house. Lanphier followed him up onto the porch. Six swung his big shoulders around and locked his glance on Lanphier's.

"What's all this about Fred Hook's gun?"

"It'd take a long time to explain," Lanphier said. All the strength had flowed out of him and he hardly felt capable of standing up straight.

"Try me," Six said. "If I get bored I'll yawn." There was something dangerous in his cold tone. "I want the whole story, Gene. From the beginning."

"It goes back a long way," Lanphier said. "I don't know if I could put it in words and make sense out of it for you. Not right now. I'm kind of rattled."

"Try," Six said, very softly.

"I —well, I mean I don't—"

"Tell him, Gene."

He whipped his head around and saw Sheila in the door. She looked ashen, her face white-pale around the purpling marks of the bruises where Hook had hit her in the face. She had to hold onto the side of the doorway for support. The baker's wife stood mutely beside her, holding her arm. Sheila said, "You've got to get it off your chest before it sinks in and starts to rot, Gene."

Slowly, Lanphier nodded his head. "Yeah, I guess I do. You all right?"

"I'll be all right," she said.

The baker's wife said sternly, "You'll be fine, girl, but right now let's get you back inside and get your feet propped up. Land sakes, it's a wonder any of us survive the way these menfolk behave." The hefty woman steered Sheila resolutely inside.

BRAND OF THE GUN

The door clicked shut; and Jeremy Six propped his hip against the porch rail, got a cigar out from under his slicker and jammed it in his mouth. Down the street the knot of curious people broke up and sought shelter from the rain. Candy Briscoe's body had been placed on the horse and led away uptown.

Six cupped a match to the cigar and spoke in puffs. "You said it goes back a long way. To where?"

"Silver City," Lanphier said. "Just after I got out of the Army and we got married."

"What happened there?" Six shook out the match, broke it between his fingers and tossed it away to the street. His full attention lay against Lanphier like a blade, motionless but ready to cut.

Lanphier waved his hands around awkwardly, searching for the words he wanted. "It's kind of hard to explain. Fred Hook was there, only he didn't call himself that. He went under the name of Al Hooker." He glanced at Six; something made Six frown, deep in thought, and tip his head slightly to one side as if something had tickled his memory and he was trying to remember what it was.

Lanphier went on. "Silver City was tamed down by then, no more boomtown rough stuff. The town had settled down to a pretty routine way of life—I guess that's why Sheila and I picked it to set up housekeeping. I opened a little gun shop. We had a sheriff name of Garrett—you remind me of him a little. He had a big county to cover and he wasn't in town much. There wasn't much trouble in Silver City, like I said, and Garrett hired an old-timer by the name of Billy Joe Weaver to be his deputy down there. Billy Joe was an old-time mountain man, honest and plenty tough, but he wasn't any gunfighter. He was just what the town needed to buffalo the drunks and bust up fistfights—he carried an old Indian tomahawk and anybody who gave him trouble would get a belt on the head that'd lay a man out for ten hours. I liked old Billy Joe. We used to sit out

BRAND OF THE GUN

and play checkers while the sun went down. He was a nice old fella, had a lot of tall stories about his mountain man days."

Six watched him steadily. Lanphier knew he was rambling; he tried to pull himself together. He said, "That's not what you want to hear about, but it'll explain part of what's happened, maybe. You've got to understand how I felt about Billy Joe."

"I think I get the idea," Six murmured. "Go on."

"One day this Hook, Hooker, whatever you want to call him, he came riding into Silver City on a foamed-up horse. Billy Joe stopped him at the stable and started asking a few questions. I wasn't close enough to hear what was being said, but I saw the whole thing. Hook started laughing at him and after a little bit he just must've said something that got into Billy Joe's craw. Billy Joe stepped back and went for his gun. 'Course, there wasn't anything for it. Hook was a professional, and Billy Joe was no fast-draw expert. He hardly had his gun halfway out of the holster before Hook blew him apart with three shells from his forty-four. They weren't standing more than five feet apart."

Lanphier took a deep breath and let it out. "I didn't have a gun on me. Don't know what I'd have done if I had. I started across the street, and Hook got on his horse and came around at a dead run. Just about rode me down. I jumped out of the way and landed in the dust, and Hook went on riding by. I went over to see if I could help Billy Joe, but he was dead. He didn't even last a few minutes, like Candy did. He was just dead."

Six nodded and tapped ash from his cigar.

Lanphier continued. "Hook didn't clear out of town right away. He hung around a little while, raising hell in half a dozen saloons. Three or four days later the word came in that Sheriff Garrett was on his way into town, and Hook cleared out. That was the last I saw of him until just the other day here. But I guess it must've festered in me quite

BRAND OF THE GUN

a while, what he did to old Billy Joe Weaver. Anyhow, it gave me a hell of a jolt when I saw Hook walk into that gun shop of mine the other day. I wasn't positive, right off, that he was the same one, but I knew for sure as soon as he opened his mouth. I sent Sheila home because I didn't want her anywhere near him. It all got clear as crystal in my mind right then. I remembered what he'd done to Billy Joe and for just a minute there I made myself into the judge and jury and executioner, all rolled up in one. He needed his gun fixed, and I fixed it good. While I was filing down a spring to fit, I did some filing on his firing pin too. He didn't notice what I was doing. I filed the pin down too short to make contact with the cartridge primer. You could fire that gun all day long and it wouldn't shoot."

Lanphier heaved a deep breath. "There, that's it. I fixed Hook's gun, knowing he'd try to use it sometime in a gun-fight. I murdered him in cold blood, just like that. Just like that."

His eyes came up dismally to stare at Six. "I've been kicking myself ever since. But what could I do? I couldn't very well walk up to Hook and tell him what I'd done. And then I came home last night and found he'd tried to rape my wife. I guess that was because I was foolish enough to let him know I'd been in Silver City when he was there. He told me if I didn't keep my mouth shut about that, he'd kill my wife. I did keep my mouth shut, but he came after her anyway."

Lanphier went across to the end of the porch and locked his fists on the porch rail. His knuckles whitened. He spoke without turning his head. "It's been a nightmare, Jeremy."

"And Briscoe?" Six asked.

"Somehow he found out how I'd tricked up Hook's gun. He was Hook's partner, I guess he figured it was up to him to get revenge. He called me out. I don't know if it means anything any more, but he shot first. He got four shots at me before I shot him. Remember what I told you

BRAND OF THE GUN

about long-range shooting? He didn't know how to handle a six-gun at that distance."

"Uh-huh," Six said. He was drawing thoughtfully on his cigar; his face was lowered and he squinted, looking up through the smoke, looking up at Lanhier from under the thick overhang of his heavy eyebrows.

Lanhier said in a very quiet and tired voice, "I guess you'll be arresting me now."

"Maybe. Could be I won't have to."

"What? But after what I just told you—"

Six said, "Walk up to the office with me."

"Mind if I just say goodbye to Sheila first?"

"I think you'll be coming right back home," Six told him. "You won't be gone long enough for her to miss you. Come on."

IX

SIX PUSHED the door of his office open and glanced around, frowning. Somebody had been in here. The papers were in disorder on the desk; two or three had fallen to the floor.

He went around behind the desk and opened the bottom drawer. Hook's gun was still there, but it wasn't in the same position he remembered. He took it out and examined it, having a look at the firing pin.

"I see what you mean. You'd never notice it unless you knew what to look for."

"I know my trade," Lanhier said dully.

BRAND OF THE GUN

Six set the gun aside. "Something must've given Candy the idea to come in here and examine the gun."

"Maybe he heard that it misfired."

"Probably," Six agreed. "Sit down. It'll take me a minute to go through these."

Lanphier was obviously spooked. He sat down and kept crossing and uncrossing his legs. Six opened the top drawer and took out a thick stack of wanted flyers. With deliberate care he read the top one, slipped it aside, and read the next.

It went on for some time. After a little while Lanphier got up and started pacing restlessly back and forth. "Mind telling me what you're looking for?"

"I'd rather not," Six said. "If I'm wrong, I'd just be getting your hopes up for nothing."

"I wish I knew what in hell you're talking about," Lanphier said raggedly. "I don't see any way to call what I did anything but murder. And sifting through a bunch of reward posters can't do me any good. I'm not wanted for anything, if that'll help—nothing except the murder of Fred Hook, that is."

"It's not your name I'm looking for," Six said, and then, with a roar of triumph, he snatched a document from the pile. "I knew it!"

"What?"

Six's eyes moved down the document and a smile spread across his face. "Don't ever tell me there's no justice, Gene." He reversed the flyer, end-for-end, and held it out. "Read it for yourself."

Frowning, not understanding a bit of it, Lanphier took the reward flyer and read aloud: "Wanted—for First Degree Murder and Armed Robbery—Allen Frederick Hooker. Age thirty-eight. Height five feet nine. Weight. . ." Lanphier looked up, exasperated. "So what? I'm not surprised he was wanted by the law, but that doesn't change what I did. I don't—"

BRAND OF THE GUN

"Read what it says down at the bottom," Six told him.

Lanphier's puzzled glance dropped to the bottom of the flyer and he read the bottom lines: "A bounty of one thousand dollars will be paid for this fugitive, dead or alive."

Lanphier looked up slowly. "You mean—?"

"Exactly," Six said. "A strange quirk, or maybe not so strange, but that's the way it is. Hook was wanted, dead or alive. You didn't commit murder, in the eyes of the law. You enforced the law. You haven't committed any legal crime, Gene. You've got a one thousand dollar bounty coming to you."

Lanphier shook his head. "I wouldn't touch it with a ten foot pole."

"Then sign it over to the padre's school," Six said. "That's the least of your concerns, Gene. You're a free man."

Lanphier's head was still shaking back and forth. "I just don't understand it, Jeremy. I guess I don't really believe it yet."

"Go on home and take your time working it out for yourself, then," Six smiled reassuringly at him.

Lanphier sank weakly into the chair. He buried his face in his hands and sat like that for such a long time that Six began to think there was something wrong with him; but then Lanphier's hands dropped into his lap and he stared vacantly at Six and said, "I just don't believe it. Things like this just don't happen."

"They do," Six said. "It's my fault you got into this mess and it gives me considerable relief to be able to get you out of it."

"How in God's name is it *your* fault?"

Six pointed toward the wanted flyer. "I should've remembered that poster before. It wasn't until you said Hook used to call himself Al Hooker that the connection snapped into place in my head. But if I'd been as smart as I'm supposed to be, I'd have recognized Hook as soon as he

BRAND OF THE GUN

came into town, arrested him and thrown him behind bars and had him extradited to New Mexico to hang."

"Good God, Jeremy, no man alive can be expected to remember every reward poster that comes in the mail."

"It's my job," Six answered. "My mistake, Gene, and I'm sorry you and Sheila had to suffer for it."

Lanphier looked dazed. He grinned awkwardly. "I don't reckon we'll be holding it against you, Jeremy. For some strange reason I don't reckon we will." He laughed, half hysterically. He leaped out of the chair and rushed forward, grabbed Six's hand and pumped it up and down.

"Jesus," Lanphier said, "you are a good man, Jeremy!"

Lanphier was near the door when Six said, "Hold on a minute."

Lanphier turned, half afraid. Six waved a hand. "Sit back down for a minute, Gene. There are a few things we'd better get settled right away."

"Things? What things?" Lanphier moved back to the chair and sat down, on the edge of it.

"Relax a little. I'm not going to arrest you. But I wonder if you've thought about what happens next?"

"I can tell you that right now," Lanphier said firmly. "I'm going to put this gun back where I got it in the shop, and do my damndest to forget any of this ever happened. I'm going to take care of my wife and stay as far as I can from loaded guns except on the tin-can target range. I'm a gunsmith, not a gunfighter."

"Not any more," Six murmured. His eyes narrowed down and he said, in a vaguely regretful way, "You've gunned down two of the toughest gunslingers in the Territory, Gene. And there's no way to prevent the word from getting around. The first thing that's likely to happen is that Wade Cruze will get mad. He stood still for it when you killed Hook, but now you've wiped out his other gunnie too. He's

BRAND OF THE GUN

not likely to be too friendly. But I can handle Cruze. It's the rest of them you've got to think about."

"The rest of who?"

"The would-be gun-notchers," Six said. "The woods are full of them, Gene, and when the word gets out, they'll reckon you're fair game for them."

Lanphier nodded slowly. He didn't seem shocked. "I should have known I wouldn't get away scot-free."

"You never can," Six said. "You've got the brand of the gun on you now, and nothing but time can rub it off. If you're lucky enough to keep yourself out of fights for a few years, sooner or later they'll forget all about you. But if you let even one trigger-happy tough needle you into a gunfight, you'll be right back on the list."

"Jeremy, if I have to bend over backward so far that I'm standing on my head, I swear to you I'll back-pedal my way out of any gunfight that comes my way."

"It may not be all that easy, Gene. When Candy Briscoe came after you just now, you didn't want to fight him either. But there wasn't any way out of it, was there?"

"Not that I could take."

"Think about that, then," Six said quietly. "And think about this, too: it doesn't take any time at all for rumors to get around. The rumor's already all over town that you've got some sort of special magical gun."

"You know better than that."

"Sure I do. But neither of us can do anything about rumors, Gene. We can both deny them until we're blue in the face. It won't do any good. That gun of yours is as famous as you are, and getting more famous every minute of the day while the story spreads. A week from now there won't be a town in Arizona where they're not discussing you in saloons. I'm not suggesting you make yourself into a professional gunman, but you'd better have a long, hard think. You'll have to decide just what you're going to do when the

BRAND OF THE GUN

first gun-notcher catches you off alone somewhere and challenges you to gunfight him."

He added more softly, "I'm sorry, Gene, but I had to caution you. It won't be easy."

"I reckon it won't," Lanphier agreed moodily. He got up and said vaguely, "Much obliged, Jeremy," and left the office like a sleepwalker.

Six sat looking at the door for quite a while before he shook himself and got back to business. He took out a sheet of office stationery, and in his crabbed hand wrote up a report of the last twelve hours' events. He signed it and addressed it to the U. S. Marshal's Office at Prescott.

After he mailed the report he started out on his rounds. He stopped at the Drovers Rest, and as he expected, Wade Cruze was up in arms.

Cruze was in a table-thumping mood. His short, powerful arms slammed down on the card table and he demanded to know why that sonofabitching killer, Lanphier, wasn't behind bars.

Six explained it, coolly and briskly: "Your two hired gunnies weren't good enough, Cruze. That's all. Hook was wanted dead or alive for a murder over in New Mexico, and Candy couldn't hit the broad side of a barn from *inside* the barn. There are no charges against Lanphier—and let me add this: Lanphier is strictly out of bounds to you. If you've got a gun that needs fixing, you bring it to me and I'll see it gets delivered."

"You'll stick to your own townsfolk, right or wrong," Cruze accused him, "no matter how many of my boys get killed. Is that it?"

"If one of your men got in a fight and had to defend himself, I'd stick up for him just as fast," Six told him. "Understand me. I've got no quarrel with you or your men. But you've got no quarrel with me or my people, by the same token. Do I make that clear to you?"

BRAND OF THE GUN

"I reckon you do," Cruze said darkly. "Hell, I got bigger fish to fry than some local tinhorn gunsmith who wants to make a rep for himself. Look, just tell your Lanphier fella to stay clear of my way."

"He won't give you any trouble," Six said.

"Hell, Marshal, he's already give me plenty of that. Killed my best two fighting men."

"If they were your best," Six answered, "then you were in pretty bad shape already, weren't you?" He left that hanging in the air and went out of the saloon.

Six was surprised to see Cort Danziger in the Glad Hand. Danziger had posted himself back in a dim corner, on a straight chair with his shoulders wedged into the intersection of the adobe plaster walls. A whisky bottle stood on the table in front of him, untouched. Old Will Greer was sitting at the table talking energetically. Will Greer was the town gossip, a one-man grapevine. It looked as if Danziger wasn't drinking but he was staring at the whisky bottle the way a starving man might stare at a loaf of bread through a bakery window.

Six moved along the bar, nodded to the bartender and waited for his customary cup of coffee. He had his back to the rear corner but he could hear Will Greer's husky voice clearly. Greer was saying, "Sure, that's her stepfather, guardian, whatever you call it. That cattle-buyer fella. But he ain't her natural-born daddy. I used to haul freight for the Army and I recollect her old man was a Cavalry captain, Cap'n Holbrook. He came from some rich down-East family that dated back to the Pilgrim days. I never knew her ma—she must be dead a long spell now. The Cap'n got himself killed by 'Paches up in the Chiricahuas, four—five years back, when General Crook came down here with the Fifth. I recollect that campaign right well. I was still hauling supplies for the Army, civilian contractor I was, and I was

BRAND OF THE GUN

with the troops when they moved out, spring of 'Seventy-nine it was. I recollect we—"

Danziger interrupted in a voice too soft for Six to pick up the words. Six hooked a bootheel over the bar rail and nodded acknowledgment to the bartender, who set the mug of hot coffee in front of him and drifted away down the bar. Greer's voice started up again, evidently in answer to Danziger's question.

"Danville, I recollect it was. Cap'n Holbrook came from Danville, Connecticut. That's where the family came from. I recall he told me one time. Seems his family didn't think much of him joining the Army—that was during the War Between the States, of course. He was quite a soldier, got himself brevetted brigadier general when he was twenty-eight years old. You might recall he commanded the Nineteenth Connecticut at Vicksburg. That's where he lost his hand, you know."

Danziger said something quietly. Six sipped his coffee and eavesdropped unashamedly; he was no busybody but he had the feeling that he ought to make it his business to be interested in anything Cort Danziger was interested in.

Greer went on gossiping; he seemed to have a memory full of pigeonholes, each one filled with information.

"Left hand, it was. He got hit in the forearm with a minié ball and the Rebs captured him half dead from loss of blood. His left hand was amputated in a Reb field hospital. Seems there was a young Yankee spy who helped him escape and get back to his own lines—name of Boone, I recall. I remember that on account of Dan'l Boone, of course. This spy's name was Jim, I think—Jim Boone. The Cap'n told me he met this Boone fella in the Reb hospital and Boone sneaked him out one night and got him back to General Grant's headquarters. The Cap'n never set eyes on that Boone fella after that, but when I knew him he told me he was still looking to find Boone and thank him."

Danziger asked another question, and Greer answered,

BRAND OF THE GUN

"Nope, not that I can remember. All he said was that Boone was a young fella, a Southerner from New Orleans or thereabouts. Never did say what he looked like. I reckon he was kind of half dizzy from the amputation and all. He probably never did get too good a look at Boone."

Danziger spoke again, and Greer said, "Sure, don't mention it, mister. Nice talking to you. Thank you kindly for the nourishment here." Greer chuckled. When Six glanced over his shoulder, Greer was picking up the whisky bottle possessively. Greer stuck the bottle under his arm, tugged his hat down, and scurried out of the saloon.

Six finished his coffee and left the bar to go back to Danziger's table. Danziger's eyes came up, like two holes burned in a coat. He gave no sign of recognition. Six said, "Hello, Cort."

"Hello, yourself," Danziger said, with no audible enthusiasm.

"You're a long way from home."

Danziger laughed mirthlessly. "Yeah. I have to be."

Six said, "Mind if I ask you something?"

"Why? So you can twist it around?"

"What makes you say that?"

"Never mind," Danziger said. "Just making conversation. What's on your mind, Jeremy?"

Six hooked an empty chair over from where Greer had been sitting. He reversed it and sat down cowboy fashion, legs astraddle and arms folded before him over the back of the chair. Danziger asked, "How come you're not busy polishing your armor?"

"I don't know what you're talking about, Cort. Do you?"

"You always were a crusader. That's all I meant. No offense. You look like you've got a burden, Jeremy."

"Could be."

"Wade Cruze?"

"Might be."

Danziger said, "You're a damned fool, you know that?"

BRAND OF THE GUN

You pin on that marshal's badge and sooner or later get yourself killed for people who won't even remember your name."

"I know my name," Six answered. "All right, then—what would you do? How would you handle Cruze?"

"Me? I'd go back to bed and pull the covers up over my head." Danziger laughed coarsely and turned to yell at the bartender. "Hey—bring me a bottle. A full one."

Danziger brought his attention back to Six and said hollowly, "Don't tell me about your troubles, Jeremy. It's like complaining of a drizzle to Noah."

"Want to talk about it, Cort?"

"Not particularly."

"I'm a pretty good listener."

"Never mind," Danziger said. "Nothing runs out of listeners faster than a hard-luck story." He held out his hand—a slim hand with long, supple fingers; but the veins showed. "Nothing left," he muttered, "nothing but a fistful of lost dreams. No, Jeremy, God knows you don't want to hear about it. You've got trouble enough."

Six said, "I'm sorry, Cort."

"Yeah. Let me know when you bottle it." Danziger reached for the bottle the barkeep brought. He uncorked it and tossed down a mouthful. He didn't blink. "Some days," he muttered, "I wonder if I'm going to make it through to sundown. You ever hit bottom, Jeremy? No, I reckon not. Listen—stay tough, Jeremy. Don't ever get the rug pulled out from under you. Don't ever soften up."

"Why don't you talk about it?"

Danziger said, "I don't have to tell you anything."

"No, you don't. But why shouldn't you? You don't have anything to hide. Or do you?"

"You seem to have your collar turned around backward, don't you, Jeremy? Why don't you just pour some violin music out of this bottle while you're at it?"

"I'm serious, Cort."

BRAND OF THE GUN

Danziger laughed. "Are you sure that's the word? *Serious*? Don't be such a farmer." He shook his head. "What I need is a drink, that's what I need." And he suited action to words by lifting the bottle to his lips again. His mouth curled up derisively and he said, "If you're going to sit there and stare at me like some padre-confessor then I'll tell you, Jeremy. It's simple, altogether. Nothing to get interested in. There's something gone, inside me, Jeremy—that's all. It happens. I've got no gumption left in me. I don't know, maybe I'm just tired. But sometimes you just get to feeling cursed. If you don't know what I mean then I can't explain it any better than that. It'd be like trying to describe a color to a blind man. Hell, I used to be a top gun on the circuit, and I was everybody's target, and don't you think I was scared? Sure I was. I was scared all the time, but for a while a man can live with that. But now I'm not scared any more. I'm terrified."

He brooded at the table before him. "I don't eat much any more because food never tastes like food when you're terrified. I don't think much, any more, either. Thinking stinks. I don't sleep nights any more."

Danziger's hand slammed down, making the bottle rock. "The sky's falling, Jeremy. I guess it's Danziger's last stand."

Six took his time lighting a cigar, after which he said, "You didn't have to be a gunfighter, Cort. You could have made a whole career out of feeling sorry for yourself."

"Hah. Well, I'm sick and tired of the life I lead, that's all. You asked, Jeremy, and I told you."

He had another drink and stared drowsily at the bottle before him. "Nothing makes me drink. I volunteer. I figure anything that's worth doing is worth overdoing." He laughed off-key. "For a while I took every chance, until I figured there were no more chances left, but nothing happened—I'm still alive. I don't want to be alive, Jeremy, it's too much work."

He looked up, almost challengingly. Six said mildly, "If

BRAND OF THE GUN

I agreed with you, your teeth would fall out. You want me to give you an argument, don't you?"

"Can you think of one? I wish I could."

Six said, "Do what you have to do, Cort. That's what I do."

"God damn it, Jeremy, it won't help to talk to me as if I'm a man of honor. I'm not, any more."

"What are you trying to say, Cort?"

"I just said it."

"Because you got tired of killing? I never knew a gun to be the measure of a man, Cort."

Danziger shook his head and muttered something that Six only caught part of: ". . . that wild goose you're still chasing after, Jeremy."

"You're drunk."

"Certainly I'm drunk. In my shoes you'd be drunk too."

"I'd have a good look at myself, if I were you," Six said.

"You're lucky, Jeremy. You're not me."

Six took the cigar down and pursed his mouth in an attempt to blow a smoke ring. It was an art he had never mastered. A ragged cloud of smoke emerged and drifted listlessly past Danziger's face.

With a tone of resignation, Danziger asked, "You ever hear of a young fellow called Steve Boat?"

"I've seen him a time or two."

Danziger nodded. "Nice young gent, for a killer."

"Not nice enough," Six said. "Last I heard, he was in prison at Leavenworth."

"He was released a few months ago."

"That a fact?"

"If you hear anything about him," Danziger said, "I'd be obliged if you'd let me know."

Six's glance shot at him sharply. "You're looking for him?"

"Let's say he's looking for me," Danziger said, "and I'd just as soon not be found. Not by him."

"Is he packing a grudge?"

BRAND OF THE GUN

"You might say," Danziger said. "I killed his woman." He spoke without expression.

Six's eyes narrowed. "You wouldn't be telling me that if it was a crime you were wanted for."

"That's right," Danziger said. "Look, I made the mistake of polishing up my suit of armor just like you did. I took a job as town marshal in a railroad town up in Colorado. I wouldn't have taken it except that I was on a vicious losing streak and I needed the job to eat. Steve Boat and his partners drifted in one morning—the girl was with them. Boat had it in mind to hold up the railroad payroll office. I guess he was down on his luck, too. He's a hired gun by trade, not an armed robber. The holdup was a pretty amateur job and he telegraphed what he was up to long before he went after it—I could see his boys sizing up the payroll office with their eyes glued on the place. It wasn't hard to figure out what they were in town for—a blind man could've seen it. I hired a couple of deputies and we waited for Boat to make his move, and it wasn't long before he did. In broad daylight. The girl held the horses out front while the three men went inside. I'd given the payroll manager strict instructions not to resist, and he didn't. There wasn't any trouble until Boat and his two partners came out of the place lugging the payroll. I hollered out to them to drop their guns and freeze, but Boat must have figured the odds were better than they were. He tried to make a fight of it. Guns started going off all over the place and the girl ran in front of Boat just when I took a shot at him. Killed her, just like that. It took all the starch out of Boat and he just stood there and stared at her—I went over and took his gun away from him. The other two men with him didn't make any trouble. The county grand jury dismissed the charges against me, and Boat and his boys went to prison. The last time I saw Boat he was on his way to Leavenworth with a Federal Marshal and he gave me a look like I've never seen in my life. I'll never forget it."

BRAND OF THE GUN

Danziger's voice ran down wearily and took a drink. He added softly after a moment, "So if you see him or hear anything about him, I'd appreciate it if you'd let me know. I can't face Steve Boat."

"You only did what you had to do."

"You don't get it yet," Danziger said. "I was on a losing streak, Jeremy. I was in a foul-black mood, just waiting for somebody to look cross-eyed at me. I was hoping Boat would make a fight of it. If I'd handled my job the way I should have, I wouldn't have been so anxious to spray that street with bullets—I'd have taken my time. It doesn't matter what the grand jury said. I didn't have to kill that woman."

"It was an accident, if it happened the way you just told it."

"There are no accidents," Danziger muttered. "Things happen because people make them happen. If I'd held my temper I'd have been cool enough to take some care with my shooting."

Six brooded at him through half-shuttered eyes. "Cort, that girl knew the risks she was taking when she decided to throw in with Boat in the robbery. She gambled and lost. I can't live your life for you and I don't want to, but I'll tell you this—you're acting like an idiot if you let it ruin your life. You've punished yourself enough, by the look of it."

"Sure," Danziger mumbled, dismissing it. "Sure, Jeremy."

Six tried unsuccessfully again to form a smoke ring, then said, "I didn't sit down with you just to pass the time. I need your help, Cort."

"Then Heaven help you."

"I've got a little something up my sleeve," Six said, ignoring him. "It may work and it may not. If it doesn't work, we're likely to have some gun trouble within a couple of days. I'll have a hell of a time handling it alone. I need a good deputy to back my play."

"Forget it," Danziger said. "It's a nice try, Jeremy, but

BRAND OF THE GUN

forget it. I'm in no mood to be reformed or converted. It doesn't matter a damn to me whether or not you want to pretend you believe in me."

"I'm not just wasting wind or trying to do you a favor. It's likely to be hell out there."

"You're trying to shame me into pulling myself together," Danziger said, "and I'm obliged to you for the interest, but it won't work. Just forget it, Jeremy, all right? Now get out of here. You don't amuse me any more."

Danziger's eyes came up, bleak and dismal. Six stood up and put the chair back where he'd got it. "Think it over," he said, and made his way out of the saloon.

X

THURSDAY AFTERNOON, Six kept a careful eye on the Terra-pin men. At three o'clock Cruze's foreman, Sid Arklin, went up the street to Lanphier's gun shop, spent ten minutes inside, and emerged carrying a new double-barreled shotgun and a carton of shells. Six watched him walk back to the Drovers Rest. There was no law against buying a shotgun, so he didn't say anything to Arklin. Down at the gun shop Lanphier was standing in the doorway watching the sky. It was not raining, but there was no sign of clearing; there wasn't a single patch of blue anywhere. The gray afternoon leaded the town. Six saw Sheila come out of the gun shop and take Lanphier's arm. The two of them stood there, not talking. Six recalled the flirtatious banter that had always characterized the two of them, and watched their solemn stillness with a heart-gripped sense of regret. Something had gone out of their lives in the past twenty-four hours and it was unlikely it would ever return; the best hope was

BRAND OF THE GUN

that it might be replaced by something equally warm, if quieter—a steady silent bond.

He could not help being troubled about Lanphier. All afternoon he had listened to snatches of lusty talk in stores and stables and saloons and the blacksmith's, where men gathered in little knots and did everything short of making bets about how long it would be before the gun-fighters started drifting into town to try Lanphier on for size.

Six looked up the street again. Lanphier was not wearing a gun. It was small satisfaction. But, again, bound by the iron restrictions of his duty, Six could do nothing to help. He could not remember a more frustrating week in his life.

He saw Cort Danziger emerge from the barbershop and pause to stand under the chain-hung sign: TONSORIAL PARLOR. Danziger had spruced himself up. His clothes looked better—clean, if not new—and he had removed the bristle of whiskers from his cheeks. He did not appear drunk. His eyes swept the street, passed over Six without acknowledgment, and completed their survey; Danziger turned up-street, walked to the hotel, and stopped there on the porch to watch a squat man advance along the walk. It looked like Eddie Hanratty, in his railroad cap and overalls. Hanratty stopped beside Danziger and tried to look as if he were just pausing to stretch and have a casual look around, but it was evident to Six that Hanratty was talking to Danziger, softly and out of the side of his mouth. It was equally evident that Hanratty was angry. Danziger never once looked at him; the gunfighter said something in a terse way and swung with an abrupt snap of his trim shoulders, then pushed into the hotel. Obviously not satisfied with what he had heard, Hanratty yanked the cigarette from his mouth and hurled it into the street. He rammed his hands into his pockets and tramped across through the mud to the Drovers Rest, where he went past Owen McQuarter without a glance

BRAND OF THE GUN

and plunged inside. The cattle buyer remained on the saloon porch, teetering on his heels, thumbs in his vest pockets and hat tipped back.

After a few moments Wade Cruze came out and joined McQuarter and the two of them stood deep in conversation. A few minutes later Marianne Holbrook stepped out of the millinery shop with a parcel, waved gaily to McQuarter across the street, and walked back to the hotel. Her guardian acknowledged her wave with an absentminded nod of the head. When Six looked at the hotel he saw that Cort Danziger had reappeared in the doorway; when the girl turned in there, Danziger removed his hat gallantly and held the door for her. Both of them disappeared inside.

On the porch of the Drovers Rest, Owen McQuarter was glaring angrily at the hotel, shushing Cruze with an impatient wave of his hand. He obviously didn't like the idea of his ward having any truck with the likes of Danziger. But after a moment he turned back and resumed his conversation with Cruze. Sid Arklin came out, cradling the shotgun in the bend of his elbow, and the three men looked up at the sky and talked energetically, Cruze with great sweeps of his little arms. Evidently they were discussing the odds that the rain had quit permanently. That would most likely have considerable effect on the speed of Travis Canaday's approach with the Warbonnet herd and crew. If the mud dried up overnight, Canaday might arrive by Saturday morning.

Six tipped his shoulder back against the wall under the sign, CITY MARSHAL'S OFFICE: J. SIX, CHIEF MARSHAL. He was Chief Marshal because ordinarily he had a night man and a deputy, but the night man was a hundred miles away with a county sheriff's posse, tracking down a group of pesky rustlers, and Six's most recent deputy had quit to take on a higher paying job as a Wells Fargo detective. He had a family to support and Six couldn't blame him for taking the job, but at the moment he was perilously short-handed,

BRAND OF THE GUN

if that was the word for a man whose only hands were the ones attached to his own wrists.

He had offered a job to Cort Danziger not out of pity or misguided idealism, but because he needed a deputy. He needed one quite badly right now. Danziger, if he got over feeling sorry for himself, might just fill the bill. He had the experience and ability for the job.

It was hard to explain Danziger. Six had seen gunmen come apart before. He knew the symptoms well enough to know that Danziger's exaggerated fears had less to do with the death of Steve Boat's woman than Danziger thought. Killing the woman was just the spark that had set the tinder on fire inside Danziger, but the fuel had been there before. A man didn't just go to pieces all of a sudden on account of a single act. That was why Six had told him that he never knew a gun to be the measure of a man. He had been getting the impression that Danziger had taken a long, sour look at his life, and must have decided that his values were worthless. It wasn't Steve Boat who scared Danziger; it was Danziger who scared Danziger. He didn't know who he was any more.

Six wasn't a missionary. It wasn't part of his job to reclaim or reform men like Danziger. But he liked the man, or at least he liked the man Danziger had once been, and he needed a deputy. The two factors were not in conflict, and so he had asked Danziger to help him. It remained to be seen whether Danziger would give it any serious thought.

One thing about all this continued to puzzle Six, and that was the conversation Danziger had been having when

Six had found him in the Glad Hand this morning. Danziger had been pumping old Will Greer about Marianne Holbrook's background—her soldier father, his rescue from a Rebel prison camp by a spy named Boone, and his family background in Connecticut. If Danziger's only interest in Marianne Holbrook was that she was a pretty girl and he wanted to make social contact with her, then he had a strange

BRAND OF THE GUN

way of going about it: he might have asked the girl herself, instead of doing roundabout detective work to find out about her.

Danziger had been frank enough about his personal problems, but he hadn't said anything at all to Six about what he was doing here; and there was something about the way Danziger acted that suggested he wasn't just passing through. He was in Spanish Flat for a reason, and evidently the reason had something to do with Marianne Holbrook.

Six looked up the street. Gene and Sheila Lanphier were still at their silent post before the gun shop. Six's glance traveled down the street toward the hotel, where Danziger had disappeared inside with Marianne Holbrook—perhaps to proceed with whatever mysterious plan he had. Six brooded on that but after a while decided there wasn't much he could do about it unless someone asked him to help. It wasn't his job to meddle in private business.

He glanced bleakly at the sky, gave up his vigil, and turned into his office. He couldn't shake the feeling that the currents now flowing through town were carrying a flood-tide of trouble at their crest.

Late in the afternoon Cort Danziger drifted into the Drovers Rest for a drink and saw that a card game was in busy progress at Wade Cruze's table. One of the players was Owen McQuarter, and McQuarter's intent concentration on the play made it clear that he was deep into the game and serious about it. Danziger had been a gambler long enough to know the symptoms, and he could see that McQuarter was going to stay with the game for quite some time.

It was just the opening Danziger sought. He finished his drink and walked back to the hotel, glancing at the sky: the rain was still holding off but the thick carpet of clouds continued to roll overhead, darkening the earth so that now, before six o'clock, twilight seemed to be on the town. When

BRAND OF THE GUN

he crossed an intersection and looked west along the open street, he could see a darker wall of heavy cloud massing on the horizon. Below it hung sharply slanted streaks of rain, indicating a strong wind driving forward.

He went on toward the hotel, summing up in his mind what he had learned. This afternoon he had made it look like an accident when he had met Marianne and held the hotel door for her. Actually he had seen her go out and had waited for her to return, timing his arrival at the door to coincide with hers. He had struck up a conversation, introducing himself in a vaguely mysterious way and dropping hints that he had known her father during the Civil War.

He had allowed her to draw him out. He had met her father, he admitted to her, under odd circumstances—he dropped a few references to prison camps and field hospitals. When she was plainly on the hook, her interest whetted, he excused himself, saying he had an important appointment. He left the hotel knowing that he had all but convinced Marianne that he, Danziger, was the mysterious Boone who had rescued her father and then disappeared into the night.

He didn't know any more about her father or the spy Boone than Will Greer had told him, and he didn't want her to ply him with questions to which he would not know the answers. For that reason he had left her to convince herself. She'd had all afternoon to piece together the hints Danziger had dropped. By now, if she was as smart as she seemed, she'd have talked herself into the absolute conviction that Danziger couldn't possibly be anyone but the secret agent Jim Boone.

A gambler always had to be something of a confidence man; the professional gambler had to have the ability to perform mental sleight of hand, convincing others that lies were true and truth was a lie. The gambler's profession depended on expert deception and no gambler survived long on the circuit without developing that ability to a peak.

He had lost a lot of self-confidence, he knew, but he

BRAND OF THE GUN

hadn't lost the con-man's abilities. He was reasonably sure that Marianne had taken the bait. And if he had sized her up correctly, she wouldn't need further evidence; she would jump right past the stage of suspicion into the stage of excited discovery and gratitude.

At least, that was what he was hoping for. It was time to see if it had worked. He straightened his lapels and turned into the hotel.

She was on the divan, knitting. When she looked up her face brightened with a warm smile. It was enough to tell him he'd been right. She wouldn't be sitting in the hotel waiting for him if she hadn't made up her mind.

He swept off his hat with a gallant Southern gentleman's gesture and made a brief bow. "Ma'am," he said softly, in his best New Orleans drawl. He tried to make his deep-sunk eyes smile out of his gaunted face.

She stood up and took both of his hands in hers. "Mr. Danziger, there's something I must say to you."

"I thought there might be," he murmured, "but I think I'd better explain one thing to you first."

She began to speak, full of excitement that flushed her cheeks, but Danziger shook his head. "Let me finish. You're an Army girl, Miss Holbrook, and perhaps you know the provisions of the War Department Act of 'Sixty-six?"

It made her frown; obviously she had not expected this sort of direction in conversation. Danziger curled the brim of his hat, held it at his side, and spoke in a soft confidential way.

"Some of the provisions of that Act are well known in Army circles. For instance, former Confederate officers may serve in the United States Army but they cannot hold commissions. That's why you find sergeants in the Cavalry who were majors and even generals in the Confederate Army."

"Yes," she said, "I do recall that, but I don't see—"

"You will, I think," he cut in. "There's another provision of the Act that isn't so well known. It provides that the

BRAND OF THE GUN

armistice of 'Sixty-five, and the general amnesty to Rebel soldiers, does not apply to spies and secret agents still at large. Especially not to double agents."

"Double agents?" she said, puzzled.

He explained: "That would be a spy who served both sides."

"How could a man do that?"

"He might pretend to be serving the Confederate cause while actually being a Union Agent. Or vice versa."

She said slowly, "I think I'm beginning to understand."

"It might be," he murmured, "that a former Confederate double agent who was still at large would still be under sentence of death from the military tribunal, if his identity were discovered. You understand my meaning, Miss Holbrook?" He spoke in a very courteous way, as if he were willingly putting his life into her hands.

She said, "What you're saying is that if the Army learned your real identity they could still hang you for things you did during the war. Why, that seems—"

"No one said anything about me, Miss Holbrook. I was speaking in general terms. I wouldn't want you to get the wrong idea." He smiled, like a fellow conspirator.

Her frown turned to a small laugh. "Yes, I do see, Mr. Danziger."

"Then you see why there might be certain things I'd rather not discuss with you."

"Of course." She reached out and squeezed his hand. "Of course I do. There might be many things you'd like to tell me but you can't."

"Exactly." He stood up straight and glanced toward the hotel dining room. "Tell me, have you had dinner?"

"No," she said, and hesitated. "Not yet."

"Would you care to join me?"

She smiled and linked her arm in his.

On his way into the dining room, with Marianne on his arm, Danziger congratulated himself privately. It was a bluff,

BRAND OF THE GUN

but it had worked; actually he had no idea whether any such statute existed, and the only provision of the War Department Act of 1866 that he really knew was the one he had mentioned about the former Confederate officer's ineligibility for a commission in the U. S. Army. That was fairly common knowledge along the frontier, where many Southerners served in the Indian fighting Cavalry. He didn't know a thing about spies or agents beyond what he had read in the illustrated weeklies. But he'd had to dream up something that would dissuade the girl from asking questions or coming right out and addressing him as Mr. Boone.

He gave her hand a friendly pat before she disengaged his arm to sit down; he held her chair for her and went around to sit. She said, "My guardian may come to dinner soon."

"I doubt it. I saw him in the Drovers Rest up to his eyebrows in a card game. He looked as if he'd put down roots." He smiled.

She nodded, a bit troubled. "Yes, he's like that—he has a compulsion about gambling and it's not good for him, because he's not a good card player."

The compulsive ones never are, he thought. What he said was, "Well, your guardian seems to be a fairly successful man. He can afford to indulge in a friendly game now and then."

"Sometimes they're not so friendly," she said. "I've seen him lose quite a lot of money."

"How long has he been your guardian?"

"Since my father died—about four years ago—no, it's almost five years now. I didn't—"

"I know," he said. "I heard about his death at the time." He gave her a friendly little smile. "I followed the news of your father's career. He was a fine officer. I was sorry to learn of his death. I suppose sometimes, in strange ways, a man develops a proprietary sort of feeling about another man."

BRAND OF THE GUN

"For example, when he saves the man's life," she said quickly.

"Could be," he said carefully, and shot her a warning glance of secrecy. Her excitement was all but breathless; there was no doubt in her mind that he was the savior who had rescued her father. She was a bright, quick-witted girl, but she was the sort who wouldn't have much trouble converting the middle-aged, gaunt ex-gunfighter she saw before her into the image of an Arthurian knight on a white horse, somehow appearing as if by magic to enter her life with a smile and a flourish.

It was the image he had calculated to create, but now that she was falling for it he was beginning to have his regrets. Angry with himself, Danziger took time out to compose himself by reading the menu and making small talk about frontier towns and their food; he drew richly on his New Orleans boyhood in describing the culinary delights of the old French city, its plush restaurants and gourmet chefs.

He asked her about her guardian, McQuarter the cattle buyer; he asked her questions without appearing to interrogate her. By the end of the meal he knew what he had come to learn: under the terms of her father's will, she was to inherit the Holbrook estate on the day she reached the age of twenty-five. Sunday. The Holbrook estate was not enormous but it was comfortable. The figure Marianne tossed off was "about seventy thousand dollars." And it came as no great surprise to Danziger to learn that if the girl should die before her twenty-fifth birthday, the estate would go to her guardian, Owen McQuarter, who had been acting as executor ever since her father's death.

It didn't take any great mind to figure out what had happened. McQuarter had probably gambled away a good part of the estate and knew that as soon as the girl came of age he would have to make an accounting. On the other hand, if the girl died, McQuarter would not have to

BRAND OF THE GUN

account to anyone, and he would be entitled to keep whatever was left of the \$70,000. Obviously he had hired Hanratty as a go-between to arrange the murder of Marianne Holbrook.

The thought of Hanratty struck an involuntary chill through Danziger; he felt it ripple its way up his spine. He had to look away from the girl, and, as if by supernatural ordination, his eyes slipped across the dining room window. Outside, in the half-shadow, he could see a face peering inside.

It was Eddie Hanratty. Hanratty was scowling meaningfully at him and there was no mistaking what Hanratty had in mind.

Danziger shook his head almost imperceptibly and turned his attention back to the girl; he tried to smile.

"What's wrong?" she said, gentle but startled. His expression seemed to frighten her.

He tried to laugh it off but she pressed him. "There is something wrong. Tell me."

He knew he had to tell her something. He looked down at his plate and sawed through a bit of steak while he composed his answer. Finally he said, "It's no good, I guess. I shouldn't have made myself known to you. It was an impulse and I'm sorry I've done it. It will never do you any good, knowing a man like me."

"I like you fine," she said softly. She was a solid sort of girl; she had sand. He had pulled the wool over her eyes but she was no fool. She said, "You're a gunman. That's the way you make your living, isn't it?"

He looked up, surprised. She said, "It's no secret around town. Everyone knows who you are. We received some unfriendly looks when we came in here together—did you think I hadn't recognized them? I know what I'm doing. You don't have to treat me like a fragile piece of glass, I'm not a little girl any longer."

He said something that surprised him by its honesty:

BRAND OF THE GUN

"Do you know what it feels like to kill a man, Miss Holbrook? To watch him spit blood in some dusty street?"

"If you're trying to disgust me you won't succeed. I've seen what the Apaches do to people on wagon trains. I'm not a shy violet, Mr. Danziger."

"Then maybe you've got a mistaken notion of what a professional gunfighter is."

"I don't think so," she answered evenly.

"Sure," he muttered, as much to himself as to her, "a gun makes a man feel big. But they'll buy drinks for the man who shoots you down, and they'll spit on your grave. My grave, Miss." He looked up suddenly, to catch her expression, then went on. "Gunfighters are not glorious, gallant knights, Miss. Let me tell you how glory tastes when you're hungry. How it feels to have nothing close to you but your shirt. To feel like you've got knives sticking in you because you suddenly wake up one morning and realize that you made the terrible mistake of believing a gun was the answer to every problem that turned up. A gunfighter is only half a man, Miss Holbrook. A gunfighter's no good. He can't live with anybody but himself, and sooner or later the time comes when he can't even do that. The day you take up a gun you marry that gun, and you raise its children. You're husband and father to that gun and the killings it does in your hand."

She studied him calmly and said, "I'm unarmed, Mr. Danziger. You needn't fire all your ammunition at me."

"I'm sorry," he said. "I guess it spilled out." That was true; he hadn't meant to say all that.

He gave her a twisted smile and added, "If this gun of mine could talk it would have quite a bit to say."

She was toying with the spoon in her saucer. Steam curled up from the after-dinner coffee. She said in a faraway voice, "Self-pity isn't unique. You don't have a corner on it. I've lived with it for enough years to know that."

"You?"

BRAND OF THE GUN

She met his eyes. "I always wanted to be beautiful. I knew I wasn't but that didn't stop me from wanting it. Sometimes when I'm not thinking about it I make up lies to convince myself that I'm a beautiful woman—wanted, desired, loved. Yesterday I told the marshal I'd been married. I told him my husband was killed at Wounded Knee. It's a story I often tell strangers—if you'd caught me in a different mood I'd have told you the same thing, but it isn't true. I've never been married. No one ever asked me."

She was looking at the coffee spoon, her eyes downcast. "I'm a very plain girl. Sometimes I'm able to accept that. I have to, whenever I pass a mirror, you know. I think I'm better about it than I used to be." She looked up at him. "So don't think you're the only one who's sorry for himself, Mr. Danziger. And don't mistake me for a flighty girl painting imaginary pictures on the sky."

"You're mistaken about yourself," Danziger said. "You're a damned attractive girl."

A sour little smile jerked at one corner of her mouth. "Thank you," she said, not meaning it, not believing him.

Without saying anything, he stared at her until her eyes came up and met his. He held her glance until she blushed. He said, "You're a lot of woman, Marianne. You've got a wonderful smile. Start believing in yourself."

"Are you saying that to me—or to yourself?"

It took him aback; she had trapped him neatly. She said, "For a moment there you were feeling sorry for me. Do you still feel sorry for me?"

"In a way."

"Don't. Every word I told you was a lie. I was married—you can look it up in Army records. My husband was killed at Wounded Knee just as I said he was. He was a good man and I loved him but I won't spend the rest of my life weeping for him. And now what about you, Mr. Danziger?"

"This town," he answered petulantly, "is just full up to the brim with crusading evangelists who want to bring me

BRAND OF THE GUN

back to the path of the self-respecting and the righteous."

"Who do you mean by that?"

"Your friend, the marshal," he answered.

"I hardly know him."

He nodded. "But I know him. We used to be close friends, Jeremy Six and I."

"Used to be?"

"I'm nobody's friend now, Miss. No good to anyone. Everything I touch—it dies. I reckon I was born to be hung, and that's the sum of it."

"Nonsense," she said, in the book-closing definite way of a practical girl. "All you need to do is occupy yourself with a challenge, something to get your mind off your troubles."

It made him laugh. "Thank you. But things aren't as simple as you'd like to have them."

"Then what are the complications?" she demanded. "Mr. Danziger, Boone, whatever your name is, look at me. A moment ago I had you all ready to take me in your arms and pat me on the head and say, 'There, there, little girl, everything will be all right—you're not really a wallflower at all, you're the most beautiful girl in the world, so stop feeling sorry for yourself.' You were all ready to come to my rescue, Mr. Danziger, just like the shining white knight you claim you aren't."

He sat back and lifted the coffee cup, drained it and watched her over the rim of the cup. When he put it down he said gently, "You're a lot of woman."

"You already said that."

"I meant it."

She reached across the table to touch his hand, but he drew it back and said bitterly, "Marianne, I'm not fit to hold your stirrup."

"Nonsense."

"Take my word for it. There are things about me you don't know—or want to know."

BRAND OF THE GUN

"I'm strong," she said. "Let me be the judge."

"I can't do that."

"Try."

"Why?" he asked. "Why should it matter to you?"

"Can't you believe I could care enough, without needing some other motive?"

"Aagh," he grunted, dismissing it. "We're answering questions with more questions."

A silence stretched between them until she said, in a different tone, "What's going to happen now?"

"What do you want to happen? Do you know?"

"I'm not sure," she said. "Do you know?"

"No," he said. "Yes. I know what's going to happen to me, anyway. There's nothing waiting for me but a grave."

"I guess," she murmured, "that doesn't make any difference in the way I might feel."

It made him glance at her quickly. He said, "You're a strange one. You've got a lot of sand—you're pretty deep."

"So are you," she said. "I don't bother myself with shallow men."

He stood up. It had gone far enough; he needed to be alone to sort things out. He said, "It would be a mistake for you to bother yourself with me, then."

"I don't think so," she answered. "Good night—Cort."

Her eyes were lifted toward his, direct and unwavering. He left the dining room disturbed by the frankness of her gaze. He turned up the stairs and went to his room, locked the door and only gave a passing glance to the bottle of whisky on the commode; he sat down and had to hitch his gun around for comfort. On the rickety table before him sat a pack of playing cards, squared off and neat. He began to lay out a solitaire game: it was a time to make decisions.

BRAND OF THE GUN

XI

FRIDAY MORNING Danziger had his breakfast in the hotel dining room but Marianne did not appear. He paid for his meal and went outside, squaring his shoulders and turning down the street—toward the Marshal's Office. He went by an alley, intending to go by the place, but a quick imperious hiss drew his attention and he saw Eddie Hanratty with an angry scowl jerking his head in a come-hither signal.

It wasn't raining. There had been some drizzling overnight and the alley was still muddy. The sky was as blackly overhung as it had been all week. Danziger trudged through the mud. When Hanratty was sure he was coming, the squat Irishman turned on his heel and went back through the alley to the empty lot behind, and turned in under the overhang of an outside staircase. Standing there in the shadows, Hanratty waited for Danziger to join him. Impatient anger pushed Hanratty's lips in and out.

Danziger was hardly within earshot when Hanratty snarled at him, "Friend, you're after hanging on by an eyelash. You understand what I'm saying to you?"

"Maybe."

"You don't listen good, do you?"

"Maybe you didn't talk loud enough," Danziger murmured.

Hanratty's eyes widened. "So. It's more money you're after."

"I didn't say that."

BRAND OF THE GUN

Hanratty reached out and bunched up the front of Danziger's shirt in his fist. Before he could firm up his grip, he found his arm batted away by a contemptuous swing of Danziger's arm. Hanratty frowned and studied him. Off-balance, Hanratty said, "Just what the hell have you been doing for the last forty-eight hours?"

"Maybe I was reading the Bible."

"Reading books makes people nearsighted, didn't you know that?" Hanratty laughed flatly, but his eyes were at odds with his mouth. He was becoming aware that there was something in this Danziger that hadn't been in him the other night; it was taking Hanratty time to adjust to the new circumstances.

"Know what day this is?" Hanratty said.

"Friday. I've got till midnight tomorrow. Why don't you simmer down?"

"Simmer down?" Hanratty demanded. "Look, friend, you left your horse out behind the ice house the other night and I took you at your word. When you didn't do the job I had to scramble myself back there and retrieve the money from your saddlebags."

"You said that yesterday."

"We didn't get a chance to talk. I told you to meet me here and you didn't show up."

"I had other business."

Hanratty lifted his hand, but thought better of grabbing his lapel. "You better stop and study on that a while, Danziger. You're making a powerful mistake, stalling any longer."

"I'll take my chances."

"You haven't got any chances left," Hanratty said. "I'd be reminding you of this, friend: whoever eats my bread is obliged to sing my songs. And don't you forget it."

"It's not your bread," Danziger said. "You don't think I'm fool enough to believe you're in this by yourself, do you?"

If Hanratty was surprised, he didn't show it. "That makes

BRAND OF THE GUN

no difference to you, friend. I've got you hog-tied and sweating, that's all you need to know. Now I want to hear from you why it is that you haven't finished the job you're here for. The girl is still alive. Why?"

"The deal was for Saturday night, remember?"

"You're stalling. I saw you eating with her last night. You falling for that girl, Danziger? You ought to know better, honest to God. Women are all alike, they've just got different faces so you can tell them apart." —A remark that revealed more about Hanratty than it did about women's faces.

Hanratty added, "You got no reason to check up on the girl, Danziger. Your job's to kill her."

"How I do the job is my business," Danziger said. "It's to your advantage that I do it clean."

"Meaning?"

"If I learn enough about the girl's habits, then I can pick a time and place where it's safe to do the job. That way there's no chance I'll be arrested. You ought to care about that, Hanratty, because if I got caught there's always the chance they'd force me to admit who paid me to do the job. If I don't get caught, then you don't get caught. It's that simple."

Hanratty's lips peeled back off his discolored teeth. "By Jesus," he rasped, "if you ever open your mouth, Danziger—"

"Don't be an idiot. As long as I'm free the only thing I could accomplish by admitting the job would be to get myself hung."

Hanratty nodded. "Just remember that."

Danziger began to turn away, but Hanratty said quickly, "Just one thing, friend. You wouldn't be forgetting Mr. Boat, would you?"

Danziger's bleak eyes pinned him back like a butterfly on a board. "Don't mention that name to me again," he said, and tramped out to the alley.

He had taken a chance, lying to Hanratty. But it was a

BRAND OF THE GUN

risk calculated to protect Marianne. He went on down toward the Marshal's Office, fairly well satisfied that his scheme had succeeded.

Last night he had made his decision. Or maybe it was Marianne who had made it for him. He'd known what he had to do. There was no question about it; he was not going to go through with Hanratty's job. He wasn't going to kill the girl.

But if he told that to Hanratty now, it would give Hanratty time. He could have said to Hanratty, *The deal's off, Hanratty, get yourself another boy*—but then Hanratty would have done just that. Hanratty would have hired somebody else to kill the girl.

At first, Danziger had thought, *Let him*. He had almost decided to be frank with Hanratty, and to glue himself to Marianne from now until Sunday, to protect her from anyone Hanratty might employ to try to kill her. But a cooler second thought had changed his mind. There was no foolproof way to protect the life of someone threatened with murder. If McQuarter and Hanratty were determined enough—and they obviously were—then it would be nothing but luck that would save Marianne's life. He could lock himself up in a hotel room with her but they could set the hotel on fire and shoot her from ambush as she ran out. There were a million ways to kill a person. No protective device was foolproof.

It was better to let them go on believing Danziger planned to kill her. As long as he could keep them convinced of that, they wouldn't make any other arrangements against her life. And by the time they found out Danziger wasn't finishing the job, it would be too late for them to change their plans. If Marianne lived until Sunday, there would no longer be any profit in having her killed. She would be safe after Saturday midnight.

So he had played along with Hanratty. He had no qualms about double-crossing Hanratty and McQuarter. Whatever

BRAND OF THE GUN

happened to them now was no more than their due. The girl would inherit the estate, and McQuarter would be found short. He'd be jailed for embezzlement. As for Hanratty, he wasn't worth bothering with.

And as for Steve Boat . . .

That had been the hard decision; that had been the one he was sure Marianne had made for him. For without her quiet strength, the remembered image of it, he would have been unable to make the decision he made.

To hell with Boat. Let him come after me if that's what he wants.

Six looked up when Danziger walked into the office. Danziger said, "Morning, Jeremy."

"You look like a new man. What happened?"

"Maybe I saw the light. Maybe I just woke up out of a bad dream." Danziger walked across the office and examined the gun rack. "How about this ten-gauge Greener with the double-set triggers?"

"You've decided to take the job?" Six said without concealing his surprise.

Danziger grinned. "Yes, I have."

"Think of that," Six said. He tossed a ring of keys across the office. Danziger selected one, fit it into the chain padlock, and freed the shotgun. He locked up again and threw the key ring back on the desk, and broke the shotgun open to check its breech. "Where'll I find shells?"

Six opened a drawer and got a carton of ten-gauge buckshot shells. He pushed it across the desk. Danziger started stuffing them into his pockets.

Six didn't ask questions. He stood up and administered the oath of office. Danziger said, "So help me God," and lowered his right hand to pick up the last two shells out of the carton and ram them into the twin breeches of the shotgun. He snapped it shut and set the hammers on safety,

BRAND OF THE GUN

and leaned the gun against the wall. Then he pulled up a chair and said, "Fill me in."

Six lifted the lid off the glass jar and selected a cigar. "Want one?"

"Sure. Thanks."

Both men lit up. Six sat back and propped his boots on the desk. He glanced out through the window—his attention was drawn momentarily by a rider, a stranger, who came up the street and racked his horse before the Drovers Rest and went inside. What held Six's attention was the horse—a tall, handsome palomino gelding that pawed the earth proudly.

He brought his glance back to Danziger and said, "It stacks up like this: McQuarter's got a safe full of Army scrip waiting to pay for a herd of cattle to feed the troopers and the Reservation Apaches up at Fort Dragoon. McQuarter's to take delivery here at Spanish Flat and the Army will send down a crew to drive them up from here. There was a verbal agreement that Wade Cruze's Terrapin ranch was to supply the cattle."

"I've seen Cruze," Danziger told Six. "I haven't seen any cattle."

"Uh-huh. That's where the trouble comes in. Cruze claims Travis Canaday swindled him out of his herd. He's got a confession signed by a couple of crooked gamblers to prove it. And Canaday's on his way into town with the herd, planning to sell it to the Army as his own."

"I see," Danziger said. "So Cruze is waiting for Canaday to show up so he can take the cows away from Canaday."

"That's about the size of it," Six said. "Canaday ought to arrive with the herd by tomorrow sometime. Late in the day, I expect. If Canaday brings his Warbonnet crew into town and Cruze gathers his own crew to meet them, there's likely to be a small-sized war."

"And your main street the battlefield," Danziger finished for him. "Knowing you, I can't believe you're just sitting

BRAND OF THE GUN

here waiting for the blood to start flowing. You've got a plan to stop the fight, haven't you?"

Six's sly grin grew across his cheeks. "You've got sharp eyes."

"I remember you pretty well," Danziger acknowledged. "You haven't changed a bit. I never knew you to get trapped inside a place that had only one door out. There's always a back door with you. What is it this time?"

Six said, "You may have noticed that Cruze's men have been getting mighty friendly treatment around town."

"Except for those two gunnies that your hotshot gunsmith took out," Danziger put in dryly. "Yes, I've noticed, now that you mention it. A lot of free rounds of drinks being set up by the house. Friendly conversation from bartenders. That what you mean?"

"I want Cruze's boys to think the town's wide open to them. Last night almost all of them got pretty well drunk."

"You expect them to drink themselves under the table and not be able to fight Canaday when he shows up?" Danziger looked doubtful.

Six shook his head. "I just want them to have a good time," he said. His eyes were twinkling. "Until tonight."

"What happens tonight?"

"Canaday will be coming into town tomorrow sometime. If Cruze's whole crew is locked up in jail when Canaday arrives, there won't be any fight."

"Jail?" Danziger took the cigar out of his mouth. "And you expected to arrest all fifteen or twenty of them by yourself?"

"One at a time," Six explained. "They'll get drunk tonight and I'll pull them in one by one. I can hold them forty-eight hours on drunk-and-disorderly. By the time they're released Sunday night, McQuarter will have possession of the herd, and Canaday's bound to have enough sense to clear out before that."

BRAND OF THE GUN

"You hope," Danziger said wryly. "Well, I admit it's as likely to work as anything I can think of offhand. You want me to give you a hand arresting the cowboys, that it?"

"Yes. I'm obliged to you for coming in, Cort. It was going to be touch-and-go if a bunch of them decided to gang up on me once they found out what I was up to."

Six's cigar had grown a tall ash. He tapped it off into the ash tray on his desk. "Mind telling me what changed your mind?"

"A girl," Danziger said without hesitation. "A missionary priest dressed up to look like a pretty girl."

"Marianne Holbrook."

"Uh-huh."

"I heard you pumping Will Greer yesterday. I wondered about that."

Danziger gave him a sharp look. Six kept his expression blank as he said mildly, "Seemed to be a funny way to go about making her acquaintance."

"I'd just as soon not talk about it," Danziger said.

"Suit yourself. I'm glad to have you aboard." Six got up and extended his hand. Danziger gave him his quick, firm handshake. The two men smiled, almost identically—the smiles of two men who were not fooling themselves about the dangerous business on which they were about to embark.

Six sat back down and glanced out the window just as the stranger who had recently arrived came out of the Drovers Rest, mounted the handsome palomino gelding, and headed out of town the way he had come. Six watched him ride out of sight to the south. Something made him get up and go to the window and follow the rider down the road with his gaze. It wasn't the usual thing for a trail-weary stranger to ride into town, spend ten minutes in a saloon, and go back down the trail he had just come up.

But there was no point worrying himself about it. The

BRAND OF THE GUN

rider was gone. He went back to his seat and said, "We'll start rounding them up about ten o'clock. They ought to be pretty drunk and disorderly by then."

XII

EDDIE HANRATTY tipped the railroad cap far back on his head and leaned against the top of the bar with both elbows. The Tres Candelas was a depressing place, especially since the brutal death of the bartender whom Candy Briscoe had beaten to a pulp, but whoever owned the place had wasted no time hiring a new man to keep it open. Somebody had tried to wash the bloodstains off the woodwork but there were still traces.

Hanratty had once seen a caged grizzly bear in a traveling circus at Tuscon. He remembered watching the bear waddle back and forth inside the confines of its cage—eight steps to the right, then turn ponderously around, and eight paces to the left, haunches waddling and paws padding. Back and forth, back and forth, always the same eight paces one way and eight paces the other way.

That was how Hanratty felt—like that caged bear. His mind kept waddling back and forth from one end of his cage to another. McQuarter had given him this job to do and he was beginning to suspect that it wasn't going to get done, if he left the doing of it to Cort Danziger. McQuarter had told him there would be three thousand dollars in it for him if he'd get it done. He didn't know why McQuarter had to have the girl dead by tomorrow night, and he didn't

BRAND OF THE GUN

care. But he knew that if the girl wasn't dead there wouldn't be any money coming from McQuarter. It was McQuarter who'd suggested he hire Danziger, McQuarter who knew about Steve Boat and Danziger. McQuarter was a slimy man who seemed to know all sorts of dark-shadowed things like that. It made Hanratty feel crawly just to be around the fat cattle buyer. But Hanratty made his living by running various errands of nefarious kind, and it wasn't up to him to pass judgment on the men who hired him for the shady work he did.

Hanratty had taken a good look at Cort Danziger's eyes this morning. He didn't know what had changed, but he knew he didn't want to tangle with Danziger. The other night he had insulted Danziger and got away with it. Danziger had changed between then and now. Hanratty wouldn't get away with it if he tried it again.

He couldn't trust Danziger to do the job, but it was too late to do anything about that. He couldn't fire Danziger now. It wasn't the sort of job you could fire a man from. Danziger would demand his money anyway, and if he didn't get it he might just shoot Hanratty in the bargain.

But if Hanratty didn't do anything, he had the feeling Danziger wouldn't do anything either. He wasn't blind. He'd seen the way Danziger was looking at the girl over the dinner table last night. It wasn't the look a killer gave his victim.

That was what put Hanratty in the grizzly bear cage. His mind paced back and forth, confined by imprisoning bars: at one end the bars were his feeling, growing stronger all the time, that Danziger wasn't going to do the job; and at the other end the bars were the knowledge of what McQuarter would do to him if the job didn't get done.

Hanratty's bleak, unhappy glance drifted around the dim saloon. Back in the corner sat Griff Jestro, the town derelict. Griff would sell his own mother for the price of a drink. His face had the same hollow vacant cast that Danziger's had had the night Hanratty had hired him. But Danziger

BRAND OF THE GUN

didn't look like that any more. There was a glitter in Danziger's eyes and a strength in his jaw today, like a man who'd come back from the grave. Hanratty thought sourly, *I'd have been better off hiring Griff Jestro. At least he wouldn't have sobered up on me.* He glanced at Griff again. Once an Eastern promoter had come into town with a wagon and set himself up out on the vacant lot beside the feed store. The promoter had had an enormous wild dog in a cage on the wagon. He'd taken the dog out and chained it in the vacant lot and posted a hundred dollars that said his dog could whip any dog in the valley in a fight.

The promoter had gotten a few takers and his dog had ripped all of them to pieces. Then some sadistic cowboy had got Griff Jestro drunk and dared him to take on the promoter's wild dog. The cowboys had put together their bankrolls and scraped up two hundred dollars that said the dog would whip Griff and chew him to pieces. They said Griff could have the money if he could whip the dog.

Hanratty had seen the fight. Marshal Six had been out chasing after an escaped prisoner. The marshal had come up just as the fight ended. Griff had taken the dog apart, snarling so you couldn't tell his own voice from the dog's; groveling on his hands and knees, Griff had kicked the dog senseless and ripped his throat out. Six had arrived just about the time it was all over with. The promoter had gone over to Six and demanded that Griff be thrown in jail and made to pay him back for the valuable fighting dog he'd killed. Six had thrown the promoter out of town and given Griff a pitying look, and Griff had taken his money and gone off on a two month drunk. The cowboys stopped laughing at him after that.

The thought had crept into Hanratty's mind as a wry joke, but now that he started thinking about it, it didn't seem so improbable after all.

He shifted position at the bar to get a better view of Griff. Griff was an ape, with bowed arms longer than his

BRAND OF THE GUN

squat legs. He hadn't shaved in months; he didn't have a beard, it was just that he hadn't shaved. It wasn't the same. His face was a patchwork of tufted hair, matted together in tangles and probably infested with lice. His eyes were tunneled back so far in his head they were invisible. He had a low sloping forehead and big ears that stuck out like wings. You could smell him coming.

"Why not?" Hanratty muttered. He couldn't lose anything by coppering his bets, especially since he felt he'd bet on a losing combination with Danziger.

Hanratty finished his drink and went outside. He knew Griff's habits. Everybody had to eat—maybe Griff didn't, maybe Griff only had to drink, but even for that he needed money. Griff had a job that started at noon, pitchforking around the livery stable, heaving manure and baled hay. Griff had a strong back and it was about the only kind of work he was any good for.

It was getting close to noon. Hanratty picked his way through the muddy back alleys until he got to the corral behind the livery stable. He slipped between two rails of the fence and went inside the dark stable, pausing to accustom his eyes to the gloom. The stench of manure and straw was strong in the stale air. The man who owned the place was up front in his office with his back to Hanratty. The stable boy would have gone off duty by now. Hanratty spotted the pitchforks in the open tack room. He slipped inside and took the handkerchief out of his pocket; he made a road agent's mask out of the handkerchief, tied it across the bridge of his nose, and removed the railroad cap and stuck it into his coat pocket. He didn't want Griff to know who he was.

He didn't have too long to wait. Griff came shuffling listlessly into the tack room to get his pitchfork. Hanratty stepped around behind him and shut the door. "Take it easy, Griff. I ain't here to harm you."

"Huh? Who're you?"

BRAND OF THE GUN

"It doesn't matter who I am. How'd you like to make yourself another couple hundred dollars? You won't have to wrestle any dog for it this time."

"Huh?" There wasn't much light filtering through the warped cracks in the outside wall, but even by that dim illumination Hanratty could see Griff's thick tongue come out and lick his inflamed lips. Griff was already tasting the whisky that two hundred dollars could buy.

"Two hundred dollars," Hanratty said again, very soft.

"What I gotta do for it?"

"There's a woman named Marianne Holbrook at the hotel."

"Yuh. I seen her."

"She's small," Hanratty said. "Not very strong. All you've got to do is kill her, Griff. You sneak inside her room when she's at dinner, and when she comes inside you stuff a pillow in her face until she stops breathing. Nobody hears you. You make sure she's dead and then you slip out through the window. Nobody knows about it. You come back here when it's done and I'll give you the money. That's all there is to it."

Starting at five o'clock, Six made the rounds to fix the positions of Cruze's men in his mind. None of them was drunk enough to arrest, but he wanted to know where to find them later in the evening. He dropped a word with each bartender and madam in Cat Town, where most of the Terrapin hands were hanging around—all of the hands were aware that if a fight came it would come tomorrow, and a few of the men Six saw in saloons were sitting at tables with dismantled guns in front of them, cleaning their six-guns. He didn't say anything to them, but only spoke his quiet reminders to the bartenders and went on his way. He counted sixteen cowboys scattered around the lower part of town, all of them Cruze's men. It wasn't the sort of crew that stuck together in a bunch; there wasn't much

BRAND OF THE GUN

esprit de corps among them—Cruze wasn't the kind of man who inspired it. They did, however, possess the average cowboy's loyalty to his hire, and Six knew he could not expect them to turn tail and run if shooting started. Nobody wanted to be accused of cowardice, and if the Terrapin cowboys were afraid of a fight, they were more afraid of not fighting, of being thought a coward.

Left alone, they would gather quietly before midnight and bunk down, perhaps in a stable, with one or two men standing guard; they would sleep fully clothed with guns at hand, ready to go to war on an instant's notice. That was the way it was with the border cattle crews. Many of them were old enough to have cut their teeth on thicket-busting and brush-beating for wild cattle in Texas right after the Civil War when the cattlemen like Wade Cruze had parlayed rope, saddle and horse into brawling longhorn herds. Others, too young to have served in the War, were steeped in the legend and lore of the early drovers. To a man they thought themselves to be the toughest men alive. They would welcome the chance to prove it against Travis Canaday's battle-blooded riders.

The church bell chimed the half hour—five thirty—and Six went into the Glad Hand. The barkeep gave him a nervous smile of greeting; strain was beginning to tell. Two Terrapin cowhands sat together with a bottle between them, talking in low tones, probably out-bragging each other with tales of mythical range wars. Six said softly to the bartender, "Keep them here until they get drunk, if you can. I want to know where they are."

"You going to start arresting them tonight, Marshal?"

"Soon as they're loaded enough."

"They ain't the only things that're loaded," the barkeep muttered. "You keep an eye on those guns of theirs. They've been fiddling with them all day."

Six nodded. "Keep your head down, then, if they get

BRAND OF THE GUN

playful." He glanced impassively at the two cowhands and went back to Clarissa's door.

She ushered him inside; his dinner was laid at the table. He smiled briefly, showing his tautness, and pegged his hat. Clarissa glanced at the hat when she closed the door. "I see it's not raining."

"It will," he said. "There's a blow coming up from the west. We'll have some rain dumped on us tonight."

He seated her and took his place. She said, "Do you like my new dress? I made it this week."

"It's beautiful," he said.

"Jeremy."

"What?"

"You haven't even looked at me, *or* my dress."

He gave her a wan smile; she said, "It's all right. I know what you're going through. Men don't mind action but they hate waiting."

"It's something I'm not much good at," he agreed, and went to work with a corkscrew to open the wine bottle.

They were halfway through the meal when knuckles signaled a staccato code against the door. Clarissa gave Six a startled look; Clarissa's dinner-hour was sacrosanct and woe betide the man who interrupted it. Six put aside his napkin and went to the door.

It was Larry Keene, the rancher. Keene was stooped over; otherwise his tall head would be lodged against the ceiling. "Sorry to bust in on your dinner, Miss Vane."

"Not half as sorry as I am," Clarissa snapped.

Six said, "What's up, Larry?"

"Half my herd's bogged in a washout and I've got to head home right away," Keene said. "I was hoping to stick around and lend a hand but I'll go bankrupt if those cows drown. But before I light out, I've got a piece of news you need to have."

"Go ahead."

"My man just rode in from keeping watch on Warbonnet.

BRAND OF THE GUN

Canaday's bedded the herd down about twelve miles south of town. When my man left, the crew was gathering at the chuck wagon to eat. If they don't get socked by bad weather it's certain they'll have the herd here by tomorrow afternoon."

Six nodded. "On schedule, then. Tell me something—did your man mention seeing a Warbonnet rider on a big good-looking palomino gelding?"

"I was going to mention that. He told me a man on a palomino rode north out of camp this morning and came back and joined up around the middle of the afternoon. That mean something to you, Jeremy?"

"Just that Canaday's not coming in with his eyes closed," Six answered. "Thanks, Larry. You've been a lot of help."

"Wish I could stick around for the payoff," Keene said regretfully. He made a gesture to Clarissa and bowed out.

Six closed the door and went back to the table. Clarissa said, "What was that about a palomino?"

He picked up his knife and fork and dug in. "A cowboy rode a palomino into town today, spent ten minutes in the Drovers Rest and rode back out of town. He came from the south and he headed out the same way. It was one of Canaday's men, sizing up the town. He obviously spotted Cruze and Arklin in the Drovers Rest, and probably asked a few questions. When Canaday comes in, he'll be primed—he'll know what to expect."

At the door he plucked his hat off the peg and turned the knob. Clarissa stopped him. "I won't ask you to be careful," she said. Her eyes were level, warm and troubled. "Jeremy, I don't ordinarily go in for this sort of thing, but do you want me to put something in those cowboys' drinks?"

He considered her gravely. "No. I wouldn't want to set a precedent like that. I'll take them according to the letter of the law, or not at all."

BRAND OF THE GUN

She gave him a gentle smile. "Still the same hidebound, crochety, jackass-stubborn little book of rules."

"I guess so." He bent his head down and kissed her. She said, "I'll keep the coffee warm for you." She was trying to keep the concern and fear out of her voice.

Six made a gruff remark that was supposed to be reassuring, went out and clapped the hat on his head. When he reached the front of the saloon she was still in the office doorway, giving him a forced smile when he looked her way. He nodded and went out. It had started to drizzle.

XIII

CARRYING a ten-gauge shotgun and a deputy's badge, Cort Danziger walked into the hotel shortly after six o'clock. His face was as dismal as the rain. He went into the dining room and found Marianne there.

She looked up. "Have you eaten?"

"I had a couple of bar sandwiches. Afraid I'm working tonight." He touched a thumb to the deputy's badge on his lapel.

She regarded it quizzically. "I didn't know that was your line of work."

"It is for today," he said. "Have you finished your dinner?"

"I was just leaving."

"Good. I've got to talk to you."

The urgency in his tone made her look at him sharply. She seemed about to ask a question, but then, abruptly, she agreed. "All right. You want to speak with me privately?"

"I have to."

BRAND OF THE GUN

"Your room or mine?"

He was surprised by the quick ease and frankness of it; he liked her even better for it. A man quickly tired of coquetry and the Victorian manners of the day.

"Yours is on this floor," he said. "I won't keep you long."

"I've plenty of time," she answered. She gave him a hesitant smile and left the room with him. When they had gone out into the lobby she made a face back toward the dining room.

"What was that for?" he said.

"Those two busybodies at the corner table, buzzing in each other's ears about you and me."

He laughed. But the laughter died quickly in his throat. He turned down the hall with her and waited while she found her key in her handbag. She turned it in the lock and pushed the door open; he waited for her to go in ahead of him. Neither of them had spoken since they had left the lobby.

She turned inside and Danziger heard a scrape of movement behind the door. He wheeled into the room in time to see a grotesque, long-armed man leaping toward Marianne with a pillow in both hands.

The girl picked up the sudden white flash of movement in the corner of her vision; her face whipped around, wide with sudden fear. Danziger heard her fast intake of breath, and then he brought the buttstock of the shotgun down with full force across the apelike man's head.

The man dropped like a stone, and lay in a crumpled heap. Danziger stepped across him and Marianne lurched against him, turning her face into his chest. He held her tightly within his free arm as she breathed in gasping jerks. He didn't speak for a moment; finally he said, "It's all right, Marianne—it's all right."

"Have you killed him?"

"I don't think so. Are you all right by yourself for a moment?"

BRAND OF THE GUN

"I'm—all right," she said in a small voice. He let go of her and knelt down by the unconscious man; he laid his hand along the pulse-line of the throat. He glanced up at Marianne—her eyes shut tight. He told her, "He's knocked out but he'll come around."

She opened her eyes and stared at him. Color began to return to her cheeks. "My God," she whispered. "My God, Cort—who is that man?"

"God knows. A hired thug."

"Hired?"

"That's what I came to tell you. Your guardian wants you dead, Marianne. That's why this man was here. To kill you."

"Kill me?" she said, not understanding at all.

"Tomorrow night at midnight you reach your twenty-fifth birthday. McQuarter can't afford to have you live that long."

"What? What are you saying? Why?"

"He'd have to account for the money he's probably embezzled from your estate. He wants all of it, or whatever's left of it. He's probably gambled a good part of it away. But if you're still alive Sunday morning it means McQuarter goes to jail, and he knows it."

She scrubbed a hand across her face as if to rub away numbness. "I can't believe that. I don't believe it. What are you saying? It's not possible."

He took her by both shoulders and made as if to shake her, but he didn't; he dropped his hands and picked up the shotgun. He wasn't looking at her when he said, "Marianne, I know this for a fact. There's no denying it. McQuarter has paid to see that you're killed."

"How do you know?"

He still didn't look at her. "Because," he said in a muted tone, "I was hired to kill you."

A brittle silence fell across the room and hung between them, thickening. As if against her will the girl dragged

BRAND OF THE GUN

her eyes up toward Danziger and stared at him with horror. He made himself look at her and he said again, so that there could be no mistake, "They hired me to murder you."

Moving like a mechanism, she took a sleepwalker's steps to the edge of the bed. She sat down very slowly. "You brought me to my room to have me killed."

"No," he said. "I knew nothing about this man."

"Then why—"

"They hired me to kill you, but I didn't do it. I couldn't. That's all there is to tell, Marianne. Except that your life's still in danger. I brought you here just now to tell you all this. I had to get it off my chest and see that you were protected." His glance dropped to the man on the floor. The man hadn't stirred; he was out cold and probably wouldn't awaken for hours.

The way she was looking at him it was clear she had the impulse to run from him in terror; her eyes shot to the door, still standing ajar. Danziger stepped across the unconscious man and pushed the door shut. "Listen to me," he said, in a low calm voice. "Pay attention."

She nodded her head mutely.

"Marianne, you've got to trust me."

A lurching sound came out of her throat, half derisive laugh, half terrified cry.

He had the idea of shucking out his revolver and handing it to her, allowing her to hold him at gunpoint to prove that he meant her no harm. But he decided against that. She was shaken up, half in shock, and there was a danger that her emotions would run away with her. It wouldn't do either of them any good if she shot him.

He leaned the shotgun against the door and stepped away from it, folded his arms and stood across the room from her. "You want to run," he said. "I can't blame you. You want to get away from this—thing—on the floor and you want to get away from me. But you can't do that, Marianne. You'll expose yourself to them that way. Your guardian or

BRAND OF THE GUN

his hired hand will be waiting for this man to show up and tell them the job's been done. When he doesn't show up they'll know something's gone wrong, and they'll wait for you to show yourself."

Her eyes lifted toward him. The fear in them now was a different kind. He was surprised by the level tone of her voice. "What can we do, Cort?"

She had accepted him, that quickly; she had worked it out and she had made up her mind. He was amazed.

He couldn't help it. He blurted, "I love you, Marianne."

"Cort—" She stopped and shook her head. The fine mass of her hair flowed back and forth and she pressed her hair back at both temples with her palms. "Tell me what to do," she said in a small voice.

"There's only one thing we can do. But you've got to be game for it. You've got to be brave."

"Tell me," she whispered.

"McQuarter doesn't know what's happened here yet. Neither does his hired man, Hanratty. We've got to go to them and put it to them face-to-face. I'm a deputized officer and I'm empowered to arrest both of them for conspiracy to commit murder. But I can't leave you here alone while I go hunting for them. You'll have to come with me. It's the only way I'll know you're safe. We've got to have them in front of us where we can see them with both eyes until I've got them locked up in jail."

She bit her lip. "You're asking a lot of me, Cort. I'm not made of iron."

"You're made of pretty strong stuff," he said. "I think you can do it."

"You believe that? Then I can't let you down, Cort." She got up from the bed and moved gingerly around the unconscious man on the floor. "Let's hurry," she said, "before I come to my senses and break down and bawl."

He picked up the shotgun and held the door for her. When she went by she had to pass close to him; she paused

BRAND OF THE GUN

and looked up and he wanted to kiss her—he wanted it very badly. But he let her go by and then he went out into the hall and pulled the door closed, and locked it. The man inside might wake up and get out the way he come in—through the window—but that man wouldn't be dangerous to her again. Not if McQuarter and Hanratty were out of the way.

He knew where McQuarter was—in the Drovers Rest, still playing cards with Cruze and some others. He didn't know about Hanratty. He'd have to get them one at a time.

She stopped in the hall just short of the hotel lobby. She leaned one hand against the wall for support. When Danziger came up she said, "I don't know if I can go through with it, Cort. My knees are giving way."

"You'll do fine. Come on—let's go." He took her gently by the arm and they walked into the lobby, crossed it and went out into the street.

An earsplitting thunderclap smashed through town, as if every door in Spanish Flat had been slammed simultaneously. Echoes reverberated across the sky, and a torrent of hard rain tumbled onto the town. Its slashing blades cut along the streets, drumming rooftops and boardwalks, dappling and then—almost instantly—flooding the already muddy streets. It was a flashflood storm, the classic desert thunderstorm, a brutal and vicious onslaught of slanting high wind and sudden driving rain.

It drove Danziger and Marianne back to the hotel door and he said, "We'll go back inside and get you a raincoat."

She was trembling. "Can't we wait till it stops?"

"It may go on all night. We've got to get this done before they have time to think about setting up an ambush." He turned her back inside the hotel.

At that precise moment, a horseman splashed up-street at a dead run, spilled out of his saddle in front of the Drovers Rest, and clambered leaping to the porch. The

BRAND OF THE GUN

horseman slammed the saloon doors wide open and stood in the doorway shouting:

"Mr. Cruze—they're coming. Canaday and his whole crew, not more'n two minutes behind me and riding fast."

XIV

THE NEWS reached Six almost immediately; he was coming into the main street from Cat Town, the slicker held up over his head; a man bumped into him and almost knocked him off his feet.

"It's you, Marshal—thanks be to God. They're coming in!"

"Who?"

"Canaday and his crew. Must be hitting the edge of town right now."

Six dropped the slicker back onto his shoulders and ran out to the corner of the block. A dark handful of men were spilling out of the Drovers Rest and now, summoned by three quick shots from Cruze's gun, men started pouring up out of Cat Town.

Six smothered a curse. His shotgun was still in the office, a block away. And his erstwhile deputy, Danziger, was nowhere in sight.

I should have known, he told himself bitterly. Sure, Canaday'd leave the herd bedded twelve miles away where the shooting wouldn't stampede them.

It was no time to cry over spilled milk. The sound of thunder had died but there was a new thunder—the muffled

BRAND OF THE GUN

drumming of horse's hooves, drawing nearer from the south end of town. Six wheeled across the muddy street and ran toward the Drovers Rest.

Cruze already had himself surrounded by eight or nine of his men. His foreman, Sid Arklin, stood by him with the new shotgun cradled in his arm. As Six passed the front of the hotel a man burst out—Danziger. Marianne Holbrook was behind him in the lobby, putting on a raincoat; Danziger thrust her back and said, "It will have to wait—stay put, stay with these people—" and then Danziger was running alongside Six, bringing up the double-barreled ten-gauge and laying his thumb across the hammers. Danziger shouted in his ear, "How do we handle it?"

"Kill the first man who fires a shot," Six said, with grim economy. He batted through the rain, bringing his revolver up in his fist from under the flowing oilskin slicker.

More Terrapin hands rushed up from Cat Town, joining the thick knot of men spread along the porch of the Drovers Rest. McQuarter's fat shape appeared briefly in the doorway, silhouetted, and then faded back inside. The lamps started to go out. Sid Arklin was shouting orders, and in response the Terrapin crew was spreading itself into a crescent-shaped line with both ends out in the street, forming a human barricade.

Against it rode Travis Canaday and fourteen horsemen.

Six had a quick glance over his shoulder and saw them bearing down at top speed, guns glistening in the rain. Hoofbeats swelled and mud splashed the walls of buildings lining the street. Canaday's crew was within a block when Six moved out into the street, Danziger at his shoulder, and turned flat-footed to face the advancing army. He could feel Danziger's shoulder blades against his back; Danziger was standing solid against him, but facing Cruze. The two men formed a single shadow in the driving rain, their badges winking dully, eyes hidden by the runneling rain-water that flowed out of their troughed hatbrims. Six batted

BRAND OF THE GUN

his hat back, got a hatful of water down the inside of his collar, and poked his gun up, cocking it. Danziger was twisted around, looking over his shoulder, and Six heard his quick explosion of breath. Danziger said, "That gunslinger to Canaday's right—Jeremy, that's Steve Boat!"

Six watched them come. Warbonnet slowed to a walk the last half block. It was obvious from the grim set of their faces that there was to be no talk. Cruze and Canaday both knew what it was all about—Canaday needed no more than to see Terrapin ranged against him; he required no further explanation. Canaday was a big man, black-bearded in the rainy gloom, on a big red horse. Beside him, flashing pearl-handled six-guns, was Steve Boat. The crew fanned out to breast the width of the street. Six said gruffly to Danziger, "I timed it wrong. You don't need to stay—it's my mess, Cort."

"Seems hardly the time to leave."

"What about Steve Boat?"

"Jeremy, I don't give a good God damn about Steve Boat."

"All right, then. Ready?"

"I was born ready."

Warbonnet swirled to a halt fifty feet from Six's lifted gun, and Six said, "Drop those guns, Canaday!"

He could hear the sharp rasp, in the sudden silence, of the twin hammers of Danziger's buckshot gun snapping back to full cock.

It seemed to be enough to sober Cruze momentarily; there was no noise from the Drovers Rest. It was Canaday who spoke, his voice roaring across the rain.

"Stand aside, law dog, or I'll carpet this street with your hide. I got business here and you're in my way."

Danziger had his back against Six's and Six could feel him digging in his heels for firm footing. Six leaned forward

BRAND OF THE GUN

slightly over his gun. "I'll tolerate no range wars in my town," he said grimly. "Get out or get killed, Canaday. My front sight's on your chest and when one shot goes off you're a dead man—you and Wade Cruze together. You'll both go down in the first volley. Think about that before you open the ball—what good will four thousand cattle do you if you're both dead?"

A door burst open to Six's left; he couldn't help glancing that way, but his eyes shifted immediately back to Canaday before anyone had time to move. His brief glimpse had showed him two figures in the door—Sheila and Gene Lanphier. Lanphier had his long-barreled revolver and now he stepped forward to the edge of the boardwalk.

"I owe it to you to pitch in, Jeremy," Lanphier said, and in a louder voice he called out, "Count another gun here, both you cattle barons. I'll kill the first man that moves a gun."

Behind Six, Danziger stirred. "Get that woman inside, you idiot!"

Sheila was running forward, grasping Lanphier by the arm. Six could hear her urgent protests but he could not afford to shift his attention from Warbonnet. The gun stood rock-steady in his fist. Danziger said again, "Get inside, both of you!"

Steve Boat gigged his horse forward a pace and said in a rasping level voice, "I recognize the voice, Cort—now stand out where I can see you before I kill you!"

Six's gun stirred toward Boat. "No time for private feuds, Boat. Settle your horse back and lower that gun—"

But Boat had distracted his attention and that was when a man on the far end of Canaday's line snapped off a shot. There was no time to tell what it had hit; riders were wheeling their horses and guns started banging, orange muzzle-flashes lancing weirdly through the pouring rainfall. Six threw himself down into the mud; he leveled his aim and fired deliberately, his bullet smashing into Travis Canaday's right

BRAND OF THE GUN

arm. He heard the roar of a shotgun but knew it was not Danziger's—it wasn't near enough—it must have been Sid Arklin's. Steve Boat was spurring his horse furiously, trying to break out of the tangle of horses and riders. In the eerie light Gene Lanphier wheeled back toward the open doorway, thrusting Sheila ahead of him—and a wild bullet knocked the woman down asprawl across the muddy boardwalk.

Lanphier wheeled, yelling with blind rage; Steve Boat broke out of the crowd and came bearing down, looming in the street on horseback with both silver guns gleaming. Danziger took a stance behind Six's prone figure and Six was rocked and deafened by the roaring explosion of the two shotgun charges. Steve Boat was blown—physically blown—off his horse and slammed to earth fifteen feet away.

Lanphier was crouched down on one knee, protecting Sheila with the bulk of his body. His long gun was locked in both fists and he was firing with cool, methodical deliberation, each shot taking effect in the muscle and bone of a man. Six found a word running insistently through his head—*Madness, madness!* Up on the porch Sid Arklin buckled and fell, gut-shot, and Wade Cruze wheeled slamming back against the wall with a bullet somewhere high in his shoulder or collarbone.

Six scrambled to his feet, heedless of bullets and carnage. There was a weird lull, a silence in the firing, and across it Six's full-throated voice hurtled with massive savagery: "Hold your fire! Do you want every man on this street to die? A woman's been shot! *Damn you, hold your fire!*"

And, suddenly, that was it. They did, they held their fire. The war was over.

Horses stirred. The slashing rain drenched the street. There was no other movement except Gene Lanphier, who walked indoors carrying his wife in his arms. She was moan-

BRAND OF THE GUN

ing. On the street the fixed tableau seemed statuesque until Cort Danziger broke it by walking across to the remains of Steve Boat and prodding Boat's mangled corpse with the toe of his boot. There was a fragmentary, racing glitter of light as the gun fell out of Travis Canaday's grip and Canaday lifted his empty hand to clutch his wounded arm.

Terribly shaken, Six had to gather himself with care; his voice was unsteady when he spoke.

"Cruze and Canaday—you're both under arrest and if that woman dies I intend to see that you both hang. The rest of you have got just five minutes to pick up your dead and clear out of town before I clap you in jail and charge you with murder. Now *move!*"

Cruze pushed himself away from the wall with an effort. He had no gun, his shoulder was smashed up and he seemed dizzy, but he mustered enough bravado to say, "What about my God damn cows, Six?"

It made Travis Canaday laugh bitterly. "Drop it, Wade—forget it. Never mind the damned cows. You damn fool, we're all through."

"That's right," Six said through clenched teeth. "You're all through, both of you. How many nights' sleep do you think you'll get from here on in, either of you?"

Danziger came up. He had Steve Boat's six-guns in his hands. "Five dead men," he said, "and hardly a man that's not bleeding somewhere. Is that what you two gents came here for? It's what you got." He threw one of Boat's guns at Cruze's feet, turned, and pitched the other gun under Canaday's horse.

"Hanging," Six said distinctly, "is too good for you two."

Lanphier came out of the open door and every pair of eyes in the street switched to him. "Did somebody get the doctor?" Lanphier said in a dazed way.

"On his way," somebody said.

Lanphier nodded. "She'll be all right. It's just a graze."

His words broke the frozen air of expectancy. Cowboys

BRAND OF THE GUN

began milling in the street, picking up their dead and moving away silently, like ghosts—too shamed to speak.

The doctor bustled inside with Lanphier. A group of injured men followed to wait their turn for the doctor's attentions. Six and Danziger stood like boulders until the street was cleared. Finally Danziger muttered, "They were so busy shooting at each other they didn't bother with you and me. That's the only reason we're alive, Jeremy."

"And Steve Boat?"

"Steve Boat is a ghost," Danziger said, "in every way there is."

Hal Craycroft came out of the Drovers Rest in his bartending apron. He had a single-bore sawed-off shotgun. Danziger was looking toward the hotel and now his glance shifted around to the saloonkeeper. "Craycroft, where's McQuarter?"

"Drifted out the back way a few minutes ago," Craycroft said.

Danziger's glance shot to Six. And then abruptly, Danziger was off and running toward the hotel.

Danziger's expression had warned Six. He spoke quickly to Craycroft: "Herd Cruze and Canaday down to the jail for me, Hal," and got up on his toes, sprinting after Danziger.

XV

MCQUARTER must have hurried up behind the buildings, crossed the street two blocks away, and made his way back to the alley behind the hotel; he must have come in the

BRAND OF THE GUN

back way. A few terse questions revealed to Danziger that McQuarter had appeared in the lobby, drenched through, and during the excitement both McQuarter and Marianne had disappeared from the lobby.

Terror gripped Danziger by the heart, like a fist set to wrench it out of his body; but all the habit and training of years made him steady and alert when he ran into the hall with his gun up and slammed into Marianne's door without pausing.

The door burst open and he braced himself, gun up, but nothing greeted his entrance except the limp body of the would-be pillow-murderer, still unconscious on the floor.

"Not here," Danziger muttered, as if he were unable to believe it. He spoke an oath and wheeled back into the corridor, sprinting for the stairs. Six was just rushing into the hotel. Danziger shouted, "Upstairs—McQuarter's room—*hurry*, Jeremy!" and went up the stairs three at a time.

He wheeled into the upstairs hall—and came face-to-face with Eddie Hanratty, who was standing guard outside McQuarter's door. Hanratty's face was contorted and there was a wicked little two-barrel derringer in his meaty fist. The little gun packed a big .41 caliber charge; it went off point-blank and Danziger felt it hit him somewhere, but momentum carried him forward. He pumped two shots into Hanratty and would have run Hanratty down if the Irishman hadn't slammed to one side with the force of the bullets. Hanratty fell to the floor, mouth wide open; Danziger went over him and wrenched the door open and piled inside, windmilling his arms for balance.

They were struggling for the gun, McQuarter and Marianne. Danziger's heart was in his throat. He crashed forward, hurling furniture out of his path; he saw the glaze of horror on Marianne's face and heard McQuarter's maddened grunting, like a hog in a slough. Danziger was on top of them instantly, chopping his gunbarrel down in a vicious swipe that laid McQuarter's head open from brow to ear.

BRAND OF THE GUN

It knocked McQuarter back but it didn't knock him out; it hardly seemed to stun him at all—he wrenched the gun away from the girl and brought it around. Danziger saw it coming around toward him, and he tried to bring his own gun to bear, but the bullet Hanratty had fired into him was taking effect and he didn't seem able to make his muscles work. . . .

A gunshot boomed, very loud in the small room, and through the thickening red haze of vision Danziger saw McQuarter slump back, the gun falling from nerveless fingers. Jeremy Six was braced in the doorway with his smoking gun out.

Marianne crawled toward Danziger; he could vaguely make her out. He said thickly, "Thanks, Jeremy—thanks," and he just felt the touch of Marianne's fingertips and the splash of one of her tears against his face before he lost consciousness.

Lanphier found Six in the little infirmary beside the doctor's house. Six was sitting with Marianne Holbrook. Lanphier took off his hat and nodded absently to the girl. "How's Danziger?"

"The doctor says he'll pull through."

Lanphier tried to smile at the girl but he couldn't make it work. "Can I talk to you a minute, Jeremy?"

"All right." Six went outside with him. The rain had quit. Sunshine beamed down, baking the land, cracking up the mud.

Lanphier squinted against the sky. "I wanted to say goodbye. Sheila and I are leaving."

"Running away from something, Gene?"

"Maybe you could call it that. But we've looked at it pretty cold-bloodedly. I think it's the right thing to do. We'll find some town in California or Oregon and change our name. Maybe I'll grow a beard. The other night, Jeremy, I'd been eating myself to pieces with the knowing that sooner

BRAND OF THE GUN

or later some gunfighter would come looking to make me into the next notch on his gun. Somehow I talked myself into the idea that if I could kill enough men it'd scare them off—they'd be scared of me and they'd leave me alone. That's why I forced myself into that fight. I don't know if I killed anybody, but I put bullets in two or three of them. But my stupidity got Sheila a scar across her ribs and it could just as well have got her killed. Jeremy, I'd rather die myself than take that chance again. That's why we're leaving."

Six pointed at the gun on his hip. "What about that? The story's bigger now."

"Me and my magical gun," Lanphier said, and laughed off-key. He unbuckled the gunbelt and held it in his fist. "Here. You take it. I want you to have it, Jeremy. I won't be touching a gun again, not even to tinker. I'm good with just about any kind of machinery and maybe I can find myself some work fixing plows and wagons." He handed the gun and belt to Six and looked at Six as if he expected an argument.

Six nodded slowly. "It might be the best thing, Gene. I wish you both all the luck there is."

"Thanks, Jeremy."

Six watched him walk down the street, shoulders slightly bent, and went back inside the infirmary.

Marianne looked up. A wan smile crossed her face and when she saw that Six was about to speak she said, "I'll be all right. You don't need to make up reassuring words, Marshal."

She was strong as tempered steel, this girl; he remembered the glimpse of her, struggling with McQuarter for possession of the gun with which McQuarter had tried to kill her, just before Danziger had stumbled forward, streaming blood from his chest, to bat McQuarter away from her. Not every man could handle a girl like this one; not every man would

BRAND OF THE GUN

want a girl like Marianne. But Danziger would be a good man for her, and she a good woman for him.

Six took her hand, held it silently for a moment, and finally left the infirmary, putting on his hat. It had a clean .45 caliber hole in it—he had come that close to death in the gunfight between Terrapin and Warbonnet.

Cruze and Canaday would probably spend the rest of their lives in prison; Griff Jestro, who had tried to kill Marianne with a pillow, would most likely hang. McQuarter and Hanratty were dead, and so were the two gunfighters Lanphier had killed earlier, and five cowboys a long way from their Texas homes. There was the bartender Candy Briscoe had bludgeoned to death. . . .

Six forced himself to stop making tally, to stop thinking about it. It didn't work very well. He knew he wouldn't stop thinking about it for a long time to come. He was the marshal and it was the marshal's job to keep the peace. Peace was a hard-won commodity at the best of times on the frontier, but just now he knew he had done an exceptionally poor job of obeying his duty.

His boots turned toward Clarissa's and carried him forward with a frown on his face. A man did the best he could, and that was about all there was to say.



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11A

SUDDEN DEATH IN SPANISH FLAT

Vermillion's gun bucked and thundered. Its concussion knocked out all the lamps except the most distant ones. In the sudden dimness, Miller opened fire. Lament lifted his right-hand gun and held it poised, calling out in a loud bitter voice—calling for a halt.

Then he caught the glint of light racing along the nickel-plated revolver and wheeled toward it just as the bouncer thumbed off a hasty shot. Lament's hand convulsed in reaction . . . the orange lance of muzzle flame stabbed out.

The bouncer went over as if he had been axed . . . and behind the bouncer a slim shape, dim in the deep shadows, slid slowly down against the front of the bar.

Lament crossed the room and bent down by Clarissa. He laid his finger along the side of her throat to catch the pulse. After a moment he got to his feet and went outside into the dying blaze of sundown, got on his horse. His hands were trembling. He jerked the horse's head up and savagely reined it around, spurred it to a dead run and ran south into the darkening desert.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE TWO HORSEMEN rode into Jeremy Six's town at five in the evening, loping south from the Mogollon country. The tall one said, "Spanish Flat. I hear Clarissa's got a place here now."

"That a fact?" his partner inquired politely. They breasted the head of the main street and the tall one stopped a passerby to ask the way to Clarissa Vane's saloon.

"That'd be the Glad Hand. Turn to your right down at the corner and go back three, four blocks. You can't miss it."

"Obliged," said the tall horseman, and went that way.

The two riders dismounted in front of the Glad Hand and went in, the tall one smiling a little in anticipation. He was a long, saddle-gaunt man with a narrow youthful face and salt-and-pepper gray hair; the strange combination made it impossible to judge his age. He had a big beaked nose and a narrow, triangular chin; the impression he gave was a little reptilian. His clothes were ordinary range clothes, his boots run down at the heels, his hat sweatstained. He looked like a lot of cowboys except for two things. He wore gloves, to protect his hands; and he wore two forty-four caliber Thuer Conversion Army Colt revolvers in hip holsters, thonged down for saddle riding. No ordinary cowboy wore more than one six-gun; no ordinary cowboy wore gloves on a warm afternoon.

He spotted Clarissa across the room. It was a long room, narrow, low of ceiling, with a polished bar running along the right-hand wall. The rest of the room was

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

given over to a half dozen tables, a dance floor the size of a buckboard bed, and a little corner platform with an unattended upright piano. The walls were thick adobe, with small high tunnel-windows that admitted little light; lamps burned all around the room, though it was full daylight outside.

Clarissa was willow-slim, a picture of grace, her face framed by the long soft fall of her dark hair; she was smiling at him when he came up to her.

"Steve. Steve Lament." She gave him her hand.

With a gesture of gallantry remembered from somewhere back along the obscure years, the tall man removed his gloves before he took her hand and bowed over it. The attitude of his body, in spite of the cheap range clothes, gave him—in that brief moment of greeting—the unmistakable air of a Confederate cavalry officer. But the Confederacy was a long time gone.

Steve Lament said, "You haven't changed a hair. The most beautiful woman west of the Rio Grande."

"You always know the right thing to say," she answered.

"I heard you were here—couldn't pass through without stopping to see you."

"I'm glad you did," she said. "You're full of dust—a drink on the house."

"Much obliged to you," he said. "Meet my saddle partner, Miller."

Clarissa nodded courteously to the squat man beside him. Miller's lipless mouth opened and shut; he did not speak. Steve Lament said, "He doesn't talk much, I'm afraid. We're on our way south, got a job waiting in Mexico."

"I'm happy to hear that," said Clarissa. "You look like a man who needs work."

"You can say that again," Lament murmured, with a small twisted smile. "Isn't this Jeremy Six's town?"

"It certainly is."

"Like to pay my respects before we move on."

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

"I'm afraid you can't," she said. "Not unless you can stay over a few days. Jeremy's gone to Prescott—something about testifying at a trial in the Federal Court."

"Why, I'm sorry to hear that," said Steve Lament. He was about to speak again when a heavy hand clapped him on the back and a roaring laugh thundered in the room:

"Stevie, boy, how you makin' it these days?"

He wheeled, touching his gun—the gesture of a man on edge. Behind him stood an ox of a man with a flowing black moustache and the black-and-white clothes of an itinerant gambler—Jack Vermillion, bull of the gamblers' circuit.

Steve Lament spoke without warmth. "Evening, Jack."

"Surprised to see you way out here," said Vermillion. "We don't get too many of you riverboat boys out this far."

"Lot of water's flowed down that river since the last time I saw it," Steve Lament breathed. "You look fit, Jack."

"He ought to," Clarissa said. "He's been pushing a streak of luck at my tables for five straight days."

Jack Vermillion uttered a barking guffaw. He was a huge man of hearty appetites, red-cheeked, full-mouthed, round-bellied—but he had shrewd small eyes set back under unruly sandy brows, eyes that gave away nothing, missed nothing, never joined in the meaty laughter of his mouth.

Vermillion said, "Last time we sat down together, you took a thousand dollars in greenbacks away from me, Steve."

"You've got a long memory."

"I never forget a hand of cards," said Vermillion, and meant it. "Like to have another crack at you if you're willing."

"I'm traveling light," said Lament. "My pockets have been fuller."

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

"What about your friend here?" Vermillion looked inquiringly at Miller.

"He can talk for himself, if he's a mind," said Lament.

Miller's thin mouth peeled back from yellow teeth. "I might sit in for a hand or two if the lady serves food in this place. My belly thinks my throat's been cut. Ain't had a full meal since we left Denver."

"Denver," Jack Vermillion mused. "A thousand miles—long way to come, unless a man had a reason." He watched Steve Lament speculatively—never a man to let information pass when it might be useful.

But Lament gave him no help. He only nodded to Clarissa.

She said, "I can put up a bar supper, or send the swamper to the cafe for a steak."

"Steak sounds fine," Miller said, and clamped his lipless mouth together.

. . . . And so the card game began, Miller bucking Jack Vermillion, with a house dealer and two other poker players at the table. Steve Lament stayed aloof, standing at the bar with Clarissa. They talked old times—New Orleans, the river, paddlewheeler saloons, days of long-dead elegance, memories of crinoline and jasmine and fine cognac. Steve Lament brought Jeremy Six's name into it after a while and saw the way Clarissa's face changed, and drew his own judgments from that; he said: "He feel about you the same way you feel about him?"

"I think so," she said quietly. "I think he does." Her smile was small and bittersweet, her eyes faraway as if she were composing the man's image in her mind.

"You'd go well together," Steve Lament remarked, his face momentarily dark with the thought of his own solitary life. "I envy Jeremy."

"Thank you, Steve."

"I didn't mean that as flattery."

"I know."

"Well, Jeremy always had plenty of sand. There was

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

never much doubt he'd make something of himself."

"You sound jaded," she said.

"I guess I am. You get to a point when you look down to see what you've gathered to you in the course of a lifetime, and you can get a little sour when you see all you've got is a fistfull of ashes. It gets so you can't stay in one place very long."

"I'm sorry, Steve."

His smile was crooked. "Yeah." He shook his head slightly and mused, "Nothing much left for my kind any more, Clarissa. Jeremy did the smart thing, got off the circuit while he still had his guts inside him. I guess he makes this town a pretty good marshal."

"He's the best."

"Uh-huh. He always did believe in that law stuff. Rules, regulations, right and wrong, good and bad. I guess I had most of that shot out of me in the war."

"The war was a good many years ago."

"You trying to tell me you've forgotten it? You, with a father who went broke on three-cent cotton with carpetbaggers living high on the hog all around him?"

"You have to put things behind you," she said.

"I wish *I* could." He brooded into the amber swirl of his drink. "I'm running out of places to go, you know that? Not much call for jobs with gun wages any more. The old free grass is getting fenced in. Railroads and barbwire. Not many wide-open boom camps left."

"Why don't you settle down? Take a job, the way Jeremy has."

He laughed off-key. "Not for me, I'm afraid. You see, I just don't believe in it. Nobody's ever going to tie me up in a neat-wrapped package of regulations, twelve-hundred a year and fines, whatever he gets."

"He's got a good life."

"For him. Not for me. I'm not built that way and I'm too old to change."

"Then what will you do?"

He shrugged. "Like I told you, I've got a job down

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

Mexico way. A little revolution brewing up down there."

Clarissa glanced toward the squat, uncommunicative man playing cards intently with Jack Vermillion. "With him—with Miller?"

"Kind of an eyesore, isn't he?" Lament said with a wry grin. "Well, they hired him and they hired me, and we were both headed the same way, and I was just too tired to care enough to tell him to pick his own trail. A man gets damned weary of traveling alone all the time."

He saw the troubled concern in Clarissa's eyes; he avoided her glance and tossed down the rest of his drink, banging the empty glass on the bar with more force than was necessary. He said bitterly, "You know how it ends for folks like Miller and me? They find us one day out in the brush, a set of bones the buzzards left behind, no name left to bury us under. I hear they found Curly Bill Graham like that up Parker Canyon way a few months ago."

Clarissa said with studied calm, "You're feeling sorry for yourself and I'm starting to run out of pity, Steve. If all you want is a sympathetic ear, you—"

She didn't get a chance to finish it; the room erupted. It all happened too fast to take it all in; he had glimpses, impressions. He never did find out what started it but evidently it started with an argument over cards—perhaps Miller accused Jack Vermillion of cheating, or the other way around. What slammed Steve Lament's hard sudden attention around was the bull-roar of Jack Vermillion's great voice and the clatter of a tumbling chair.

Miller—whose first name Lament had never learned—was on his feet. The chair he had knocked back from under him had fallen over and was still sliding back away from him when Lament's eyes shot around. Jack Vermillion's right hand was dropping off the table, evidence he was reaching for a gun, and Miller's thick hand was a claw curled around the handle of his own six-gun, tugging it out into play.

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

Clarissa spoke one sharp word: "Billy!" And in response a big bald man at the end of the bar—clearly a bouncer—went ramming toward the table hefting a sawed-off pool cue. The bouncer roared, "*Hold it!*"

His voice was strong enough to roll into the scene and distract the adversaries for a split moment. The bouncer thundered, "Outside—take it *outside!*"

Clarissa said, "Cool off, boys." She looked stern and calm, quite in control of herself.

Steve Lament moved quickly forward; he had seen far too much senseless violence over meaningless card games. He had a stake in Miller's well-being, and nothing much against Vermillion; he saw no reason why they should be allowed to shoot each other without interference.

"Miller," he growled, "back off. You too, Jack."

But it was all too late. The guns roared.

Vermillion's gun bucked and thundered. The first shot went wide but its concussion knocked out all the lamps except the most distant ones at the front of the room. In the sudden uncertain dimness, Miller opened fire. Lament, stopped in his tracks by the explosion of shooting, lifted his right-hand gun and held it poised, calling out in a loud bitter voice—calling for a halt. He saw men scrambling and scuttling to get out of the line of fire. Vermillion was a huge hulk, weaving on his feet, ducking and shooting; Miller, squat and fast, was down on one knee, bracing for a shot, and he was like that when Vermillion's gun threw a slug into him just above the belt-buckle and knocked him down. Tumbling on his side, Miller kept shooting. The racket was earsplitting—forty-fives in an enclosed space. The acrid stink of cordite filled Lament's nostrils; his shouting was hoarse and enraged.

The bouncer had dropped his bung-starter and whipped out a nickelplate revolver. Miller's slugs were flying wild; the man was gut-shot and no longer thinking,

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

shooting by pure reflex. Lament caught the fragmentary glint of light racing along the nickelplate revolver and wheeled toward it just as the bouncer thumbed off a hasty shot at Miller. The shot flew wide of the mark, slicing across the outside of Steve Lament's arm. Lament's hand convulsed in reaction, setting off his own gun. Its orange lance of muzzle-flame stabbed toward the bouncer.

Eyes wide in horror, Lament saw the bouncer swing the glittering gun up toward him—the bouncer thought Lament was shooting at him. The nickelplate gun steadied and Lament, shaking his head, still shouting, saw there was no choice left now. He fired twice, very fast in a rolling thunder of sound, his only purpose to still that bright-glinting gun in the bouncer's fist.

The bouncer bent over as if he had been kicked in the belly; tipped off his feet and pitched to the floor.

And behind the bouncer a slim shape, dim in the deep shadows, slid slowly down against the front of the bar.

Lament swallowed in terror. *God. Oh, Jesus God.* He wheeled. Miller was on the floor, groveling, his legs jerking, his gun fallen away. Jack Vermillion was frowning, holding his fire. Smoke swirled in the darkness. The bouncer was motionless, plainly dead by the way he had fallen. Beyond the bouncer Clarissa lay, still and awkward, propped against the foot of the bar.

Lament crossed the room in four long strides and bent by her. He laid his finger along the side of her throat to catch the pulse.

After a moment he got very slowly to his feet and walked to the door. The crowd was still under cover, unsure, afraid it was not yet over. Lament went outside into the dying blaze of sundown and got on his horse. His hands were trembling. He jerked the horse's head up and savagely neck-reined it around, spurred it to a dead run and ran south into the darkening desert.

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

CHAPTER TWO

GUADALQUIVIR SPRAWLED ACROSS the hills, a baked old town of adobe and tall palm trees. The Rio Soldado, which started somewhere back in the high timber of the Sierra Grande, flowed through the town on its curling way to the sea at Puerto Naco, another sixty miles to the south. Not so very far north lay the United States border, from which Jeremy Six had come horseback on this grim and determined journey. Southeast, many hundreds of miles, lay Mexico City, where Maximilian had been crushed so that Mexico might be Mexican. It was a land of great leaders like Juarez; it was also the land of the ruthless and bloody Cortez.

Narrow dusty streets threaded past the crowded 'dobes. Ox-carts with big solid wheels creaked along the night-dark *avenidas* and fat women moved among them, carrying wooden yokes across their shoulders, laden with baskets and big clay jars. Splashes of yellow lamplight from doorways checkered the dusty central plaza; the music of a guitar drifted sadly out of the Cantina Monte.

That was where Six drew rein and dismounted. In this country of squat men he looked notable: a tall gringo with a shield-shaped face and the long flat hips of a born horseman. An Arizona hat, flat-crowned and curl-brimmed, overhung his heavy brown brows; a belted Colt revolver hung at his hip in a holster that had seen a good deal of use; over his gray flannel shirt he wore a calfskin vest with two pinholes to mark the place where a lawman's badge usually hung.

South of the border now, he was out of his jurisdiction; down here he was Mister, not Marshal. But civilian status

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

didn't change the habits of years; a professional fighting man, Jeremy Six used his eyes and his ears and his intuitions at all times, and there wasn't much he missed. He was keenly alert to the shadows of the alleys and streets that opened onto the square; though he wasn't looking that way, he was fully aware of the shriveled man in white peon clothes who stood by the covered well in the center of the plaza. Chewing the narcotic coco leaf had made the peon old before his time; soon, senile at the age of thirty-five, he would die. The peon drank from the well and went away, and Jeremy Six knew all that without having looked at him more than once.

The cantina doorway was propped open against the close heat. From his angle, Six could see inside to a rear corner, where a blind old guitarist sat folded over his guitar and played a soft, intricate melody from Chihuahua. Six looked back across the plaza; for a moment the guitarist's song was drowned out by the passage of a company of mounted troops that swept into the plaza, clattered across without a glance at Six, and drummed out along the road to Tajo, column of twos at a trot. Peace settled slowly, with the dust, and the gentle tune of the guitar filled the night.

Six left his horse and walked inside the bar room. Smoke rolled heavy under the low ceiling. A few men stood at the bar drinking beer, talking in liquid soft Spanish—talking of crops: San Juan Day was near and still there was no rain; the river ran low, the land was dry.

Lamplight reflected frostily against Six's jewel-hard eyes. At the far end of the bar a man looked up, a very tall black man with sleepy, half-arrogant eyes. The eyebrows went up and the suggestion of a sardonic smile appeared on the Negro face; he came out from behind the bar and came toward Six, a long-stepping man with his legs fitted into soap-faded Levi's and his feet cased in walking boots of roughout leather. Dark sweat circles

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

stained his shirt at the armpits where it showed through the wide armholes of the black vest. At his hip rode a heavy revolver, holstered backhand, the way a gambler who needed to reach his gun fast while seated would wear it.

"Evening, Jeremy."

"Hot as hell down here."

"Wait a month, it'll get worse."

Six said, "How've you been, Jericho?"

"Still taking nourishment." The black man's voice was deep and resonant.

"Using your real name down here?"

"Jericho Stride, like always. As close to a real name as I want to come." Stride scraped a thumb along the angle of his jaw and observed, "You're not wearing the badge but you didn't ride this far from home to pay a social call."

Six showed his teeth. "I took a chance you'd still be running this place. I'd like a word with you."

"Sure. Beer?"

"All right."

Jericho Stride signaled the squat brown bartender. "*Dos cervezas, Miguel, por favor.*"

The barkeep lifted a pair of foaming mugs onto the bar. Six clicked his against Stride's and drained half of it. "That's a thirsty ride," he said.

"Fit for lizards and bobcats." Stride gave him a level, appraising stare. "The charges against me," he said in a spuriously soft voice, "they still open?"

"Yes."

"But you didn't come for me?"

"No."

"Still, I can't go back."

Six said, "Do you want to?"

"Not so much, any more. I kind of like it here. They never heard the word Nigger around here."

"I never heard you yassuh any white gringos either."

Stride laughed a little. "I reckon. It kind of gravels

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

me not to be able to go where I please. I set foot north of the border and they'll clap me in Yuma Prison for fifteen years. Hell of a price to pay for kicking up my heels once when I had too much cougar sweat in me to know any better."

"You treed a whole town and shot three people," Six said. "I wouldn't exactly call that kicking up your heels."

"Still a sobersides, ain't you? Hell, they all survived, nobody was hurt bad." Stride's big shoulders lifted and dropped. "All right, that's enough on my miseries. What you want to talk about?"

Six's glance swept the room. Stride took the hint; he said, "We can talk outside if you want."

They took their mugs of beer outside into the empty plaza. Jericho Stride tipped his high shoulder against the front of the adobe wall and watched Six over the rim of his beer schooner.

Six regarded him with close attention, trying to decide how much he could tell Stride. They had been friends once, but that had been a lot of miles ago. When you hadn't seen a man in half a dozen years it didn't pay to take the chance he hadn't changed. Six tried to size him up as if he had never met the man before, but memories kept intruding, recollections of good times and bad times shared along the old gamblers' circuit—Fort Griffin, Denver, Leadville, Tombstone; they hadn't ridden together but they had run across each other a good deal, as circuit riders usually did. Now they were two big men pushing into their upper thirties, two who'd seen the elephant together. Casual friendships had become important along the circuit, where knives and guns and fists were part of everyday life and it paid to know the men who could be counted on in a tight place. Jericho Stride had been one of those men. But six years of loose easy living in a strange country could make changes in a man.

A knowing smile touched Stride's dark face. "You don't need to tell me anything you don't want to."

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

Six took the time to finish his beer. Stride said, "Your face looks like it could hold a three-day rain, Jeremy. You've toted a lot of grief a long way."

"A lot farther than the limits of my jurisdiction," Six agreed.

"Down here a man's jurisdiction goes about as far as the ballistic range of his gun—badge or no badge. Who you looking for?"

Six didn't give him a direct answer; he said, "Up north there's talk of a revolution down here."

"Big word. There's always some bandit back in the hills that says he's leading a revolution. It hasn't hurt my business. I don't pay too much attention to politics."

"This Carlos Santana sounds like more than a run of the mill bandit."

"Could be," Stride said. "He makes a lot of promises. You have to, if you want to get enough followers to build yourself an army. There's a hell of a lot of miserable dirt-poor people around this country. What it cost Governor Orbea to build that palace up there, you could have put clothes on the back of every peon in this province and fed them for six months. But most of them don't give a damn. Nobody cares. Things have always been like that so nobody cares. That's why the Governor gets his palace and his fine wine and fat women. You take a mess like that and it's bound to breed a few reformers like Carlos Santana. Maybe Santana means what he says about putting in a fair government, maybe he's just another Governor Orbea out to grab the big palace for himself. Who knows? You see that troop of horse soldiers that went through here a little while ago?"

"Yes."

"They were chasing off to Tajo, down the road there. I hear Santana's bunch overran the barracks at Tajo, killed eight or ten of the Governor's troops, captured fifty or sixty of them and took some guns."

Stride drained his mug and made a wide gesture.

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

"You can't keep secrets in a country like this. I hear things down here about as soon as the Governor finds out about them. Orbea, he's big and fat and pretty slow, but he's got a mean lizard for a militia commander. Fellow called Colonel Sanders. Sanders sent that company of pony soldiers down to Tajo, the one you saw ride out. But it's six hours to Tajo and by the time they get there you can bet Santana's rebels will be a long time gone. They won't find anything but ashes where that garrison used to be. A stripped storehouse and pigs eating on the corpses. Those soldiers have got Yaqui trackers with them but they won't find Santana. That's the way Santana fights—hit hard and run fast. He hasn't got enough men to fight a real war, occupy towns, that kind of thing. He just raids and goes back into the Sierra to hide out."

"Where in the Sierra?"

"If the Governor knew that," Stride said, "Santana'd be all through. Nobody knows where they hide out. There's a hell of a mountain range up there. You'd need half a million troops to search all of it. Look, you must have a reason to pump me about all this."

Six nodded. "I'm looking to find Steve Lament."

A slow wicked smile widened Jericho Stride's mouth and drew his eyes into slits. "Old Steve. Tall order, Jeremy. Very tall."

"His partner let it drop he was on his way down here to throw in with Santana. Some high-priced gun work."

"I didn't know he had a partner."

"He doesn't. Not now."

"Cashed in?"

"Yes."

"You kill him?"

"No," Six said, and didn't elaborate. "Steve Lament's down here somewhere."

"And you want him. How bad?"

"Bad, Jericho."

"Personal or law?"

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

"A lot of both."

"Steve rough up some friend of yours?"

Six said, very low, "He put a bullet in someone—close to me."

"A woman."

"Yes."

"She dead?"

"Yes."

"And you weren't there at the time—otherwise you'd have killed him on the spot, or got shot trying. How much of a jump did he have when you started after him?"

"Three days."

Jericho Stride nodded. "And you want to know if he came by here, if I happened to see him."

"He used to be a friend of yours," Six said.

"He used to be a friend of yours, too."

"Yeah."

"If he's still a friend of mine, and if I've seen him, I might not want to sell him out."

Making no immediate reply, Six tugged a cigar out of his shirt pocket and turned against the wall, out of the wind, to put a match to it. The sulphur flame glowed brittle and brilliant against the hard surfaces of his eyes; he was looking at Stride, unblinking. His strong teeth bit down on the cigar as if to sever it. Still trying to size up his man, he spoke in a hard voice, rigidly controlled:

"Here's how it went. Steve Lament came into my town with a partner, a tough called Miller. They were passing through, that's all. On their way down here. I was up in Prescott testifying in a trial, I didn't see any of this—I got it secondhand from witnesses when I got home. Lament and Miller went into Clarissa Vane's place to have a few drinks. Jack Vermillion was there and they got into a card game with him."

"You going to tell me Lament shot Clarissa?" Stride's face, tightly composed, revealed no expression whatever.

"It was a fight over cards. Miller was drunk and call-

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

ing names, Jack Vermillion started to slap him down for it. Clarissa sent the bouncer in to throw them out in the street and Miller started shooting. Vermillion and the bouncer were both shooting back at him and Lament bought into it. I guess there was a lot of shooting. Vermillion put a slug in Miller and the bouncer pinked Lament with one before Lament put two bullets in the bouncer. One of them killed him, the other went through the soft part of his arm and drilled straight into Clarissa."

Stride wasn't looking at him. "How long did she hurt?"

"She never knew what hit her."

"What about Jack Vermillion?"

"Not hit. But I heard some toughs rolled him for his winnings and dumped him off a train in New Mexico, dead."

"It does go like that on the circuit," Stride muttered, remembering. . . . He said, "And this Miller, he was hit?"

"Belly shot. It took him a while to die. Steve Lament got on his horse and left town on a dead run before anybody thought to stop him. Miller got mad because Lament left him behind. He told the crowd they could find Lament down here, working for Santana's rebels."

"About the only place left where he can hire out his gun, I imagine," Stride observed. "And Steve's not much good for anything else but guns."

"I want him, Jericho," Six breathed. "*I want his hide on a spit.*"

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

CHAPTER THREE

JERICHO STRIDE TAPPED his knuckles against the empty beer mug and said, "Jeremy, was I you, I'd ride back to your regular job and if anybody asks, you tell them you couldn't find Steve Lament."

"So it's like that, is it?"

"It's not what you think. If I had to pick a side I'd rather see Steve hurt than you. Look—you want an answer, and I'll give you a straight one. I saw Steve. He came through a few days ago, we had a drink and talked over a few old times and he went on. I expect he got himself to Santana's camp up in the mountains, one way or another. That's what he came for. But you sure as hell can't go in there after him."

"I've got no choice."

"They'll roll your head down the mountain. You wouldn't have a chance in hell."

"You can't always go by that," said Six.

"You're as much a fool as he is," Jericho Stride said with a head-shake and a vicious swiping gesture.

Six began to reply, but stopped, alerted by the advancing sound of wheels and hoofs. Stride lifted his head and moved away from the wall, his proprietary interest stirred: anything that took place in the plaza this late at night would elicit his curiosity.

A buggy made the far bend and came into the plaza, veering past the covered well and bearing down on the cantina. Six had an impression of long-waisted femininity on the seat—a tall woman in long dress and shawl, dark hair flowing. He sucked in his breath.

Jericho Stride grinned. "I thought she'd be back. But

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

I wasn't expecting her this soon." Glimpsing Six's intent expression, he said, "Holly Moore. You know her?"

For just a moment there Six had thought it was—*Someone I knew*. He shook his head. "No—I guess not."

Stride stepped forward; when the woman reined in and braked the buggy, Stride grabbed the horse's head, then moved alongside the buggy to offer his hand up to her.

Holly Moore gave him an arch look of disgust, climbed down, and immediately shook off his arm. Stride chuckled. "That sure as hell didn't take long."

"I don't want to hear a word about this from you. Not a word, Jericho. You understand me?" There was just a trace of Irish in her talk.

"Mum's the word," Stride agreed good-humoredly.

"Oh, to hell with you," she said, and turned the direct blaze of her eyes against Six. It was a frank, sensual appraisal she gave him—head to foot. "Well, now," she breathed, and formed her face into a slow smile of unconcealed appreciation.

"This here goes by the name of Jeremy Six," said Stride.

Holly Moore dipped her head coyly, still smiling, her eyes locked frankly on Six's. "How very pleased I am to meet *you*. Where've you been hiding *this*, Jericho?"

Six met her glance, sizing her up as openly as she had done, but his expression remained cool. Close up, standing in the splash of lamplight issuing from the cantina, she still reminded him—so strongly it was like a belly blow—of the woman he had not forgotten and would not forget, for a long time yet to come. After a moment he saw the resemblance was not in her face. The bone structure was different—the high-boned construction of that kind of beauty which would, likely, remain ageless. She might have been twenty-five, she might have been forty-five. Her eyes were large, set wide apart, hooded indolently—he could not make out

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

their color. Her lips were full, characterized by a quizzical turning.

Her face was smaller, bonier than Clarissa's had been. She had a direct manner, blunt and unapologetic, reflected in her expression—not at all like Clarissa's gentle surface of courtly manners, which had covered—but not concealed—a core of tough resolve and subtle courage. This woman was far more open, rougher at the edges without being any the less feminine.

It was the way she carried herself, he decided. The rare tall grace of lean, willowy length. The back straight without being stiff—none of the self-conscious shoulder-hunching that so many tall women resorted to. The long waist, trim without bulges, flaring into high proud breasts and long gently curved hips. She stood like Clarissa; she even moved like her. It was uncanny. The fall of her hair was the same, even the length of it, though the color was different: in the light he saw it to be auburn, tinged reddish at the edges where lamplight filtered through. She wore a shawl against the evening chill, over a dove gray traveling dress which revealed a well-turned display of ankles.

Not unaware of Holly Moore's direct sensual interest, and all too aware of the dangers his own hard-shaken emotions could lead him into if he relaxed his guard, Six instinctively surrounded himself with a protective barrier of cool defenses. His murmured greeting to her was one of precise courtesy, giving no opening; he kept his eyes half-shuttered, his face strictly composed. It made Jericho Stride look at him in surprise; it made Holly Moore frown petulantly and say, "What's the matter with you—have I stepped on a sore corn?"

"Maybe you have," Six said. "But it's not your fault. I don't mean to seem rude."

"Will you listen to that," she said. "The last time I met a man with drawing-room manners like that—hell, I can't remember that far back, Jericho, can you?"

"You trying to tell me I've got bad manners?"

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

"Hell, you, Jericho, you're nothing but a one-horse nigger with manners to match." She grinned and snorted.

"Only human being alive can get away with that," Stride murmured. "I've killed men for less."

"I'm not a man," Holly retorted, "in case you haven't noticed lately."

"Lately," said Stride, "you haven't been around for me to notice anything at all."

"You can go plumb to hell, Jericho Stride." She stood by the front wheel of the buggy, frowning at the starlit façade of the saloon. "This place gets uglier every week, do you know that?"

"Be it ever so humble," Stride breathed, smiling softly. "Welcome home, Holly."

"Agh," she said in supreme disgust. She glanced toward the back-bed of the buggy. "I've got valises there, you know."

Stride ambled toward it. Holly smiled with mock-sweetness. "Why, thank you *ever* so much, darlin'."

Stride glanced into the back of the buggy and then looked at Six with bland innocence. "Hell," Stride said, "He's bigger than I am."

"Still tryin' to impress us with your damned independence," she observed.

"I came down here to run a saloon," Stride said, "not lug carpetbags." But he reached into the back and easily lifted the two bulky valises out. With a sardonic inclination of his head he nodded toward the cantina. Six smiled slightly and stepped forward to relieve him of one of the bags. Stride said caustically, "That's right, Jeremy, pick the light one."

"You want to swap?"

"Don't do me no favors," Stride snapped, and Six wondered what, suddenly, was eating him. Behind the shell of mock-acid banter between these two, he realized, lay something important but dangerous—something neither one of them seemed willing to say aloud.

Holly went into the cantina ahead of them, marched

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

swaying through the light crowd, stopped to speak to the barkeep and one or two customers, pinched a man's cheek, and finally paraded through a back door. Six and Stride followed her through the cramped rear office and out into the dusty back yard. By the time they manhandled the bulging valises outside, Holly was half way up the narrow steep flight of stairs that ran up the backside of the building, precariously hung on the wall. The two men jockeyed the luggage upstairs. At the head of the stairs Holly stood, arms propped on hips; she said, "Wouldn't it be easier if you hauled them up with ropes? I never saw so much grunt and fuss over two little bags."

"If you're such a God damn expert," Jericho Stride said, heaving upward, "why in hell don't you carry your own God damn baggage?"

"You're taking the Good Lord's name in vain," she rebuked him, and disappeared laughing into a low-roofed attic. Before Six reached the top, a lamp bloomed and a yellow swath of light cut across the landing.

Holly was regarding the tiny room with a critical expression. "You haven't touched a broom to this place in weeks."

"Maybe I had other things on my mind," Stride growled. He set the bag down in the middle of the floor.

Six dropped the second bag beside it and said, with a wry attempt at humor, "What's in these—silver bullet?"

"Lady things," she snapped. "None of your damn business."

"Yes, ma'am," he said, straight-faced.

It made her grin at him, friendly and unabashed. "So you're after bein' a human after all?"

"He's a law man," Stride grumbled. "Species marshal."

"Ah, then, that explains it sure."

It was hot and close under the low ceiling. Stride edged past her to the front and threw open a small

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

window. Up the hill across the city, the bright lights of the high Governor's Palace were visible. Six saw Holly's glance follow Stride across the room; she watched Stride's back unwaveringly. After a moment Six felt awkward and unneeded here; he turned and started toward the door. He had to thread a path through a tangle of things. Beside the door on either side stood the accumulated miscellaneous possessions of, evidently, all the successive owners of the ancient cantina, the piles making a tunnel to the door. The rest of the room was cluttered with broken furniture—among it bar chairs, a sagging bed, a tilted commode, a splintered clothes-press.

Six paused in the door, ducking his head to clear the low transom. Holly was facing Jericho Stride across most of the room's length, her face illuminated dimly by the single flickering lamp. The pose of her body arrested Six's attention: it was so much like Clarissa's way of standing, head slightly to one side, hair falling past her cheek. And while he watched, the mask of derisive toughness slipped from Holly's face and she became a confused, lonely girl; she wept. Jericho Stride crossed the room and let her cry against his chest. She buried her face in his shirt and after a while her voice came, muffled in the cloth:

"He was no good, Jericho."

"I tried to tell you that," Stride said gently.

"You didn't tell me loud enough."

"Would it have done any good?"

"Probably not." Her head rocked back. "Mining engineer, hah! He was a cheap crook. The smooth talking son of a bitch. It was all talk and blarney. He didn't have ten pesos to rub together!"

Jericho Stride smiled raggedly. "You just keep looking, orphan, one day your millionaire will come along."

Six was curling through the doorway, feeling like an interloper, but Holly's voice arrested him: She was looking right at him, talking loud in rage:

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

"I left the bastard in Guaymas at a cockfight. I don't think he even noticed when I walked out."

He didn't know why she was talking to *him*. Not knowing how to respond, he did nothing; he stood awkward, bent in the doorway, watching her, not speaking. Why did she want him to hear this? To make him take the blame, because he was a man and she hated men for what the fake mining engineer had done?

She said wistfully, "You know, I almost liked the bastard, I think. I had to hock my last string of pearls to get back here. You don't want to buy a horse and buggy, do you, Marshal Jeremy Six?"

He shook his head. Jericho Stride said, "We'll peddle it somewhere. You want something to eat?"

She looked at Stride. "You're ugly," she told him, "and you need a clean shirt."

"Yeah." Stride touched her chin with a forefinger. His smile was soft and gentle.

Six ducked outside, went down the stairs, and walked around the outside of the cantina, back to the plaza where he had left his horse tethered. He hadn't come down this far to get mixed up in the personal troubles of Stride and Holly Moore. He reached for the reins of his horse, unwrapped them from the hitching post, and stood thinking about getting a place to stay the night. Tomorrow he would head into the mountains and try to find Santana's camp—and Steve Lament. When he thought about Lament his face turned cold and craggy.

He was turning to put his foot in the stirrup when the soldiers rode into the plaza and picked him up.

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

CHAPTER FOUR

THERE WERE SIX of them—soldiers on horseback, armed with rolling-block rifles which they held across their broad flat saddlehorns. The rifles were not exactly aimed at Six.

The corporal in the lead gestured with his rifle and gave Six a gleaming smile in which there was utterly no friendship. "*Señor, por favor?*"

"*Noches*," Six said politely. "*Qué quieren?*"

In Spanish the corporal said, "The Colonel Sanders wishes to speak to you."

"For what purpose?"

The corporal grinned again. "Matters of state, one would suppose." He shifted the rifle an inch. "The Colonel is waiting, please."

There did not appear to be a great deal of choice. Six got on his horse and went with them, gigging the horse to an easy singlefoot. The six troopers formed a practiced phalanx around him—they didn't crowd, but they did it neatly, placing themselves full circle around him so that he would not make a break. The corporal grinned every time Six looked at him.

They turned up a narrow curving street. The town was silent and dark. At the head of the street squatted a long row of barracks, low buildings with corrals and sheds behind them. A light burned in an open doorway. The corporal gestured; Six got down. One of the troopers took his horse; the rest of them rode away. The corporal ushered him inside with an extravagant flourish and an unpleasant toothy grin.

Two doors stood open off the unattended anteroom.

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

Through one of them, Six saw a youth sitting in a chair. Streaks of half-dry blood glistened on the young face, oozing from cuts in his cheeks and over his eyes. A little bantam rooster of a man in the uniform of a militia sergeant stood over the youth, slapping a bloodstained leather quirt against the palm of his open hand.

The scene stopped Six in his tracks; eyes rigid with anger, he took one pace toward that door—and felt the cold touch of the corporal's rifle muzzle against the small of his back.

A gaunt man came to stand in the other open door, tall in a trim tailored uniform. He had the un giving triangular eyes of a bird of prey—a beaked, sharp-edged face and long slender hands. He wore a colonel's epaulets; he gave Six a synthetic smile and said, "I am Pedro Sanderos."

Six said nothing. He felt the shift of the corporal's weight behind him, as the corporal went back against the front door and stood there with his rifle in both hands, watching.

Colonel Sanderos addressed Six in English. "The young man's name is Rafael Sagan. One of Carlos Santana's bandits. He refuses to disclose Santana's hiding place. No matter." Sanderos turned. Six felt the prod of the corporal's rifle in his back and followed Sanderos into the big office. They hadn't taken Six's gun but there hardly seemed any point in reaching for it. Colonel Sanderos sat down behind a small old desk and picked up a rusty long-bladed scalping knife that rested on top of it, probably some kind of souvenir of Sanderos' past. The colonel waved a gaunt hand around. "Sit down, Señor Six."

Six shook his head slightly and stayed put, on his feet, midway between desk and door. Behind him he could hear the creak of leather boots as the grinning corporal stirred. Six said, "If you know who I am then you know you don't have to point a gun to talk to me."

Sanderos smiled slightly. He tipped himself back in

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

the chair and toyed with the scalping knife, not looking up from it. "Up there," he said, "you're a police officer. Down here you're just another gringo foreigner. I take no chances with gringo foreigners in these trying times, Señor." Then his eyes shot up toward Six, as if to try and catch him off guard. "What are you here for?"

"Private business."

"There is a bandit rebellion—perhaps you have heard?"

"Santana? I've heard."

"The province is under martial law. You understand?"

"Yes."

"Under martial law." Colonel Sanders said softly, leaning forward, "there is no private business, Señor."

"Then let's just say it's a personal matter," Six said.

"Nor are there personal matters."

"In my country, Colonel—"

Sanders snapped, "We are not in your country now."

Six's jaw crept forward a little. "I'm making an effort not to get annoyed, Colonel."

"Then I do hope you succeed," Sanders said with a synthetic smile. He seemed to relax; he leaned back again and resumed playing with the knife. As it turned back and forth it picked up light that raced along in swift fragmentary reflections. Rust spotted the blade but even from eight feet away Six could see it still held a good cutting edge.

Sanders said, "You came here in order to make an illegal attempt, in the absence of extradition agreements, to capture a gringo named Steve Lament and either kill him or abduct him to your country for trial. That is correct?"

"You can suit yourself." Six murmured, trying to figure out exactly how Colonel Sanders had found out so much. Jericho Stride? No—there had been no time for that; Stride had been with him every moment until he had left the attic.

Without smiling, Colonel Sanders said, "If you are

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

curious about my sources of information, it might please me to allow you to believe I have a network of spies strung from here to Arizona, but that is hardly the case. You were overheard talking with the black gringo in the plaza—by one of my men. It was, perhaps, an accident."

"Yes. Perhaps," Six said, reserving belief.

Sanderos' lips stretched back in an imitation of a smile. "You wish to go into Carlos Santana's camp after the Señor Lament."

"Do I?"

"I want you to do exactly that," Sanderos said.

The colonel's triangular eyes glittered. "You will do as you intended. You will make your way into Santana's camp. What you do to, or with, Lament is of no concern to me. But while in the rebel camp you will make careful observations of the number of bandits in the camp, the extent of their arms and equipment, and if possible the nature of their plans. Above all, you will learn the exact location of their camp. You will then report directly to me."

Six's lids were draped over his eyes as if he were slightly bemused and bored. "I'm not one of your tin soldiers."

"Perhaps you do not fully appreciate the situation," Sanderos purred. "I have sent men to spy on Santana, you see. I have sent Yaqui scouts to find him. None of them has ever come back."

His bony shoulders moved the tunic. "Perhaps they are dead, perhaps imprisoned, perhaps they have defected to Santana. No matter. You are needed, Señor, because you are an outsider."

"Why?"

"You have no side in the revolution. The rebels will have no reason to suspect you are anything but what you pretend to be—a gringo bent on a private vendetta. At any rate most gringos in this country have a stupid romantic tendency to side with the bandit upstarts—all

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

except the rich gringos, of course, because they know on which side their bread is buttered. But you are not rich and I am sure Santana will accept you—as a neutral at least, perhaps even as a friend.”

“What makes you think a stranger like me can find Santana if you can’t find him?”

“Just go into the Sierra. Santana will find you.”

Colonel Sanderos turned his palms up. The knife pointed straight at Six. “I need help, you see. I am not too proud to ask for it.”

“You’ve got a reason to think I’ll do it, haven’t you?”

“*Como?*”

“If this was all you had to say, you wouldn’t have bothered bringing me here. You must think you’ve got a way to persuade me to do what you want.”

Sanderos’ smile was hardly as disarming as he seemed to think. “I was hoping your sense of comradeship—one officer of the law to another, so to speak—would create a bond of friendship between us. A matter of professional cooperation.”

Six yawned. “Anything else?”

“That is not enough?”

“No,” Six said, “it isn’t enough, Colonel.”

“A fellow officer of the law—?”

“Not my brand of law, Colonel. I am not your friend.”

“Then I am very sorry you feel that way.”

“Are you, now.”

“It is no trick to go to Santana,” Sanderos said. “I’m sure I could do it myself. The trick is to get back—alive. That I cannot do. But it is a thing which *you* can do.”

“What makes you so confident of that? If you know why I’m here, then you also know the man I’m after is a valuable man to Santana. They’re not going to let me walk in and put handcuffs on him and take him out with me—not without a fight.”

“I’m sure you will think of something, Marshal Six. You have the reputation of a resourceful man. Besides, this is a country where pride and personal honor are

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

important things, and I doubt Santana will stand in your way once he learns exactly why you have come to capture Steve Lament. Santana's reputation would suffer it if became known that he was friendly with a gringo gunman who shot and killed a woman. No, once the truth is known to him, Santana will not stand in your way. He will let you have Steve Lament, and you will bring Lament out with you, and on your way back to Arizona you can stop here and report to me on what you have found in the mountains."

Six yawned through the last sentence of the colonel's speech and said, "I've had a long dusty ride and if you're all through talking, I'd like to find a hotel and bed down for the night."

"I am not quite—how did you put it?—all through talking. First there is the matter of international courtesy and its reverse. If you do not agree to help me, as a fellow officer of the law, then I shall have no choice but to assume you have decided to give aid and comfort to the enemies of the state. That, of course, makes you yourself an enemy of the state. You may get your prisoner away from Santana, Señor, but you will not get him—or yourself—out of Mexico. Not without my help."

"Is that a threat?"

"Set yourself against the duly constituted government of this province, Marshal Six, and you will be treated like any other insurgent rebel. You will be captured and shot."

Six said bleakly, "I told you in the beginning, my business here is personal. It's got nothing to do with your local civil war. As a foreigner I've got no obligation to pick sides."

Sanderos merely smiled.

Six turned toward the door. Sanderos said softly, "There is just one other matter—your good friend Jericho Stride."

It stopped Six. He turned back. "What about him?"

"Being a man of good heart I do not trouble Stride,

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

although he is here only by the grace of my tolerance. You know of course that charges are still pending against him in your country—that he faces fifteen years in prison there?”

“That’s no skin off your nose, Colonel.”

“What? Oh—yes. But I need not remind you of the consequences, should Stride be found one morning handcuffed to a federal marshal’s porch in Arizona.”

“I see.”

“Of course you do. It is entirely within my power at any time of my choice to deport Jericho Stride to his homeland. It is quite legal, I assure you—a matter of deportation, not extradition, for which no treaties exist.”

“And if I don’t play the game by your rules, my friend Stride gets shipped back to the States. That’s it?”

“Exactly.”

Six shook his head. “You people love to play at intrigue.”

“And that means—?”

“It means Jericho Stride will have to look out for himself,” Six said. “He knew that when he came here. I’m not his bodyguard.”

“I should have thought friendship might have counted,” Sanderos suggested.

“Stride broke the law in my country. I’m a law man. I’m afraid that won’t work, Colonel—in my country the badge has no friends.” Angry clear through, Six walked back to the desk and leaned over it, putting both fists on the desk. “It won’t work, Colonel. If you’re not good enough to fight your own wars, you’re not going to get rid of your problems by shoving them off on me. Now, you’ve made a lot of wild threats and I’ve had enough.”

Sanderos shrugged and smiled again. He spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness. “You must admit I have tried well.”

“Look, why don’t you just take your army into the hills and run Santana down? You’ve got him outgunned.”

“A good soldier knows his limitations. Santana knows

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

that wilderness far better than we do. Only my Yaqui scouts are familiar with the Sierra, and they are less than reliable—their loyalty is a tenuous thing, at best. And the proper conduct of a campaign requires intelligence of the enemy's strength and position. You do not blunder into a fight blindfolded, you know. I need knowledge before I can attack—information. You will supply that information.”

Six shook his head in exasperation. “I guess not, Colonel. Haven't you heard a word I've said?”

“Oh, I have listened very closely indeed. But there is just one thing I may have forgotten to mention.” The smile grew across the hawk face. “One small matter, you understand. The Señorita Holly Moore is a beautiful woman, is she not?”

Six straightened up, meeting his glance bleakly. Colonel Sanders murmured, “If it were to be proved that Holly Moore was acting as a spy on behalf of the rebel Santana, there is not much doubt she would be executed.”

He dropped the knife on the desk and steepled his fingers. “Executed,” he said. “To die slowly and with pain. It is not a pleasant thing to think about when the executed person is a young woman, so beautiful and full of vitality.”

He looked up and smiled more. “I am sure your heart will persuade you to do the right thing. You would not wish to have such a beautiful woman's death on your conscience. Serve me well, Marshal Six, and you shall be rewarded by the freedom of your good friend Stride and the woman Holly Moore, and you shall be free to return to your country with the prisoner—I shall even provide you an escort as far as the border, to insure he does not escape from you.”

Sanders looked up and cocked his head inquiringly. The smile had become hard and rigid.

“Of course,” Sanders said, “it may occur to you to bring false information to me, as a means of acquitting

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

our bargain and at the same time offering no injury to the rebels. But do not flatter yourself by thinking you will be my only source. There is Sagan, for example—the young prisoner you saw in the next room. Sergeant Mendez is most persuasive with a quirt. And Sagan becomes hungry. He has been with us forty-eight hours and has been given no food. He will be given only enough water to keep him alive. And of course he is in pain, great pain. In another few days he will tell us that which we want to know, but he may not have *all* the information I seek—he is young, after all, and only an anonymous soldier from Santana's ranks. Of course there are other possibilities as well."

Six turned slowly and walked toward the door. When he got to it he looked back. "You know all the ways to get a man by the short hair, don't you?"

"Perhaps that is why I am in command here."

"Perhaps it's why the rebels are willing to die to get rid of you."

The smile stayed in place. Sanderos pushed the scalping knife aside and opened a drawer to bring out a file of papers.

"*Vaya con Diós,*" he said; he did not look up again.

CHAPTER FIVE

NOT SHOWING HIS anger, Six stepped out of the barracks and found his horse waiting, held by a soldier who handed over the reins without remark and drifted away into the shadows. Six glanced back through the open door. The young prisoner, Rafael Sagan, was groaning softly but with a painful penetration that reached out through the door. From where he stood, Six could not

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

see the interrogation room, but he could hear it. His face gave away nothing. He gathered the reins and mounted, turned down the cobblestone street and walked the horse through narrow adobe passages, not hurrying, using the time to compose his thoughts.

He was deep in introspection but never preoccupied enough to miss any significant rumor from the shadows; he heard the approaching figure before he saw it. When the dark horseman loomed dimly in the alley, reining away from the deep shadows and coming toward Six, the gun was out in Six's fist, dully gleaming; and Six murmured, "*Cuidado, amigo.*" It was no night to be trusting shadows.

"Easy now," said the dark horseman, riding slowly into the open night of the street. "I'm peaceful." The language was easy idiomatic English but the accent had the liquid touch of Spanish. The rider stopped his horse in a splash of lamplight that sprawled out of an open doorway. Vague yellow illumination reflected off the cobbled street and bounced against the rider's military uniform—the same kind of uniform as Colonel Sanders had worn; this one carried a captain's shoulder epaulets. The tall militiaman reached up without sudden motions and removed his hat to show Six his face. It was a long, handsome face with a gracious aristocratic smile slanted across the smooth jaw, a straight narrow blade of a nose, wide-set eyes and a look of honest patience.

"You're Marshal Six and you just had a little chat with the colonel."

"Everybody around here seems to know everything there is to know about me."

"Perhaps." The tall captain chuckled. He had a lazy way of smiling but his shoulders were wide, his hands powerful, and his dark eyes steady and alert. "I'm Rodrigo Medina."

"That supposed to mean something to me?"

"I guess it doesn't," Medina said. "I'm a friend of

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

Jericho Stride's. Thought he might have mentioned me. You can put that hand-cannon away, Marshal."

Six slid the Colt into his holster and eased his seat on the saddle. "What do you want, then?"

Medina's smile did not change. "You don't trust me at all."

"Should I?"

"We could go over to Stride's. He'll vouch for me."

"And if he does?"

The easy smile etched creases in Rodrigo Medina's face; it became evident he was not as young as he at first appeared. He had the classic features, but not the indifferent cruel arrogance, of a Spaniard highborn. His direct eyes had a certain steady wisdom; he moved slowly, with a great deal of self-confidence, and appeared to be a passionate, warm, self-contained man. Six had to remind himself that Medina wore the same uniform as Colonel Sanders.

In a voice pitched too low to carry beyond Six, Medina answered:

"It's important that you believe what I tell you."

"Try me," Six said. "I haven't jumped to any conclusions—yet."

"I hope you don't," Medina replied. He was no longer smiling. "My fine colonel probably asked you to do a little spying for him. Did you agree?"

"Why don't you ask him?"

"I intend to. But when it comes to questions from subordinates, the colonel only answers when he feels like it. I imagine he hung a few threats on his—requests?"

"You're doing the talking."

Medina shook his head. "There are no secrets down here, Marshal. Even the dust has ears. Everybody in this town knows what you're here for. Steve Lament."

"I'm getting a little tired of being told what my plans are."

"Sorry." A small smile briefly touched Medina's features, and fled. "The point is, the same fellow who

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

eavesdropped on your conversation with Jericho and and told the colonel about it—he reported to me, too. So I know what Sanders knows, and I can guess the rest. In this country if you mean to stay alive you develop a knack of taking the two you've got and the two you've only guessed at, and adding them up to see if they make four. Knowing the colonel, I'd guess he put it to you something like this—you spy on Santana, and bring the information back here, and if you don't, you get shot by accident and your friend Stride gets executed on some trumped-up charge. Maybe Holly Moore with him, too. Am I getting warm?"

"Keep talking."

"Sure. Well, I hear you're a fellow who's got a talent for getting in and out of hot water without getting blistered. That's fine, for you. But it leaves Jericho and and Holly in kind of a hard place."

"How much time did you spend in the States?"

"Enough to learn the language," Medina said. "Are you paying attention, Marshal?"

"I'm a little bored by all this tough talk, Captain."

"Let me finish and you'll understand. You need to know what's going to happen."

"Crystal ball or tea leaves?"

"Cards, Marshal. I'm going to lay them face up on the table."

"That's fine," Six drawled. "You do that."

Medina's face was expressionless. He spoke in a soft drone. "You'll go into the hills and Santana's men will pick you up. You'll tell your story to Santana and maybe he'll go along with you, maybe he won't. If he doesn't, you'll spend the rest of your life a cripple—if they don't shoot you. If he does decide to let you have Lament, you'll bring Lament out. You'll get him about as far as the foothills and some soldiers will materialize, take both of you into custody, bring you to Guadalquivir to face Colonel Sanders. It'll be well staged. Sanders will have Jericho and Holly up against a wall and he'll

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

invite you to watch while the execution squad loads rifles and takes aim. Then he'll tell you their lives are in your hands—it's up to you. He'll give you his solemn promise to let all of you loose—you, Lament, Jericho, Holly—all of you the promise of freedom, and all you have to do is give him the little bits of information he wants. So you'll give him the information, because you won't have any choice at all. And then, of course, he'll put you and Lament up against the wall with the other two and he'll execute all four of you.

"No," Medina continued, "it isn't pretty, Marshal, and it isn't honest, and it isn't just, but that's the way things are handled down here. My good colonel has been known to stand people up against the wall for nothing more than smudged identification papers. He's got you right where he wants you."

Six had become wholly still, watching him. He did not speak. Medina added, in a different tone, "Do you understand? If you carry this through, you'll end up dead, and three others with you."

"And you're advising me to turn around and go back where I came from."

"I'm just telling you what to expect, Marshal."

Six folded both hands across his saddle horn. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I think you'd better tell me what your place is in the scheme of things."

"Let's just say I'm a friend of Jericho's."

"You're under Sanders' command."

"Under his command, Marshal—not under his thumb."

Six wanted to ask one more question: was Medina a secret Santana rebel? But as soon as he thought of the question, he realized Medina would not answer it.

He said, "I'm obliged."

Medina inclined his head gravely. Six lifted his reins.

"*Buenos noches*," Rodrigo Medina muttered, and sat motionless while Six rode past him and turned the corner.

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

CHAPTER SIX

HIS HORSE'S HOOFS crunched gravel. He passed a soldier, cruising the dark streets with silent vigilance. The soldier gave him a searching look and his rifle stirred. Six spoke a few words and the soldier's expression changed from alert suspicion to one of polite bovine interest. Six went on, toward the plaza. An old Indian sat blanket-wrapped in a doorway; he looked asleep but when Six passed, the Indian's head lifted. The night held a sullen dense warmth, unstirred by any breeze.

He stopped his horse in the plaza and sat silent, clutched by a brooding great anger, resenting supremely the threats that had been hurled against him. *I wouldn't be here in the first place if I had a choice. My God—if all their soldiers can't handle Santana, how do they expect me to do it?*

But it was Clarissa whose image stayed at the front of his mind, giving him no freedom.

He felt heavy weariness settle on him. He got down stiffly, hitched the horse and went into Stride's cantina. The place had emptied out somewhat; the crowd was sparse—clerks, evening-shift workers, the few who didn't have to get up early. The blind old guitarist softly played a ballad on catgut strings; near him, at the back of the room, stood Jericho Stride, tall and slat-sided and black, shoulder against the jamb, listening. The old guitarist played with his blind eyes closed, his face lost in concentration. At the front of the cantina, by Six's elbow, a fat woman tugged impatiently at a man's arm and led the man out of the place past Six.

He felt weight behind him, and noticed, across the room, an aproned bartender: the bartender stiffened,

BIC COUNTRY, BIG MEN

nodded, and abruptly wheeled back into the room, making his way directly toward the corner where the old man played the guitar.

A glance over the shoulder revealed to Six a man in sarape and sombrero just turning away—evidently the man had gestured some kind of signal to the bartender.

The bartender stooped, spoke a few words close against the blind man's ear; the old man's head rocked back. A guitar string twanged harshly. The old man stood up, cutting off the song in mid-chord. An expression of urgency contorted his face. The bartender guided him by the elbow, swiftly into the back office doorway. The two of them pushed past Jericho Stride, who stepped back to give them room and spoke rapidly as they went by.

Six moved down the room toward Stride; through the office door he saw the bartender and the blind old man hurry across to the outer exit, the old man stooping to lift a knife out of his boot-top. All the while the bartender was talking softly, reassuringly. The old man slipped outside.

Six reached Stride, who shook his head mutely and kept watching the front door. Six looked that way in time to see a small figure appear—the cocky little sergeant, Mendez: the one he had seen quirt-whipping the young prisoner in Colonel Sanders' headquarters. The cruel little banty-rooster sergeant was trailed by a pair of hulking troopers with rifles held at port-arms. Sergeant Mendez's shrewd glance shifted around the room. His teeth clacked and he batted into the room, elbowing past men at the bar.

Stride said, out of the side of his mouth, "Let me do the talking, Jeremy."

Sergeant Mendez made his way down the length of the saloon to the office door. He glanced into the office, ignored Six, and spoke to Stride. He had to tip his feral face up.

"The old man, Juano. We wish to speak with him."

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

"That so?" Stride said.

Mendez's eyes glittered—small eyes, set close together in a pinched face. "I heard his guitar not two minutes ago."

Stride said, "Juano stepped out just a minute ago. I'm surprised you didn't meet him on the plaza."

Mendez's disbelieving, baleful glance covered Stride an instant longer and then he put his back to them, speaking rapidly to his two soldiers. One of them turned and accompanied the little sergeant to the front door, and out. The other soldier lifted his rifle and pushed gently between Stride and Six, going on through the office and disappearing out the back.

Six said, "*Now* what?"

"Juano—the old blind man. He's Carlos Santana's uncle by marriage."

"And at this hour of the night the Army all of a sudden thinks the old man can tell them where to find Santana?"

"Looks that way, doesn't it? Maybe somebody talked."

"Did you know he was Santana's uncle when you hired him?"

"I told you, Jeremy—I don't mess in politics."

The excited babble of talk had subsided in the room. The evening was wearing late; the crowd thinned out, drifting away singly and by twos; Sergeant Mendez's interruption had dampened the dregs of the evening. Somewhere, in a near quarter of town, several gunshots sounded.

Six said, "You don't think—"

"I don't think anything," Stride said, more harsh than necessary. An image crossed Six's mind: the last time he had seen Sergeant Mendez the man had been holding a bloody quirt in his hand.

They stood and watched the room empty out. Six opened his mouth to speak, and heard the click of a door latch behind him; he wheeled into the office. The

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

back door pushed open, and Six relaxed slightly—Captain Rodrigo Medina walked in, looking weary.

Stride glanced at Six, then walked into the office and shut the door.

Captain Medina said without preamble, "Old Juano fell on his knife."

"All right," Stride said. There was no reading his face. "How'd it happen, Rodrigo?"

"A soldier shot him in the leg. Juano probably thought he wouldn't be able to stand up to much of Mendez's torture. Maybe he knew where Santana is and didn't want to be the one to give him away."

"So he killed himself," Jeremy Six said.

Stride's voice climbed: "Rodrigo—why didn't you stop him?"

"I was not sure he wasn't right," Medina murmured. "I was following the good Sergeant Mendez. He's—impetuous. I thought if he knew I was watching, he might treat the old man more gently. Unfortunately I followed the wrong soldier, and by the time I got close, the old man was dead—and so was the soldier who shot him in the leg."

Medina's brittle glance held Stride's. "I thought I saw your bartender out there. I don't suppose you would know anything about who shot the soldier, amigo?"

"No."

"He was strangled to death. Tell your bartender to take care."

"I will. Thanks."

Rodrigo Medina shook his head dismally. "Sergeant Mendez is a fitting right hand for Colonel Sanderos, I think. My God, but there is too much killing."

Then he looked up; he seemed to shake himself; he turned to Jeremy Six and said in a stiff tone as dry as autumn wind through dying leaves, "I am instructed to tell you to advise Carlos Santana to surrender. I'm told he will receive a fair trial."

"Sure."

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

Medina smiled. "Sure," he echoed. "Listen—there's a brigade of troops on the way here from Ures to reinforce us. They left Ures tonight at sundown. It's a matter of three or four days' march for them—Santana will know how far it is, far better than you or I. You understand what I'm telling you?"

"I guess I do," Six said.

The easy smile crossed Medina's handsome face, and went away. He swung on his heel and slipped quickly out the back way.

Jericho Stride said, "I never heard him come so close to admitting he's working for Santana. That was taking a chance—and around here that can get you in trouble." He looked more closely at Six. "You're thinking about old Juano? Look, Jeremy, he was a sweet old man but he was all used up. Death doesn't mean much down here, they kill each other for a hunk of bread. Don't let your hate for Colonel Sanders and that little ferret Mendez get you all fired up for Santana's crazy hairpin revolution."

Six said, "Don't tell me what to do, Jericho. I've had a belly full of that."

"Sanders told you to hop to his tune, hey?" Stride's smile was crooked. He turned away, toward the battered table that served his office as a desk. "I sure miss the sound of that guitar."

Six opened the door into the cantina. The bartender had come in; he was going around the empty room putting out lamps. When he reached the door and looked in, Stride spoke to him. The bartender nodded coolly, said, "*Noches, patron,*" and left. Six rubbed his jaw. Jericho Stride said, "You can bed down out back in the shed. There's a cot against the back wall."

"Thanks."

"*De nada.* What do you plan to do?"

"About Steve Lament?"

"Yes."

"Go after him," Six said. "That's what I came for." He

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

turned and laid his heavy glance against Stride. "But first I owe it to you to give you a warning. If I go after Lament, I'm mixing you and Holly in it up to your necks."

Stride scowled at him. "How?"

Six passed a hand over his eyes; he was dead tired. He said, "Sit down, I'll tell you the whole thing. You need to know—you'll want to make your own plans."

While Six spoke, Jericho Stride sat back and withdrew the revolver from his holster. Methodically, listening without interruption, he thumbed open the six-gun gate and dropped the five cartridges one by one into his palm. They had turned green from a leather mold that had discolored them—sign they had been carried a long time in a shellbelt's loops. Jericho grunted once or twice as Six spoke, and rubbed the cartridges with the ball of his thumb until each brass shellcase shone. Out front there was a little noise—a few customers left in the cantina. A hoarse voice bawled, "*Buenas noches, señores.*" Huaraches scuffed across the cantina floor. Through it all, Six's voice droned on. Stride took a box of cartridges out of a carton under the table. His eyes were hooded. He put the five cartridges back into the revolver and took a sixth from the box, and loaded that into the empty chamber. Then he worked the weapon's action, rhythmically cocking and uncocking it.

Finally he put the gun away in his holster. For an extended interval he sat still. Once he flicked imaginary moisture from his mouth corners with thumb and forefinger. His expression slowly clouded, bespeaking a far-away regret.

Six was still talking when Holly Moore came in through the outer door. Six started: for a moment he had thought she was— *She's dead. Get it through your head.* Holly said snappishly, "Hell of a lot of noise around here tonight. Can't a body get any sleep?" She

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

was dressed in a quilted robe; her eyes were puffed with sleep.

She said, "Your window's open."

Jericho said, "You been listening?"

"I couldn't help it, darlin'." She wasn't smiling. She walked over to Stride and took a long cigar out of the pocket of his vest; she bit off the end expertly, spat it out, and bent over the chimney of the lamp to light it. She coughed and took it out of her mouth. "I never could stand these things."

Stride took it out of her hand and poked it in his mouth. Holly had turned a baleful glance on Six. "You've got us in a hell of a mess."

"Yes."

"Why don't you just turn around and go home, Marshal?"

"I can't."

"Men are stubborn fools. You can't bring her back, not by going after that man, Lament."

Jericho said mildly, "If he didn't go after Lament he wouldn't have much of himself left, Holly."

Six lifted his eyebrows; it was the first indication he had had of Stride's reaction.

Holly went to the window and folded her arms under her breasts; she looked cold, though it was a stifling warm night. She said absently, "I came through Puerto Naco yesterday. There was a boat in the harbor, a steam packet, leaving Friday for Buenos Aires." She turned around and stared at Stride. "We can both get on it."

Stride made no immediate answer. Holly said, "You need a shave."

"What do you want out of me? I changed my God damn shirt."

"So you did."

Jericho Stride said, "I'm not running anyplace."

"You're *what*?" She flung an arm out toward Six. "Didn't you hear what your *friend's* been telling you? You know what our lives are worth if we stay here now?"

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

"I know," Stride said, and shrugged. "I guess I keep thinking about old Juano." He turned his smoldering glance against Six. "But one thing's sure, we can't stay here."

Stride ground the cigar out under his foot. "Jeremy will do what he's got to do."

Holly said, "That's fine. That's just fine and dandy. But what about *us*?"

Stride looked at Six. "You're dead on your feet. Go on out and bed down."

"I will," Six said, without apology. He needed sleep; he also needed time alone, to think things out.

Holly, with an icy expression of scorn, reached over to the table and picked up a dog-eared dime novel with crumpled paper covers, and tossed it in Stride's lap. "Here. You might take up reading, all about how Buffalo Bill shot down Yellow Hand with a rifle at a range of one mile. You haven't got anything better to do."

The dime novel fell on the floor, crumpling pages. Stride picked it up, flattened it out, put it back on the desk and got up. He said, "I miss the sound of that guitar."

Six, at the door, said, "Jericho—"

"Never mind, Jeremy. No apologies, all right? You don't owe me a damn thing."

"Take care of yourselves," Six muttered, and went out.

CHAPTER SEVEN

DAWN: JERICHO CROSSED the office and leaned over the narrow cot to take down a pair of worn leather saddlebags from a wall peg. He packed them tight.

A .44-40 rifle stood in the corner. He checked it for dust and load, and laid it across the cot beside the saddlebags. He went to the door. When his hand gripped

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

the edge of the jamb the knuckles stood out, corded. He went onto the stoop behind the office and looked around the place as if to memorize it. The empty yard was littered with discarded junk—a weathered wagon-wheel, its iron tire buckled; a battered whale-oil lamp; odd wooden blocks, splintered and dry. Weeds grew profusely and a great ball of tumbleweed rested wearily against the wall under the stairs. A cloud scudded with stately speed across the red eastern sky.

Jeremy Six came out of the shed lugging his blanket roll. Jericho Stride said, "You don't leave a man much."

Six just looked at him. "I don't want any company, Jericho."

"Why—because I might pick sides with Lament when the time comes?"

"That's right."

"You might be right, after this. I had a pretty good little business here."

"Take your title papers with you and sell it somewhere down the line. You'll be all right."

"Sure. Only a man gets tired of being hounded from place to place by law badges like yours. And I was getting to like it here."

"I'm sorry, Jericho."

"I know," Stride said. "If I was you, I'd start down in Madera Canyon. Take the main road south about ten miles and turn up toward the foothills when you come to a mine road. You can't miss it, the ruts are good and deep from all those ore wagons. You'll go about six, seven miles and come to a big red rock spire. Turn to your left and head up the canyon. Just keep going, heading for the high country. Likely they'll pick you up sometime in the next day or two."

"All right. Thanks."

"And one more thing—don't light any fires and don't make any sudden motions." Stride smiled briefly. "But I guess you know all that. All right, Jeremy. Maybe I'll be seeing you sometime."

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

"Maybe you will," Jeremy Six said, and went.

Beyond the outside staircase that led up to the attic was a wooden enclosure the size of an outhouse. A ladder led up to the top of it, where an intricate lacework of pipes and buckets stood against the sky. One of the buckets had its bottom sieved with small holes. The rusty handle of a pump stood out. Stride went up the ladder and worked the pump until the wooden tank was full; he climbed down and stepped out of his clothes and entered the enclosure. A little light filtered down past the pipes and buckets above. He gripped a rope-pull to dump water through the sieved bucket and soak his naked body. He lathered with a bar of strong soap and dumped several more bucketfuls of water over himself, stepped out into the yard and stood dripping, taking pleasure in the cool sensation as the water evaporated from his skin. When he started to chill he took down a wrinkled towel from a peg.

Hard laughter bubbled down from above. He looked up. At the head of the outside staircase stood Holly Moore. She said, "My God, what an ugly sight to wake to."

She came down the stairs holding up her skirts. Without fuss Stride wrapped the towel around his midriff and padded forward barefoot. He said, "You don't look so daisy-fresh yourself."

"Kiss yourself," she said, and grinned. "Nobody else would. Did I ever tell you how damn ugly you are?"

"I think maybe you mentioned it a time or two."

"I hope to God you put clean clothes on."

"I had it in mind," he said. He went inside and stuffed himself into drawers and pants, buckled his gun-belt around him, and found his last clean shirt. Holly put her back against the door and said:

"I'm all packed."

"I've got to see Rodrigo first," he said. "Sit tight."

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

Rafael Sagan sat again in the chair stained with his own blood; again he felt the tight wire binding his wrists and ankles. His face, young and smooth just a few days ago, was puffed and scratched with welts. His back was laced with the tracks of Sergeant Mendez's whip. His belly and groin throbbed from the steady beating of Mendez's sharp fists. His shoulders were blue where the butt of the whip had beaten them. His shins showed the marks of boot toes. His clothes hung in ragged strips, glued to his body by scabs of half-dried blood.

His expression was a study in abstracted composure.

Mendez slapped his quirt against his palm, standing in front of him. "You have had the night to think and to heal your wounds, chico. Perhaps now you feel more inclined to speak?"

Sagan said nothing. Mendez smiled wickedly. On the desk were the remains of the breakfast the sergeant had eaten, forcing Sagan to watch: corn tortillas garnished with red chili peppers, brown frijoles, coffee. Sagan had not eaten anything in days. He closed his eyes and felt agony sing through him.

The door opened. Captain Rodrigo Medina looked in. "Sergeant."

"Yes, Captain?"

Medina jerked his head and backed out the door. The cocky little sergeant gave Sagan a cruel glance and left the room, leaving the door ajar. Sagan let his lacerated body hang loose in his lashings. He fought the impulse to moan. Footsteps scraped outside and presently he heard the impatient rasping voice of the lean hawk-faced colonel: "Well, Mendez?"

"He is stubborn," Sergeant Mendez said, half in apology. "You know these mountain people, Excellency—"

Sanderos made some reply; Sagan, fighting back a wave of pain, did not catch it. Bootheels struck the floor, a man pacing; the colonel's voice came through again and Sagan listened to it with full concentration.

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

It gave him something to fix his mind on besides his agony.

Sanderos was saying, "It seems certain the gringo marshal is traveling toward the Sierra. Otherwise why did he not go north toward the border?"

"Perhaps he intends to cooperate with us." That was Captain Rodrigo Medina's voice. The back of the chair stung Sagan's cut flesh. He tried to pull away but the pressure only increased the throbbing pain in his belly. His half-shut eyes were damp; his mouth was tight under pressure. Outside he heard the pacing footsteps halt and the colonel speak again:

"I gave fair warning. Captain, you will place Six's friend under arrest—the saloonkeeper Stride. And the woman with him. It must be done publicly, with many witnesses, so that the rebels will learn of it quickly. The news that we have taken his friends may discourage Marshal Six from displaying any unfortunate initiative. Second, Captain, you will post patrols at strategic points around the northern end of the Sierra to intercept Six if he tries to break out with his prisoner. They will be instructed to bring Six back to me."

"Alive?" That was Sergeant Mendez's voice.

"By all means alive. He cannot talk if he is not alive, Sergeant."

"Of course. But he might resist arrest, Excellency."

"In which case he might suffer injuries," Sanderos replied. "But he must be brought to me alive and conscious."

"Yes, Excellency."

"Captain?"

"I understand," Captain Medina said with cool formality. "That is all, Colonel?"

"Yes. Go now and arrest the two Yanquis. Meanwhile, Mendez, you will have one further chance to persuade our young guest to talk. If you fail, you must leave him in my hands."

Mendez's reply was not audible. Boots banged stiffly

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

across a floor, a door slammed, and Mendez appeared scowling before Sagan. "It is time you sang, little bird," Mendez said, and minced forward, lifting the strained quirt. Watching it come, Sagan tried to ride with it, but it lashed his shredded face. Tears blinded him. Mendez kept cursing softly—he did not hear the footsteps behind him, did not sense the lift of the heavy revolver, did not feel the barrel descend along the side of his head like a club.

Sergeant Mendez went limp. Strong arms caught his falling body and lowered it gently to the floor.

Captain Rodrigo Medina holstered his revolver and bent down quickly to twist away the wires that bound Sagan. Medina's voice was a murmur: "One day perhaps you will forgive me for not having done this sooner. I had to wait until now."

The surge of life, the renewal of hope, almost swept Sagan's pain from him; he was able to smile—though he had no idea what that action did to his mutilated face. "My life is yours, *Capitan*."

Medina went to the door, peered out cautiously, came back and bent down to drag Sagan's arm across his shoulders. When Medina stood up he was supporting most of Sagan's weight; still, blood rushed from the youth's brain and he felt dizzy; he tightened his muscles against the faintness and said, "I can walk alone."

A great sadness lengthened the captain's handsome face. "You ought to be in a hospital, *niño*, but I can't take you there."

Sagan was only half aware of the journey that followed. Medina half-carried him out the side door of the building, down into the stables. A wagon stood there, hitched and waiting, its bed two feet deep in loose straw. The captain's strong muscles tensed and Sagan found himself lifted into the wagon, settled among blankets. Medina laid straw over him. "Keep still and don't disturb the straw. No one can see you."

"Captain—"

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

"You can talk later." Sagan heard the captain's boots stride crisply away. Silence filled the stable, disturbed by the occasional swish of a horse's tail and kick of a hoof against a belly-fly. A steady ache pulsed through Sagan, dulling his senses; he felt himself drifting away from awareness. . . .

A hand shook him gently and he came awake smelling food. The warm spice of thick meaty tacos. Captain Medina spoke softly: "Eat."

Trembling, Sagan swept the straw aside and began to eat. "Keep your head down," the captain advised. The wagon dipped and swayed under the captain's weight. Sagan relished the food but ate quickly. The captain spread straw over him and then there was the snap of the brake being released, the soft cluck of the captain's tongue, the gentle slap of reins, and the break and surge as the wagon lurched into motion and swung out of the stable, bumping the wagon-bed, jarring Sagan with waves of pain. He endured them because he knew that each moment of pain took him farther from the barracks, closer to freedom. Then the wagon stopped; Captain Medina spoke in a murmur and got off the wagon. Through the lacing of straw Sagan could see the deep far blue of the sky. He had despaired of ever seeing it again.

The wagon seemed to be drawn up beside a building. One or two people came outside and he could hear them talking in a foreign tongue. One voice was Medina's. Medina's head appeared against the sky and Sagan watched his face; the captain said, "You are badly hurt, *chico*, but I rely on you to guide this man into the mountains. His name is Stride and he is our friend." To the man called Stride, Captain Medina said, "I'll tell Sanderos you'd already escaped when I arrived to arrest you."

"You do that, Rodrigo."

"Go now, amigos."

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

A woman's voice said, "I still say it's too damned sudden."

"Go on," said Medina.

The wagon creaked, swayed under a man's weight. Looking up, Sagan could see him now: high-boned, tall, black-skinned. Stride looked down and made as if to smile. A woman with dark reddish hair got up on the seat beside Stride. Captain Medina reached over the side of the wagon and gripped Sagan's shoulder. "Guide them well, Rafael."

"Mil gracias, Capitan."

The wagon broke away. Something bucked uncomfortably against his hip. He reached down and found it was a canteen; he uncorked it and drank. The cool water slid down his throat like a healing ointment. The wagon rocked and jerked under him, pummeling his body, and after a long time the black-skinned man craned around and said, "We're out of town now. You can sit up if you feel like it."

He pushed himself up, clinging to the side with one hand. Falling away quite far behind them he saw the town and the river. On either side the arid hills rolled by. Ahead of them lifted the foothills. "Santana is far to the south," Rafael said.

"I'm heading for Madera Canyon."

"Good." Sagan adjusted his body and tried to ignore the burning pain. "I will guide you from there," he said.

A rifle lay in the wagon bed with him, inside a coiled ammunition bandolier. Sagan stripped off the bandolier and picked up the rifle, examined its load, placed it across his lap: he was a soldier of the revolution, and a soldier must go armed in enemy country. He caught the black-skinned man's troubled smile.

They lurched forward at a steady clip until at noon Stride halted to rest and eat and browse the horses. They spoke little. Stride bound up Sagan's open sores with cloth. Afterward the black-skinned man climbed a nearby hill for a look down the backtrail, and the auburn

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

haired woman unwrapped the dressings on Sagan's wounds and re-tied them, shaking her head and speaking in the tongue Sagan did not understand. Her tone of voice, when Stride came back, was vitriolic as she gestured violently toward the bandages on Sagan, but Stride only grinned at her and gave her behind a friendly whack as she went by him toward the wagon.

The sun was hard as brass. They rolled on. When they achieved one crest, Sagan looked back, stiffened, grabbed Stride's arm and pointed.

Stride said huskily, "Army."

Sagan squinted through their dust plume; he heard Stride ask, "How many do you make out, Rafael?"

"Six men, maybe eight."

"No more'n a mile back." Stride said. The wagon broke loose and yanked wildly forward, pitching Sagan about; his pain seemed to cry out above the rolling din. He clenched the rifle: he would not fall into their hands again. Not alive.

The wagon careened past scrubs, plunged across the hills, threatened to tip over. Sagan hung on fiercely with one hand, feet braced; every pounding jolt battered his inflamed flesh. The roar and rattle deafened him. The wagon wheeled past a tall rock, surged up a stony slope, sailed bucking over the top—and crashed precipitously without warning into an unseen cut-bank.

The impact threw free the two riders on the high seat. Lodged in the angle of the bed, Sagan was caught there when the wagon began to tip over. The tongue snapped, the doubletree separated, harness broke. Both front wheels collapsed, snapping the heavy axle. The wagon pivoted on the front of its box and flipped end over end.

The sky wheeled. Sagan landed, stunning-hard, on his belly; the wind went out of him, he cracked his jaw. Dizzy, he had a brief moment of silent incredulity, skidding forward on his belly across rocks that ripped him open, and then felt the massive drop of the somersault-

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

ing wagon across the backs of both legs, just above the knees.

Almost abstractly he felt his legs snap. He heard them break; he knew they were crushed, and yet he felt no hurt from it. What he felt was a sharp incisive pain in his left arm, pinned under him.

The two wild lathered horses clattered away. Sagan lifted his shoulders to free his arm, and found it only twisted. The rifle was still somehow locked in his grip. The ammunition bandolier was tangled around his arm.

Baffled and amazed, he saw a figure stagger up through the settling dust, rising tall by a scrubby manzanita, stumbling, coming forward. When Stride came up he stared down at Sagan as if he did not comprehend what had happened; he turned away, back to the manzanita, knelt there and spoke. When Stride stood up again he was not alone. He came up with the woman, both of them unsteady on their feet but walking.

Sagan talked to himself silently. He told himself a great many things but chief among them was the fact that he was a soldier: he knew what he must do.

Before Stride could speak, Sagan was cocking the rifle and propping himself awkwardly to point the rifle at them. When he spoke his voice was calm and low:

"There is no time to dispute me—you only have time to try to catch the horses. Run—run that way, south, and you will come to the Rancho Nijar. As for the man called Ybarra. Ybarra, remember it. He will show you the way. Go!"

The woman's eyes snapped toward Stride. "We can't just—"

"Do not be fools," Sagan said tightly. "Both my legs are broken. You would not even get the wagon off me before the troops are here. Go now—and I will hold them back."

Stride studied him over a broken interval of time and then went past Sagan and disappeared around the bulk of the wagon. Sagan's suspicious eyes followed him but

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

Stride went out of sight. When Stride reappeared he had the canteen. It was dented but intact. Without a word Stride dropped the full canteen by Sagan and turned away, taking the woman by the arm.

The woman dug in her heels, protesting. "God damn it, Jericho, you can't just leave the poor son of a bitch to—"

Stride wheeled on her. "I've got no time to argue with you."

"You'd run out on a—"

"Sweet Jesus," Stride thundered. "*Rafael* understands!"

"Well that's just dandy, Jericho, because I sure as hell don't!"

Stride gripped her by both arms. "I've seen them live and I've seen them die, Holly. I could get him out from under the wagon but he hasn't got two hours left in him. Do you understand?"

Sagan's throat was very dry. He spoke urgently to the woman: "Señorita—listen to him. A dying man for two who are not injured, it would be a very poor exchange. If the soldiers catch you they will shoot you. Go—go with God."

The woman kept shaking her head. Stride wrenched her away and dragged her with him.

In a short while Sagan was alone. His legs began to throb with numb growing pressure. He drank from the canteen and put it aside carefully, bringing the rifle to his shoulder. From where he lay he could see a quarter of a mile downslope along the backtrail. The troops crested the rise, horseback silhouettes against the sky. Sagan cocked the rifle. He would make time for Stride and the woman. After that—he would not let them take him alive. He laid his cheek along the stock and began to squeeze the trigger.

The sun was very hot against his lacerated back.

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

CHAPTER EIGHT

SUNSET: LANCES OF blood-red cloud shot across the horizon. Jericho Stride, his face painted crimson in the twilight, reined in to twist around and sweep the undulating dry land behind them. The red hills rolled away, silent. "Nobody in sight."

"We've done enough doubling back and running in creeks to lose a Yaqui tracker," Holly said. She sat slumped on the bareback wagon-horse, her feet braced awkwardly in the harness. Her thighs were raw from the rub of horsehair. She said, "Stay put a minute," dismounted stiffly and limped into a clump of creosote. It was no real concealment but it hardly mattered. She made a quick job of ripping off her petticoats and wrapping them, bandage-like, around her thighs.

Stride grinned lazily when she came back. "Maybe we can pick up saddles at the rancho."

"If we find it. Shouldn't we be there by now?"

"Who knows? He said to come this way."

"The poor miserable kid."

"Not a kid," Stride said. "He was a man." He slipped off the back of the horse and came forward. "Better keep moving," he said, and helped her up.

Twilight came in shifting layers of vermillion and indigo. When darkness finally settled, it brought a cool dry wind. They jogged on while the night enveloped them like a seamless tent and uncertainty became a cage, against the bars of which Holly threw herself with increasing resentment. She said, "What the hell are we doing here?"

"Trying to stay alive."

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

"Sure."

"You'll make out, Holly, you always do. Just like me—we're mavericks, the both of us. Nothing bad going to happen to us."

Abruptly he halted his horse and reached out to grasp the halter of her mount.

"What is it?"

"Hush up." Stride was squinting across the dark hills behind them. Holly followed his glance but she could see nothing more than the vague swells of ground. No sounds touched her ears.

Stride said, "We're not alone, honey child. Here, take my reins—lead my horse down there and wait for me when you get to that tree."

"Tree?"

"Mesquite," he said, "halfway up the far slope there."

"My God, I don't see any tree over there."

"You just take my word for it." He slipped off the horse and stood beside her with his right hand on his pistol and his left hand on the hilt of his belt knife. "Move, now—I want him to hear two horses going on."

"Jericho, you be—"

"Go on," he said softly, and slapped her horse on the rump.

Frowning archly, she trotted down the long sweep of the hillside, leading Stride's horse. It seemed to take a long time to reach bottom; it was not until she started up the far side that she saw the stunted tree growing out of the slope. She stopped by it and looked back anxiously. Her eyes couldn't make out anything except a vague sense of the bare hillside going up a third of a mile into darkness. Her nerves strung out tighter as the minutes passed and she began to imagine terrors in the night. They were all the more fearful for their shapelessness and vagueness.

She remembered the hard brittle shine on young Rafael Sagan's eyes—she had not been able to forget it for a moment. She thought of the monumental courage of the

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

shattered youth, and thought of the pitiful few gunshots they had heard behind them as they rushed away from the wrecked wagon. And in those fragile moments while the boy died behind them they had both been on the point of wheeling back—Holly had yanked her horse down, had been swinging it about, when Stride had stopped her and talked with harsh, broken reluctance:

"You want him to die for nothing?"

And so they had gone on—if only, they told themselves, to give meaning to the boy's dying. Holly still tasted the bitterness of it; she shuddered in the darkness, where she did not need to maintain her flippant mask of derision.

It was a long time before anything moved within the sphere of her senses. Finally she heard footsteps, saw a man afoot coming toward her, nothing furtive about his movements: she heard his easy voice, "All right, Holly."

"What was it?"

"Yaqui," Stride said. "Scouting ahead for the troops."

"What happened?"

There was a faint, brutal shine on the surfaces of his eyes when he turned toward her and said, "I killed him."

"I didn't hear any shooting."

Stride only touched the hilt of his knife in reply; and boosted her up onto her horse. Holly said, "I didn't know you were that good at that Indian-fighting sort of stuff."

Stride mounted up. "A man picks up all kinds of odd pointers in thirty-odd years. All set?"

"Sure and I am. But I hope that rancho's not far." She followed him over the hill, staying close in the dark; after a while she said, "Jericho?"

"Aeah?"

"What did it feel like when you killed him?"

It was too dark for her to make out his expression. He said in a dull tone, "He didn't say."

It was evident enough, he didn't want to talk about

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

it; his macabre joke was designed to put her off and she allowed him his wish.

Presently they went over a crest and saw a ranch sprawled below them a half-mile away, the hilltop villa overlooking village and outbuildings. Rancho Nijar, where Sagan had told them to find a man called Ybarra, who would deliver them to the mountain rebels. . . .

They were about to put their horses down the slope when they heard a group of men singing; the melody came softly on the breeze. Holly began to smile but Stride leaned forward in his saddle to grab the bridle-headstall of her horse; he said, "Hold it up."

"What?"

His head was cocked. "That's an army song they're singing."

"What of it?"

"I've heard the troops sing it around the barracks. Never heard it anywhere else."

"And so?"

"And so," he said, "there shouldn't be any troopers around here. Come on—stick close to me and keep quiet."

They pulled off into the brush and angled toward the ranch, keeping off the skyline. In time they made a quarter-circle, edging closer to the ranch. When they reached the side of one hill they could see a small fire burning near the main house. No men were in sight, but a gunshot cracked and in reply three or four rifles opened up, booming from various positions around the village. The shooting quit as abruptly as it had begun; the singing went right on.

Holly said, "What the hell?"

"Pipe down."

Stride was squinting toward the ranch. Holly did the same; her eyes began to pick out little things she had not seen before. There were charred heaps in the village that looked like the burnt-down remains of buildings; little fires smoldered among them and there were spirals

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

of thin smoke. Someone darted across an interval between huts, and out of the brush beyond the buildings a rifle fired once. Several guns answered from the village. Two or three other rifles fired from various points along a ragged brushy perimeter surrounding the ranch; she could see the orange lances of muzzle flame. Through it all the singing kept up faintly.

"Like you'd whistle in a graveyard," Stride said.

"What?"

"That singing—just trying to keep their spirits up."

"Just what is going on here, my good man?"

"Well, the way I piece it out, the army must've laid siege to the ranch."

"Why on earth?"

"Politics. Old Don Pablo Nijar's a pretty powerful man down in these parts, and Carlos Santana's girl friend is Nijar's niece. I reckon the governor and old Colonel Sanders must've decided it's time to cut down the power of the Nijar family, seeing as how the niece is hung up with the rebel boss and all. So those'll be regulars down there, soldier boys, inside the houses—that's where the singing is. The guns out in the brush must be Nijar's people, driven out maybe, sniping back."

"That's a hell of a note. What do we do now?"

"Hush up and listen."

Holly stilled a protest on her tongue. The gunfire had subsided again; as she turned her head she heard a new sound, very faint, a chipping sound like someone digging, shovel against gravel.

"Let's have a look," Stride said. He turned his horse toward the sound of digging. Holly went with him, breathing shallowly, thoroughly frightened by the night's mystery. The hilltop crowned up on their right and blocked out their view of the rancho. Stride was only a dark vague shape on horseback. The chipping of a spade continued, louder now, digging steadily. They reached a stand of paloverde and he held up his arm, halting her. His arm swept forward to point at something

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

below them. She could see nothing but impenetrable obscurity, but by now she was sufficiently impressed by the keenness of Stride's eyesight to put up no objection. Stride made several gestures, in response to which Holly dismounted quietly. Stride put his reins into her hand and faded quickly into the night, on foot. The chipping sound continued for three or four minutes; then it stopped, and she could just make out the murmur of voices. Then the digging resumed.

Stride called her name; Holly, uncertain, led the two horses downslope toward his voice.

She found them at a low point in a saddle of ground between hills—Stride standing by, a stocky man deliberately thrusting spade to earth beside a heap of loose dirt. Another man lay prone on the ground, dead beyond question.

Stride said, "This is Ybarra." The man with the shovel glanced at her with a brief nod. Even in the darkness she could sense, perhaps in his movements, the tracks of grief on him. Holly looked at the corpse on the ground—an old man dressed in expensive riding clothes. Stride said, "That's Don Pablo Nijar."

"I'm so sorry," Holly said to the man. "Did you work for him?"

"I did, yes."

Stride said, "Sagan told us to find you, Señor."

"Rafael Sagan?"

"Yes. He too is dead," Stride said in Spanish.

"The pigs," said Ybarra. "Rafael was my cousin."

Holly stood mute. Ybarra looked toward the rancho, as if to pierce the hill between with his gaze. "Tonight we shall attack the rancho and kill the pigs." Ybarra was a sturdy block of a man, speaking without tone; he seemed almost indifferent to his own statement, as though what he prophesied had already taken place and the soldiers in the rancho were already dead.

Stride said, "What happened?"

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

"You are the black gringo from the cantina in Guadalquivir, no?"

"Yes."

"You are a friend to the captain, Rodrigo Medina."

"Yes," Stride said again.

Ybarra nodded and spat. "The pig of a governor sent his troops to surprise us. He is greedy for the Rancho Nijar. Many of us died, but many of them died as well. We let them take the rancho only so that we could trap them there. Now we are outside and they are inside. Before we left I poisoned the well. By now they are thirsty and our rifles keep them afraid. You can hear them singing to reassure themselves. A company of Carlos Santana's men is coming down from the mountains to join us, and then we shall close in."

While he was talking, Ybarra resumed digging in the hard ground. "Tonight we will kill them all. Then we ride to join Santana. All of us."

Stride said, "There's a big gringo who passed by here not too long ago."

"Yes. He has gone to Santana's. You are his friend as well?"

"Yes."

Ybarra mopped his forehead with a sleeve and turned to face the high mountains. "You may wait and ride with us," he said, "or if you wish, I will point out the way."

Stride said, "I'd just as soon have the lady away from here when the fight commences."

"Of course," Ybarra said, and lifted his arm to point the way while he spoke.

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

CHAPTER NINE

CRIMSON DAWN SPREAD across the high Sierra. Far back in the mountains, men stirred along the rocky tilted ground. The red glow flowed down from the higher peaks, past crevasses and humps to highlight a motionless sentry on a pinnacle, and moved on slowly, leaving streaks of black shadow in its wake.

Steve Lament stood on a flat rock overhanging the canyon. It had become his private place, the place where he came to brood. From here he had a view of the entire crowded length of the camp, when he chose to look at it.

Lament's face had become even more gaunt since he had come to Mexico; his peppery half-gray hair was enough, added to the hollowing of his face, to make him look prematurely old.

The sky brightened, red going to orange; the shadow line slid down the steep incline almost into Santana's camp. The hut village lay swallowed up in the cancerous spread of tents; at the head of the canyon, with light touching the tip of one pole, sprawled the horse corrals, long since outgrown: horses stood hobbled and picketed all through the tall pinetree groves. Below the trees were the half dozen old huts, the spring house, and the creek corkscrewing down past dead cookfires and blanket-rolled men just now coming awake, yawning and stretching and cursing, grinding knuckles into their eye-sockets. The night's chill still hung, sharp and clear in the air; Lament could taste it. He had the feeling he could count the individual pine cones on the tree that towered over the stone hut at the upper end of the canyon where Carlos Santana had his bed.

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

Shadows were long, breakfast fires starting up, men stretching their thick strong arms by the stream. They stood near their rifles and saddles, their taste for battle whetted at Candera, at Noga, at Durán and the railroad at Teculán and the barracks at Tajo. With each victory Santana's popularity increased, and the rebel army gained recruits. Looking on them now, Lament felt a distant sense of pride, almost as if they were his own followers.

The sun crossed the stream and dappled its surface with dancing points of light. Lament stood with his eyes hooded, breathing shallowly of the fresh raw air.

Footsteps scuffed the trail below. He wheeled, clutching a six-gun—and saw the giant Vargas coming up. Lament holstered his gun, nodded stiffly in the face of Vargas' childlike grin and effusive greeting, and turned a shoulder to the man. Vargas ignored the rebuff. A massive, huge, muscular man, he moved out onto the rock shelf, tipped back his big sombrero and planted his hands on the butts of his twin cross-belted revolvers. He wore ammunition bandoliers across his vast shoulders. His face was huge, round, glossy brown; he said hoarsely, "A fine morning."

Vargas was Carlos Santana's second-in-command—big, bluff, and a good deal smarter than he acted. He said, "I used to be a shepherd. Summer we camped here. I used to sleep where Santana sleeps now. My mother taught me to read but we only had two books, we had the Bible and the Don Quixote of Cervantes. Now I can't even remember what I read in them. A long time ago, that was. When I had seventeen years I went to fight with Benito Juarez in the south, and then I forgot about reading books."

Vargas spread his big hands. "You see all this? You know why Santana made me his general? I'll tell you, gunfighter, this Santana is a good man and a good fighter but he doesn't know a single thing about handling soldiers. They have to be trained. They have to

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

be fed. Their horses have to be grained. Santana, he knows nothing of these things. He thinks you feed two thousand men with leaves off the trees—he thinks you put a rifle in a peon's hand and right away he is a sharpshooter. All he knows is Governor Orbea is a bad man and has to be overthrown. Gunfighter, I'll tell you this, without Vargas there would be no revolution."

Vargas was laughing, a low rumble in his throat. Along the creek below, men moved back and forth with great charred coffeepots. Down near the foot of the canyon figures stirred in the tent city of the camp followers—fat wives, ragged children, old men, women who called themselves laundresses. At the top of the camp Carlos Santana came to the doorway of the stone hut, watched the camp for a moment and then swung back inside. A steady stream of lieutenants and messengers flowed in and out of the stone hut, nerve center of the revolt. From his high viewpoint it all seemed diminutive and a bit unreal to Steve Lament, like a stage play. Everything had seemed not quite real to him ever since he had arrived; the recent past hung around him like a cloak made of gauze—he felt like a temporary tenant, only renting his own life, afraid—afraid of death, for the first time in his memory. His carriage had developed a certain fragility, an uncertainty of foot and action that was unlike him. Fear imprisoned him while it mocked him. Up here in these mountains he had the feeling he was dying, or already dead, and was just waiting for his body to catch up with the reality of his death.

It was Clarissa Vane, of course; he had her death on his conscience. He couldn't shake it.

Across the canyon on a pinnacle a sentry stood up, etched against the sky with his rifle. Someone shouted—a long, ringing, distant echo. The sentry waved his hat; presently a small group of riders appeared at the bend of the creek below the camp.

Riding in the lead were a pair of Santana's men; two more brought up the rear. In the center was a big-boned

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

gringo, and the sight of that man sent a chill shudder through Lament. *So he's come. He did come.*

Vargas was watching him. "You know him?"

"I know him."

"Another gunfighter to help us train, help us fight."

"Not this time," said Lament.

"Who is he?"

"A lawman from my country."

Vargas' eyes were quick; he watched the horsemen below, turned and studied Lament, and said in a low rumble of hoarseness, "He has come for you?"

"Just so."

Vargas heaved his greatness off the rock and lumbered back down the trail. Steve didn't follow him right away. He stayed on the rock and felt the pressure of lonely fear. He did not know whether he could whip Jeremy Six with guns; there was a good chance he could. But what he did know was that he didn't want to have to try. He hadn't the stomach for it—not now.

He had come here to take refuge; he had found himself alone. Santana tolerated him, Vargas liked him, but the rest looked upon him with cynical curiosity, fearful awe, or downright hate. The older ones had no love for his kind: they hated gringos. The bounty hunters from Texas had come to collect rewards for Apache scalps not so many years ago, only they had made no distinctions between Apache scalps and the hair of Mexican peon farmers. Then, too, the gringo travelers on their way through northern Mexico to California had left a backtrail strewn with contempt, rape, pillage and death. The Mexicans with Santana, some of them, were old enough to recall the war of 1848—a war of gringo aggression.

And so he had found few friends. He was a hired gun, used to traveling alone, but things had changed when Clarissa had died.

After a long time he started down the twisting trail. The sun cast his shadow ahead of him and he tramped

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

it into the ground. His boot dislodged a stone that skittered down the side, starting a little avalanche of pebbles. He reached the bottom and still had to thread the crowded gather of tents and fires before he could reach the trampled road by the creek, pick a path through and turn upcanyon. It was going to be a very long walk, not unlike a walk to the executioner's scaffold. Lament began it—his walk toward Jeremy Six, his walk to meet retribution. Along the way he touched his guns and shivered.

When Jeremy Six dismounted, the slowness of his movements bespoke his fatigue. The scout who had picked him up three hours back in the mountains went inside the stone hut to report. Soon a man filled the doorway, a great rock of a man ballasted with revolvers and bandoliers. The giant glared at Six. "I am Vargas."

A man came from behind Vargas into the sunlight, fully as big as Six; it was only alongside the giant Vargas that he seemed small. "I am Santana. And you, Señor?" "Jeremy Six."

Santana's face was long and triangular, so that his large head did not seem too big for him. He had a short neck; the chin hung below the level of his shoulders. His eyes were slits set wide apart, separated by a great hook of a nose. He wore engineer's boots and a faded vest over his shirt; the big handle of a Remington service revolver stuck up from his waist sash.

"I have heard of you," Santana said. "Vargas, the horse."

Vargas moved ponderously past to take up the reins of the tired animal. Santana led Six into the hut. It was a small and spartan room; a straw-tick mattress lay on the floor in the corner. The ceiling was low, the floor coarse rammed-earth. The only furnishings were a few packing crates and a clumsy handmade wooden table, littered with papers. Vargas came up and stood in

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

the doorway, his head bowed to clear the top, and Carlos Santana said, "*Tiene hambre.*"

"Then I will have food brought to him," Vargas said, and stepped outside.

Santana showed Six an enigmatic smile; he said, "Vargas is a practical man—revolutions need practical men. What do you come here for, Señor?"

"Looking for a man called Lament."

"So," Santana said, and showed, again, his split second smile. "I thought perhaps you had come to join our revolution."

"Maybe some other time."

Six was about to continue but someone burst into the hut—a small figure, a waif at first glance; when Six looked around he saw it was a girl, small but full-grown, very dark and very pretty, her face clouded by anger.

"Carlos—"

"*Querida*," Santana said, gentle and fond.

"You waste time with this gringo while they shoot at my uncle. He may be injured, Carlos—he may be dead!"

"Have patience," Santana said.

"Patience!"

"Patience, my love. It is hard—you are concerned only with your uncle and his Rancho Nijar, which is as it should be, but I am concerned also with thousands of men here, concerned indeed with the fate of the province. I can't simply mount my whole army and rush to your uncle's ranch with guns blazing."

"And why not?" Her eyes flashed; she was, Six observed, a very beautiful little woman, spirited and passionate.

Santana had not answered her; the girl said again, "I don't see why you don't."

"You see very little, my sweet one," Carlos Santana said. His glance brushed across Six, made slightly irritable by the obvious wish that this could have remained private.

The girl said bitterly, "I hadn't realized what a cruel

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

man you are, Carlos. Don't you care at all what becomes of my uncle and the others at Rancho Nijar?"

"I care very much, Elena." With a glance at Six he added, "Now I am sure you have many things to do—we will talk later, *Querida*."

She stared at him. "Yes, of course," she said. "You are busy." Her face turned scornful; she whipped away from him. "I shall not bother you again."

Santana took a pace forward. "Wait—had I the time I should explain—" but she was out the door and gone.

Vargas appeared in the doorway, blocking the light. Santana gazed moodily past him. Vargas said, "Food is being brought."

Santana said, "Any word from Rancho Nijar?"

"Not yet."

"Hernandez should have got there by last night?"

"In plenty of time."

"I pray for that."

"Hernandez had a whole company of men," said big Vargas. "More than enough to protect Nijar."

"I hope so—I hope so. Nijar could not last a day without them." He scowled, turned toward Six, muttered under his breath—"They must attack Nijar merely because his niece is my woman. Jackals."

Then he lifted his long head to face Six. "Now you want to see Lament. Why?"

"Private and personal."

"Don't be absurd," Santana said. The explosive way he said it made Six smile in spite of himself; Santana was so much like a professor admonishing his students. He made an incongruous revolutionary, for sure.

Santana added, "Two nights ago you were in Colonel Sanderos' office in Guadalquivir."

"You don't miss much, do you?"

"Do you think I can afford to?" Santana went over to his table and sat on the corner of it, one leg free-swinging, the other stretched to the floor; he bent his head

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

down, pretending to look at a paper document, and spoke in a spuriously casual way:

"Six, you came here to kill a man who's very valuable to me. Everyone between here and the border knows that—you cannot keep secrets in a country like this."

"So they keep telling me."

Santana's head turned slightly; his eyes darted toward Six, as if to catch him off guard, and he said, "It must be clear to you that I can't let you have him. I need his skills. And so I have to admit you puzzle me—why did you come to me? Why didn't you try to sneak into my camp and abduct him or kill him?"

"It would have taken me half a lifetime to find this place without your help."

"So you let my men pick you up and bring you here. What do you expect to do now?"

"Take Lament back with me."

"To kill him?"

"To make him stand trial."

"And then hang him."

"I guess so," Six said grimly.

"I am still baffled," Santana said. "What made you think I would just let you have him?"

Six's face was bleak, giving away nothing. He said in a cold voice, "The woman he killed in my town was pretty well liked. Not a whole lot older than your young lady, there. Tell me this—what would you do if the tables were turned, if it was your woman he'd killed, my town he'd run away to?"

"You're appealing to my honor? Isn't that a great risk? How do you know what kind of man I am?"

"I only know one way to find out," Six said.

"She was your woman, the one you say he killed?"

"Yes," Six said, making a simple answer because it avoided qualification. He wondered if, were she still alive, he would have said to any man, *She is my woman*. They had been close, but there hadn't been that possessive sense of ownership. They had never *belonged* to

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

each other; now, as the realization flashed through his mind, he did not know what that meant—did not know whether it had been better or worse for that lack of possessiveness. They had each been full of independent dignity. . . .

Santana was looking down at his paper-strewn table again; he said, "I wish things were as simple as you want them to be. I'm at war, Señor. I need the use of every means available to me. Particularly Lament—I have all too few good men trained with guns. Lament has been teaching my soldiers, but the work is far from finished—we keep gaining new recruits and they need training. We are a shoestring army, we need to know how to make our own cartridges, how to repair our own weapons—not to mention how to kill with them. Lament knows these things."

"He's not the only gunslinger in the woods."

"He's the only one I've got right now."

Six's glance shot toward him; it surprised him—he had had visions of a camp crowded with expatriate American gunmen. This made it a great deal more difficult.

"You did not know that?" Santana murmured. "I'm sorry if it throws your scheme into a new light, Señor. But perhaps now you see why I find it difficult to consider honoring your wish."

"There's still the little matter of justice."

"A woman murdered. I know. But I'm concerned with justice for a vast population of exploited peons—not just one woman who, whatever else she may have been, is dead now and can't be helped by me."

Santana stood up, his eyes half-shuttered; he said, "And so, you see, I need Lament more than you do." And he nodded slightly to the giant Vargas, still standing mute in the doorway.

When Six looked that way he saw Vargas' guns. They were leveled and cocked.

Santana said, "Please drop your gunbelt, Señor Six."

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

He stood facing Santana, his hands rope-tied behind his back, his gun taken from him. Santana said to him, "Six, listen to me—guns are going off, you can smell smoke. I need men like you."

"Not my line, I'm afraid," Six said, and found himself liking this big shaggy rebel leader. He said, "Before you dump me in your hoosegow, I've got a message for you from Captain Medina. He said there's a brigade of army reinforcements on the way from Ures to Guadalquivir to beef up the Governor's forces. They left Ures night before last. I guess that's supposed to mean something to you."

"It does. Thank you for the information—although of course I had already received it from other sources."

"A test?"

"One always likes to know who one's friends are."

"But it won't buy me much, will it?"

Santana smiled. "I appreciate your understanding."

In the door, Vargas stepped out, spoke briefly to someone outside, and in a moment came inside with a plate of simple food, which he placed on a corner of the big table. Santana nodded to him and Vargas went around behind Six to untie his hands. When Six looked around, Vargas had stepped back against the wall and was holding a gun trained on him.

"Eat," said Santana.

"And then what?"

"I'll have to keep you in custody for a while."

"I've got a town depending on me. They expect me back within a week."

"They'll have to do without you for a while. Eat."

Too hungry to object, Six moved to the table and began to eat, standing up. Santana said, "Don't you care at all about what's going on down here?"

"It's not my fight, is it?" Six chewed the spiced meal slowly, his mind working energetically. "I've seen revolutions down here. There was a time when your Governor

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

Orbea was a rebel himself. He spouted all kinds of principles too—rights, justice, reform. Until he won.”

“Orbea’s day is past. Yes—it *is* a question of rights and justice. The ignorance of men doesn’t give Orbea’s thieves the right to rob them, even though it may make the theft easier. My people are too hungry to fight for their rights without leadership—and so, it’s left to men like me. I won’t pretend false humility, Marshal—I’m not a humble man. I fight this revolution because I want to lead the people. I think I can lead them better than those who now have the power.”

“Does that make you any different from Orbea?”

“The difference, my friend, is that Orbea forgot what he started out to do.”

“And you’ll remember?”

“I’ll try to,” Santana said levelly.

Six continued eating, aware of the cocked gun in Vargas’ fist. He watched Santana, Vargas, and the movements outside, visible through the doorway, with consuming interest: he acted unconcerned, giving no indication whether or not he was worried by the prospect of captivity.

Two unpleasant-looking men appeared just outside the door; Vargas moved that way and argued with them in taut low tones. All the while, Vargas kept his gun—and his eyes—on Six. Santana moved toward the hut door to find out what was going on, and Vargas said disgustedly, “These are your loyal patriots—they demand immediate payment for the food they have delivered.”

Six, watching with half his attention, was thinking fast, eating almost bovinely to cover the workings of his mind. He had not come here without a plan, even if it looked as if he had; was this the time to spring it—and would it work? He was still deciding; meanwhile the colloquy went on near the door: Santana asked,

“How many pack animals have they brought?”

“Sixteen,” said Vargas.

“Pay them, then.”

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

"*Por Dios*—with what?"

"The coffer, Vargas."

Vargas began to turn, then stopped. "And him?" He was pointing, with a gun, at Six.

Santana looked over his shoulder. "Send someone in to guard him while he eats."

Vargas lifted his bellowing voice and sent it hurtling out across the camp. Presently an armed youth arrived; Vargas spoke quickly, the youth nodded and held his rifle on Six, and Vargas left.

Six, his eyes hooded, finished his meal and set the plate down on Santana's table. Just then Vargas came back with canvas pokes, which he dropped into the hands of the two sour-faced traders, one of whom licked his lips and grinned at his partner: "And where shall we deliver the next load?"

"There will be no next load," Vargas said. "You will stay here."

"What!" But when the two men looked at Santana, Santana only nodded.

The trader drew himself up. "Santana, I will have you know—"

"You were led here," Santana said. "You know my location now."

"But you can rely on our honor."

"Of course," Santana murmured, with distaste. "You will remain as our guests until we depart this place."

Vargas took the two men roughly by their shoulders. "Come on, jackals. You'll have time to count your gold—grain by grain." He led the two of them, protesting, into the sheds below.

Six could see most of the scene through the doorway. He saw them go into the shed, heard a man cry out inside the place and heard boots crush the earth, scrambling into a run. One of the traders came running out of the shed, wide-eyed and open-jawed. A gun inside the shed went off, making a great round boom. The running man fell flat on his face in the dust. Vargas ap-

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

peared in the shed mouth, stooped, a revolver in either hand.

Santana went down the slope and bent over the prone trader. From where Six stood, inside Santana's hut, it had been evident by the way the man fell that he was dead.

Vargas dragged the second trader out of the shed. That one was dead too—knifed in the chest. Vargas had the two heavy sacks of gold dust in one fist.

Carlos Santana spun toward the giant and grabbed a handful of Vargas' shirt-front. Vargas met his blazing glance unblinkingly. His voice was loud with justification; Six heard him say self-righteously, "They fought with me. It is his own knife—you can see that. I turned it against him and then the other one was running away. I had to stop him."

Santana released him and pushed him away, and came back toward the hut, saying, "We are no better than our enemies, Vargas."

"What?"

"Bury them."

"Yes. And I'll put the gold back where it came from—where it belongs."

Santana came as far as the doorway of the hut, and turned and spoke to the crowd that had begun to gather:

"If I thought any of you would kill two men for the sake of a few ounces of gold—"

Leaving the sentence hang, he curled inside the door. Outside, Vargas stood by the dead men and called petulantly after him:

"They were jackals, Santana—greedy worthless scum."

Santana murmured, "And aren't we all?" He shook his head. "These are tragic times." He looked up, at Six, as if suddenly realizing that Six was still here. And Six, who had seen more than enough, thought, *Time to quit being a spectator*. It was time to start the action he had come for. He had arrived knowing the risks he faced; he was prepared. It was a small piece of luck that they

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

had not thought to tie his hands again when he finished eating—but even that was not vital; he was prepared for that, too—a folded razor, carefully sewn to the inside of his belt, at the back where he could reach it and where no one was likely to look for it. As it turned out, he would not need it, at least for a while.

Vargas had his gun, but that too was not important; he had come fully expecting to be disarmed. Now, watching Santana and the confused armed youth by the door, Six thought, *I'm as ready as I'll ever be.*

Moving slowly, so as not to startle the youth, Six put his boot up against the edge of the table and made as if to tug it straight on his foot. When he dropped his foot to the ground he turned, his face expressionless, to step forward. The movement momentarily placed Santana between Six and the young man with the rifle.

In that moment Six lifted his hand, displaying the twin-barreled derringer pistol he had lifted from his boot, and said very softly to Santana, "All right, now, don't move a whisker."

CHAPTER TEN

"TELL THE KID to drop his gun," Six said. "Tell him to do it easy and not raise a ruckus."

Santana watched him dismally. Not moving, not taking his eyes off Six, he said to the youth, "Do as he says, please."

With reluctant rage the youth put the rifle down against the wall and stepped away from it.

Six said, "Now call Vargas in here."

"Vargas?"

Six nodded and gestured with the derringer. It was

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

taut and full of danger, this stretching moment—no telling when someone might barge into the hut, or when the youth might take a notion to make a try for Six. The derringer wouldn't do him much good in a real fight. But he hoped Santana wouldn't allow that to happen; Santana had to have a good enough sense of relative risks and values. Six had to count on the fact that Santana wouldn't risk lives—his own or others—for Six. Six wasn't that important to him. Or at least he hoped so.

Santana filled his chest, watched Six, and let his call sing out:

"Vargas!"

Six moved closer, reached out and extracted the Remington service revolver from Santana's sash. With that in his left hand, he put the little derringer away in his pocket, cocked the Remington, and moved swiftly across the room to stand by the front wall, next to the youth's rifle. The youth, unarmed now, backed up, going deeper into the room to join Santana.

Vargas' giant shadow darkened the doorway. "You want me?"

"Come in here," Six said, and shot a sharp glance at Santana.

Santana had no expression at all on his face. Vargas came slowly inside, blinking to accustom his eyes to the relative dimness inside the hut. He hadn't yet seen the Remington in Six's fist.

Six said, "Stand still, Vargas, and don't make any sudden motions."

Vargas stood bolt still, rearing back to look around at him. Six gave him time to see the gun, time to get used to the idea; then he said, "Now unbuckle your gunbelts and let them drop to the floor, and step over there with Santana."

Vargas' thick brows beetled down. Santana said quickly, "Do as he asks, Vargas."

"But—"

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

"He does not intend us harm," Santana said. "Don't risk your life without need."

"Smart," Six murmured. He waited until Vargas had dropped the gunbelts and stepped angrily back; then he went to them, picked them up, and recovered his own revolver, which had fallen along with Vargas' belts. Six took the gunbelts back to the wall and dumped them beside the youth's abandoned rifle.

He now had his own revolver in one hand, Santana's in the other—formidable enough firepower, he hoped, to discourage even Vargas.

Santana said, in an almost conversational voice, "All right—what do you think this will get you?"

"Only what I came for."

"Lament?"

"That's it," Six said. "Now I want you to come over to the door, nice and easy, and call him up here the way you called Vargas."

"Suppose he's not in earshot."

"Then send someone for him," Six said. "Just remember, I'm right here behind you with these guns. Don't make any sudden remarks. You don't want to risk your whole revolution for a couple of two-bit gringos who'll be gone and forgotten within a few hours."

"You really expect to get away from here with him?"

"One thing at a time," Six said. "First call him." And gestured gently with the revolver in his right hand.

Evidently Steve Lament had not been far away. He appeared very shortly after Santana called his name from the doorway.

He came in obviously primed—hand hooked over one gunbutt. *He saw me arrive*, Six thought. But he didn't give Lament any chance at all. When Lament stepped into the room Six, standing right by the doorway on the inside, jammed one gun hard against Lament's back and said, "Not a whisker, Steve."

"Jeremy?"

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

"That's right." Six's voice was cold.

Lament hadn't turned, not even his head. Now his shoulders slumped. "All right," he said. "Go ahead. Pull the trigger."

"I guess not."

"Isn't that what you came for?"

"I came to take you back."

"Waste of time," Lament said woodenly. "I'd just as soon have you get it over with now."

"So would I, I guess, but the book isn't written that way."

"You do everything by the book, Jeremy?"

"By the book. Yes—everything in the book was put there for a reason. Drop your hardware, now."

Lament let his gunbelt fall and moved farther into the room, toward Santana and Vargas and the youth. When Lament turned, it was the first Six had seen of his face. He had expected to feel a livid sense of hate. All he felt was a cool indifference, shaded by a slight surprise: Steve Lament looked gaunt, hollow and old. He had aged terribly since Six had last seen him.

This next part, Six thought, would be tricky.

Seeming to sense the same thought, Carlos Santana said, "All right—you've got us. Now what do you do with us?"

"Nothing—with you. Lament goes with me. So does Vargas."

"Vargas?"

Vargas himself roared something and scowled.

"As a hostage," Six said. "I'll let him loose when I'm in the clear."

Santana said, "And when will that be?"

"When I'm at the border," Six told him, and met his eyes. "Vargas will help us keep out of the way of the Governor's troops, because if he doesn't, he'll fall into their hands himself. And if any of your people come too close while we're on our way, I'll have to start putting

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

bullets in him. In the knee, maybe, or the hand for a start."

"You know my people's methods, I see," Santana muttered. "The question is, are you willing to use them?"

"You can try me," Six said coolly. "I don't imagine you will. Vargas is pretty important to you—you'll be wanting him back in one piece."

It was, right now, the riskiest part, and he saw he was going to make it: he saw Santana was going to let him do it. Santana could have stopped him, with one shout—at the risk of his life and the others', taking a chance Six would not shoot them unarmed. But Santana would make no decision; no matter how much of an idealist he appeared, Santana was nevertheless aware of the brutalities of his own world. Had the positions been reversed, Santana—in the end—would have shot his unarmed hostages if it seemed necessary. Being that kind of man himself, Santana could not do otherwise than attribute the same style of thinking to Six.

And so, in this challenge of wills, Six was the winner—perhaps only because he had planned it, prepared for it, while it had taken Santana by surprise.

Six, who had been speaking in Spanish like the rest of them, spoke now in English to Santana: he said, "I want you to talk to the kid, there. Tell him to bring up four fresh horses, saddled and ready to go, and post them right outside the door here."

"Four?"

Six said, "No questions, Santana. Four horses. Tethered right outside. He's to talk to no one at all. I want you to tell him that—impress it on him. I want it to come from you, which is why I'm not telling him myself. Tell him that if he so much as says one word about what's going on in here, it will cost you and Vargas your lives."

"Would it really?"

"It could," Six said flatly, "if you force me into that

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

kind of corner. Don't take the chance, Santana. Use your head."

Santana turned and began to speak to the youth. Six watched all of them, particularly Vargas and Steve Lament. They all looked at him; none of them moved. Santana spoke at some length, impressing on the youth the importance of silence, the risk to his leaders' lives should he blurt out what was happening inside this hut. Presently the youth, subdued and pale, slipped outside.

Six, with both guns cocked, leaned back against the wall. "Now let's all just stand still. We've got a little wait to get through."

Six came out the door first and stood just beside it while the others filed out. They all wore their guns—all unloaded, except Six's. Six stood at the edge of the door so that he could watch Lament and Vargas mount up while at the same time he could see inside the hut, where Santana and the youth sat in the far corner, tied hand and foot, gagged with bandannas. Vargas had tied them, under Six's supervision, but Six had tested the knots with care.

Now he stepped away from the doorway, picked up the reins of one of the horses and gathered them to the saddlehorn as he stepped smoothly into the saddle. His right hand rested on the holstered gunbutt; he said *sotto voce*, "Pick up your reins now and move out ahead of me, nice and slow."

Steve Lament said, "This is a hell of a waste of time, Jeremy."

"Gentle down and keep quiet," Six said.

There were, easily, more than a thousand people in view, scattered through the length of the crowded camp below. Six had no intention of riding a gamut through the entire camp. He said, "Turn left up into the trees."

Vargas gave him a cold glance and reined his horse

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

that way. Six had the reins of the fourth horse, saddled but riderless, draped over his left wrist. Leading the horse, he kept his right hand free on his holstered six-gun. Lament and Vargas rode just ahead of him, slowly singlefooting toward the handful of sheds and cabins that marked the upper perimeter of the camp. It was from one of those cabins that Six had seen the girl emerge, earlier when he had entered the camp; now he told his prisoners to head toward that cabin. As they moved up the steep, pine-needle-strewn slope, Six spared a brief glance downward at the sprawl of the rebel camp. There was a great deal of busy activity. He had the feeling—he had felt the same way on arriving—that this was no longer merely a training camp for a someday revolution; he had the feeling Santana had them just about ready to go to war. Full-scale war against the Orbea administration. Another few days, he felt, and he would have had to ride onto a blazing battlefield to find Steve Lament.

. . . . They reached the cabin in the pines and Six told them to halt their horses. Lament obeyed, incurious; he seemed wooden about everything. But Vargas gave Six a bright, alert frown of suspicion.

Six spoke to him rapidly. "Call the lady out here, Vargas."

"I don't—"

Six lifted his gun half out of holster. "You want me to go in there after her with this?"

Vargas flushed. He folded both big paws across his saddle horn and spoke in his thundering growl: "Elena?"

The girl's voice came from within: "Who is it?"

"It is I, Vargas. Can you come outside a moment?"

"Of course. Who is that with—"

She had pulled the door open and stepped fully into daylight before she saw the revolver in Six's fist. Six said mildly, "Please try not to be alarmed, Señorita Nijar. I want you to get on this horse and go for a bit of a ride with us."

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

Her eyes were wide. "I—I don't understand."

"I'll explain on the way. Please?" He held out the reins of the horse he was leading. Vargas moved forward to help her into the saddle; Vargas said:

"We must do as the gringo asks, for the moment, Elena."

"But I still don't—"

"Later," Six said, feeling pressures of nervous urgency; he was strung taut as a telegraph wire. The past half hour had been endless, an almost intolerable tension; all the way his scheme had been a one-man operation, capable of exploding against him at any moment. His luck had held, but the strain on his nerves was beginning to tell. He herded the three others ahead of him, up over the top through the tall pine timber, and out of sight of the main camp. They passed a sentry post—Six ordered Vargas to lift his hat and call out a greeting—and then, beyond sight of the sentry, he halted them and told them to dismount: he had Vargas tie Lament's hands together and rope Lament's feet together under the belly of the horse. Then he ordered Vargas to tie Elena Nijar's hands in front of her—not too tightly. Vargas growled and scowled but obeyed. Then, with the other two safeguarded for the moment, Six tied Vargas' big wrists together behind him and lashed him to his horse as Lament was lashed.

"It won't be comfortable for you," he admitted, "but it's the only way I know of to keep all three of you in line."

Steve Lament said drily, "No need to apologize to us, Jeremy, but I think you owe the lady an explanation."

"Maybe you all need one," Six answered. "All right, I want all of you to listen to what I've got to say, because it may keep you from making a mistake that could cost somebody his or her life."

Elena Nijar drew in her breath sharply. She still had not lost her baffled look of anger.

Six moved among them, using his saddle rope to tie

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

all three of their horses together, as if on a long picket line. The free end of the rope he carried forward to his own horse. Finally he mounted up and sat his saddle hipshot, twisted around to talk to them:

"This man Lament killed a woman in my town. I'm a peace officer. I came here to take him back. He's to stand trial for murdering a woman called Clarissa Vane."

Lament wasn't looking at him; his eyes were trained, brooding, on his own saddlehorn.

Six went on:

"I've got no intentions of doing harm to Carlos Santana or anyone else. I took you, Señorita, and Vargas because with you here Vargas will not take stupid chances, and with both of you here Santana will not take chances either. The fastest way for both of you to return to Santana unharmed is to get me and my prisoner to the border by the fastest possible route. As soon as we get there I'll turn you both loose. Vargas will guide you back to Santana. If anybody has any questions, let's hear them now."

Vargas stirred. The great voice rumbled in his chest. "How can we trust you to do what you say?"

"Have I got any reason to harm you?"

"No, Señor," Vargas said tonelessly, "but I do not pretend to understand the mind of the gringo. Your people have come to this country before and killed without reason."

Steve Lament said, "Six will keep his word, Vargas. I know him. Don't give him any trouble—I don't want either of you hurt on my account." His voice was bitter, final, washed out.

Six, surprised, did not show it. He was making a point of avoiding all possible personal contact with Lament. With Clarissa fresh in his mind he knew his only chance of doing his duty objectively, as it had to be done, was to maintain his distance from Lament. Now the man had him doubly confused; he didn't want to

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

have to fight that uncertainty just now. There were too many other dangers to worry about.

"We've got a long ride," Six said, "and I don't intend stopping until we get to the border. Let's get moving."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

SANTANA STOOD ARMS akimbo. His brow was deeply creased. The cabin door behind him stood open; down below, while he watched, crowds of men shifted and milled like flowing oil. Alemán, who was third-in-command, came up and stood mute, a lean trim little man dwarfed by Santana.

Santana frowned across the camp. In his hand was crumpled the note Jeremy Six had left on the table: *I am taking the Señorita Nijar as well as Vargas and Lament. You will understand, I hope, the need for this. The señorita and Vargas will be released unharmed at the Arizona border unless you attempt to interfere.*

And, Santana had learned as soon as they had discovered him and untied him, Six had written the truth: Elena was gone.

The gringo was shrewd; Santana had to credit him that. It was one of the most daring one-man successes, against formidable odds, that Santana had ever seen or heard of. Looking at the tidy, competent Alemán who stood patiently awaiting orders, Santana found himself thinking, *Por Diós, what I would give to have a company of men like this Jeremy Six.* Despite the events, he found—almost unaccountably—that he could not bring himself to hate Six; and in the past few moments he had realized that this was because he and Six were much alike in many ways. He could only admire Six's

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

resolute integrity—his decisive obedience to what he regarded as his duty, regardless of the odds against him.

Well, then, Santana thought bleakly, *I have my duty too*. He turned to Alemán. "We have a great many things to do and very little time, amigo."

"Tell me what to do, then, Excellency."

"You will send one company of men—the best men, with Indian scouts—to follow Vargas and Elena and the gringos."

"With orders to try to rescue them?"

"No. Under no circumstances are they to approach the gringos' camp. They will merely follow, at discreet distance, and make absolutely certain the Governor's army troops do not interfere with the gringos' ride to the border. Once the two gringos have crossed the border, our men are to pick up Vargas and Elena and give them safe escort back to us."

And, as he spoke, Santana thought very drily, *This I must do, and it is exactly what Six knew I would have to do. He counted on me to give him his protection from Orbea and Colonel Sanders and the loyalist army*. The irony of it did not escape him. Six had forced him into a position where even if all he wanted was to see Six dead, he would still have to give Six the protection of his own troops—to prevent Vargas and Elena from falling into the cruel hands of Colonel Sanders.

Alemán, small and brisk, had gone to relay the orders. Very shortly, Santana saw a hundred men ride out of the lower end of the camp. Somewhere in the fastness to the north, they would pick up the tracks of the two gringos, of the great Vargas, of Elena—*Elena*, he thought, his eyes clouded with pain. If any harm came to her. . . .

He went inside the hut, picked up his Remington where Six had dropped it on the table, and reloaded it from a box of hand-loaded cartridges. By the time he clapped on his hat, rammed the revolver in his waistband and returned to the door, Alemán had returned.

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

Santana said, "We cannot change the schedule because of this."

"I cannot tell you how sorry we all are, Excellency."

Santana nodded. None of them was half as grieved as he was. But the timetable had been set up quite some time ago and to change it now would be to risk the success of the entire revolution.

He shook himself, as if he had a chill tremor; he said, "I have a bad feeling about starting without Vargas. You might say a superstition."

"You speak of Vargas, Excellency, when you mean the Señorita Nijar."

"I suppose you're right. But Vargas—I have never fought a battle before without him."

"Vargas is a very good general," Alemán said with a trace of insinuation in his voice.

Santana smiled vaguely. "Because you are a friend you may insult me, Ricardo—but do not speak of such things when others can hear."

"I did not mean to be offensive, but we each have a job to do—and yours, Excellency, does not seem to be the job of tactician and planner of military details."

"Then I'll have to learn it fast, won't I? I can't keep relying on a child in the guise of a giant. Vargas is brilliant but we should be able to continue without him, without any one man. No one should be indispensable. Not even me, you understand?"

"I am afraid things are not as simple as that, Excellency. Without you, clearly, there would be no revolution."

Santana looked away. "It's up to you to gather the men and instruct the commanders, Alemán. See that every man is properly equipped, every horse ready for the march."

"How soon do we break camp?"

"According to the plan, at four o'clock by the sun."

"We'll be ready," said Alemán, and walked away into the teeming camp.

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

Santana looked at the sky. Alemán's shape diminished as he descended into the canyon, stopped by a junior officer's tent, stooped under its flap to go inside. Santana looked to the west; all he could see was the mountain-side, where Six had taken his Elena, with Vargas and Lament, across the mountain. Santana visualized for a moment an image of the meadows far below, on the edge of the foothills, where a large number of his own men awaited him after having done battle just a few hours earlier at the shattered remains of the Rancho Nijar. Half an hour ago the dispatch rider had arrived on a lathered, windbroken horse. Red-eyed and husky-voiced, the dispatch rider had handed him the message. It rested now beneath Santana's shirt: he kept it there in hopes that it might prove a signal of things to come. The fight had gone well at Rancho Nijar—and now the ranks of the rebellion were swelled by Ybarra and several hundred vaqueros and peons from Nijar's ranch—as well as a fair number of loyalist army troopers who had defected to the rebel side. Perhaps it was that they believed in Santana's cause; but he thought it more likely they felt in the wind a shifting promise, a change in the balance of power. This morning he stood on the slope with conviction lifting his heart—the conviction he would win his war of revolution.

Officers moved among the men below, calling out orders; there was a frenzy of men wheeling past one another, seemingly without pattern but all in a great hurry. Today began the final campaign.

There would be no turning back. Up to now he had been only a thorn in the side of Governor Orbea—who, hopefully, had no conception of the present size of Santana's force. Whittling here and there, the revolutionaries had struck fear into the loyalists with small scattered attacks: he had kept his foe, Colonel Sanders, wheeling off balance with mosquito-like strikes. *Gue-rilla*—that was the word they used in the south for such tactics. But last night's counterattack against the troops

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

at Rancho Nijar had been the last such raid. Today the rebel army would begin its march in force—first to strike down the relief column on its way from Ures to reinforce the loyalists. That would prevent the reinforcements from coming up behind him. Then Santana would move against the major fortresses of Governor Orbea's army, sweeping toward the capital at Guadalquivir. It would be total commitment: no reserves stood behind him. Once the shot was fired it could not be recalled. No turning back.

He ought to be giving thought to last minute details in these final hours; but his mind kept drifting, he kept seeing Elena's little heart-shaped face, her gentle smile. Her uncle had died last night at Rancho Nijar, he had learned—she did not know yet. He felt a great sympathy for her—and then, abruptly and coldly, he remembered the last words she had spoken with him this morning. They had argued. . . .

He felt hot and ill. He used his thumbnail to split a matchstick and began to pick his teeth delicately, a big man with a bluff rugged face and troubled, hollow eyes. He kept seeing her quick smile—wondering if he would ever see it again.

He looked at the camp, all the young men below. Many of them would die in the days ahead. He thought of that all the time; his only defense against it was his faith—in himself, in this revolution. He had to act always as if he were totally right: if he ever let anyone think he doubted, for even an instant, there would be hesitation. Just now he had shown Alemán, his second officer, a fragment of uncertainty; he reminded himself not to let that happen again. He could not let anyone see his fear.

And he *was* afraid. He was afraid of what he would suffer, for having sent men to die on his account. He was afraid he might lose this conflict. He was afraid if he did win, if he became governor of the province, he might fall under the same evil corrupting spell of power

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

that had destroyed Governor Orbea, made him a fat, old cynical despot.

Without Vargas . . . He drew himself up with a start. *If I can't lead my own revolution, there is no hope I can lead the province.* But he was still afraid—because those young men, the thousands in the camp below, believed in him, and he did not want that: he wanted them to believe in themselves, so that when he was gone they would carry on, without him, without anyone like him.

He closed his mind against these speculations; he snapped the broken match away from him and wheeled into the cabin to make his final preparations. He had started a fight; now he had to finish it. That was all that mattered now. He had no more time to debate abstractions with himself.

It was time to go to war.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE SUN SLASHED through thin crystal air, bright where it struck, leaving deep black shadows in the forest. Six shepherded his three trussed captives through the high peaks, following Vargas' grudging instructions, threading gorges of rock and timber. Six rode with the accomplished, indolent ease of an expert horseman. He seldom looked back and did not speak at all. They went through some pines and broke out into a small clearing, from the center of which they could look up and see the permanent snow pockets glistening high above on the tallest summits. That was virgin land up there—probably no human foot had ever trod it. It was a big country for big men to ride.

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

Gradually the trail dipped to lower elevations in a long valley in the center of the range. Here, in thickening foliage, they crossed a razorback ridge and then corkscrewed down a gully wall; at times they wound through long-sounding forest corridors, at other times they inched down steep switchbacks. Six kept to rock wherever he could, on general principle, covering the most obvious tracks while being fairly certain Santana's trackers would not lose the spoor. In every direction the raw, rugged land stood on end, a grandeur of monumental proportion, deep color and brute power.

Past noon he halted the expedition to breathe the animals by a stream. The mossy bank was soft and easy; sunlight rippled on the rushing water. Ever vigilant, he studied the mountainsides; his glance never stopped sweeping the roundabout land and the three captives in his little party. Wind roughed up the leaves overhead; above, clouds gathered slowly together. Soon, probably, it would rain. A few hundred feet downstream a whitetail doe popped out of the trees and went down to the water's edge. Upwind of the riders, it drank without noticing them until Elena's horse whickered, whereupon the doe wheeled in alarm and sprang out of sight.

The night wept softly, pattering raindrops against Six's oilskins. In the total darkness he walked forward a pace at a time, leading the horse. Behind him the three riders, tied to their saddles, had no choice but to follow where he led. Six picked his downhill path with painful slowness, testing the ground at each step, frequently stopping to walk back and test the lashings that bound the three prisoners. There was no talk.

Something alerted his horse: it lifted its head, keening the night. Six stopped. Steve Lament's horse roved up beside him, bumped into his arm, and Six heard Lament's quick intake of breath.

"We may have some company," Six murmured. "All

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

of you keep quiet, for your own sake—no telling who it may be.”

Holding the reins and lead rope, he stepped off to the end of them, far enough away to mute the saddle-creak and breath of the horses. He stood fast in the night, turning his head slowly, exposing the flats of his eardrums to all the compass points. He stood that way, unmoving, for a long time until his ears picked up the sound of advancing hoof-falls. Two horses, it sounded like. Moving slowly.

Six palmed up his revolver and waited in the rain with a thin stream of water runneling down out of the trough of his hat brim. Behind him one of the horses stirred—a sharp clump of iron shoe against earth. In time two horsemen came vaguely into view, very vague in the blackness although they were not twenty feet distant. They rode by without a sideward glance; as they went past, one of them spoke:

“Shouldn’t we stop and wait it out? We can’t see where the hell we’re going.”

It was a woman’s voice, talking in English. Six said, “Hold it up there.”

He heard an explosion of breath. A man’s voice boomed at him: “Jeremy? That you?”

“Me, Jericho.”

“Well, then, what the hell!”

“Don’t strike any matches,” Six cautioned.

“Not on your life,” said Jericho Stride. The two horses turned and moved toward Six. As they approached he could make out the silhouettes, Stride and Holly Moore, bulky in rain-ponchos.

“What the hell,” Stride said again. “How about this. Who’s that with you?”

“I’ve got a prisoner and two hostages.”

“That you, Steve?” said Stride.

“Yeah,” said Steve Lament. “How’re you doing, Jericho?”

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

"You didn't kill him, then," Stride said to Six. "What about these other two?"

"Climb down a minute," said Six. "We'll talk."

Morning sunshine blasted Steve Lament's back and cast long shadows to his left. His wrists were chafed raw behind him. From his own horse's bridle the reins led to the hand of Jeremy Six. Behind him he could hear the footfalls of the other horses—Jericho Stride bringing up the rear. The path Vargas indicated curled among thick pine groves. No one spoke; only horse and saddle sounds broke the silence, and the whisper of a sharp westerly wind that roughed up the trees and chilled the morning air.

Lament kept his seat easily and held his eyes with purposeful indifference on the trail ahead, deliberately noncommittal, giving away nothing whenever Six looked at him, which was often: Six was a careful man. The plans Lament had made to escape had been destroyed when Stride and the auburn-haired woman had joined up with Six. Lament hadn't been able to overhear the conversation last night; he was not sure exactly how Six had persuaded Stride and Holly to join up and help Six guard the prisoners on the way to the border. He had a fair idea how Six had done it, though—probably told them they were safer with him than banging around the hills alone, what with loyalists and rebels all over the place. Lament had managed to overhear one part of it, when Six had promised to make every effort to get Arizona to offer amnesty to Jericho Stride on some old charge of armed assault—something that had a fifteen year penitentiary sentence hanging over Stride's head back in the Territory. Fifteen years, to Lament right now, sounded like a light sentence. He had no illusions about what was waiting for him. He hadn't killed Clarissa deliberately. But no jury in Spanish Flat would pay much attention to that.

Lament had spent the better part of his life on rough

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

hard trails and he was not without ability; he knew, in his heart, that if he wanted to badly enough he could probably escape, or at least make a good try. The trouble was, he no longer cared enough to try. In the end, he thought, *I guess I want them to hang me. Get it the hell over with.* It was easier not to make any decisions at all—just leave it up to fate. Fate, right now, had the visage of a hangman.

. . . . Six, watching Steve Lament closely on the long ride, was reminded of distant days along the gamblers' circuit: Lament was wearing a poker-playing face, there seemed no penetrating the bleak expressionless armor of his gaze. He had said virtually nothing in the past twenty-four hours. Of the others, it had been Elena who had done most of the talking—protestations, querulous demandings, empty threats; finally Vargas had calmed her down. Vargas—gigantic, efficient, competent—had early recognized the realities of the circumstances. He granted Six the respect due a worthy adversary, acknowledged that they meant each other no personal harm and after weighing alternatives and odds, accepted the situation and agreed to follow instructions without challenge, without attempting escape. Before the arrival of Stride and Holly, Six had been outnumbered by his prisoners, but that gave him an unusual advantage: each prisoner was a hostage against the others. Vargas, for example, could not make a break for freedom without putting Elena in jeopardy. Knowing that, and knowing the dangers that faced all of them from Orbea's loyalist troops, Vargas had cooperated—not happily, but resigned to it. It would serve his own interests best to get Six and Lament to the border as fast as possible, so that he and Elena could rejoin Santana that much faster. Vargas remarked at one point that it was tribute to Six's reputation that he never doubted Six would keep his word and turn them loose at the border.

That part of it had worked without a hitch for Six—

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

persuading Vargas and Elena to give him at least the cooperation of not fighting him every step of the way. It had been more difficult to work Jericho Stride and Holly Moore into it, because he had not anticipated crossing trails with them in the night. But when he had seen them ride by, recognized Holly's voice in the dark, he had known immediately he could not let them go on without stopping them. If they had ridden on to Santana's camp it would not have taken Santana long to decide to tie the two of them up and use them as hostages in exchange for Vargas and Elena. Santana would have sent dispatch riders to his company of men who—even now—followed Six at a discreet distance: he spotted them occasionally, knew they meant him to see them, knew what it meant—Santana was giving him protection from the loyalist soldiers.

And so, knowing he couldn't let Stride and Holly fall into Santana's hands, Six had had to persuade them to ride with him. He had thought fast and gambled, offering Stride a chance of amnesty in Arizona against the old assault charge, and telling them that Santana by now had probably broken camp and led his army down from the mountains, so that the only refuge from Colonel Sanders' regulars for Stride and Holly would be north of the border. If they stayed here, rattling around the mountains, they would sooner or later stumble across a patrol of loyalist troops and be captured.

Using those flimsy arguments he had somehow persuaded Jericho Stride to join him. He had a feeling it was not his arguments that had swayed Stride so much as Stride's own uncertainty about Steve Lament: Stride still had not made up his mind about Lament, who like Six was a friend of his. It was possible that once they reached the border Stride might decide to help Lament escape. That was a risk Six had no choice but to face. In the meantime, they all rode together, bound to

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

each other by tenuous threads of hope, danger, uncertainty, and a common enemy—the loyalists.

Six looked over his shoulder and caught Holly Moore staring openly. The pink tip of her tongue darted speculatively between her lips; a tentative smile briefly crossed her face. The long fall of her hair framed her eyes delicately and once again he was struck by the uncanny way she reminded him of Clarissa. . . .

They made a brief midmorning halt to rest the horses. The sun reached down into the canyon; Six chewed a strip of dried beef, standing at the head of a clearing with his attention moving restlessly from face to face. Holly Moore moved close to him, stood with one arm against the trunk of a pine and said quietly, "I half expected I'd never see you again—I guess revolutions play funny tricks."

Six nodded absently. His eyes roved the clearing. Jericho Stride walked over to them, swigging from a canteen. His face was black, unreadable under the shadow of his hatbrim. Holly looked at him and said tartly, "I've never seen two filthier wrecks than you and me. I wish I had some respectable clothes. And you—"

She left it hanging, unfinished; Stride said, "Hell, I changed my clothes before we left town the other day."

Six listened with half his attention. He was watching the others. Lament sat under a tree by himself, brooding into space. Vargas and Elena were talking in low tones, probably about her uncle—his death, reported by Holly and Stride last night, had been a hard blow to her; Vargas had been trying to comfort her ever since.

Holly, following the direction of Six's glance, said gently, "She's going through a private patch of hell, I guess. I wish I'd known he was her uncle, I wouldn't have sprung it like that last night."

"Not your fault, honey," said Stride.

"What do you know about it, you big oaf? Her uncle's dead, her world—that ranch of theirs—all burned up. She's afraid Santana will get killed and it'll all be for

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

nothing. She must love Santana hot and deep, Jericho—there's nothing like being in love when you're young and haven't learned to hate yourself yet."

"You don't hate yourself, Holly."

"Don't I?"

"No. I guess you've had to hike through some rough spots and maybe you took a few wrong forks, but you're all right. You've never hurt anybody."

"Jericho," she answered bitterly, "I hurt everyone I touch. You ought to know that by now."

"You hear me complaining?"

"If you weren't such a softhearted idiot you would."

Stride chuckled amiably. Holly shook her head. "I don't know, Jericho, every time I find something that looks good to me I start prying up the edges until I get it all bent out of shape. Everything goes sour."

"Take it easy," Stride said.

"That's easy for you to say—you're so damn tough. Why can't I be tough like that?"

"It doesn't help much," Stride said softly. "If you're tough enough, yeah, maybe it'll help keep you from getting hurt. But tough people can have thin skins too."

"Can they?" she breathed, musingly; she turned, stirring, and Six saw the deep color of her eyes. "I still want that millionaire, Jericho. It's all I've got left." She put a smile on her face.

. . . . The night came on them moonless, a sky carpeted with broken clouds that let only a little starlight through, and when they stopped to eat and feed the tired horses, Steve Lament began to stir out of his sluggish torpor. He thought to himself, *I came into this damned world fighting and that's the way I'd like to go out.* He had changed his mind, sometime in the course of the day, for reasons he did not altogether understand; now, accepting it without puzzling it over, he set about planning his break.

It shouldn't be too hard. Last night's rain had soaked the ropes that bound his wrists; when they had started

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

to dry out he had complained of the tightening, and Six had loosened the lashings obligingly, perhaps lulled by Lament's steady indifferent lethargy. Lament was a gaunt man with supple, clever hands; he tested the ropes once again, and had the feeling he could eel out of them without scraping off too much skin. After that, he would have to get his hands on a gun—and so, like a man waking out of deep sleep, he began to study the little gathering, putting bits and pieces together in his mind, starting to lay his plan.

Jericho Stride picked a hasty path through the rocks to the shadows where Six stood vigilantly on watch; Stride hauled up, breathing fast, and said, "Fires lighting up."

"Where?"

"Come have a look." Stride led the way back up through the rocks. It was a steep quick climb; both men were winded when they reached the top. "Yonder," Stride said.

Beyond the nearby mountain hung heavy clouds. Their heavy underbellies reflected a faint red glow, thrown up from the earth below. "Campfires," Stride said. "Maybe three or four."

"Not likely to be Santana's men," Six observed.

"I make it to be just over that peak. Maybe four miles from here. A little close for comfort, Jeremy."

Six squinted toward the red-painted clouds and Stride remarked, "Wouldn't be more than a five, six mile ride by way of that pass over there."

"All right. Have a look."

They went back downhill to the horses. Holly came up and Stride spoke softly, quickly to her; when he mounted up, carrying his rifle, Holly said, "Take care, Jericho."

"Yeah," Stride said, and left them behind, setting off at a ground-eating jog. A thin rind of moon stood tipped

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

on end just above the eastern horizon; it had appeared within the past few minutes.

There was no trail; once he had to turn back and pick another route out of a blind canyon. A little creek ran thin down the slope from a rock-hidden spring; he clattered across the rocky bed and then the horse was straining up against a hard pitch toward the timbered pass. A carpet of pine needles muffled the sound of his travel. He had to duck under low branches while he picked a careful path through trees so tall and heavy that hardly any moonlight at all penetrated to earth. Twice he had to dismount and lead the scratching horse up a slope too steep to ride. Here the bedding of needles made slippery going and he slipped back, skidding, gaining ground only slowly. *Making enough racket to wake the dead*, he thought sourly.

It was a couple of miles yet; they wouldn't have heard him unless they had outriders. He wondered who it was—*loyalistas*? For all he knew it was a wild pack of mountain Yaquis; but it would do to find out.

The fires were going down; the pink glow on the undersides of the clouds was almost gone. He achieved the head of the pass, rode through it, and found himself on a faintly moonlit flat. On either side lifted the peaks, jagged and impassable. A faint trace—game trail or Indian path—cut across the flat at an angle. He put his horse onto it and rode across the brief clear stretch and suddenly found himself on the verge of a steep drop that fell away into shadowed obscurity.

Mountain goats, he thought, *but I don't know about a horse.*

He stepped down, took a short grip on the reins, and led the horse forward.

The narrow trail curled down the cliff at an angle, ledging back and forth. Stride felt his way with one hand against the wall. Here and there a gnarled shrub grew out of the cliff. The trail was worn into the slope; in places the edge was shored up by small rocks. *Man-*

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

made trail, he thought. And, he was thinking, he would have to come back up the same way—he hoped he wouldn't have a pack of Indians or soldiers on his heels.

The trail reached a turning, doubled back on itself, and continued downward, switchbacking, with no bottom yet in sight. Then, suddenly, it turned a corner of the cliff and moved outward; without warning Stride found himself climbing a gradual incline on a hillside. He mounted up and rode forward, letting the horse find the way. In a little while he reached the rim of the cliff's sullen shadow and rode into the pale swatch of moonlight. A wall of timber confronted him: he threaded his way into it, still on the trail. A hunting owl swooped by hooting. The faint hazy glow on the cloud-bottoms was all but extinguished. At the crest of the hill Stride dismounted and tied his horse and went forward afoot.

A sprawl of rocks led away from the trees. He moved with care, to avoid dislodging loose stones. Belly-flat, he wormed up until he raised the lights below.

First he searched the higher shadows. Something moved off to the right— *Sentry*, he judged. There was another one on the opposite slope. The horses were down below.

He counted four fires and after five minutes had made out seventeen bedrolls. Two guards in sight and possibly a third man with the animals—twenty men all told.

And he saw wheels down there. It looked like a cannon.

But longer inspection told him it was not. He had seen one once at Fort Griffin; he remembered it well:

Gatling gun.

I've seen enough, he thought. *Time to move out.* But he stayed a bit longer. One man below got up to feed one of the fires; it was a chilly night. Stride frowned in the dark and reasoned carefully to himself: *Nobody but the army would have a Gatling gun. It's got to be Colo-*

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

nel Sanders' butchers down there. But what the hell are they doing way up here in the Sierra?

He left the way he had come—silently on his belly; when he reached the trees he stood up and walked back to the horse. He took the trail away at a faster pace than he had come; he felt a sense of urgency.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

WITH STRIDE AWAY from camp and Vargas taking a cat-nap it seemed the best time for Steve Lament to make his break. *Now or never.*

He had his eyes unblinkingly on Jeremy Six, who stood fifteen feet away or so. The camp was a shallow bowl among shoulder-high rocks that crowded the district. Wizen shrubs grew among the yellow rocks; shelves of pale rock thrust away from the earth at improbable architectural angles. Six was ever vigilant; but sleeplessness was beginning to tell on him, and he had to watch not only Lament but the entire countryside roundabout, constantly alert for loyalist soldiers. There had to be moments when Six would be looking the other way. With his hands free behind him, one wrist throbbing where he had scraped the flesh raw squirming out of the lashings, Steve Lament waited for that moment when Six would be distracted enough to look away.

In time it came, as it had to. Six began to turn a slow full circle on his heels to sweep the near horizons with his glance and his ears. When Six was in profile, Lament made his move—crouching, wheeling low toward the saddle beyond Vargas' huge slumbering shape. It was only a few feet away. . . .

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

. . . . Six completed his turn and stiffened: something was wrong, out of place—then he saw Lament moving in the shadows, crouching, vague and dim against the heavier mass of rocky shadows just beyond Vargas. Something glinted in Lament's hands.

Six whipped his gun up into his fist; he said, in a cool quiet voice, "*Freeze.*"

Lament's unhurried voice came back at him from the shadows: "Too late, Jeremy. I've got your rifle cocked and aimed at you. Mexican standoff, amigo."

Six moved a pace forward; Lament said quickly, "I don't want a fight, Jeremy. If you drop that gun I'll just get on a horse and ride away—no shooting. My word on it."

Neither of them had raised his voice, but the talk had roused the others. Vargas was up on one elbow, growling in a half-sleep; Six heard the women stirring behind him, heard Elena's puzzled questions.

With a cold sour feeling of resignation, Six said, "Can't let you do it, Steve. Drop the rifle or make your play. You won't get out of this camp except over my corpse."

Slowly, Lament straightened to his full lean height. Easier to see against the higher rocks, he braced the rifle against his side ribs. The range was no more than fifteen feet; neither man could miss, even in this bad light. A corner of Six's mind abstractedly warned him that if Lament shot first there was little chance he would be able to return the fire. And so it was imperative that Lament not get the first shot.

"Drop it, Steve. Last chance."

It was at that moment that a cloud, drifting across, moved past the moon. Lament's hatless face came into better view. The rifle gleamed dully, lancing fragmentary reflections. Lament said bleakly, "I didn't want this, Jeremy, but all right—"

It happened very fast, then: Lament's finger went white on the trigger, the gunman's careful squeeze in place of a jerk; on that signal, with no choice, Six fired.

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

But in the split instant of firing he saw Lament's eyes move, flashing past toward something behind Six, and Lament's mouth began to form a word while his finger opened away from the trigger—all that in the broken moment of time during which Six, with the muzzle of that rifle dead-center against his chest, pulled off his own shot and saw it take Lament high on the right side of the breastbone.

The rifle fell from Lament's hand, unfired, clattering on rock; Lament spun back hard against the boulders and stood there, both knees bent, for a little while before he began to sink to the ground. All the while, Lament kept shaking his head: "No—No!"

Six dropped his revolver back into its hip scabbard and crossed the intervening distance with five long strides. Down on one knee by Lament, he reached for the man's jacket to pull it open; he said, "I didn't shoot to kill you."

"Jeremy—"

"I could have told you about that rifle," Six said. "Got a hard trigger pull. I've been meaning to fix it."

"I am damned glad you didn't."

"What?"

Lament lifted a hand weakly, gestured limply past Six. "I couldn't do it twice, Jeremy."

Six said again, "What?" He looked over his shoulder, saw Elena standing at the far end of the rock bowl, one hand to her mouth. Holly was coming forward in a hurry from the opposite corner.

Lament said, "Elena—right in the line of fire. I couldn't do it anyway, Jeremy, but I'm glad you didn't have a hair trigger on that rifle."

Six said slowly, "Is that the way it happened with Clarissa, Steve?"

"Like that," Lament said. "Only the light was bad and I didn't even know she was there, Jeremy. I swear to God."

"You didn't say a word about that."

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

"Maybe I didn't want to make excuses. I did kill her, Jeremy, and I'd had a warm place in my heart for Clarissa half my life. Maybe I wanted you to hang me for it."

"So you said nothing."

Holly Moore was at Six's elbow, shoving him aside. "Get away from him and let me have a look before the poor fool bleeds to death while the both of you spend half the night talking each other's ears off. I never saw the like."

Six moved back, straightening up. He felt unsteady on his feet, rocked and wheeling. He looked across the shelf at Elena; she was moving forward hesitantly. Vargas, instinctively, had moved to her. Hands tied, he could not put his arms around her, but Vargas loomed by the small girl like a bear, protecting her with the shell of his mass.

Six saw how it had been. She had been right in Lament's line of fire. If Lament had missed by an inch, or if the bullet had gone through Six—as it had gone through Clarissa's bouncer—it would have struck Elena. And Lament had chosen to die, rather than take that chance with her life.

He said to Holly, "I aimed high," as if in apology.

Holly said, "Good thing you did."

"He's all right?"

"Nobody," she said, "is *all right* when he's just had a forty-five bullet through him. But I think he'll pull through. Will you quit breathing over my shoulder, Marshal? I've patched more bullet holes in my time than I care to remember. You just let me take care of him."

"Uh," Six said, baffled.

Steve Lament coughed quietly and said in a hoarse voice, "Jeremy, damn it, it's all right. I'm not blaming you. It had to happen, that's all—it was all written down in the book this way before you or I were ever born."

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

"Look, Steve, I made a mistake. A lawman can't afford to get mad—and I got mad. It almost cost you your life."

"You wanted revenge for Clarissa. If it'd been me I'd have done the same."

"There's a difference. You're not a peace officer. Do you know how many laws I broke coming down here after you?"

"Jeremy," Lament breathed, "it just doesn't matter now, don't you see that?"

"Not yet," Six murmured. And not for quite a while yet, he suspected. He put a hand on Holly's shoulder: "Do a good job with him."

Holly only snorted. "Get out of my way, Marshal."

Jericho Stride came into camp at a trot. Six was waiting in the shadows with his gun lifted; there had been enough surprises for one night. When Stride appeared, Six stepped into the open, holstering his gun.

Stride said, "I heard a shot."

Six nodded toward Lament. Stride said, "He make a break for it?"

To save time, Six only nodded. Stride said, "I barely heard it where I was. I doubt those loyalists heard it at all, back over the mountain where they are."

"It was a loyalist camp, then?"

"Yeah. Twenty soldiers and a Gatling gun." Stride walked over to Lament and looked down past Holly's shoulder. Lament grinned weakly. Stride said, "Made a fool play, did you?"

"I guess I did," said Lament.

"Might do you good—bleed some of the poison out of your system."

"Amigo, I think that's just what it did."

Stride patted Holly on the head and said, "At least you've got the best bullet-hole nurse this side of New Orleans."

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

"I've been appreciating that," said Lament. "Did I hear you say something about a Gatling gun?"

"Yeah."

Six had come up; Vargas and Elena stood near, watching Holly minister to the wounded man. Jericho Stride said, "Wish to hell I could figure out what they were up to with a Gatling gun way back here in these mountains."

Six said, "It could have come in by ship, into Puerto Naco down on the coast. If the loyalists wanted to get it through to Guadalquivir, they'd have to go right through Santana's country unless they brought it all the way around this way. Maybe they're trying to get it past Santana's lines into Guadalquivir."

Steve Lament said, "That'd make sense. The Governor must know that eventually Santana's going to have to attack Guadalquivir. It's the only way to decide the revolution. I reckon Colonel Sanders wants to fort up that Gatling gun across the trail in front of the city. He could cut a rebel charge to pieces with that gun. They'd cut across the Sierra here with it because it saves them two days over the seacoast route, and Santana's less likely to stumble across them this far north."

Vargas moved into the shafted moonlight and spoke with rumbling contempt. "Twenty men, one gun. What difference can one gun make? Is it a cannon? What is this Gatling gun you talk of?"

Steve Lament said in a calm level voice, "Ten barrels around a circular core. It's mounted like a field piece on a two-wheel cart, carries a fifty-shot magazine that sticks up from the breech. You work it with a crank. It fires several hundred times a minute if you can keep it fed." He paused and said in a lower voice, "You can cut down a hundred men before they have time to run ten feet. One gunner can do that."

"One gunner," Vargas echoed. "None of our people have ever seen such a weapon. I do not think many men would ride into the teeth of such a gun as you describe."

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

Jericho Stride said softly, "Steve, you know how to work that thing?"

"I've handled them for Army Ordnance," Lament said. "I can work it. Why?"

In the darkness Vargas' big voice was almost disembodied: "Please—we must not allow this gun to reach the Governor."

Six looked at them, each in turn. There was a slow silent interval; they were all looking at him. He took the sheath knife from his belt and stepped around behind Vargas. "In any case," he droned, "we won't need to hold each other prisoner any more."

He cut Vargas' hands loose.

The big man stood rubbing his wrists, breathing loudly. Steve Lament said, "I hired out to do a job down here, Jeremy. If it was up to me I'd try and get that Gatling away from the loyalists and deliver it to Santana, and show him how to use the damn thing."

Six said in a low voice, "You're in no shape for that kind of thing, Steve. But you all can decide to do whatever you want. I won't stop anybody."

Jericho Stride said, "Holly and me, we made up our minds a while back. We can't stay alive in this country if Orbea and Sanderos keep control. They want us dead. That's why we were headed for Santana's."

"I thought you didn't mix in politics," Six said.

"I was wrong," Stride said.

"I guess we've all made some mistakes," Six murmured.

Stride turned his head and studied him. "We're all standing around here thinking the same thing. If we can take those soldiers by surprise and turn their own Gatling gun against them, maybe we can get it away from them and deliver it to Santana. What about it, Jeremy?"

Six returned his gaze, not speaking for a moment; Stride added, "Maybe we've got no right to ask—but we're kind of short of manpower right here. Vargas

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

and me, we couldn't pull it off by ourselves. Needs your help, Jeremy."

Not my line, he thought automatically—the same thing he had said to Santana's invitation. But he owed them all something, most of all he owed Lament something; and he had stood aloof too long, he knew. He had seen Santana, taken his measure, and he had seen Colonel Sanders and Sergeant Mendez and the other representatives of the Governor's faction. It was not, strictly speaking, Six's fight—except that for a law man, any fight for justice ought to be *his* fight.

"I have got some mistakes to make up for," Six said in a slow voice of careful thought. He looked down at Steve Lament, propped up with his back against a boulder; he said, "How're you makin' it, Steve?"

"I don't think you punctured anything vital," Lament said. "Weak as a kitten, that's all. Put me on a horse and I guess I can ride. Put me down by that Gatling gun and I can work it for you."

Six looked up at the others. It was a situation unlike any other in his experience; his duty, as he saw it, pulled him both ways at once.

Jericho Stride said softly, "Remember old Juano, Jeremy? He was an old man, blind. I keep remembering how they had him so scared he killed himself to protect Santana. Santana means a lot to these folks."

"I guess he does," Six muttered. "I guess he does."

Stride suddenly uttered a burst of barking laughter. "Hell, listen to me. I never talked like this in my life. Christ—I *hate* heroes!"

Holly drawled, "Which is why you love reading Buffalo Bill dime novels, I'm sure."

"Anybody ask you?"

"Pipe down," she snapped, and grinned at him.

Six drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. "All right," he said. "Let's go get that Gatling gun."

An enormous grin split Vargas' huge face. He clapped

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

a thick arm across Six's shoulders. "Hombre," he said—"Amigo!"

"Saddle up."

Holly said, "We'll all go." She looked at Elena, who smiled shyly and nodded.

Stride exploded: "Are you crazy, woman?"

Holly said, "If you all get killed, our lives won't be worth anything anyway. Those soldiers would find us. We'll come along—you may need us."

"I can shoot," Elena said tentatively.

"Oh, for God's sake!" said Stride.

"Wait," Six said. "Holly may be right. If we manage to get our hands on that Gatling gun, we can't drag it back through here anyway. We'll have to go the other way with it. You two will have to come along with us as far as the far side of the pass, and wait there. If the fight goes the wrong way for us, head straight for the coast and on down to Puerto Naco."

"If the fight goes the wrong way," Holly answered, "I won't much care which way we go."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

AND SO THEY left, riding across the mountains in silent file. An hour's travel brought them to the summit of the cliff and its precarious down-pitching trail; dismounted, they led their horses downslope at a crawling pace. Steve Lament moved without complaint; no one could tell whether his wound pained him—he claimed it did not, but Holly expressed her concern.

Once a horse kicked a loose stone over the edge and it fell clattering to the black unseen bottom. They halted; a horse snorted; they waited while time stretched. When

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

nothing moved in sight or hearing, Six began the descent again. Finally they reached the bottom and the four men readied their horses, leaving the women standing silent in the shadows. Six looked back once.

At four o'clock with false dawn still twenty minutes away, they halted in the trees at almost the exact spot where Stride had tied up his horse on his earlier foray. There was no need to talk. They left the horses and crawled across the rock flats until they lay four abreast overlooking the camp. The fires had died out; a single glowing coal made a red dot. Six's hand moved and in response Jericho Stride slid away into the rocks, swallowed up almost immediately. He moved without sound. A moment later Six himself crawled away.

Reaching the edge of a grove of pine, he looked back. Lament and Vargas were nothing more than two lumps amid a strewn clutter of boulders. Six faded into the grove and moved downslope toward the picketed horses.

He settled himself by a tree not fifteen feet from the huddled horse guard and waited. His breathing was measured; he had made a quarter circle within the trees to come upon the horses from downwind, and none of them detected his presence. The guard, squatting on his haunches with a rifle tilted against a tree, rubbed his hands together for warmth and adjusted the blanket that was draped around his shoulders. Six looked eastward.

A faint gray band began to appear in the sky. Six moved forward an inch at a time. He took out his knife, picked up a six-inch dead pine branch, and tossed it against the face of the nearest horse.

The horse jumped and rolled its eyes; the guard came erect, staring around, and stooped to grab up his rifle.

He was like that when Six rammed into him, knocking the wind out of him, pinning him down, setting the keen edge of the knife against his throat. Six did not speak. He thrust the guard's rifle aside and, with-

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

out moving the knife, stuffed a wadded rag into the man's mouth. Then, presenting his knife at the guard's face, he lifted several lengths of rope from his belt.

By the time the gray strip of sky began to color, the guard was trussed and gagged. Six glanced past the horses at the outline of wheel-spokes and rims of the Gatling carriage. Two shadows were moving out of the trees toward the gun. Up above, beyond the camp on the hillside, a squat figure stood up in sharp outline: light glinted off a raised rifle. That was Jericho Stride, signaling that he had silenced the upper sentry. There was another guard across the camp on the downhill side, but there was neither time nor manpower to silence that man; he was out of sight of all four of them now.

With the brightening sky, sleeping men began to stir. Deliberately Six sighted the sentry's rifle on the single glowing coal in the second of the four dead campfires. He eared back the hammer of the rolling-block rifle and fired its single shot.

The cheap rifle went inches wide of its mark, but it was no matter. The shot, solitary and loud in the strengthening light of dawn, served its purpose.

Every figure in the camp moved. Some sat bolt upright; some rolled around and blinked; some dived for the pyramid stacks of rifles. A great shadow rose from the earth near the Gatling gun and shouted a bull-throated roar in Spanish: Vargas, calling for surrender. A big .45-70 repeating rifle hung in Vargas' hands like a toy.

Some of the scrambling troopers had reached the stacked rifles and now, with methodical precision, Jericho Stride's rifle opened up on the higher rock-slope, firing with nerveless regularity. Around the weapon stacks his shots took effect among the confused, uncertain soldiers. Six sat on one knee, grimly sighting along his revolver barrel, choosing it in preference to the sentry's inaccurate rifle. By the Gatling gun Vargas uttered hoarse

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

bellows between his shots, standing fully in the open, legs spread apart, choosing his targets with deliberate care. Steve Lament moved painfully around the Gatling, trying to get it loaded.

A soldier dived into a stack of rifles, knocking the weapons asprawl; grabbed one up, fired, and began to toss rifles to comrades. An officer's wild shouts for order went unheeded; a bullet from Vargas' repeater cut off the officer's voice in mid-cry and knocked the officer down, still waving an unfired pistol, clad only in unfastened tunic and long underpants.

Beyond the camp another rifle began to talk at long intervals: the third sentry, firing his single-shot rifle as fast as he could reload and aim. Up on the hill Jericho Stride switched the concentration of his aim to drive that sentry under cover. By Six's position, horses were milling and wildly rearing, restrained from flight by the picket rope. Six began to sidle to his right as he fired, moving closer to the Gatling gun, farther from the horses; he wanted to give the soldiers the chance to get to their mounts. He had no stomach for a massacre. The air filled with acrid gunsmoke, the shouts and shots of battle, the scream of a horse stricken by a stray slug. Through the smoke he saw men's shapes weaving, milling, dodging. Surprise had caught them at an hour when they lay half drugged with sleep; but now, fifteen seconds after the opening shot, order was establishing itself. These were no raw recruits. A sergeant, talking in a loud but level tone, had rallied half a dozen armed men around him and these were now advancing steadily from tree to tree toward the Gatling gun, which stood defended only by Vargas' hot rifle: Lament had yet to load the ammunition.

A cry of pain went up from the farther sentry. Jericho Stride's rifle went quiet for a few seconds as he reloaded; then he began to put his shots into those six advancing men. One of them went down soundless; another wheeled, propelled by the impact of a bullet in

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

his shoulderblade; a third, his leg knocked out from under him by Six's well-placed pistol bullet, closed the rolling breech of his rifle and continued toward the Gatling on hands and knees until Vargas flattened him with a chest shot.

Six moved aside out of the pall of his own gunsmoke and stood behind a pine long enough to reload. There was a lull in the firing; he ran a dozen yards closer to the Gatling gun and saw Vargas, slightly unsteady on his feet, moving out in front of the gun as if to protect it with the bulk of his own body. Six shouted at him to take cover; the giant paid no heed. Lament came up, sweating and panting, from a heap of packsaddles, with a heavy rectangular metal tin in his hands; he crouched beside the gun carriage and began to claw off the lid of the magazine tin.

More troopers had joined the attack on the Gatling; they were too seasoned to cut and run. Six saw his plan beginning to collapse. His lips peeled back from his teeth in an involuntary grin of tense rage and fear. The magazine tin slipped from Lament's sweat-damp fingers and he grabbed for it. Jericho Stride was moving downhill, advancing with his rifle going steadily, trying to draw off the massing troopers. Six reached the Gatling just as Lament lifted a magazine from the opened tin and stood up behind the right-hand side of the Gatling's breech to set the magazine into its vertical position above the firing pin. Vargas stood before the gun, firing the last shot out of his rifle, and dropped it in favor of his revolvers, which he lifted and began to fire alternately toward the advancing troopers, no more than twenty feet in front of him. Smoke and dim light made for poor shooting; but Six saw dust puff away from Vargas' vest and plainly heard the thud of bullets finding flesh. Vargas lurched and swayed but the revolvers still talked in his great fists. The roar of his voice lifted above the din of fighting:

"Viva Santana!"

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

Steve Lament spoke with cool economy: "All right." His eyes were clear, his hands steady on the uplifted crank of the Gatling's firing mechanism. Six dived past the gun, rammed bodily into Vargas, and carried the big man down with him under the muzzles of the Gatling gun as Lament swung it around and depressed the barrels and began to crank the handle.

The Gatling blazed with an ear-shattering fifty caliber rattle. At point-blank range it sawed across the thin rank of onrushing soldiers and cut them down like a scythe mowing wheat stalks.

The attack broke. Four men collapsed, all but cut in half; another eight or ten wheeled back, wounded or not, and staggered away in the rising smoke. Six got to one knee and braced his revolver. He had one shot left in it; he tried to see through the gray-black swirl of smoke and dust and semi-darkness.

Vargas stirred. Six looked down at him. The big man's hat had fallen off somewhere and the front of his vest seemed soaked in blood. He said thickly, "The gun—the gun for Santanal" And died.

Lament stood leaning weakly on the gun's crank, squinting against the smoke. Sweat gleamed on his face but his eyes shone. "We've whipped them," he said.

There was the wheel and rush of several horses. "Look out," Six said, turning that way; but the thunder of hoofbeats quickly diminished as the riders swept away.

An army corporal ten feet in front of the black muzzles of the gun rolled over onto his back and tried to speak. Blood welled from his mouth and he coughed once. His eyes glazed over and he sagged loosely. The Gatling gun had stitched a line across his torso. All told, it had fired only twenty-five or thirty rounds.

Jericho Stride came walking into view, plugging cartridges into his rifle. "All done?"

"All done," Six said wearily.

"Anybody hurt?"

"Vargas cashed in."

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

Jericho Stride walked up to them and stood looking down at Vargas. "I hate to think a man like that has to be wasted on a fight like this."

In the east, dawn turned the sky crimson.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

TWIGS OF LIGHTNING sizzled across the sky; thunderclaps roared and rain fell upon the mountains in sheets. A dead horse was a mound, fading away into the drizzle. Disarmed were the two sentries who had been ignominiously tied and gagged during the brief savage fight.

Jeremy Six stood long-jawed over a heap of earth that lay separated from the large common grave into which they had committed the bodies of the slain troopers. Rainwater runneled from the trough of his hatbrim until he raised his head to look across Vargas' grave at the others, standing mute in the storm. It was Jericho Stride who had spoken the words over these graves; Six now turned and led them away.

They prepared to move out. Two horses were hitched to the Gatling carriage; Jericho Stride would lead the team from the back of his own horse, rather than ride one of the team. They released the half dozen extra horses left behind by the fleeing troops and watched those animals bound away to freedom. Jericho Stride stared back at the newly made cemetery, its scrawny wooden crosses half-obsured in the rain. Elena and Holly sat their saddles, enveloped in oilskin ponchos, their heads scarved and hatted. Jericho Stride said, "Toss a coin and those fellows might have been on Vargas' own side."

"No war's as bad as a civil war against your own people," Lament said.

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

Jericho Stride looked around at Six and said, "Heroes. Christ."

"Let's go," Six said tonelessly. "We ought to catch Santana this side of Boaca Verde." He tossed aside the army entrenching spade and gathered the reins in quick synchronization with his smooth rise to the saddle. Muscles unused to such work ached from digging the hard earth. Steve Lament mounted stiffly, glazed by pain, and put his horse alongside the Gatling gun. It stood loaded and ready to fire, in case of sudden attack. The job of gunner had automatically fallen to Lament, since he was the only one of them experienced with that kind of weapon. A singular group of soldiers, they rode in ragged file away from the scene of bloody victory.

The heavy gun cart kept them to broader roads through the passes and valleys. Rain made some patches muddy, hard going for the horses; twice during the day Six and Holly Moore had to dab their saddle-ropes over the carriage's doubletree and lend their mounts' weight to the team's in order to haul the gun through hub-deep mud in the trail. At noon the rain quit as abruptly as it had come, leaving behind a cool damp wind that sliced through their sodden clothing and made all of them miserable. The trail branched into a broader road, the coach-road to Boaca Verde. The road and its environs a hundred feet on either side were trampled: grass had been crushed and broken, horse dung made scattered heaps. Jericho Stride prodded a heap of dung with a stick and said, "Not over twelve hours old. That'll be Santana all right." And since a good part of Santana's ragtag army was afoot, they had hopes of overtaking him before the following dawn.

Wearied and without speech, they rode into the waning afternoon. The road moved at a tangent toward the flatlands, gradually descending, valley by valley. They made camp at sunset, resolving to travel on before dawn so as to catch up with Santana in the early morning.

With no water in sight it was a dry camp, coffee ra-

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

tioned out of canteens. Before daylight drained fully out of the dull sky, they extinguished their fire to avoid discovery. The road was half a mile away to their left; Six had selected a campsite on the brow of a hill, from the top of which one sentry could command the surrounding territory for five hundred yards.

At full dark he lay back under his blankets and glanced across the ashes at Jericho's shape, slowly stirring with somnolent breathing. Up on the hilltop Steve Lament walked slowly back and forth to keep awake and work out the stiffness of his wound. Holly slept nearby, her face turned toward Six. The moon, a thin wedge, softened her features. Her head rested on one outflung arm; in her sleep she moved, seeking comfort on the hard ground.

Elena came across the camp and sat beside Six. For a while she did not speak. A cloud traveled across the moon and then uncovered it again. Elena said softly, "I could not sleep. I think of Vargas. Carlos will be saddened to learn of his death."

He made no answer. He noticed that Holly's eyes were open, watching them; but Holly did not move. Elena said, "You did not have to do any of this, Señor Six. We owe you so much, Carlos and I."

"I don't want your gratitude," he said, more roughly than he intended.

She said, "We are all angry tonight, I think. Death makes us this way."

"How about you, Elena? Are you angry?"

"I suppose so," she said. "But I am sad also. Not only for Vargas, but for us all."

"You've got a lot of courage, to be thinking of the rest of us right now."

"Oh, I do not think of myself much any more," she breathed. "Only, I should like to live a while longer, so that I may serve Carlos. He will need all the strength he can get."

"He's lucky to have you to stand by him."

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

"If only I could do more," she said. "You are a very good man, Señor. I hope that no harm comes to you because of us. After all, this is not your revolution."

"I'm beginning to think it's mine as much as anyone else's."

"In that case," she said, "I am very glad. *Buenas noches*, Señor."

"'Noches, Elena."

The girl turned away and soon settled into her blankets across the camp. Six saw Holly looking at him: moonlight glistened on her eyes. Holly said, "I wish I had her youth. So much hope. She sees the evil in the world but she can still let it pass her by. You know, this morning I listened to the guns, and I got scared. I'm still scared."

"Scared of what?"

"If I knew, I'd only be half as scared."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

ON THE HILL overlooking the town of Guadalquivir, two or three candles flickered within the ancient church. Above the church, the Governor's Palace was resplendent with light. Sentries stood at attention by the main gates as Captain Rodrigo Medina rode through them.

He rode between sculptured hedges and neat lawns, dismounted before the marble stair and handed the reins of his horse to a brown-skinned servant in livery. Knocking his gloves against his thigh, Medina went up the steps and allowed the butler to bow him through into the great hall.

A feast was laid out in the ballroom. It was just reaching its end. A white cloth covered the length of the

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

huge table, around which sat the corpulent cream of Guadalquivir's society or, at least, those individuals whom Governor Orbea saw in that light. A mess of food droppings bespattered the tablecloth. The elaborate crystal chandeliers sent down a flickering light that danced in the dregs in champagne glasses. Men and women sat in various attitudes of stuffed rigidity, utterly gorged. The fat Governor spoke from his massive chair at the head of the table; a mutter of polite laughter responded. Medina, standing outside watching, was reminded of a Roman orgy performed with the barbarians at the city gates. Things had not changed very much in fifteen hundred years after all.

Colonel Sanders sat by Orbea's right hand. The gaunt, deep-carved face was humorless and Sanders, alone of the company, did not laugh at the Governor's pathetic little jokes. His fever-bright eyes lifted idly and caught Medina outside in the hallway, and all but pinned Medina to the wall. Sanders nodded almost imperceptibly, leaned forward and spoke softly into the Governor's ear. Orbea frowned, irritated by the interruption; but a moment later he stood up, his rotund bulk slightly swaying, thereby indicating that the feast was ended. The guests left the table and began to wander toward the exits, forming small knots of conversation. No one seemed particularly agitated that there was a revolt boiling in the hinterlands.

The Governor waddled out of the room toward Medina. Sanders followed closely and addressed Medina in the brusque tone he customarily used on subordinates: "What is it?"

"Boaca Verde has fallen."

"What?"

The Governor said, "You jest, man!" The Governor was a little drunk.

"Somehow the Gatling gun fell into Santana's hands," Medina said. "After defeating the relief column from Ures, he made a forced march directly to Boaca Verde."

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

The attack was made at noon today. With the Gatling gun they made a quick job of it. It is said that a gringo mans the gun."

Sanderos was staring at him. "Gatling gun or no, we had two thousand troops massed at Boaca Verde, Captain. Did they all vaporize?"

"Many of them seem to have joined Santana's army."

The Governor raged unreasonably: "Captain, you will not refer to that ragtag band of cutthroats as an army!"

"Yes, Excellency," Medina said automatically.

Colonel Sanderos swung away, batting fist into palm. He stood looking out through an arched window, staring past the dim outline of the old church toward the outskirts of town, visible between the branches of trees on the Palace grounds. "So quickly," he muttered. "They have moved with incredible speed. One must give them credit. This man Santana is diabolical. Captain, what is their strength?"

"Lieutenant Silva estimates them at sixteen thousand," Medina replied evenly.

"*Leche!*" the governor roared. "Milk of thy mother! *Cabrones!*"

Colonel Sanderos ignored him; Medina only glanced at him. At this moment the Governor was but an obese onlooker. Sanderos was still looking out the window. "Do you believe that, Captain?"

"Lieutenant Silva is not given to hysteria," Medina said.

"I agree," said Colonel Sanderos, who, whatever his shortcomings were, was not a stupid man. "If Lieutenant Silva believes them to be sixteen thousand strong, then we must act according to that figure."

The Governor blustered. "But they were only a paltry few hundred!"

No one answered him directly; he had become superfluous.

Colonel Sanderos cracked his knuckles. "We have al-

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

ways underestimated this man Santana. He is a far more capable general than we had assumed." He glanced with ill-concealed contempt at Governor Orbea, whose face was red with belching. Sandersos went on: "He cut through the relief column as though it were butter. He managed to get that Gatling gun away from us in spite of our deceptions and caution. He has overturned a garrison of two thousand men. I think, Captain Medina, that if we do not begin to take him seriously now, it will be too late."

Medina nodded soberly and stood with the attitude of a junior officer patiently and obediently awaiting orders.

"Catacamas," Sandersos said quietly. "We must hold them at Catacamas." He swore and turned abruptly to face Medina. "It is the only town between Santana and here. Catacamas must be held, Captain. I will take charge there personally."

Reality finally seemed to have seeped through the haze into Governor Orbea's consciousness. His voice roared abruptly: "Crush Santana. Set a trap. Trap him at Catacamas!"

Colonel Sandersos brooded. "It will be difficult. He will expect us to make a great effort at Catacamas. He will be prepared for a decisive battle. Captain, how soon can Santana be in position to attack?"

"He moves very quickly," Medina said. He spoke truthfully: Colonel Sandersos was shrewd enough to know the answer to his own question. "Perhaps by noon tomorrow."

"Nonsense," the Governor said. "It is more than a day's march from Boaca Verde to Catacamas. His men must rest, they must eat; they must bury their dead. He cannot reach Catacamas before evening."

"In that case, Excellency," Colonel Sandersos murmured, "we shall be ready for him if we prepare as though he were to arrive at noon."

Thus appeased, the Governor subsided. Sandersos

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

spoke briskly: "Fortunately, Catacamas is not such an easy target as Boaca Verde. To attack, Santana must march up the road through the lower canyon. There is no other approach to the town. The flanks of the canyon road are amply provided with woods that our men can use for concealment. We will allow Santana to march up the road until the whole of his army is trapped within the length of the canyon. We will divide our own army into three divisions: one to block the entrance to the town, one to lie in concealment along the sides of the road, and a third to close the mouth of the canyon once Santana's rear guard has passed through. We will have him in a four-sided box. No warning will be given. We will attack from the woods, from the town, and from the lower end of the canyon at his rear. Caught in a double cross fire, the enemy will be crushed."

He stood silent a moment, contemplating his own plan, and then said: "The idea has several weaknesses. Let us see if we cannot anticipate them. First, there is the possibility—slim but evident—that Santana might choose to thread his men through the trees alongside the road instead of marching up the road. In that case he would immediately stumble across our troops, lying in wait for him. To counter that possibility, we must hold our men far back from the road until the order to attack is given. Thus even if the rebels march through the woods they will not find us. Second, it is also just possible that Santana might divide his force—half to keep our army occupied at Catacamas, the other half to circle past Catacamas and march directly on Guadalquivir. We must place a division midway between here and Catacamas to forestall that. A third possibility is that he might avoid Catacamas entirely and attack Guadalquivir immediately, but he would be a fool to expose his rear to our garrison at Catacamas. No, I believe the plan is satisfactory. Even his Gatling gun will have little effect against our troops, who will have ample protection

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

of thick forest on both sides of the road. A Gatling gun cannot cut down trees."

Colonel Sanders was a master tactician; Medina had to credit him that. The battle plan, so simply sketched, seemed unassailable. The canyon road would become a bottle: a division at the lower end of the canyon would be its bottom, and the troops barricaded across the narrow entrance to town would put the cork in it.

Sanders said, "If your reports are accurate, Captain, we are about equally matched in manpower. We shall have to commit most of our reserves to defend Guadaluquivir while the main body of troops forms the trap at Catacamas. Well, Captain, have you any suggestions?"

"The plan seems good," Medina said.

"Crush them," Governor Orbea growled: it was as though he was crouching over a mantis tearing apart its mate.

"It will be done, Excellency," Colonel Sanders said. "I promise you that." He saluted and took Medina outside with him. On the Palace steps, out of hearing of the sentry, the gaunt Colonel gripped Medina's arm and turned to face him. "Captain, you have allowed a great many mistakes to happen recently. First there was the escape of the prisoner Sagan. I suppose you might blame that on Mendez, who allowed the rebel spies to release the prisoners—but ultimately the responsibility is yours, as it is also for the escape of the two gringos who got away from here. I should advise you that I am not ignorant of these things. You have let them make a fool of you several times—and in so doing, you have put us all in danger. When this campaign is over you will have to stand accountable for these things. Do you understand?"

"I understand," Medina said evenly.

"It is good at least that you do not make excuses. Well, then. You will issue field orders for the Second and Third Brigades, effective immediately. I will lead them myself. We will march in one hour. You yourself will

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

take command of the Palace Guard and remain in Guadalquivir. Send my orderly to me. Go, now."

Medina saluted and left the Palace. At the gate he mounted his horse and dispatched a trooper after the Colonel's orderly. He rode directly to the command office above the barracks, summoned half a dozen officers, and tersely relayed Sanders' orders. When they had gone he left a sub-lieutenant in charge of the Palace Guard, trusting that in the haste and confusion no one would notice his own absence; Santana had to be warned. He went to his own quarters, sent his orderly after his horse, and took out pen and paper. He wrote swiftly, blotted the page, folded it, and buttoned it inside his tunic. When he walked outside the orderly was waiting with a big sorrel, saddled and skittish. Medina took the reins, mounted the horse, responded to the orderly's salute, and rode at a calm trot out of the compound. Downhill he rode, through the twisting narrow streets of the city; he crossed the square, glanced at the darkened and shuttered facade of Jericho Stride's cantina, and lifted the horse to a lope when he cleared the edge of town. Once he looked back, hoping no one had marked his departure. His face was drawn, his eyes hollow.

He traveled at a steady gait across the rolling hills. The crescent moon rose and dappled the hills with pale illumination. He rode quickly, a solitary horseman on the empty road. Now and then he raised the lights of a lonely house amid the limitless hilly acres.

Shortly before midnight he reached Catacamas. It was a long, narrow town that sprawled up the hill-slopes on either side of the high canyon. Commanding the district was a highstacked copper smelter, blooming orange smoke into the night sky far up on the mountainside. At the town livery stable he swapped his exhausted mount for a fresh horse and rode on down the long canyon, without having seen a single soldier: he had avoided the garrison purposefully. Colonel Sanders must not learn that he had passed this way. Going down the road

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

he had a chance to study the massed shadow of the forest that grew thick and deep on either side of the road; beyond the mile-wide swath of timber lifted steep limestone walls. Colonel Sanders had planned well. Santana could not but come up through this canyon; there was no other way to reach Catacamas, unless Santana circled completely around the end of the mountain range. That would require an additional day's march, and would leave Santana's rear unguarded. Medina's jaw crept forward to lie in a long, level shelf. He broke out of the wide mouth of the canyon, boulder-strewn: here would lie in wait the division that would form the bottom of Sanders' bottle. Ten thousand men could hide unseen in those rocks. His face took a pale grim cast and he plunged on through the night. Next to his chest he carried the lives of sixteen thousand men. He could not say why he had written out the message; he had long ago learned to trust his instinct.

The glow of a thousand fires filled the sky ahead of him. There was no longer any need for concealment; Carlos Santana knew by now that he was under constant surveillance. The campaign was no longer a matter of striking, running, hiding; troops were now massed on the plain for desperate and final battle.

At four o'clock, just before first light, Medina topped a hummock and saw the vast camp laid out before him, two miles away under the stars. He started down the hill and a voice, nervous and high-pitched, arrested him:

"Alto! Quien es? Alto—Alto!"

Medina fought the horse down and sat, his uniform silhouetted against the sky behind him. He reached into his tunic for the letter he had written, and said: *"Yo soy—"*

The sentry's bullet cut off his voice and sent him thrashing from the saddle. He hit the earth and lay crumpled. The sentry ran up to him, slamming the breechblock of his rifle home, looming up in the night; the muzzle faced Medina like a tunnel. Weak dizziness flowed into him. He raised the document in his hand

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

and saw the ragged bullethole cut through it; he waved it at the sentry and whispered, "On your life, *soldado*, take this to Carlos Santana. You must not fail."

The sentry stammered and kept his rifle pointed at Medina. Medina fell back loosely. He breathed two hoarse words: "*Viva Santana*." The paper fluttered from his slack hand.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

FOUR OR FIVE MILES from Catacamas, on the flank of a grassy hill, there was a little nameless village surmounted by a church with double domes. Beside the church grew a little dusty garden where Elena walked slowly, careful not to tread on a precious green plant. The early morning sun cast a long shadow of her figure, on her firm shoulders and the scarf over her head. Out in the road stood two horses. Jeremy Six was standing by, holding the horses, talking quietly with Holly Moore. They were some distance away and Elena could not hear what they said. All three of them were waiting.

Carlos Santana stepped out of the church, putting on his hat. His eyes found Elena and he came to her; he put his big hands on her shoulders and she felt the strength of his glance. Fear was a knot of pain inside her but what Elena said to him was, "Fight well, *mi corazon*." She folded herself against his chest within the circle of his arms. He spoke softly:

"Will you always stand by me, *querida*?"

"Always."

"I need that," he said, and turned her out of his arms. They walked slowly to the horses and the padre came out onto the church steps, his brown Franciscan robe flapping gently in the stir of wind. "God be with you," the padre said to Carlos Santana.

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

Santana took his reins from Six and mounted. "Guard them well, padre."

Elena stood by his knee and watched Six climb asaddle and say something quiet to Holly. Holly grinned up at Six and gently slapped the back of his hand. Elena stepped back and shaded her eyes and said, "Go with God, my darling."

Santana dipped his head to her in a tender and gallant gesture. Elena turned back to the church steps and stood between Holly and the padre, and watched the two horsemen drum away in a thin haze of dust. The padre said, "You will feel more comfortable in the rectory. It is cooler there."

Down the road half a mile Santana said to Six, "Sometimes it is the worst for those we leave behind." He withdrew a crumpled, bloodstained paper from his pocket, smoothed it out, and read Rodrigo Medina's brief message for perhaps the tenth time since it had reached him at dawn. "These cruel ironies are what turn the taste of everything sour on the tongue," he said. "Rodrigo stood among the finest of men."

He passed the document to Six, who glanced at it for the second time. They rode past a chicken coop attached to a tumbledown shack. In front of it a sagging bovine woman stared at them through black strands of disheveled hair, holding a tattered five-year-old girl by the hand. A rooster strutted across the dusty yard and someone snored within the shack. Farther away a dog was barking monotonously. The woman's unblinking stare was unfriendly and that made Santana smile ruefully; when they had ridden beyond earshot he said to Six, "It is for her that I send men to die in battle."

They crossed a barren mile and crested a hill, and saw Santana's thousands sprawled across the road before them in line of march, so many tiny figures going toward Catacamas. Boots and huaraches and moccasins and horse-hooves raised a choking pall of dry dust that bannered behind the army for a full mile. Horse-

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

men shouted hoarsely at men afoot. In the advance company rumbled the Gatling carriage. Wagons trailed along in the van—buckboards and Studebakers, freight wagons and heavy-wheeled oxcarts. There was no precision in the marching and no uniformity of equipment.

Santana said, "It all belongs to me, doesn't it? I suppose I ought to feel pride."

"But you don't?"

"Until this morning I had not made confession in a church for more months than I can remember. All that time I have been hiding in the hills, far from the house of God. I wish this thing were over and the dead buried."

Six folded Medina's letter and handed it back. "What are you going to do about that?"

There was no immediate reply. Six said, "You can't ram right into Catacamas. He'll box you in and cut you to pieces."

Santana smiled shrewdly. "You do not speak with an idle air, amigo. If you have an idea in your head I will welcome it."

Six began to speak. They rode alongside the plodding army where dust got onto their skin, inside the fiber of their clothes; it caked against their eyelids and gritted on their teeth. When they reached the head of the long column Santana raised his canteen and proffered it. Six took a sip, handed it back, and watched the big rebel leader palm off the neck of the canteen and drink lustily. Santana capped the canteen and hung it on his saddle, and said, "You are as clever as Vargas himself. You're one *gran caballero*, amigo."

It was then five-forty in the morning. At half past three that afternoon, with thunderheads threatening rain—the shadow-streaks of falling rain were already visible beyond the mountains—Colonel Sanderos stood frowning on the roof of the town hall in Catacamas. From

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

here he could see the whole town and most of the wide canyon below. Nothing had come up through that long green gap except a few farm carts, half a dozen odd produce wagons, and not more than fifteen farmers, who had drifted into town one or two at a time at intervals during the day. All of them had been stopped and questioned; all of them had said they had seen Santana's army beyond the canyon; none of them could tell what he was doing. Colonel Sanders' own scouts kept him informed: Santana's rebel army sat just beyond the mouth of the canyon. It appeared to be waiting for something. The rain, perhaps, or darkness. Colonel Sanders cracked his knuckles and went through the trapdoor and down the stairs into the square central courtyard of the town hall. His staff officers were gathered here, standing around in little knots of conversation and trying to appear less nervous than they were.

In the street outside a horse rattled to a stop and a young soldier came inside to report that the Governor's coach had been sighted a few miles up the Guadaluquivir road, coming this way with an escort of troops. Sanders cursed under his breath and went back up to the roof for another puzzled look down the silent canyon. The sky was leaden. The Governor's coach rolled in its heavy stately fashion down the main street of town and drew to a halt before the town hall. Colonel Sanders went down to meet it and tried not to show his displeasure when he gave the Governor his reluctant welcome. The Governor swept inside and waddled into the alcalde's office, which Colonel Sanders had commandeered for himself since it was the largest office in the building. The Governor assumed a proprietary air, wedged himself down into the alcalde's big chair, and glowered up at Sanders. "I expected that you would have crushed them by now."

"They have not moved, Excellency. Perhaps they wait for night."

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

"The trap will work as well in the dark as in the light."

"Of course," Sanderos said.

"I have come here because all our force is committed here. I stand or fall by what happens here in the next few hours, Colonel."

"There is no question of falling, Excellency."

"No, no, of course not."

"It might be dangerous here for you."

"I rely on you for corporal protection, Colonel."

"I will post a guard platoon," Sanderos said, and bowed himself out of the room. Left alone, the fat Governor began to drum on the desk with his fingernails.

In the upper end of town, the end that faced Guadalupe, a high-sided wagon rumbled unhurriedly into town, drawn by four scrawny mules. Its driver, a squat man with a seamed brown face, rode a saddle on the off-wheel mule. The loyalist guard detail halted the wagon and a soldier got up on the rim of the back wheel to peer down into the load. All he saw was the top of a load of hay. He climbed down and the corporal-in-charge waved the wagon on. The driver nodded subserviently and cracked his lash over the mules. The corporal of the guard went back and sat down and picked up his beer bottle. Inspections at this end of town were casual; no one expected the rebels to come this way: all one had to do was climb up the copper smelter, and one could see the whole of Santana's army camped beyond the mouth of the canyon. The corporal drank his beer and with a bored glance watched the big wagon lumber down-street.

Ybarra, the driver, turned the mules into a sidestreet and drove the wagon slowly down a half-deserted thoroughfare that ran parallel to the main street. He whistled unconcernedly. As he approached the lower end of town he had opportunity to take a look at the barricades and troops massed across the head of the canyon, just at the lower end of town. The barricade ran

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

across the narrow throat of the canyon, piled high with sandbags, rocks, lumber. At its center was a narrow open passage which could quickly be sealed by ramming into it a fully-loaded wagon that stood ready for just that purpose. On the town-side the barricade was so crowded with soldiers that it hardly seemed they would each have room to fire over the top without elbowing each other down. The better part of a brigade of men seemed to be clustered there. A few men sat on top of the barricade looking down the canyon. They were smoking and talking, hoisting their canteens, laughing and cursing.

Every detail of what he saw was recorded indelibly in Ybarra's memory; but to all outward appearances he only gave the barricade an ordinary curious and cursory glance before he cracked his whip and, still casually whistling, turned the mules into the open gate of a corral. A powerfully muscled Negro came from within the adjacent warehouse to hold the gate open while Ybarra tooled the wagon into the corral.

Jericho Stride let down the bar across the gate and glanced casually both ways along the street, and turned to give Ybarra a hand unhitching the mules. The wagon now stood with its tailgate almost butt-against the wide doors of the warehouse. Two muscular men, both wearing thick dark moustaches, came out of the warehouse and helped roll the wagon half-inside the building. Then the two men with moustaches went out and sat down inside the corral with their backs to the warehouse wall. To all intents they seemed to be enjoying a siesta; but under the lowered hatbrims their eyes gleamed alertly, and each of them carried a rifle and a brace of loaded revolvers underneath the concealment of his enfolding sarape, as well as a number of packed charges of giant powder, fused and capped.

Inside the warehouse the light was poor. Jericho Stride glanced around and said, "All right, everybody out."

An eruption heaved upward against the hay inside the

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

wagon. Two men pushed up, stood straight, and batted straw from their shirts and faces: Jeremy Six and Steve Lament. Ybarra let down the wagon tailgate; and in the dimness of the big room, the four men grinned tautly at each other. Six said, "All set, Jericho?"

"Everybody's posted. I thought for a minute the soldier-boys were about to find the rifles we'd hid under our load of chili peppers, but we got through." He looked at the big wagon and shook his head. "My God, you mean to say those spavined mules hauled this outfit all the way around the mountain in this short a time?"

"We had ten teams of horses hitched to it until about three miles back," Six said. "Give us a hand here."

Ybarra and Jericho Stride climbed up onto the wagon and immediately the four men set to work with pitchforks, tossing the loose hay out of the wagon. When they were finished, the wagonbed lay scattered darkly with the dismantled parts of the Gatling gun, its carriage and ammunition.

"Now," said Jericho Stride, "that's a sweet sight."

Ybarra flexed his thick-rippling muscles and bent with Six to lift the gun down. When all the parts were on the floor, Ybarra said, "If we roll the gun out the front door, we will have a field of fire across almost the whole barricade. This warehouse was well chosen."

Steve Lament said, "What time is it?"

Jericho Stride drew a chained watch from his pocket, clicked the cover open, and said, "Three forty."

"Twenty minutes," said Six. "We cut it pretty fine. Let's get to work."

For a while it was not clear whether they would make it in time. With quick deftness, Six and Lament set about putting together the gun-carriage, pinning the wheels onto the axles, mounting the gun; while Jericho Stride stood guard at the door with a rifle, and Ybarra moved the heavy ammunition tins one by one to the door, where they would be within easy reach of the gunner once they rolled the weapon outside.

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

During those final minutes ticking toward four o'clock, the rain moved steadily closer to Catacamas. At the far end of the canyon, unseen by the loyalist troops, scores of men were filtering through the rocks, carrying hastily-manufactured charges of blasting powder. Across the town from where Six and his crew worked at the gun, a pair of men climbed into a loft, each carrying three repeating rifles and several bandoliers of ammunition. From the two loft windows they could command the left end of the barricade—the end that would be hidden by buildings from the Gatling gun.

Struggling under a heavy load of equipment, a thin young man climbed into the bell tower of the town hall. No one would have believed he had been able to pass the three-score officers who milled the rooms and corridors of the town hall, which had been commandeered by the army as nerve center for the defense of Catacamas. Yet the young man had not been discovered. Now, entering the bell tower, he carefully closed the door behind him and wedged a heavy timber against it. He moved to the opening that faced the canyon, keeping close to the pillar to avoid being seen from outside. Methodically he laid out his equipment below the sill of the oval opening: A bucket half-full of water, several rags, a rifle ramrod, bandoliers and boxes of ammunition, each cartridge meticulously hand-loaded for a precise charge of powder; a metal rod, perhaps twenty inches long, with a sharp point at one end and a U-shaped notch at the other; five sticks of blasting powder, capped and fused; and a long-barreled Sharps rifle, caliber .38-56, with its caliper sights adjustable for ranges up to eleven hundred yards. This thin young man was the best marksman of the sixteen thousand in Santana's army.

He took out the pocket watch that had been issued him for today's mission, set it on the floor with its lid open, and opened all his ammunition boxes. He took a small oil can from his pocket, uncapped it and set it

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

beside the watch; taking out a small cloth patch from another pocket, he dipped it in the oil, put it on the end of his ramrod, and pushed it through the bore of the Sharps from muzzle to breech. Then he picked up the forked metal rod. He sat down on the floor so that he could see out over the parapet formed by the sill of the bell-opening. The bell itself hung silent overhead. From here he could see far over the heads of the soldiers lining the barricade: he could see, with his keen young eyes, the shapes of individual trees a thousand yards away in the forests that lined each side of the empty road leading down to the foot of the canyon. Here and there among those trees he made out the shape of a soldier.

His thin steady hand set the point of the forked metal rod firmly into the adobe floor. He rested the upper end against the sill while he took a piece of charcoal and blackened the muzzle of the rifle to prevent it from reflecting light. A cartridge slid smoothly into the oiled breech of the long-barreled weapon. He closed the finger lever, set the hammer on full cock, flipped up the tang sight, and rested the forepiece of the rifle in the U-shaped notch of the upright rod. Nestling the butt-stock into his thin shoulder, he sat calmly, waiting. A glance at the watch told him it was four minutes until four.

Three minutes until four was the reading of Jericho Stride's watch when he snapped it shut and called impatiently to the others: "Hurry up, damn it."

A drop of rain struck the metal roof of the warehouse.

Up in the loft across town, the two men silently laid out their three repeating rifles, took a last drink from their canteens, and arranged their ammunition. They hoped fervently that the sun would stay hidden behind the clouds. If the sun appeared it would be shining right in their faces. One of them said to the other, "It is one minute yet."

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

Down at the foot of the canyon, among the rocks, a rebel soldier took two sulphur matches out of his pocket and held them with heads together, ready to strike them against a rock and touch them to the fuse of the blasting sticks he held in throwing position in one hand. His eyes rested on the hands of his watch and his ears listened for the confirming signal from the town two miles above.

On the flat beyond the canyon mouth, Carlos Santana sat his horse at the head of his silent army, stretching in march formation behind him. He lifted his hat.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"NO MORE THAN three minutes," Six warned. "Then we hightail. All right—move."

It was the point of four o'clock. The warehouse doors scraped open across the dusty floor and they rolled the Gatling gun into the opening. It faced the vulnerable backside of the barricade. A thousand soldiers were before them. Steve Lament began to crank the big handle before Six and Ybarra had fully settled the carriage in place.

Only a hundred feet from the nearest part of the barricade, the Gatling gun sliced into the loyalist line and shredded it. The gun stammered, broke off once, and resumed its deafening chatter with a deadly monotony of sound while Ybarra, muscles heaving, slowly swung the carriage from side to side, to increase the radius of the aiming arc. Six and Jericho Stride stood behind the gun in the shadows, firing their rifles steadily. The Gatling's three-hundred-grain bullets rammed into the loyalists, caught them in stunned shock, and methodically ripped them to pieces.

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

In the bell tower of the town hall, the thin youth heard the stutter of the Gatling and squinted. He had already chosen his target and now he squeezed the trigger unhurriedly. The Sharps rifle boomed. Its muzzle smoke drifted away and far up the left-hand hillside he saw a man's tiny figure outstretched. The thin youth reloaded and fired again, and again, and kept firing with steady speed, picking targets among the trees. His mission was to demoralize the hidden troops who waited to ambush Santana's charge.

In the stuffy loft across town, the two men fired their Winchesters as rapidly as they could pull triggers and jack levers. One of them laid aside his rifle long enough to ignite the fuse of a blasting-powder stick and toss it down upon the knot of crowded soldiers who swung away from the barricade to charge toward the two blazing rifles. The explosive roared among them, knocked them down and drove them back.

At the far end of the canyon, among the rocks, sudden great explosions rent the silence with the rapid pounding regularity of a heavy artillery barrage. The earth shuddered under an onslaught of giant-powder that ran like a string of mammoth firecrackers across the canyon. Through a choking cloud of smoke flew an appalling shrapnel of hats, guns, human limbs.

And on the flats, Santana's army began to move.

Beyond the ends of the barricade at the foot of town, the sloped canyon walls ran upward at a steady steep pitch to their crest far above. Scores of rebels spilled over those crests from their hidden gathering-places beyond; whooping and firing, they descended at great bounds through trees and rocks, carrying the attack right up to the barricade.

The Gatling gun drove men before it like wind roughing up a heavy sea. Soldiers shouted, leaped, ran in blind circles. They scrambled over the sandbags and went running down-canyon, abandoning their arms; they wheeled and crouched and tried to shoot back at the

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

smoke-shrouded doorway from which the ten-barreled machine vomited lead. They found themselves pinned between the gun and the attacking rebels who swarmed down the slopes at either end of the barricade.

None of them had ever seen anything like the Gatling gun. Sticks of giant-powder roared along the barricade, tossed by Six or Jericho Stride or the thin youth in the bell tower or the men in the loft; the dusty explosions contributed to the confused furor. An officer bawled orders at the top of his lungs but no one listened. A hundred bodies lay dead or near-dead at the base of the crumbling barricade; a hundred men staggered or limped away and gently supported their injuries.

As the gun's wheeling barrels heated up, Ybarra took a soaked rag out of the waiting water-bucket and draped it sizzling over the barrel assembly. Every few seconds the rag fell off the revolving metal; Ybarra caught it and replaced it. Six and Jericho Stride stood flanking Steve Lament, feet braced, firing rifle bullets into the wake of the gun's chattering destruction.

The youth in the high bell tower was also cooling his weapon with a water-soaked rag. He ran a fresh oiled patch down the bore and resumed fire. He had fired thirty-five shots in the space of two minutes and figured, by his own calm estimate, to have pinked or killed nineteen men. His eyes were dull. In all the confusion the soldiers below him in the streets had not yet made the discovery that he was above them. He had volunteered for this task, although he could not have said why he had done so. There was no retreat from it. The staircase that descended within the tower opened out into the town hall, which was filled with a press of officers and couriers. There was a constant rushing of men in and out of the building.

In the loft across town, one of the two riflemen lay sprawled dead. His companion had but a single stick of blasting powder left. Below the loft the street and the end of the barricade lay drenched in death. The surviv-

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

ing rifleman had a bubbling slow stream of blood running down his left arm from a wound near the shoulder; he fired his rifle with one hand until it was empty and then clawed for a match to ignite the charge. Coming down the slope, only a hundred yards distant now, he could see the advance wedge of the small rebel column that had worked its way up there. The rifleman tossed the fused sputtering charge and wheeled to put his back to the wall and be away from the window. Now he had his revolver, five shots.

Throughout the length of the canyon, unreasoning confusion took hold of suddenly frightened men. Among the trees, men died mysteriously from the scattered bullets of an undiscovered sniper who killed men at ranges up to six hundred yards, and whose bullets stung the air beside men's ears at almost twice that distance. Down the head of the road, rushing headlong or staggering blindly or limping painfully, fled hundreds who had seen the licking tongues of the Gatling gun. Midway along the canyon men looked up and found scores of riflemen pouring gunfire down on them from positions higher along the precipitous canyon walls. Far down in the mouth of the long canyon, where Santana's advance guard rammed its massed attack against a shattered and frightened opposition, the saboteurs had done their job: craters pitted the boulder-fields and smoke hung thick over an earth that trickled in crimson.

By the open warehouse door, the Gatling's drifting pall of smoke obscured vision and Jeremy Six's voice cut powerfully over the roar: "Let's pull out."

But Lament did not seem to hear him. Lament's lined face showed no expression at all. He locked a magazine into place and turned the crank, swinging the muzzles slowly. From one side a bellowing soldier rushed forward; Jericho Stride's rifle cracked and the man fell flat. Six's ears rang steadily. A bullet made a soft whacking thud against Ybarra's chest and he fell without uttering a sound.

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

In the big office deep within the town hall Governor Orbea stood amid a sweating squad of armed men and shouted Colonel Sanders' name time after time until the gaunt colonel presented his drawn face at the door. Orbea screamed at him:

"What has happened? What has happened?"

"Our trap has turned upon us," Sanders said, and went away with a revolver in his hand.

Down the canyon walls on either side came a line of rebel soldiers, beating the bush, driving the loyalists from cover. The bulk of the loyalist army retreated toward a central silence in the canyon, trapped by the Gatling gun and guerillas at the upper end, by the descending rebels on the slopes to either side, and by the mass of Santana's main advance at the bottom. The loyalist army broke up like a piece of moist cake dropped into a boiling caldron.

In the bell tower the thin young man wrapped a wet cloth around his left hand to hold his rifle. It had grown too hot to touch. He adjusted his sight and brought down a running figure two hundred yards away at the near edge of the trees.

In the smoky loft the rifleman with the wounded arm sat listening to a squad of soldiers tramp up the stairs toward his trapdoor. He walked over to it and fired four shots through it with his pistol. He put the pistol in his mouth but then he took it out again, cocked it, and trained it on the trapdoor, waiting for it to open. He glanced once at his dead companion.

A wizened old woman fell from a second-story window with a bullet in her heart.

In the town hall a young beardless lieutenant had discovered the sniper in the bell tower. He gathered a group of soldiers and led them up the spiral stair toward the tower door.

At the lower end of the canyon a bull-throated officer commanded order among his loyalist troops and organized them rapidly to make a stand against the ad-

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

vance of the rebel force. He was outnumbered three to one. Santana's men had threaded to either side into the trees instead of marching up the road; now the fighting was hand-to-hand and rifle-to-rifle among the trees. Slowly the loyalists lost ground, backing uphill. Coming down toward them were the half-thousand who had fled the Gatling gun.

The gun chattered a final time, firing blindly in a wide arc through the dense choking fog of its own smoke. Lament coughed raspily and Six's powerful hand ripped him away from the crank-handle of the empty gun. Ybarra's corpse lay silent on the warehouse floor. Six bled profusely from a superficial wound: a bullet had neatly pierced his right earlobe. The side of his face was a ghastly red mess. With a shove he propelled Lament across the floor; he stooped and heaved and dragged the Gatling back from the doors. Jericho Stride rode the door shut with his shoulder and dropped the heavy cross-bar in place. Lament got to his feet and stood as if stunned. All of them coughed steadily. Six shook him by the shoulders: "Disarm it."

The glaze faded from Lament's eyes and he nodded jerkily. It took him a moment with a small tool to remove the Gatling's firing-pin, thus rendering the weapon useless. Jericho Stride fired a rifle empty through the closed door to discourage an attack on it. Then the three tall men stumbled choking through the room and heard behind them the pounding of oncoming boots: with the retreat of the Gatling, the remnants of the army were quick to respond. Lament pocketed the hot firing pin and they edged past the wagon that blocked the open back door.

The two men with moustaches, who had guarded the back of the warehouse, lay dead in the corral. The four spavined mules ran around squealing, kicking up dust. One of them bled at its neck. Somewhere a man's voice was shouting orders. There was an intense volley of rifle fire not far away.

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

A slight drizzle began. A pair of soldiers walked up to the gate in the far fence and shouted in alarm. Six fired and Jericho Stride's rifle spoke just beside him; Six fired again and the two soldiers retreated, one of them limping. Faintly they heard a hard battering against the barred warehouse door. "On the run!" Six called, and they ran dodging along the wall toward the fence corner.

In the bell tower the thin youth cursed the thickening rain, which obliterated his distant targets. He heard boots climbing the stairs toward him and he turned with a stick of blasting powder, lighting it with one swift motion while he flung the door open. He tossed the sputtering charge out, slammed the door, and propped a timber against it.

The blast shook the tower; the bell reverberated faintly and plaster crumbled onto the youth's hatless head. There was a rending, splintering sound and a long series of loud crashes. Someone screamed in a falsetto voice. Dust puffed in around the seams of the door. After a moment the youth kicked the prop away and opened the door, his revolver ready.

The explosion had blown down the staircase. A heap of tangled bodies lay in the debris forty feet below at the base of the tower.

The youth left the door open and went back to his post at the sill. A squad of soldiers darted nervously from building to building in the street below. He loaded his Sharps and began to pick them off deliberately. At the head of the street he saw an officer whipping up his horse, galloping out of town.

A splashing wall of rain descended, damping down the smoke. Out of a blast-shattered building stepped three men in bloodied loyalist uniforms. One of them had a bleeding ear; another had a ragged bandage tied about his head, concealing all of his face but the eyes. The first man, the tallest, growled at him in English: "Get those Goddamn black hands out of sight."

The man with the bandaged face grinned unseen un-

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

der his bandage. He put his rifle on his shoulder by its strap and rammed his hands into his pockets. The third man looked anxiously both ways. Presently the three slipped across a narrow street and climbed the hill, falling in with a wildly staggering group of unarmed soldiers fleeing up into the wilderness by the smelter. What they fled from was not clear; the Gatling gun was silent and Santana's advancing army was still half a mile down the canyon, attacking against resolute but badly outnumbered lines. At the foot of the alley an officer stood with his legs apart and tears in his eyes, bawling up at the fleeing men. But he found himself ignored.

The youth in the bell tower saw the ragged group of soldiers streaming up the hill. They were obviously in flight; most of them had no guns. He let them go. They slowly disappeared upward into the driving rain.

In the canyon forest roared the boom of gunfire. The thick sting of smoke was held down by the rain. Loose lines of men surged and swelled, moving fragmentarily through the trees. Here and there men died. Carlos Santana rode among his men, shouting and firing his revolver, urging them on. He seemed oblivious to the fact that he presented a clear target, a big-chested man tall on horseback, conspicuous and bold. No bullets found him but finally his horse was shot out from under him; thenceforth he led his men afoot. They rallied around him and pressed forward through the gray gloom of the wet and violent afternoon.

In the road those who had fled the Gatling gun met those fleeing uphill from Santana's advance. The two groups met and milled in confusion. One man fainted of his wounds; boots trampled him and no one heard his weak cries. The body of men, eight hundred strong but leaderless, found itself surrounded by Santana's men, who had simply walked past them through the trees. A few loyalists fired in panic and were quickly silenced by their own comrades, who had lost their

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

stomach for the fight. No officer could be found who cared to surrender and so, after a disorderly consultation, a tall sergeant of infantry formally surrendered the eight hundred into Santana's hands.

Rebels filtered down the canyon sides into the town itself and through the waning afternoon a score of single encounters took place as the rebels swept from building to building. Santana's main body of troops crossed the barricade unchallenged at sundown, herding their prisoners before them. The monotonous rain fell heavily, soaking them all.

A last ring of defense held out at the town hall for another full hour, other than that, the battle was over except for sporadic bursts of firing in scattered quarters of town and canyon. Catacamas had fallen. Jeremy Six and his two partners came down out of the hills to rejoin them. On Six's ear was a makeshift bandage, soaked and stiff with blood. A volley of fire erupted lower down the canyon and over their footsteps sounded Steve Lament's voice, quoting a fragment:

" ' . . . Where ignorant armies clash by night.' Matthew Arnold, I believe." He sounded in good spirits. The streets were brightly lamplit and patrolled heavily by squads of men.

A troop of prisoners sweated in the pitch-black rain, guarded by rifles: the burial detail, digging long trenches. Two padres walked angry-faced through the streets, kneeling here and there by the dead. A field hospital had been set up in what had once been loyalist barracks.

Almost two thousand loyalist soldiers were unaccounted for. The dark and the rain made for easy escape.

A man on the town hall roof flung up a weighted rope, which was caught by the youth in the tower. It had no stairway. The youth climbed down the rope, carefully carrying his Sharps rifle. He had fought alone from the tower for fully four hours but not a single bullet had touched him. He was fed and given dry

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

clothes and was then brought before Carlos Santana, who personally shook his hand. Afterward he spent half an hour cleaning his rifle, which was still warm to the touch.

The town hall had fallen and in the alcalde's office sat Governor Orbea, composed and silent. He had surrendered his guard when the hopelessness of resistance had become apparent. He drank wine and smoked long Turkish cigarettes and spoke to no one.

Colonel Sanders was nowhere to be found.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

A SHAWL OVER her head, Elena knelt before the altar. Her lips moved soundlessly. She crossed herself and stood up and went back along the aisle. The padre stood in the open door looking out at the rain. In a corner, Holly Moore sat on a wooden bench underneath a flickering candle. Elena went to her and sat down. The two women looked at each other and attempted to smile.

A horseman came forward out of the rain. Hoofs clattered to a stop and a rasping voice spoke:

"Padre, I need clothes and food and a fresh horse."

The padre's head jerked back. After a moment he said, "Come inside."

Boots scuffed the steps and a gaunt disheveled figure appeared: Colonel Sanders, bleeding at the chest. Elena's eyes widened and her hand went to her mouth. Sanders swayed on his feet; he had not seen the women. The padre said, "You are hurt."

"I must get on, padre. Bring me what I need."

Colonel Sanders' eyes were hooded and dim. He turned and his glance fell upon the women. If he was

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

surprised he did not show it. He stood back and rested wearily against the wall, his head back and his eyes almost closed. The padre stood where he was, his expression uncertain. Sanders' eyelids fluttered open and he said harshly, "Move, man!" His head turned and settled and he said to Elena, "You are Santana's woman." His stare was like a lizard's. Without warning he lifted the revolver from his holster. He said something unintelligible. Holly shouted a warning and tried to draw Elena aside. Colonel Sanders' revolver wavered; he pulled the trigger.

The round boom of the shot echoed through the church. Elena slumped against Holly. Sanders cried out violently and sagged back against the wall. The revolver dropped to arm's length and fell to the floor. He reached up toward his bleeding body and slid slowly down to the floor.

The padre knelt by Elena, taking her wrist in his fingers. In a moment his eyes lifted to meet Holly's. "She is dead."

"He couldn't stop killing," Holly said. Her head dropped and she lurched with weeping. The padre touched his cross and began to murmur over Elena. Gently Holly laid the inert body down on the bench and went away. She looked at Sanders. He was still breathing but there was a bubble of red foam at the corner of his mouth. His eyes opened and he looked up at her. He said nothing. His eyes filmed over, still staring at her. Holly stepped across his body and stood in the doorway. A horse was galloping forward through the night. She could see a few lights in windows not far away. Sanders' winded horse stood with its head down and its legs spraddled. The padre was kneeling by Sanders now. Holly folded her arms and huddled against the chill of the rainy night, but did not move from the doorway. Her eyes wept.

The padre touched her and she turned quickly, defensively. "I am sorry," the padre said. "That one, he

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

was shot in the back. It is strange. It is difficult to bestow unction upon such a man."

"How can you?"

"I am but an instrument," the padre said, and turned back to the dead. The approaching hoofbeats grew steadily louder. Holly murmured, " 'And the fourth horseman was death.' " Her shoulders bent and she cried into her hands. Rain dappled the roof with sound. She went forward through the aisle and knelt, crossing herself in an almost forgotten gesture; she stared unblinkingly, beseechingly at the mute crucified figure above the altar.

She did not notice the horse arrive outside, but when she turned away from the altar she saw Jeremy Six in the doorway. Six removed his hat and came inside and the padre stood up to talk to him. Holly walked up the aisle and locked both hands on Six's arm, saying nothing. The oilskin of his poncho was slick in her grip. The padre said to Six, "In that case I will have her brought to Guadalquivir for burial. Is the revolution ended?"

"Yes," Six said.

The padre's glance turned to Holly. "Sometimes it is hard to understand the ways of God."

"Don't parrot pious clichés at me," Holly snapped. Her eyes grew moist and she said, "I'm sorry, Padre."

"This other one," the padre said to Six. "What about him?"

"Bury him."

"He was hated by the people in this village. They will not want to have him in the consecrated ground of their parish."

"Do what you want, Padre," Six said tiredly.

"He will be buried, of course."

Six turned and looked down at Holly. "Have you got a slicker?"

"Yes. I don't want to stay here."

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

"We'll get you a horse. Santana's gone on to Guadalquivir. It's all over."

It was dawn when they rode through the silent streets of Catacamas and put their horses down the back of the pass. They stopped to eat at a farm. The farmer fed them and spoke with great enthusiasm of the great changes that would be made under Carlos Santana. They went on, speaking very little to each other, and reached Guadalquivir before midnight. The rain had quit sometime in the night and the road was sodden with mud.

A pall of smoke hung over the city like a thundercloud. They caught the smell of it miles from Guadalquivir. Holly said, "What is it?" and Six could only shake his head in answer. On a sagging porch at the outskirts of the city they found a crippled old man who hobbled forward on his crutches and answered their question:

"The Palace. It is the Governor's Palace. The people have made a fire." The old man emitted a thin little laugh that was a cackle. They rode on into the city. The streets were all but deserted and the air was foul with smoke. They crossed the bridge over the Rio Soldado and passed under the cottonwoods. The sun went down. Holly said, "My throat feels raw."

"I think there's a wind coming up."

"Where will we go?"

"Jericho's cantina, I guess."

"Sure," Holly said. "We've got noplacelse. We ought to tell Santana about Elena."

"I'll tell him."

"It won't be easy, Marshal."

"No," he said, "I guess it won't."

"He's paid a God-awful price for whatever he's got—I suppose you'd call it victory. I wonder if he'd have done it if he'd known what was going to happen to Elena, and Medina and all the rest of them."

"He might," Six said. "Who can tell?"

Stride was in the cantina, drinking and brooding. Six

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

left Holly there, put their horses away in the stable, and walked across the dark empty plaza. Smoke stung his eyes and with the fall of dusk he was able to make out the massive glow on the hilltop. He stopped by the covered well and hauled up a bucket of water, splashed his face and drank; he went on up the cobblestoned streets, encountering no one at all until he reached the military compound, where a pair of sentries presented their rifles. Beyond them within the compound he saw a large body of men, armed and ready in case of royalist reprisals. He said to the sentry, "I bring a message for the General."

The second sentry spoke to the first one: "I know him. He fought well for us. Let him pass."

The first sentry said, "The General is in the commandant's office."

"*Gracias*," Six murmured, and passed through the gate.

None of the men wore uniforms. A man sat on a step strumming a guitar, and made Six think of old blind Juano who had played his guitar in the cantina until Colonel Sanders had sent Sergeant Mendez to question him. All of them were dead now. It took years to shape a man, and a single instant to destroy him.

Above the flat rooftops, higher on the hill, he could see the skeleton of the Governor's Palace outlined in flames. Even here he could feel the heat of it against his face. There was a distant moaning, a shouting of many voices; figures bobbed in the light of the great fire.

He found Santana outside, behind the commandant's office, looking up at the fire. A number of officers stood around, evidently waiting for Santana to speak to them. Santana saw Six and showed a tired smile and waved his great arm upward toward the burning Palace. "The people celebrate," he said. "They forget that they leave me no office. What is a leader without a Palace?"

"Carlos," Six said, and saw the lion-like head swinging toward him. "Elena is dead."

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

Elena was buried after dark the following night and at ten o'clock Carlos Santana spoke a few quiet words to the priest and rode away from the grave, surrounded by his retinue of officers. On the hill he could see the gutted smoking remains of the Palace, still coal-glowing. It looked like a Roman ruin. He dismounted before the commandant's office in the military compound, handed the reins to an orderly, and entered the office. A small cadre of his officers crowded into the room, a silent chorus around him. The portly figure of Governor Orbea stood up when Santana entered. Santana sat down and nodded to Orbea, who subsided into a chair. His bulk overflowed it. Sweat made a shine on his face. An aide who had been permitted to stay by him lighted a Turkish cigarette and put it between Orbea's lips.

Santana said, "Well, Señor."

Orbea waved a hand around. "It is yours now. I hope you will know what to do with it."

Santana inclined his head. Orbea said, "I have gone soft and fat and my mind is not as quick as it once was. You must guard against that."

"We grow old," Santana said.

"The people love you now, as they once loved me. It will pass. One day in the hills a revolt will rise against you."

"I hope that does not come to pass."

"It will. A dissatisfied people always becomes unhappy with its leader—even when it is the people's own failures that cause their dissatisfaction."

"I prefer to think it is not their failure, nor their fault."

"You have time in which to learn these things," Orbea said. "I will say no more. You resent me and therefore you suspect whatever I say. I came here to bid you *adios* and to thank you for giving me what is left of my life, even if it must be spent in exile."

"There has been enough death," Santana said. "More

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

than enough." He looked directly at Orbea and added, "I cannot wish you well."

"Of course," said Orbea. "And so we part as gentlemen, eh?" He smiled wryly. With the aide's help he got out of the chair. He seemed old. The officers parted to make way for him. He went outside into the broiling sun and was assisted into a waiting buggy. Presently his aide cracked the whip and they drove off. Along the road, peons hurled insults and an occasional stone at him. A larger crowd stood outside the military compound waiting for a glimpse of Santana so that they might cheer him.

Out in back of the commandant's office, which had recently been Colonel Sanders' office, two men stood guard over the Gatling gun, which stood in something like a position of exaltation. Steve Lament was there, looking curiously at the weapon. Santana stepped out of the door and said, "It is an evil thing, this gun."

"A gun's a tool," Lament said. "It has no moral value."

"Perhaps." Santana was very weary. "You have fought well. You have done so much for me, you three. It was not your battle."

Lamplight from the office fell faintly across Lament's eyes.

Santana wiped his face with a big hand. "I'll tell you, amigo. I'm an ambitious man. Maybe I'm a fool too, to think I can do any better than Orbea."

"No," Lament said. "You're a leader. You've led these people to their freedom. You're giving them back the rights that were taken away from them."

Someone walked by carrying a lantern. Its upsweeping light caught Santana just as he stepped forward, his face gone taut, and pressed his stiff forefinger against Lament's chest. "I am not a Messiah!" He shook his head and drew his hand across his eyes. "I don't know—I'm tired, amigo. You make me think about myself and maybe I don't like to do that. I've got to talk to the people tonight and I don't know what to tell them. I'd

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

like to drink half a bottle of mezcal and go to sleep for twelve hours and wake up with Elena holding my hand." He wheeled suddenly and tramped back inside the office.

In the center of the city there was celebration. The plaza was crowded. The cantina overflowed and six bartenders sweated busily. In the back office Six and Jericho Stride sat over a bottle of tequila and Holly lay on one elbow on the cot with a cup of coffee. A cheroot was uptilted in the corner of Stride's mouth. Through the closed door they could hear the lusty voices of men laughing and talking with strong goodwill. There was no guitar. Steve Lament drifted restlessly into the office and nodded to all of them and had a drink. Six said, "What you going to do now?"

"I don't know," Lament said. "I'll have to think about it."

Holly said gently, "They tell me you fought like a dozen tigers up there."

"Did I?" he said absently. "I feel kind of old, you know that?" He finished his drink. "Santana offered me a job training his men with the Gatling gun."

Jericho Stride said, "You know why he needs somebody to train his troops? It's to keep somebody else from doing to him what he just did to Orbea. You don't want to see that happen, amigo." Stride was a little drunk.

"If that happens I'll want to see it," Lament said. "You can't just turn your back on the truth when it goes sour. But I think you're wrong, Jericho. I don't think the people will ever turn on Carlos Santana."

"Maybe."

Holly Moore said, "This is an ugly room. I hate it. It goes with you."

"I took a bath and changed my clothes. What else do you want?"

"Well," she said, and pursed her lips thoughtfully. Jericho Stride sat down behind the desk, put his feet

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

up, and picked up the Buffalo Bill dime novel. Holly looked at him. Jericho had said nothing and seemed to be making a point of ignoring her. He looked long-faced and bored. Holly said, "Haven't you got anything better to do?"

"I guess not."

"Haven't you finished that book yet?"

"No." He finally looked up. "Just when d'you expect I've had a chance?"

"You exasperate a person, Jericho, I'm damned if you don't."

He grinned. His nose was buried in the book. Holly said, "You ought to be flogged. You know there was a character in a Greek myth called Hero. Most of the time he was making a fool out of himself."

"That's what I kept trying to tell *him*," Jericho Stride said. He did not look up from the dime novel but his thumb waggled toward Six.

Six was about to speak when someone knocked lightly at the back door. He looked at it inquiringly and went to open it. A big man stood outside in the rough garb of a peon. An immense sombrero flopped low enough to conceal his face. He tipped the sombrero back and smiled. It was Santana. "I have come for a glass of tequila."

Holly said, "Twelve hours in office and he's playin' hooky already. A hell of a Governor."

"Irreverence ill becomes you, beautiful lady," said Santana, stepping inside.

"You've been drinking." Holly accused him.

Santana crossed the room and sat on the bunk. Stride poured a quartet of drinks and they raised their glasses. Santana's face turned dark and he said, "My first day in power and they throw every problem in my face at once. What do they think I am? I must have time to absorb these things. Drink with me, my friends, and ask me no questions."

"You look hungry," Holly said.

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

"No, I have eaten. It is probably the wild-eyed look of a caged animal that you see. I have led myself by the nose into a trap. Now I can see why Orbea was such an unhapppy man—he was powerless to meet the demands of the people. Well, I must try to change all that. But I cannot do it overnight. Just now I need to loosen all my joints."

Holly said, "If it's so impossible why don't you quit?"

"After all we have done? After so many have died? I tell you, every act of violence involves a moral commitment. I can never quit. Now let us forget all this and talk of simple things. Your good health, amigos." He raised his drink and drank it down.

Jericho Stride said, "If it gets any hotter around here I may just go back to Arizona."

Santana said, "The heat will break."

"Are you talking as a prophet or as a Governor?" Jericho Stride asked.

"Amigo," said Santana, "I'm all through talking. *Salud*."

A silence, half comfortable and half awkward, settled into the room. Presently Santana got up. A slight unsteadiness betrayed him as he took a step. He took Holly's hand and gravely bowed over it to kiss it; he slapped on his sombrero and went out the back door. Jeremy Six regarded Jericho Stride and Holly in turn and then followed Santana out into the junk-strewn back yard. Santana was almost at the gate, walking slowly with his head down. Six called out to him and Santana stopped to wait for him. When Six came up, Santana said in a faraway tone, "I'd like to drop in here for a tequila now and then, but I don't think I can ever do that again. A Governor is like a peon, you know—he must keep his place. Now that I am where I set out to be I must learn these things. I regret a great deal—mainly what I have done to them all."

"It's not your guilt, Santana."

"I think I have to decide that for myself."

"Be better if you never do," Six murmured. "Nobody

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

died on your account. They fought for themselves, maybe for some ideal, maybe for what you stand for, but not for *you*."

"Then I am responsible to them all."

"That's not the same thing as guilt."

"Perhaps—perhaps." Santana took off the sombrero and looked up. "It is a fine clear night."

"Vaya con Diós, Santana."

Santana laid a hand on his arm and said, "Your heart is as great as your courage, Jeremy Six. Good night." He sounded very sad; he went away with a soft crunch of boots.

Steve Lament came out of the cantina and walked over to Six and said, "About that job with Santana. I'm ready to ride back to Arizona with you and get it over with."

Six stirred, looked at him. "Steve, I think we've already paid the price for all that—both of us. You had better stay down here a while. When I get back home I'll try and get some machinery moving, get an amnesty declared for you and Jericho. In the meantime you're both better off down here."

"You came down here to kill me," Lament said. "I haven't changed, Jeremy—I'm the same man you came to kill."

"Arrest," Six said, correcting him absently; he added, "You may be the same man, Steve, but I'm not. You'd better learn to forgive your own mistakes."

"I keep remembering Clarissa, Jeremy."

"I think she'd be the first one to forgive it."

Lament uttered a short, bitter bark of laughter. "Then I guess all of us will just go on having to live with ourselves."

"Don't pick any fights for the sake of fighting, Steve."

"What else do I know how to do?" Steve Lament said dismally; and moved away into the boisterous, carousing noise of the town. Six watched him limp stoop-should-

BIG COUNTRY, BIG MEN

dered toward the noise of celebration, and shook his head in sorrow.

Moonlight made soft shadows in the yard and when Six turned he saw Jericho Stride and Holly silhouetted by lamplight in the office door. The dust here was silent; the sound of full-throated celebration was in back of him. Holly's hand was half-raised toward him and he heard Stride make some off-color remark to her. Six lighted a cigar and kicked a stone across the yard and took the dull-gleaming badge out of his pocket; pinned it to his shirt. Holly and Stride were smiling at each other. He walked away from the lamplit doorway.

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