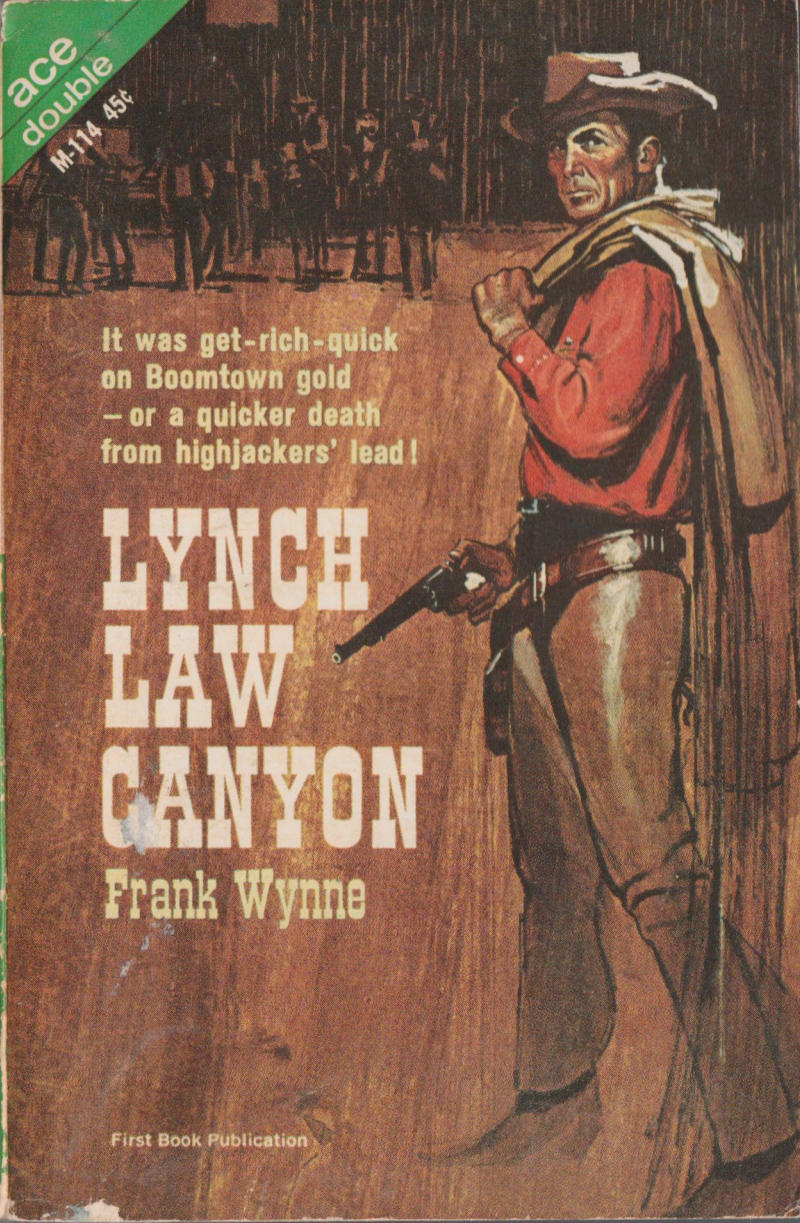
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I

CALHOUN STEPPED off the stagecoach, waited for the driver to toss down his war-bag, and carried it up the street. Sunset, and a hot autumn day; heat shimmered across the desert. The Colorado lapped its banks sluggishly and a flat-bottom steamboat churned upstream, making a racket. Calhoun swung his tall frame up onto the porch of a small one-story hotel, dropped his war-bag to the floor, and turned about to have a better look at the town.

Some called it Colorado City, some called it Yuma. It was a dusty river town, gateway to the northerly deserts and the Mormon country beyond. It was a rough settlement, virile, hard.

This small hotel was on the fringe of the fandango block, and down the street he could see barkers out in front of the dance halls, hawking the entertainment to be found within.

The chandeliers in the saloons gave their windows the brilliance of daylight.

Calhoun brushed the dust of long travel from his clothes, and turned inside to the parlor desk. Signing his name in the leather-bound book, he was handed a key and directed back through a corridor by a pale thin clerk who looked tired of life. Calhoun found his room; its only luxury was a window looking out onto a weed-grown alley. A six-by-ten room of warped dry wood; a bed, washbasin, and unvarnished stand. He had money in his tote-belt but he didn't like to spend it on frivolities, and to Calhoun, a comfortable room was a frivolity.

The past two days' riding in a bucking stagecoach had sapped him; thoroughly idle for the first time that day, he relaxed on the cot and studied the room's simplicity. Beside the doorjamb some transient, more optimistic than most, had carved: "John Henry Jarrett, Charleston, 1874." The inscription was punctuated by a bullet hole. A dry smile of conjecture touched Calhoun's firm mouth.

The room had the faint smell of whisky that had been spilled and absorbed into the floorboards. He got up and splashed tepid water from the basin into his face; stood straight and toweled dry. He had a big ragged face, homely but powerful in its structure; it looked as though it needed sorting out. His bones projected at harsh angles; his hard blue eyes were guarded by overhanging dark brows. He was a big man in a wrinkled suit of clothes, hard-knuckled, complexion wind-beaten and dark, age somewhere around thirty, perhaps a little more.

Someone knocked at the door. Calhoun's hand folded the towel unhurriedly over the hook and fell to lie against the butt of the Colt revolver at his hip. He said, "Who's that?"

"You don't know me." The voice came through the thin boards of the door as if they weren't there. "My name's Phil Mercy. Are you Sam Calhoun?"

Calhoun palmed the knob and pulled the door open. "I am."

"There's a game going on at the Oriental Palace. I heard you were in town, thought you might be interested.

"Maybe," Calhoun said, "maybe." He put his eyes on Phil Mercy and studied him. The man was not tall; he carried himself in his clothes in a manner suggesting a gentleman. A slim man, Mercy appeared to have little physical strength. The face under the flat-crowned hat was long, soft, handsome in a sensual dark way; it reflected gallantry and restlessness, and perhaps unsteadiness in the heavy-lidded brown eye. His lips were wide and sensitive, always playing with something that might have been a smile or a nervous tic or perhaps a grimace.

Phil Mercy said, "Planning to stay in town?"

"I wasn't."

"Lot of money in this game. Maybe it'll change your mind."

"Why come to me?"

"I run the game," Mercy said. "It's gotten to be a bore." He smiled disarmingly. "You could inject a little action."

Calhoun shook his head. "I've got a stake."

"Then take a chance on running it up."

Calhoun drew his head back. "Who are you, Mercy?"

"Me?" Phil Mercy laughed easily. "I'm just a gamblin' man, friend."

"Why all the interest in me?"

"Like I told you," Mercy said.

"I guess not—that's not good enough."

Mercy spread his hands, smiling. "All right—all right. One of the gents in the game heard you were in town. He asked me to invite you over. I guess he wants to look you over."

"What for?"

"He owns a big saloon up in Mule Canyon. Maybe he thought of hiring you to run his tables for him."

"What's his name?"

"Calls himself Matthew Ruarke," Mercy said.

"Well, then," Calhoun observed, "if Matthew Ruarke wants to talk to me, I'm not hard to find."

"All right," Phil Mercy said, unruffled. He turned and put his hand on the doorknob.

"One thing," Calhoun said.

"What's that?"

"When's the next stage to the camps?"

"Not for a couple of days. Wednesday morning, I think. You can check at the Walker and Knight office."

"I will. Thanks."

Phil Mercy inclined his head. "Drop into the Silver Queen sometime. I'll buy you a drink."

Shortly thereafter, Calhoun went out to eat. He had a solitary supper in a Chinese café; if he was troubled by loneliness, he didn't show it. Afterward, going into the street, he found an idler against the front of a billiard hall and inquired, "Where might I find Walker and Knight's office, friend?"

The loafer pointed along the street. "Couple blocks down and around to your right."

"Obliged," said Calhoun, and pushed away.

He found the Silver Queen saloon and entered, and immediately stepped aside from the main current of the doorway's flow of men. A haze of tobacco smoke fogged the room and stung his eyes; there was a lot of noise—rough talk and laughter—and the mingled smells of whiskey and beer and smoke and unwashed bodies pressed close together in crowds: a familiar, singular aura, the smell of a saloon.

Calhoun noticed Phil Mercy at a table near the front corner; Mercy was sliding cards out of a faro-box, and there were three players at his table. Calhoun didn't go to the table; instead he made a place at the bar, took a mug of beer, and leaned back on his elbows.

Casually, with nothing better to do, Calhoun presently moved away from the bar carrying his beer, chafing a little that he would have to wait for Wednesday's stagecoach. He pushed toward Mercy's table, and as he drew closer he felt something out of place. It was coming from the group seated there, and it was evident in the way onlookers were crushing back away from the table.

A heavy, squat man with the face of an ape sat next to

Phil Mercy, thoughtfully chewing a mouth of tobacco, bending his handful of cards between his hammy fists. He was watching Mercy heavily and Mercy was watching him.

The squat man suddenly cursed and lifted the table, and dumped it into Mercy's lap. Cards and chips and the faro-box cascaded against Mercy, bouncing off him and rolling around the floor. Mercy scuttled away from the weight of the table; the heavy man got out of his chair and came around the upset table, glaring down at Mercy and muttering in a slow stupid voice: "I like to play honest cards." He reached down and yanked Mercy to his feet by the collar.

Mercy stared round-eyed at the squat man, badly shaken. Calhoun, a passive onlooker like the rest until now, came around behind the squat man and put his hand easily on the man's burly shoulder. "Just a minute, friend."

The squat man dropped Mercy like a lifeless sack and wheeled. He put his close-together little eyes on Calhoun and thrust at him with the weight of his angry glance; he looked at the short-gun at Calhoun's hip and allowed his sneer to rest on Calhoun, and grunted, "There'll come a time, tinhorn," apparently speaking to Phil Mercy. The squat man stood his ground for a moment, trying to meet Calhoun's steady gaze; then he dropped his eyes and swung away into the crowd, battering people with his shoulders and elbows. He plunged through the door and lost himself outside in the night.

Calhoun watched Mercy get up and pull his coat straight. Mercy said, "A bad loser. Thanks, Calhoun." He set the table upright and began to pick up the fallen cards and chips. "That hurts my pride," he said. "It's been a good number of years since I tried to cheat a man at cards. I consider myself good enough not to have to stoop to cold-decking."

Calhoun looked directly at him. Phil Mercy came around and clapped him on the arm and said, "Allow me to buy you that drink."

Leroy Hamlin thrust angrily through the alleys, cursing with soft slow-headed conviction. "I'll have that tinhorn

cardshark," he promised, "I'll have him," and walked across a main street, a huge round-chested man, made even bulkier at the moment by the heavy sailor's pea-jacket he wore against the night's fall chill. Essentially a warm-weather creature, Leroy had a hatred for cool temperatures and a great fear of catching grippe. That was his only fear worth mentioning. Leroy was grotesque: short and square, bowlegged, long-armed. His bullet-round head was squashed into the shoulders without benefit of a neck. The eyes were too small, set close together, pouched in heavy flesh; his lips were blunt and his chin formed an odd contradiction, being round and sloping and not defined at all.

Leroy repeated, "I'll have him," and rolled along the dark streets until he reached the Drovers House; he tramped across its ornate lobby, went upstairs, and knocked against a door near the front of the hallway.

"Leroy?"

"Yeah."

The door opened; Matthew Ruarke, long and skinny, stepped aside to admit Leroy, who wandered around like a curious bear before he leaned his wide, fleshy back against the wall. "That Calhoun fella just butted into a little argument me and Phil Mercy was having."

"Did he," Ruarke murmured.

"I don't like either one of 'em," Leroy said defiantly.

"All right." Matthew Ruarke went to the room's only chair and shifted his body around in it until he was comfortable. He withdrew a cigar from the pocket of his bright-colored vest, lit it without hurry, and drew slowly on the smoke, afterward inquiring sleepily, "What did you find out about Price Goodfellow?"

Leroy lifted his shoulders. "Far as I could find out, all he come down here for was to pick up his daughter."

"I see." Relaxed in the chair, Ruarke made a picture of a thin, sharp-nosed northeastern man with a narrow face, a high sloping forehead, thinning sandy hair. His slim hands were pale and soft-textured. He observed, "A man like Goodfellow

doesn't travel three hundred miles across the desert just to pick up a girl and take her back to a tough bucko camp."

Leroy Hamlin grinned, showing uneven yellow teeth; and said slyly, "You ain't seen his daughter." Leroy laughed crudely.

Matthew Ruarke made a small gesture; he dropped the cigar to the floor and gound it under his heel, and said abbuptly, "Keep your eyes open." He turned away to pick up a leather-covered volume, plainly indicating that the interview was ended.

A man of enforced patience, Sam Calhoun sat in the lobby of the Drovers House and read a newspaper until midnight, after which he moved toward the door, headed for his own hotel and bed. But a thin man with calculating eyes caught him at the door, saying, "You're Calhoun."

Calhoun looked him up and down. "That gives you the advantage," he said.

"Matthew Ruarke."

Calhoun nodded. "I got your message from Mercy."

"I wanted to see if you were as good as they said you were."

"Good at what?"

Matthew Ruarke was looking directly at Calhoun's hip gun; Ruarke said, "I hear you're a high-roller."

"Do you?"

"They tell me you've downed a few men."

"I'm retired," Calhoun said, smiling softly.

"Maybe. I can offer good pay."

"For what?"

"Occasional work," Matthew Ruarke murmured. "It wouldn't take much of your time. You'd be in good company. Jack Holliday, for one."

Calhoun's lids dropped, concealing his thoughts. Ruarke said, "You and Holliday ought to work pretty well together."

"I doubt it."

"Why? You're both the same kind."

"Not the same kind at all," Calhoun said quietly. "Ruarke, if you've got Holliday you don't need me."

"Maybe I need somebody to keep an eye on Holliday."

Calhoun's lips turned into a crooked smile. "You should have thought of that before you hired him."

Matthew Ruarke made a vague gesture. "All right, then, you don't want the job. I'll find somebody else."

"Do that."

Ruarke nodded and went on.

In the morning, tired of café food, Calhoun walked down to the Drovers House to eat breakfast. He was forking eggs when Phil Mercy came into the dining room with a fresh-combed look to his hair. Mercy sat down uninvited at Calhoun's table and said, "Morning."

Calhoun nodded and settled down to the business of eating. He attacked it as he came at most things—squarely, deliberately. He was a solid man who showed little duplicity and little diplomacy.

Phil Mercy tried to maneuver him into a conversation, but his talk fell flat on the taciturn Calhoun. Trying to rouse the man's interest, Mercy said: "I hear you talked to Matt Ruarke."

Calhoun looked up but said nothing. Mercy went on, "Was it what I thought? Did he offer you a job?"

"Yes."

"Take it?"

"No."

"Good," Mercy said. "He's a crook."

"Then why'd you shill for him?"

"I was interested to see what you'd do," Mercy said. "I'm not Ruarke's errand-boy, if that's what you're thinking. Only met him two days ago. I turned down a job dealing for him. He's got a big new saloon up in Mule Canyon. There's a new strike there and it promises to be a boom town. Ruarke's recruiting men."

"What's your interest in it?"

Mercy shrugged. "I'm thinking of traveling up there to try

the action. What about you? You asked me about stage-coaches to the camps."

"I haven't made up my mind," Calhoun said. "I'll look the place over."

"Well," Mercy said, "at any rate we'll be on that stage together. I just bought my ticket."

Calhoun nodded without evident interest. The meal finished, he settled back in his seat while Mercy ate, and had his first good look around the room. Half across the room he saw a young woman sipping coffee, smiling at the older man at the table with her. In time the woman's glance came around to his end of the room and she noticed Calhoun's look. She nodded; she smiled.

Her eyes were dark; when she smiled the planes of her face became prettier. She wore her hair swept away from her ears: ash-colored hair, soft-appearing. She was slim and her face was a practical one.

In a moment her casual glance left Calhoun and went on. The old man spoke to her; she turned to him and said something and gave him her smile. He looked old and blunt, a coarse man who appeared rustic and yet intelligent.

Phil Mercy said with a little smile, "Her name is Catherine Goodfellow. The man talking to her is her father. He owns the Acropolis mine at Mule Canyon. She's been east for several years, at school and then in St. Louis with her aunt. Old Goodfellow got this new mine going and sent for her."

Calhoun said, "You find out a lot of things, don't you?"

"Sure." Mercy was one of those smiling ones who made an art of easy mixing.

Calhoun got up and went out into the morning sunlight. Firing up a cigarette, he walked idly down to the river docks and watched the muddy river flow past; he said to himself, "You'll have to make something of yourself before you get old."

When he again passed the Drovers House, he looked in through the window and saw Phil Mercy seated on a couch, talking with the girl he had seen in the dining room this

morning. Mercy saw him and beckoned. When Calhoun came into the lobby, Mercy said, "Miss Goodfellow, I'd like you to meet Sam Calhoun." He looked up at Calhoun. "Can I get you a drink?"

"No, thanks. Too early." Calhoun was looking at Catherine Goodfellow. Her soft dark eyes were wide open and direct; her breasts softly rose and fell with her breathing. She gave him an impression of cool cleanness; she said, "How do you do?" and did not take her eyes off him.

Mercy said, "Miss Goodfellow and her father are going up to the camps on the stage with us, Sam." He looked pleased, completely in his element: Calhoun's arrival had made conversation easier for him; it washed away any barriers that might have stood between him and Catherine Goodfellow. With his easy manner, Mercy took hold on the conversation and kept up a stream of pleasantries. All the while, Calhoun watched the girl, and her glance held his. Abruptly, although Mercy was still talking, the girl said to Calhoun:

"You're hoping for a claim? Don't set your sights too high, Mr. Calhoun. All the placer gold is gone from the streams up there by now. If you stake a claim you'll find it low-grade and hard work at best."

He only smiled, making no reply. A little petulant at the rebuff she had given him, Phil Mercy stood up and muttered, "If you'll excuse me—?" And went away without either one of them looking up at him.

Calhoun said, "I wasn't thinking of staking a claim."

"That's too bad," the girl said, smiling slightly.

II

CALHOUN STOOD on the veranda smoking; the girl stood back under the roof-slope, out of the sun. The street was full of wagons and cavalrymen and pedestrians—gold seekers, storekeepers, immigrants, gamblers, old men in fringed buffalo-hide breeches, and a few who still had the plow walk and hadn't shaken the look of the farm. The town had few women. He looked at Catherine Goodfellow and moved back beside her and rocked on his heels. She said, "You don't like waiting, do you?"

"Why," he said, "I thought I was a pretty patient fellow."

"You don't like inactivity. Why don't you sit in on a poker game?"

His smile changed his craggy features. "The next time I hold a hand of cards," he said, "it will be at my own table in my own card room."

"So that's what you have in mind," she said. Her lips were pursed musingly; she was studying him with unconcealed interest. "You're on the prowl, Calhoun. You're looking for something. What would interest you enough to bring you out into this wild country?"

He made no immediate answer. They heard a staccato burst of gunfire from somewhere back in town, followed by a chorus of loud laughter. Calhoun said, "The frontier shows on this town."

"Don't you like it?"

"Maybe I do. But it doesn't pay to let yourself get nostalgic. All this is dropping behind, now. It won't be long before it's all swept under the rug."

"And so you want to cash in while you can," she said.

"I guess that's right." He regarded her with a slantwise look. "You like me less, for that."

"Not at all." She was smiling gently. "I like a man who

seizes opportunities." She made a gesture with her arm that included the street, the milling roughhouse of traffic, the pall of thick risen dust. "It's tough and crude, but that's what makes it real."

"You're a romantic," he said, with quiet humor.

"No—at least I don't think so. But I was raised out here, I know this country. I hate to see it change."

"Afraid you can't stop it," Calhoun said, bracing one foot against the sun-dried wooden rail.

"Perhaps," she murmured, and showed him her faintly quizzical smile. "You're running away from a woman somewhere, aren't you?"

He picked tobacco from his tongue, and let his wrist hang over his upraised knee; without looking at her, he said, "That's a far-fetched guess if I ever heard one."

"No. It has to be a woman—someone who's still got a grip on you. Otherwise you wouldn't treat me so distantly."

"Can't a man be polite?"

She laughed low in her throat: "Oh, come now, Calhoun." When he looked, her eyes were daring him. She said, "I was raised in Levi's, remember? I'm not a prissy dude."

"Maybe it's your finishing-school accent."

"That's a Rochester drawl," she said. "I get it from my father. Don't put me up on a pedestal, Calhoun. I'm just ordinary clay like the rest."

"You're pretty brash for a lump of clay."

She laughed. "I never believed in beating around the bush. That's one thing this country does for you—it strips away the unessentials." Abruptly she grew more serious: "You're planning to stage into Mule Canyon and set up a saloon, aren't you? I hope you know what you'll be in for. You'll be competing with people the cut of Matt Ruarke and Stacy Donovan. They're all a bunch of crooks and they won't like honest competition."

He smiled easily: "Thanks for assuming I'm honest."

"That's one of the toughest camps ever born," she said, watching him intently. "It's a magnet for every hardcase this side of the Black Hills. You'll have to watch your back."

He nodded. "More important," he said, "you're the one who'll have to be careful. If it's as tough as you say, you've got no business going there."

"Oh, they all know who I am. No one's going to put a finger on Price Goodfellow's daughter."

"Are you sure?"

"There you go protecting me again," she said. "I'll be disappointed if you keep up that attitude, Calhoun."

He looked at her: she was laughing at him silently. He grinned. Two men came out onto the porch—square, doglike Leroy Hamlin, and the thin New Englander Matthew Ruarke. Leroy noticed Calhoun, and at once Leroy's eyelids dropped, covering his thoughts; he stood wholly still for a moment. Matthew Ruarke nodded to them with frosty politeness and strolled forward; when he reached the end of the veranda he turned and said testily, "Come on—come on," and Leroy went padding after him. But a block away Leroy halted to glance back; Calhoun saw his eyes narrow again and become dark; Leroy looked at him with malice, curling his lip and showing his teeth. Leroy was a burly man with the smell of violence about him, stinking like the musty odor of an animal's carcass. His face showed a savage brutality. Then he swung and disappeared around a corner, following Matthew Ruarke.

Catherine Goodfellow said, "I don't know how you've done it, but you've made a bad enemy. Leroy could tear you apart with one hand."

"No," Calhoun said. "He only thinks he could."

Her troubled look became a smile; she said, "I like a man who's sure of himself."

Calhoun spoke slowly, revealing the care with which he chose his words: "It may be a mistake for you to be so open with me."

"Why? I see no harm in it. Women chase men, Calhoun—it's the tradition. Most of them just pretend it's the other way around."

"There's a reason for that, too," he said. "A man has pride."

"Doesn't my attention flatter you?"

"You've got a high opinion of yourself," he told her.

"Don't you think I warrant it?" Her smile took the edge off it.

He raked his thumb across the edge of his jaw. "What do you know about me?"

"Quite a lot, as a matter of fact. You're the kind of man they tell stories about. An unhappy affair with a married woman, they say, and a duel—in New Orleans or Baton Rouge or somewhere like that. You were a town marshal a few times, weren't you? Some of them say you used your badge as an excuse to kill. Did you?"

"What do you believe?"

She shook her head; she was still smiling. "There are legends about you, Calhoun, in case you didn't know it."

"That's what I thought. You've built up an image of me that's based on a few tall stories you've heard. That's what attracts you—the spice of danger. Do you want me to beat you up?" He dropped his boot from the porch rail and turned. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'm not a myth, I'm the same clay as you, and a man resents it when a woman forces herself on him for the kind of reasons that make you want to play your little game with me." He touched his hatbrim with a forefinger and went down the steps loose-jointedly.

Calhoun swung his war-bag atop the Abbott & Downing stage and stepped back to watch the passengers arrive. Catherine Goodfellow came down the walk with her father. Calhoun took her elbow, meeting her curious glance with an enigmatic one of his own; he helped her into the stage and heard her cool, "Thank you." Price Goodfellow climbed in after her. Leroy Hamlin came out of the depot with Matthew Ruarke; these two got into the stage, and finally Phil Mercy arrived, presented his ticket and squeezed inside, quick to take the seat beside Catherine. Looking out the window, Mercy gave Calhoun a glance of sardonic humor, somewhat wry.

Calhoun gave a questioning glance to the driver, who nodded in answer, whereupon Calhoun swung up top beside

him. He settled into the seat and braced himself as the driver whooped and cracked his whip expertly over the heads of the lead-team. The stage lurched forward; the mules picked up a steady canter and hauled the stage, swaying on its leather springs, out of Yuma and down the northeasterly road along the Gila banks. Dust raveled high in their wake.

It soon turned hot in the jolting coach. Phil Mercy displayed sweating discomfort in a very short time. He kept looking uneasily at Leroy Hamlin, sitting directly across from him. Matthew Ruarke beside Leroy had fallen asleep the minute of the stage's departure, and rolled loosely in his seat; when he bumped against Leroy, the giant pushed him away roughly, with a dog-like frown. The northeasterner came awake, grunting, and mechanically reached into his pocket for a black cigar. He lighted this and let clouds of foul smoke into the already close compartment.

Catherine coughed pointedly. Ruarke ignored her and kept on puffing furiously, presenting her with a cool bland smile. Presently Price Goodfellow reached across Leroy's barrel chest to take the cigar from the saloonkeeper and fling it into the road. Ruarke's eyes flashed hotly and he said, "You might have asked."

"I might have," Goodfellow said evenly, giving way not at all; from his tone it was evident he preferred not to talk to men of Ruarke's stripe. Ruarke's eyes narrowed down dangerously.

Catherine said, "Thank you, Father," and turned her head to see the wild country buck past. Matthew Ruarke kept his glance on Goodfellow, and after a while it changed from anger to a secret smile.

Atop the coach Calhoun braced while the driver swore and lashed his whip loudly near the lead mules' ears. The driver said, "Can't cuss my best with a lady aboard—mules git lazy."

Calhoun smiled and shifted his foot from the metal box to the rim of the dash. The driver pulled a flat flask from his hip pocket, took a long pull from it and offered it to Calhoun, who had a drink and passed it back. The driver grinned and

howled at his teams and whipped them up into a run. Calhoun kicked the metal strongbox beneath his seat and asked, "What's in the box?"

"Acropolis mine payroll. Goodfellow's."

"No shotgun guard?"

"Figure nobody'll suspect we're carrying coin if they's no guard."

"Risky figuring," Calhoun said.

The driver looked at him quickly. "Say, you wouldn't be thinking of highgrading that box, mister?"

"That's an idea," Calhoun said with a slight smile.

The road narrowed down to a thin ribbon running between thick stands of cottonwood along the riverbank. In the lattice shadows of that passage, a man stood spraddle-legged in the middle of the road, hat low across his eyes, holding both palms out toward the stage.

The driver frowned. "What's that—what's that?"

Calhoun's alert glance swept the timber flanking the road. Something glinted in the trees. It could have been sunlight on the river surface, but Calhoun frowned and touched his gunbutt. The driver was lifting his reins to slow down.

"No," Calhoun said suddenly. "Run him down."

The driver gave him a questioning look. "You figure—?"

"Run him down," Calhoun said again, drawing his revolver with practiced smoothness.

The driver cracked a broad grin. "I'm your man," he said, and snapped his whip viciously over the team. *"Hee-yah!"*

The mules plunged against harness; the stage lurched into higher speed. Ahead in the road, the stranger's head rocked back; his body stiffened and then he swung, hurling himself out of the path of the rushing mules. Dirt-clots flew up from drumming hoofs; dust climbed high and thick. The juggernaut of the stage rammed past the diving stranger with inches to spare, and then rifles opened up on either side of the road.

"Haul it down, Charlie!" someone shouted from the trees; the driver whooped at his mules and lashed them on. A bullet screamed off the toprail, taking a sliver of brass. Calhoun

was searching for targets but it was hopeless trying to shoot from the back of a hurtling coach.

The stage gave a strange sidewise lurch; the driver said, "Oh-oh," and shouted down toward the passengers: "Hang on in there—we're going over!"

A bullet had cut the harness at the near side of the double-tree; pulled from one side only, the stage began to tip. "Better jump for it," Calhoun said in a matter-of-fact tone, and gathered his legs.

"God damn!" the driver shouted, letting go the reins and grabbing the lurching seat with both hands; his eyes had gone wide.

"Jump!" Calhoun said, and gave him a shove.

The driver kicked away from the tumbling coach; Calhoun lost sight of his figure in midair. Rifles were talking with harsh impatience. The coach was tilted half-over, about to capsize, when Calhoun leaped away on the down-side. He hit the ground on both feet, pitched flat, and rolled deliberately into the trees.

The stage fell on its side with a great racket, raising a volume of dust. There was a splintering of spokes and a loud ripping sound as it tore along the ground on its doors and hubs. The remaining harness broke away; freed, the mules ran away down the road in panic. The stage settled to a stop with rifle bullets chunking into its boot. Concealed in the trees, Calhoun gripped his revolver and drew the hammer to full cock. His pulse pounded and his shoulder ached from a hard bruise. Out in the road, the driver was struggling to his feet. Someone shouted at him from the farther trees:

"Hold still, Charlie."

The driver shouted a livid oath and wheeled toward the cottonwoods. A rifle fired once; the driver jerked back like a decapitated chicken, flapped his arms and fell. The rifles quit and suddenly all Calhoun could hear was the scratching and anxious talking of the passengers inside the coach. Leroy Hamlin's voice was lifted to a high pitch of complaint. An arm came up, opening the door on top. One of the rifles in

the trees fired, drilling a hole in the door; there was a shout: "Stay put in there."

After a moment a figure walked out of the timber onto the road, twenty yards behind the coach, and strode forward with a rifle held ready. Calhoun sighted coolly and fired with a deliberate squeeze of the trigger.

His bullet shattered the man's kneecap, spilling him down. All at once there was a concentration of voices, a bedlam of shouts among the bandits. Calhoun made out three separate voices. He rolled back deeper into the cottonwoods and flattened himself behind a thick tree. Three rifles started to pepper the spot from which he had just fired. A taut humorless grin of strain stretched Calhoun's lips. He took the time to fill the revolver's empty chambers and then began a stalk through the timber. Stillness settled down, broken only by the tiny gurgle of the river. The crippled bandit in the road was crawling back into the woods, dragging his leg. Calhoun went back through the trees, walking stealthily; he moved parallel to the road until he judged himself about opposite the point where the highwaymen were posted.

Someone perhaps fifty yards away cursed softly, and then there was a sudden flurry of hoofbeats that rose and thundered and fell away, absorbed by distance. Three or four horses, it sounded like.

Calhoun stepped nearer the road and came out into the open, gun up. When he drew no fire he sprinted across the road. There was no sign of anyone. The afternoon sun beat down through the treetops, making patterns of shadow. He found a place where several horses had stood tethered: the leaves were cropped, the earth was churned up by milling hoofs.

He sheathed his revolver and walked back to the overturned stagecoach. When he came up he said, "All clear. Anybody hurt?"

A head appeared in the window top: Price Goodfellow. "Just shaken up, I think, maybe a few bruises. All gone?"

"All gone," Calhoun said. "I guess they didn't stomach a fight."

"Not many things important enough to risk your neck for," Goodfellow said, and climbed out of the stage. Crouching on top, he reached down to help Catherine up.

Calhoun stood bracing it steady until all of them had come out. Matthew Ruarke dusted off his clothes and said testily, "Why in hell didn't Charlie pull up for them?"

"I told him to go on," Calhoun said.

Ruarke glared at him brightly. "That was a stupid thing to do."

"They were after Goodfellow's payroll," Calhoun said. "They didn't get it, did they?"

"They got Charlie," Ruarke said. "Which is more important?"

Calhoun said softly, "Are you blaming that on me?"

"Stop it, both of you," Catherine said. She was disheveled but composed. "We've got other things to think about."

Goodfellow said, "We ought to bury Charlie. We can't pack him. The mules are gone."

"Nothing to dig with," said Phil Mercy, straightening out the creases in his hat.

"Well, then," Calhoun said with deliberate malice, "I guess Leroy's pretty well equipped to dig with his hands like a dog."

Leroy squinted at him and then did a strange thing: he grinned.

Matthew Ruarke said smoothly, "I don't think that was called for, Calhoun."

"You're disgusting," Catherine said. "All of you."

Calhoun challenged Leroy with his grin. "I'll break off a couple of branches. We can scratch a grave for Charlie. Come on, Leroy."

They trudged into the dusk on exhausted legs and sank to the earth after drinking out of the river. "Thank God there's water, at least," Catherine said.

It drew Phil Mercy's lopsided smile. "I'm glad you're in a mood to be thankful for something."

"Feeling sorry for yourself won't do much good," Catherine said. Mercy only shrugged in reply.

Calhoun said, "Those mules may run on to the next stage-stop. How far is that?"

"Twenty miles, roughly," said Goodfellow.

"Maybe someone will come looking for us," Mercy said.

"Maybe," Calhoun said. "Then again, maybe not. The mules may get sidetracked. Indians may pick them up. We'll have to try for it in the morning."

"That'll be a hot walk," Matthew Ruarke said. He had his arms wrapped around his knees. "Better hope nobody comes across that payroll strongbox of yours. Goodfellow."

Goodfellow looked at him. Calhoun said quietly, "Only the seven of us know where we hid it, Ruarke."

"That's so, isn't it?" Ruarke met his even glance.

Leroy was sitting off by himself, glaring balefully at Calhoun. "I'm hungry," he said.

The last gray of dusk faded, but the moon was up, three-quarters round; it glinted along the river surface in racing ripples. Catherine stood up and said, "I'm going to sleep," and walked off into the trees.

A grove of cottonwoods lay back some yards from the bank. A tree had fallen across an opening here and afforded some shelter. Calhoun walked up and stood looking down at the girl, standing with his feet well apart, dragging wind into his chest. The water-laden night breeze bit coldly through his flesh. Catherine opened her eyes and laid her glance on him. Her hair was spread on the ground like a halo. Calhoun took off his coat and bent to spread it over her, whereupon she reached up and touched his shoulders, and pulled him toward her. She did not speak; she rolled her head back and forth once and sought his lips with hers.

Calhoun was quiet for a moment; he felt her arms tight around him and knew that she was shaken and in need of the strength he could give her; she was cold and frightened a little, and dejected. But after a moment of this he drew back and said softly, "Get some sleep," and went away from her.

III

LEROY HAMLIN glowered at Calhoun and put his shirt over his blocky torso, shrugging it over his great shoulders. Matthew Ruarke was sitting on his spread coat, looking squint-eyed at the river. Phil Mercy came over and said, "Well, what do we do now?"

"Move on," said Calhoun.

Catherine Goodfellow sat near her father by the bank, combing fingers through her long hair. Phil Mercy said, "Just a pleasant morning stroll," and smiled wryly.

Matthew Ruarke got to his feet and picked up his coat, and folded it carefully over his arm. "Let's get going," he said, and turned upstream. "The river curves around. If we cut across country we'll save four miles."

"And run smack into every Indian west of El Paso," said Phil Mercy.

Goodfellow came up and said, "Indians hereabouts are peaceful. Apaches don't roam this far west."

Calhoun said, "If the people from the stage station are looking for us, they'll travel the river road, expecting us to keep to it. We'll take the long way."

Matthew Ruarke shrugged. "Are we going or not?"

"Relax," Calhoun told him, and led the way to the road.

They stopped for ten minutes' rest at a bend of the river. Leroy Hamlin never spoke; his malevolent glance shuttled between Mercy and Calhoun and finally settled on Catherine Goodfellow, who noticed his attention and, made uncomfortable by it, stood up and said, "Well, let's go," and set out with a swinging stride.

Phil Mercy was lying on the ground, leaning on one elbow, listlessly pulling stalks of dry yellow grass from the ground, and looking as though at the moment the future was to him a very black thing. Calhoun said gently, "Come on, Phil."

They went up the road under a hot blast of sunlight that blistered their backs through their clothing. Now and then they went through a spindly growth of trees that gave a few minutes' shade; they drank frequently of the river. In all directions the land spread flat and arid, beaten into a lifeless gray-yellow by the sun. Only the river was vital, piercing the desolation of the plain. When a breeze came up it was hot, like the breath of a naked flame; soon the men took to dunking themselves periodically in the river so that the water soaked into their clothes and evaporated, cooling them, as they walked. Finally Catherine Goodfellow joined them in this adventure; afterward her blouse clung like skin to the thrust of her breasts.

Shortly before noon Price Goodfellow judged they were within five miles of the way station. They came across the carcass of a butchered and half-eaten mule. Smoke still curled from the coals of a fire. Matthew Ruarke said, "Indians—Mojaves, I'd guess."

"That's one of our coach mules," said Goodfellow. "The Indians made off with the others, I suspect. That's why no one's come looking for us."

Leroy Hamlin walked to the half-raw carcass, his nose wrinkling. He knelt and tore a hunk of meat off the carcass and gnawed on it.

Calhoun said, "Cut a piece for the lady, Leroy."

"Cut it yourself."

Calhoun grinned wickedly. Leroy threw the bone away and stood up. "Damn you," he growled, "you ain't God."

"Ease off," Matthew Ruarke said. "Leroy's right, we all need food. Who's got a knife?"

At the way station the owner regarded them with amazement and finally said, "Sorry I ain't got a wagon for you. I can borrow you company saddle horses to get you as far as the Ten Springs station. Burt down there's got a hack you can use to get you the rest of the way if they ain't a stage goin' through there. Otherwise you can wait here for the next eastbound, but that ain't for four days."

They spent the afternoon unwinding—bathing, napping, drinking; they ate a heavy meal and retired just after sundown. In the morning Price Goodfellow signed a rental note on seven company horses and saddles, and they rode out in a party.

Ten Springs was fifty miles away; they were fifteen miles short of it when they camped for the night, sheltered in the lee of a cliff. Their camp was high up in a rock-strewn pass through a range of barren mountains.

Calhoun was half asleep when a shadow moved above him—Catherine. "I brought your saddle blanket," she said, dropping it by him. "It will be cold up here by midnight."

"Obliged."

She crouched down by him. "What are you thinking?"

"Nothing much."

"That man you shot yesterday," she said. "Or was it the day before? You could have killed him but you didn't."

"I had time to aim."

"No," she said. "The fact is you're not as hard as you like to pretend. There's a human being inside that mask of iron."

"I tried to tell you that in Yuma," he said, smiling a little. He moved so that he could see her face better. He said, "It'll be good when we don't have to worry about road agents anymore."

"It was exciting," she said. "Except for the poor driver, I don't regret it."

"You're a strange child," he told her. "You can't hold it back—someday there'll be farms and towns right around here. It won't be too long before this country's settled."

"And that will be a crying shame," she said.

He looked at her; he could not wholly make out her features but this didn't bother him. She was calm and practical in some ways; she was disposed to take an impulsive view of things at times; she had will and self-confidence. But sometimes he was not certain about her. Her silences might contain deep wisdom or they might only hide childish dreams of exotic wonders. She suspected change and yet she always sought new excitements.

Phil Mercy drifted up and emerged from the dark. "Couldn't sleep." After a moment he observed, "We all belong to a pretty exclusive little club now, don't we?" He was looking at Catherine.

When she made no reply, Mercy said, "Quiet tonight."

"Be glad of that," said the girl.

"Yes," he said, and added, "It's been just another dull trip." He took out a cigar and rolled it between his fingers, but put it away without lighting it. His fingers drummed restlessly on his knees as he crouched beside Catherine. The silence seemed to bother her; she said, "What do you plan to do in the camps?"

"I don't know yet," said Mercy. "I'm a gambler by trade but I'm a little sick of myself. I'd like to work with my muscles for a while—there's a kind of magic in that, it cures a lot of things." He looked at Calhoun as though he resented Calhoun's presence, and after a moment got up and went away.

In a while Catherine also got up, with a soft, "Good night, Sam," and walked into the night, leaving Calhoun alone in the cool evening. He listened to the little dry sounds of darkness and then rolled over and pulled his blanket up about his shoulders. A shape loomed some distance away and stood wholly still for some time: Leroy Hamlin. Calhoun watched him with some amusement. "Good evening," he said.

Leroy growled softly and swung about, and padded away on his bare feet. Calhoun grinned once, and lay back to sleep.

At ten in the morning they raised the Ten Springs station across the flats. Calhoun rode behind Leroy Hamlin, not trusting the man; all during the trip Calhoun had been baiting Leroy, trying to see how the man would react. Leroy was dog-like in his simplicity, dog-like in his animal way of living, and—perhaps—dog-like in his loyalty to Matthew Ruarke. Calhoun wondered just what kind of bidding Leroy did for the deceptively easy Ruarke. There was a quick agile intelligence in Matthew Ruarke, and Calhoun said to himself, "If there's trouble in the camps, it will be tied up

with those two." Calhoun's brown, weathered hands fingered the neckreins as he rode; a wisp of dark hair fluttered under his leveled hatbrim. He was a high, strong shape on horseback, making a shadow against the bright, clear plain. Looking behind him, he allowed himself to enjoy the grace and beauty with which Catherine Goodfellow sat her saddle.

They reached the sod way station and turned in their horses. A mail hack, a lightweight brougham, was on its way into the camps, and picked them up at eleven o'clock; at one it stopped at another way station and the driver said, "Half an hour for lunch," getting down and taking the harness from his teams to change horses.

Calhoun got down and helped Catherine to the ground; he slipped his hand under her elbow and turned her toward the station, and Phil Mercy came along to take the girl's free arm, grinning brashly at Calhoun.

Leroy Hamlin and Matthew Ruarke left the hack at this way-station, taking a mud-wagon to Washington Camp. The hack took the rest of them higher into green hills and presently climbed up a tortuous gorge at the head of which was the new sprawling camp of Mule Canyon.

The depot was a tent with a rough-hewn plank platform and a litter of corrals behind. It sat at the lower end of town —town, for the moment, consisting of perhaps three dozen wooden structures and a few hundred tents and lean-tos and shanties built of rock, brush, cast-off adobe bricks—whatever materials had come to hand. There didn't seem to be any regular pattern of streets, except that along the creek that flowed down the center of the gorge there was a wide-open tilt of earth, trampled into an ooze of mud, which eventually would probably serve as the central street—if the camp survived long enough.

From the look of it it was a cheerless camp. At least it was so by day: the gamblers were sleeping, the miners were away working. A few mule trains of freight-goods piled the slopes, a certain number of pedestrians tramped the gulch in jackboots; the sun beat down on it, throwing black shadows and harsh glares.

Calhoun stepped stiffly from the hack and waited to give Catherine his arm. He noticed the speculative shine in Price Goodfellow's eyes when the man looked at him. Goodfellow said, "Let me know if you need help getting set up, Calhoun."

It came as a surprise, that statement out of the blue. Calhoun only nodded briefly, digesting it, and then Goodfellow was going away with Catherine. She lifted her skirts to clear the mud. Once she looked back at Calhoun; she was too far away to read her expression.

Phil Mercy stood on the platform brushing dust from his clothes. "Well," he said, "we got here." And added after a moment, "The hard way." He stretched his thin arms and beat a short rataplan on his chest. "I've gone sour. Think I'll try to stake a claim and do a little honest labor." He gave Calhoun a tired unsteady smile and walked stiffly into the center of town.

In no particular hurry, Calhoun stood before the depot, rocking on his heels. One of the stage-line hostlers came out of the tent and stood a little distance away, drinking out of a tin cup, squinting at the sky. A lanky towheaded man came ambling down out of the tangle of town and raised a hand: "Hey, O'Hara."

The hostler peered at the newcomer over the rim of his cup. When the newcomer came up, O'Hara said, "Top o' the mornin', Shelby."

With a broad white-toothed grin the lanky newcomer said, "You damned Irishmen. It's not morning—why don't you give me top of the afternoon?"

"It don't quite have the same lilt," the hostler said. "What kin I be doing for you, Shelby?"

"The high-side wagon out back. Are you selling it?"

O'Hara grinned. "For the right price you can have anything I got, save me wife—and that's just perhaps."

"The wagon, O'Hara?"

"Selling it? Sure and I am—and you'll not find a better mud-wagon in the whole puking camp."

"Uh-huh," Shelby said skeptically.

Calhoun watched this with idle amusement; he tiptoed himself back in the shade of the tent-awning and fashioned a cigarette. One boot rested on the war-bag.

O'Hara said, "What would you be wantin' a big rig like that for?"

"Figure to go into competition with you buzzards. Plenty of room around here for another freight outfit—and I can undercut your ridiculous prices easy."

O'Hara grinned broadly. "In that case," he said, "the price o' the wagon just went up, Shelby my friend."

"Now," Shelby said soothingly, "is that fair, amigo?" He had a slow easy Texas drawl and a sparkle in his eyes. Calhoun watched him walk around in a slow bowed circle and then come to a halt, shoot his head back, and grin at O'Hara. Shelby said, "And what did the price go up to, or do you mind me asking?"

"More'n you can afford, dear boy."

"I'll need a few span of mules too, just to get started."

"Started, finished—'tis all the same the way you're goin' about it, Shelby. What the divil d'you know about toolin' one of these rigs?"

"I was weaned on one," Shelby said. "My daddy hauled freight from San Jacinto to San Antone." He rubbed his face and said slyly, "That wagon's all dried up. May need new axels, maybe even wheels. The tongue's pretty splintery."

"You're talkin' to a horse-trader," O'Hara said. "Maybe you forgot that?"

"Not for a minute, amigo," Shelby said with easy humor. "Now, then, let's talk gold."

"You hit a pocket?"

"That's it," Shelby said. "And before I lose it all across Matt Ruarke's crooked tables, I figure to get it invested. In that wagon. How much you want for it?"

O'Hara swiveled his head around, sweeping the horizons with a pretense at concentration. He poked his tongue into his cheek, bulging it out, and said thoughtfully, "Well, I'm thinking a fair price might be somewhere around, say, four-

teen ounces pure." He grinned with abrupt innocence, rubbing his palms together.

"Why, you Goddamned highwayman!" Shelby roared. "Five hundred dollars for that broken-down wreck?"

"It's a seller's market, dear boy," O'Hara purred.

"I'll tell you what—you throw in twelve mules and a year's supply of axel grease, and I'll pay you the fourteen ounces."

O'Hara emitted a bellow of laughter. Tears came to his eyes and he bent nearly double. Shelby watched him with a puzzled uplift of one eyebrow. O'Hara said, "You think maybe I'm running a charity bazaar, is that what you're thinking?"

Shelby said nothing. His lantern-jaw lay forward, in a stubborn jutting line. O'Hara said, "I'll tell you what, sonny. I'll be doin' you a hell of a great favor which, mind you, y'don't deserve by any reckoning—but I'll give you the damned mud wagon for eleven ounce. And I mean *give*."

"Now it's my turn to laugh."

"I've hit me bottom, sonny."

"Seven ounces for the wagon alone. It ain't worth half that."

"Eleven."

"Seven."

O'Hara spread his hands, shaking his head. "You're breakin' me heart. Ten."

"Seven and a half."

"Ten."

"Seven. Next time I open my mouth it'll be six."

O'Hara shrugged. "I ain't all that anxious to sell it. Nine ounces pure—and by God that's me last offer."

Shelby frowned, considering it; finally he shook his head. "I still got to buy mules, O'Hara. What good's a wagon without mules?"

"Don't ask me. It ain't *my* hairbrained idea."

Calhoun, who all this while had been studying the Texan Shelby, strode out of the tent-shadow and walked over to the two men. "Shelby?"

The Texan looked around. His eyes were studious, half suspicious.

"Name's Sam Calhoun. I've been watching you dicker."

"And?"

"If you had a freight-wagon, could you make it pay?"

"Why else you think I been talking?"

"I like your cut," Calhoun said.

Shelby grinned. "That's one Texan talking to another."

Calhoun nodded. "I'll tell you what. I'll put up half your capital, for the mules and whatever else you need to get started."

"And what do you get out of it?"

"One-fourth."

Shelby's eyebrows went up. Calhoun said, "You'll be doing the work."

Shelby glanced from Calhoun to O'Hara, who was frowning, and back to Calhoun. Finally Shelby said, "My last name's Long. Shelby Long."

Calhoun took the man's quick, firm handshake.

Seven months ago Mule Canyon had been a handful of men and one building. Today it was a sprawling tent-camp of four thousand rough men and perhaps three dozen women, most of them whores. It was loud, hearty, impatient. It lay in the widening tilt of the rocky canyon, shaping itself to fit the terrain. The crooked tent-alleys took serpentine paths up the gulch sides, crawling over the lips, a few tents lipping over into adjoining canyons. Up at the very top was the smoke-plume of Price Goodfellow's Acropolis mine; several other big operations were getting underway now in the fall —deep-shaft mines, to exploit the land beneath the surface that had been stripped by the placer mines.

The camp attracted a good many men of the types that traveled the shadow-circuits of the West: tough ones, loud ones, dishonest ones, shrewd ones; it was open and boisterous, but behind its hard-muscled gaiety lurked a shadow of dark danger, waiting for the drunken miner to drop in an alley with his poke, waiting for the chance at easy highgrading on jumped claims, waiting for night and easy prey.

Calhoun walked on into town, and found a tent barber-

shop which advertised: PERCY HEWITT, TONSORIAL ARTIST. Calhoun went in. He sat on the packing-crate near the entrance-flap, waiting his turn at the tub in the back shed. He noticed that already the place had its row of named mugs along the mirror shelf. One had Matthew Ruarke's name on it. But the largest, most ornate of them was inscribed *Price Goodfellow.*

Finally Calhoun's turn at the tub came. He went into the back room and removed his clothes. An Indian youth poured the tub half-full of hot water. Calhoun stepped into it, enjoyed the scald, and relaxed. He closed his eyes and became thoroughly comfortable, letting the water penetrate his pores. After a while he soaped and scrubbed, called for a towel and got his clothes on. He came out into the front of the place and said, "Do me up smart, Percy," and took his haircut and shave, feeling at ease for the first time in days. An ironic thought struck him: he had gone through a good deal of trouble to get here and now he was involved in a freighting business, for no particular reason; otherwise he had no claim on anything. Once again he said to himself, "You've got to accomplish something."

IV

MATTHEW RUARKE picked up a pair of saddle horses in Washington Camp, put Leroy Hamlin on one of them and mounted the other. They rode without conversation into the hills for three hours until, just before sunset, they broke into a forest clearing and Ruarke reined in; lifting his voice in a call:

"Holliday!"

In time a big square-shouldered man walked into the clearing with a displeased expression. "You want the whole damned Territory to know my hideout?"

"Simmer down," Ruarke said. "How else do you want me to get in here without getting shot from ambush? A man's got to announce himself around here. Where's your trigger-happy crew?"

"Hunting. What you want?"

"Goodfellow's back. Did you knock down his ore train?"

"After it was smelted."

"How much you get?"

"I ain't no assayer," Holliday said. "Maybe a couple thousand dollars worth. Nothing great."

"It's just practice," Ruarke said. "Sit tight—we'll get swinging pretty soon now. I'm just about set up."

"Won't be any too soon for me and the boys. Man gets restless out here in the high lonesome, nothin' to do but bag antelopes and jackrabbits."

Phil Mercy ate his supper in a small café and walked up-gulch, over the lip and out of town. He came upon a row of claims along the farther creek-bank, headed downhill; they all sported look-alike tarpaper shacks and hasty-built sluices. A man with a thick beard came out of one shack with a friendly smile. "Evenin'. Lookin' for a claim?"

"Might be."

The bearded man pointed down-gulch. "A few passable spots left down that way a mile or so, around the big bend into Antelope Gulch."

Mercy nodded. The miner offered, "Come in and have a cup of coffee."

"Why, thanks." Mercy followed him inside.

"My name's Vendig—Henry Vendig." The miner was friendly and curious; he brought a pot from the tiny stove and filled two battered tin cups with syrupy black coffee. Mercy gave his own name, and inquired, "Having luck?"

Vendig gave him a long level glance. "Maybe." And then began asking questions. The man waxed loquacious; he was hungry for news of the outside world, as if he had to reassure himself it still existed and he could go back to it if he chose. Mercy talked awhile, finished his coffee and thanked Vendig, and left to continue down the gulch.

Calhoun finished his steak and, remembering a gambler's instructions, walked up the gulch's western bank until he reached the ridge-top; from here he commanded an over-all view of Mule Canyon, dotted now with lamplight and campfires. Calhoun went across the ridge afoot; he soon came upon a middle-sized clapboard house with a long galleried porch and a stone chimney. Price Goodfellow's home. Calhoun knocked and stood before the door with a slight upward tilt to his lips.

"Well," said Goodfellow, admitting him, "I didn't expect to see you again so soon."

Calhoun removed his hat, uttering small talk. Catherine was across the room in a big rocker before the fire. She didn't turn her head when he came in, and so he walked around and put his back to the fire, warming his hands behind him. Catherine looked casual and fresh in a crisp fawn-colored dress that lay tight against her hips and waist and breasts and brought out the full color of her cheeks; her face had lost its tiredness and when she spoke her voice had a renewed lift: she was young, and vitality had sprung quickly

back into her. Her smile was faintly quizzical—it was characteristic of her, he had learned. She said, "You look much better, all shaved and clean."

"I feel human," said Calhoun, and then the three of them formed a triangle of idle conversation that was lively and full of ease. But Goodfellow was watching him with care; Goodfellow wasn't certain whether Calhoun had it in mind to court Catherine seriously, and being uncertain, Goodfellow was not on sure ground: he didn't yet know just what kind of man Calhoun was.

Goodfellow said, "I sent two men and a packhorse down the road to pick up that strongbox we cached. If it's still there, of course."

"It will be," Calhoun said. "Ruarke knows if it disappeared, you'd go right to his door."

"He's not afraid of much, Ruarke."

Calhoun said: "He's a crook. Crooks are always afraid—always looking over their shoulders."

Goodfellow considered it. "He's tough—don't mistake that. There are a number of men like him in Mule Canyon. I suppose it can't be helped—wherever there's a big strike, you're bound to get undesirables among the camp followers. I'm a little worried about the possibility of road agents down here. I remember the gangs of toughs that sewed up Alder Gulch back in the 'sixties—Henry Plummer's gang. The same kind of things could easily happen here. We're just as isolated."

Calhoun said, "If it happens, there's always somebody who'll stomach too much and break the thing up. They hanged Henry Plummer and most of his gang." He lighted a cigarette and leaned back on the flagstone mantelpiece, pulling at the smoke. The house still smelled of newness. He said, "Maybe it won't happen here at all."

"Maybe it won't," Goodfellow agreed. "We can always hope, anyhow. Well, then, tell me—what have you decided to do?"

"I threw in on a freighting venture with a fellow named Shelby Long."

"He used to work for me. A good, solid young man."

"But that's a sideline for me," Calhoun said. "Are you a gambling man?"

"On occasion."

"Where would you figure the best spot to set up a place?"

Catherine was watching him: she said, "So you've decided to go ahead with it. I hope you remember what I told you about Matthew Ruarke and his crowd. They don't like competition."

"I don't figure to change any plans just to please Ruarke."

Goodfellow said, "Build your place right at the top of the canyon. The location will give it elegance. Men will be willing to climb to get to it—and when they're worn-out and half-drunk they'll be able to get home by going downhill. Put it up big, where everybody can see it."

"That's about what I had in mind," Calhoun said.

Goodfellow said, "Ruarke and the rest of them put up their tent-saloons and flimsy buildings down in the hollows, as if they're hiding from something. If you want to attract the wealthy players, put up a place that looks proud."

"Exactly."

Goodfellow smiled. "You talk like a businessman, Calhoun." He glanced at his daughter and there was a change in the light behind his eyes; he said abruptly, "I believe I'll go up and have a look in on the night shift." He shouldered into a sheepskin jacket and went out of the house.

Catherine smiled. "That means you've passed inspection." She cocked her head over on one side. "I had an impulse to get up just now and kiss you."

"No."

"You wouldn't have liked that."

"I might have," he said, smiling slightly.

"Then we're getting somewhere."

"No," he said. "You still don't see what I was talking about, do you?"

"I've got time to learn, I hope."

"Maybe you do."

She spoke with sudden anger: "I want you. What's so wrong in that?"

He shook his head. "I can't answer that for you."

"All right. I'm a brazen woman. Life's not so long we have any great deal of time to dawdle with outmoded customs. Hell, Calhoun—" she smiled, "did I startle you?"

"No," he said softly.

"But I disappointed you—is that it? You accused me of hero-worship, didn't you? But you're the one who's making an image. A sweet-talking society belle in crinoline, all manners and softness—isn't that what you idolize?"

"I don't know," he drawled. "Is it?" He looked amused.

"You think I'm a spoiled brat, don't you?"

"Yes."

She laughed. "At least you're honest about it. That's what I like about you."

He kept the smile on his face, but turned and went toward the door, picking up his hat. In the opening he turned to look back. Catherine had not risen. She said, "Come back when you feel like it, Sam."

"Maybe."

"Good night."

"Good night," he said. He put his hat on and walked down toward town, frowning, disturbed by her; he had not encountered anyone like her and his experience was unable to provide him with a quick certain answer.

He came down the main thoroughfare, zigzagging among shacks and tents, and came to a large structure which was clapboard up to shoulder-height, and tent above that. It bore a great and gaudy sign: *Stacy Donovan's Palace.*

He ordered a drink and pushed himself through the crowd to a corner table, where he settled himself, sipping from the drink. Under the pitched circus-tent roof a woman sang to the accompaniment of a harsh and jangling piano; she was hardly heard in the din of the place. The rattle of a spinning wheel came to him from a nearby roulette rig; the barker called, "Eleven, Red. Place your bets, gentlemen—place your bets."

Calhoun turned and watched the singer. She was a handsome woman; she wore too much rouge and a dress which

had no shoulders and which glittered with sequins in the lamplight.

He glanced at the door and saw Leroy Hamlin entering the saloon, and was surprised, as Leroy had left the stage at the noon junction. Leroy elbowed violently through the crowd; his roving eyes touched Calhoun and he turned his course accordingly and rammed forward, head tucked down.

Watching Leroy come up, Calhoun froze his expression into a noncommittal mask. Leroy stopped by his table and gave him a long and searching look. Calhoun said roughly, "What do you want, Leroy?"

Leroy was a little drunk. "All the way from Yuma you been making like how tough you are. I ain't impressed, Calhoun. I figure maybe I'll just take you apart an' see how Goddamn tough you are inside."

So this was it, Calhoun thought. It had been some time coming. He kept his eyes steady on Leroy and Leroy repeated, "I'm gonna take you apart," stupidly.

"You got Ruarke's permission, Leroy?" Calhoun said softly. His eyes mocked Leroy.

Leroy grunted. His fists clenched and opened. He grabbed Calhoun's table and thrust it against Calhoun; Calhoun found himself bound between the table edge and his chair, backed up against the wall. Leroy's eyes were hot and his lips pushed in and out rhythmically; he said in an animal growl, "Come out of there and give us a fight."

Calhoun peeled his lips back from his teeth in a wicked grin, but he didn't move. His refusal to jump infuriated Leroy. "I'll have you," Leroy cried—"By God I'll have you!"

Leroy flung the table aside as though it were a piece of cardboard. He fell on Calhoun in a rush, giving him no time to get up, swinging his fist toward Calhoun's face. Calhoun jerked his head to one side; the ham-fist grazed his cheekbone, jarring him. A hot rage overcame Calhoun; his temper was always near the surface. He braced the backs of his knees against the chair and levered himself upward, ramming his head into Leroy's belly, butting Leroy back, bending the man over. Leroy roared and stumbled. Calhoun went after

him in a stiff-legged dive, all the while thinking, *This is damned childish.*

Leroy's right hand looped around in a roundhouse that caught Calhoun at the angle of his jaw and dumped him flat on the floor.

The crowd was a hard-breathing circle around them. Calhoun shook his head to clear it; he saw Leroy's boot coming at him, and rolled quickly away. Leroy cried out with pleasure as he kicked Calhoun in the back of the ribs. He raised his big foot to stamp Calhoun's face.

Calhoun rolled over, avoiding the boot, and got to his feet. He danced away, knocking two spectators asprawl and feinted for a moment until his vision cleared; he faced Leroy constantly, and watched him constantly. He knew that with the chance, Leroy would kill him.

Squatted over, Leroy took a striding plunge, his left fist feinting, his right coming out fast—very fast. Calhoun caught it on his forearm and threw it aside; he put full strength into a blow to Leroy's belly and felt his fist sink into a layer of doughlike fat before contacting Leroy's drum-taut muscle. The sponge of fat protected Leroy and he was not hurt by the blow.

Calhoun shifted his hips to avoid the ram of Leroy's knee toward his crotch; he trapped both of Leroy's arms under his elbows and rode around in a circle until Leroy used his brute power to pull free. Calhoun let go, hooked a fist against Leroy's kidney, and backed away.

Leroy gave an impatient roar and said, "You damned leech—stand still!"

Leroy dropped his arms, leaving himself wide open, shuffling forward. Calhoun started in but Leroy, playing possum, suddenly struck out in long-reaching right and left-hand swipes. Calhoun evaded them and Leroy, off balance, stumbled forward; Calhoun caught him with a short, driving blow beneath the chin which stopped Leroy, clouded his eyes, sagged his jaw; Leroy shook his head vigorously, like a wet dog, and stood flat-footed, not turning, while Calhoun walked a quarter-circle past him. Leroy made arcs of his two long

arms, waiting to catch Calhoun in a hug. Calhoun came in all the way, but at the last moment lifted his knee to his belly so that it stood between him and Leroy; and when Leroy's arms went around him he thrust out with his upraised knee. Leroy's grip broke. He fell back against the bar.

Calhoun stood with legs braced apart, knowing that if he let this drag on, Leroy's overwhelming muscular power would wear him down. And so he didn't give Leroy time to get his balance, but moved in and slammed four evenly-spaced blows at Leroy's stomach. On the third blow he felt Leroy's tight muscles begin to give; on the last he felt them sag under the fat and then, before Leroy could push away from the bar, Calhoun put his head down and butted Leroy.

Leroy gave. He folded at the middle and only then thought to bring his knee up into Calhoun's face, but it was too late; Calhoun had moved out again and now swung his solid blows grimly into Leroy's lowered face, slugging with deliberate precision.

Dazed, badly hurt, Leroy turned his face into his own shoulder for protection and pawed his way out into the open, away from the bar. One hand slipped behind him and drew a squat-bladed knife from the back of his belt. He spat blood and came forward, the knife swaying in wicked arcs, lamplight racing along its blade.

A tall man—Shelby Long—came out of the crowd of onlookers, and put his gun against Leroy's back. "That'll be enough, Leroy."

Leroy kept advancing, ignoring Shelby Long. Long raised his pistol and brought it sharply against Leroy's head. Leroy stopped and braced himself heavily, legs spraddled; he dipped his head and stared stupidly at the floor. He swung ponderously about and growled at Shelby Long, who kept his gun leveled on Leroy's chest. Leroy stood that way for a long time and then turned, walked uncertainly to the door, and went out, the crowd making a path for him.

Shelby Long holstered his gun. He said, "Long as it was a fair fight I didn't figure to mix in."

"Thanks," Calhoun said.

"Why didn't you draw on him?"

"He didn't have a gun."

"Knife's as bad as a gun, where Leroy's concerned. He'll carve you up at the drop of a hat." Shelby Long went back and got Calhoun's hat and handed it to him. The crowd murmured excitedly. The two of them went out of the saloon; outside in the darkness Shelby Long said, "Have you got a place?" Calhoun shook his head. "Well, then, come on with me." The Texan strode off up-street, Calhoun going along, rubbing at the soreness in his knuckles.

Shelby Long took him into a one-room board shack on the edge of town. "Ain't mine, but the previous owner took off and left it—two jumps ahead of Ruarke's gang of claim-jumpers. Come on in."

Long went to a pot-bellied black stove in the corner and built up a fire under the coffeepot. He said, "Let's see that hand," and when Calhoun held out his bruised fingers Long observed, "nothing broke." He poured two cups of coffee and handed one to Calhoun. "What did Leroy have against you?"

"It started with a run-in over cards. It's been building up for some time."

"Ah," Long said. "I heard about the holdup, and the mules runnin' off. So you were one of that bunch?"

Calhoun nodded. Shelby Long produced an old comfortable pipe and puffed strenuously on it until he had it going to his satisfaction. He set his tin cup on the shelf and stepped outside. Calhoun followed and they sat against the front of the shack, watching lights wink on and off in town; sporadically voices lifted from one quarter to another. Shelby Long said, "Leroy's a man to watch. He'd have little trouble shooting you in the back."

"No," Calhoun said, massaging his fist. "Leroy's proud of his strength. I caught him against the bar there, but if he jumps me again it will be the same way. He likes to use his hands."

"You could be wrong," Long observed. "Watch him." He leaned lower in a lazy slouch and pulled quietly on his pipe, a man whose natural cheer and enthusiasm were mo-

mentarily dampened. He said, "I came up here like a lot of fellows, thinkin' to strike it rich. But I found out soon enough I couldn't tell raw gold from lead. So here I am, thanks to you, starting an enterprise worthy of my fine breedin'." He chuckled and took the pipe out of his mouth. "Tomorrow I'm heading for Sonita to pick up a load of cordwood. Big start."

"Cordwood? What for?"

"Gonna get cold up here another week or two. Ain't much firewood hereabouts—and even if there was, the boys are too busy digging gold out of the ground and losing it across the tables. They'll buy wood sooner than cut it. They all think they're millionaires."

Calhoun said, "What's to prevent us from cutting the wood ourselves? Save you a trip and the price of cordwood."

"Hold on," Long said. "You're talkin' about manual labor."

"I am."

Long frowned. His pipe had gone out and he sucked it that way. Finally he grinned. "Done," he said. "Tomorrow we'll build corrals and a woodshed up here." He stood up and tramped back and forth; the prospect had filled him with restless enthusiasm. "I thought you were going to build a saloon?"

"I am."

V

PHIL MERCY FOUND a spot a mile and a half down-gulch from the top; he put down stakes and for once his optimism —nurtured by the wild hopes of other prospectors along the canyon—blinded him to the failures of so many who left the camps with even less than the pittance with which they had arrived.

He spent two energetic days building a small tar-and-wood shack with borrowed tools, after which he busied himself building a sluice to filter and ripple out the gold. He spent most of his money on lumber to construct the rocker-box and sluice.

He was hammering the rocker-box together when he heard a wagon coming down-canyon; its rattle preceded the sight of it for three or four minutes. Phil Mercy stepped out of the muck and wiped his hands on his pinstripe trousers, now unspeakably grimy. He watched the bend in the canyon with anticipation: he was a mingling man and loneliness was one of his most fearsome enemies.

Calhoun, tooling the big mud wagon around the bend, saw Mercy, and spoke to Shelby Long, beside him on the seat: "Here's a friend."

"Hello, Sam," said Phil Mercy.

Calhoun stood on the brake. He waved a hand back and forth and introduced the two men. Mercy wiped sweat from his forehead with a muddy sleeve. "In business, Sam?"

"I am."

Shelby Long gave the claim his consideration and grinned widely. "Think you'll pull anything out of that muck?"

"I'll tell you that after I've started sluicing," Mercy said.

Long laughed. "It's a gamble. You can break your back for nothing."

The observation soured Mercy. He slid his hands into his pockets. "What brings you two down this way?"

"We're running a concession on firewood. Supply you through the winter, eight dollars a month," Calhoun said.

Mercy shook his head. "Can't afford it yet. But there are plenty of rich ones on the creek. You'll make a good living."

"Any more claims below here?"

"One, but he's a cagey old Scotsman. I'd bet he'd burn his shanty down around him before he'd pay for wood." Mercy smiled one of his sardoinc smiles and leaned his arm on the wagon. He said in an idle tone, "I saw Ruarke in town last night. He was looking pleased with himself. Did Goodfellow get that strongbox back?"

"He sent somebody to fetch it. I don't think they're back yet."

Mercy nodded. "Well," he said, "good luck."

Calhoun drove a few yards down-canyon to a spot wide enough to reverse the big wagon. He brought it around in a tight turn and drove the mules back past Mercy, who lifted a hand as they came by. Mercy watched them go and then turned to look at his sorry little mining operation; his face took on a wry expression.

Driving the wagon past the group of big tents that housed Mule Canyon's general supply stores, Calhoun heard his name called and stopped the wagon to look around; finally he saw Catherine Goodfellow in the shadows on the porch of Belding's mercantile emporium. She walked out to the wagon and stood by the hub of the big front wheel, looking up. "Hello, Shelby. I haven't seen you in years."

Shelby Long was grinning at her. "Time ain't done you any damage," he told her.

"Why, thank you, Shelby." She turned her glance to Calhoun. "I haven't seen you, Sam."

"I've been busy."

"Making excuses?"

"No," he said, meeting her eyes.

She turned a palm upward and lifted one shoulder in a pert gesture. "They tell me that you two are in the firewood business. May we subscribe?"

"That'd please us," Shelby Long drawled. He was watching the girl with unconcealed interest.

She gave him a coquettish smile. "All right. Both of you come to the house for dinner tonight and we'll discuss it."

Calhoun said, "I'm afraid I've got—"

"Fiddlesticks," Catherine said. "My father wants to talk to you about business, Sam. That is, if the promise of my company isn't enough." She smiled with mock-sweetness. "Seven o'clock," she said, and went promptly away.

Shelby Long gave Calhoun a drily amused look; he said blandly, "Best we get at the wood choppin'. We've wasted enough time—and cold weather's coming up."

Calhoun nodded and clucked at the teams. He felt a small bite in the air, a little chill that presaged the winter to come. They stopped by Long's cabin to pick up an axe and crosscut saw; Long tossed these in the bed of the wagon and hopped aboard. They fought the wagon up and over into the adjoining canyon, thick with scrub and stunted timber.

Through the length of the day they chopped trees down and sawed them into fireplace lengths, working with methodical speed; it became a good-humored contest between the two tall men, which of them would tire first. Pride kept them both working until, at five-thirty, they unloaded the wood in Long's yard and stacked it inside the shed they had built during the preceding days. Afterward, refusing to admit the stiffness of his muscles, Shelby Long set out to wet his throat in town, while Calhoun went down the gulch afoot to solicit more subscriptions.

At seven the two partners came into the Goodfellow house and had their supper with the thickset mine-owner; afterward all of them went out on the porch. Catherine brought glasses of brandy and they had their evening smokes, watching the town come to life below. Goodfellow talked firewood with them and drove a bargain. Catherine sat on the top step and clasped her hands around her knee, leaning on a post. She watched and listened, and Calhoun saw in her expression that same small-girl curiosity mingled with the sug-

gestion of deep wisdom. In a stretch of silence Catherine said, "Have you seen Phil Mercy?"

"This morning," Calhoun said. "He's working a claim."

"Good for him," she said.

Goodfellow observed, "I never pictured him as the type." He knocked out his pipe and said, "What about your saloon, Sam?"

"In a week we'll have enough subscriptions paid for firewood. I intend to buy another wagon. We'll pick up lumber in Sonoita and I'll start construction by the end of next week." He pointed, "Right up on top of the hill. You'll see our lights for miles."

Catherine said, "Is that wise? This camp may die by the time your saloon begins to pay for itself."

"I'll take that chance."

"I guess you would," she said. "You're still a gambler."

"Life's no fun without risks," Shelby Long said.

At noon Phil Mercy came into town for a bundle of supplies; having made his purchases, he went into the California saloon and had two drinks, and then turned outside again. Indecisive for a moment, he finally swung uphill and climbed to the Goodfellow house with a restless frown on his face. He knocked and heard Catherine's voice; he entered, closed the door, and saw her sitting by the room's big table, sewing. She looked at him with some kind of shadow in her eyes. He said, "Hello. Where's your father?"

"At the mine."

"Have you seen Sam Calhoun?" He watched her with care. "You like him, don't you?"

"Yes."

Mercy leaned his back against the door. His face was long and dour. Catherine said, "How's your digging?"

"Poor," he said without tone. He gave a nervous little laugh. "I suppose I knew it wouldn't work, even before I started."

"You've only been at it ten days. Is that a fair chance?"

"I don't know. Maybe I expect too much. I've never had the patience to abide long-term projects."

She said, "Sam's saloon will be open in a little while. He might be able to use you on the floor."

"I'd like to find something more solid than that," Mercy said. Then he shrugged. "I suppose that's a contradiction, isn't it? Hell, I don't know—I wish I knew what I wanted. Most of my life I've been content just keeping out of trouble. I've got a good memory for details and a good pair of hands, so I've done some gambling. I don't really enjoy it. It's no thrill for me the way it is for some."

"Maybe you ought to sit down and think it out," she suggested.

He shook his head immediately. "I'm scared to do that. I always have been. I've just drifted from one thing to another. Never stopped to figure it out."

"Why not?"

"Because I know the conclusion I'd come to." He put both palms out, facing them down, and swept his arms out to his sides. "Nothing. No meaning, no value, no matter what a man does. It all leads to the grave. Why worry about it? I'd just get scared. What's the good of a man spooking himself? I'd rather let it ride."

She said, "I don't see how blindfolding yourself can really help. All you have to do is set a goal. It doesn't matter much whether you ever achieve it."

"Exactly," he said. "None of it matters." He paced around the room like something caged, hands locked behind him. He was a small man, almost delicate in physique. There was a hollow despair in his dark eyes. He stood in front of her looking at her; she stood up, keeping her eyes on him but turning her face quarter-away. He became more aware of her body's fullness and her power to attract him; his eyes began to burn.

She shook her head. "Don't make a mistake, Phil."

He flushed. "Am I that crude, after all?"

"You're not very hard to read."

He shook his head back and forth, smiling crookedly.

"So I'm no mystery to you, and you like a mystery. That's why you like Sam, isn't it?"

"Is it?"

"That, and another thing too. He's a stronger man. I can't help it if I'm not that sort, can I?" It was practically a plea.

She said, "You're trying my patience, Phil."

"Don't you have anything for me but contempt?"

"I won't encourage your self-pity, if that's what you mean. You want a lot of things, Phil, but you haven't the stomach to try earning them. You can't hide that—it's in your face."

"You're right," he said tonelessly. But then he moved forward and grasped her, feeling her body's softness; he muttered something and kissed her with savage pressure.

She gave no response at all, only a cold scorn that hurt him more than a slap. When he stepped away she said quietly, "You're a fool."

He dropped his eyes; his face tautened in an expression of desperation. "Catherine, I need your friendship."

"Is that what you had in mind?"

He started to step forward but she repelled him with the frigidity of her face. He said a pitiful thing. "I thought that being thrown together in that stagecoach wreck had left more than this between us."

"That's a raw excuse. You'd better go, Phil."

"You hate me now, don't you?"

"No."

He nodded, as if confirming his own statement; with the dragging feet of lonely hopelessness he went across the room and left the house.

In a violent country, the strong take from the weak, and the weak say nothing, but only weep privately and are soon gone and forgotten. It is a place where the exercise of direct force makes for success, and anything less is contemptible.

That was the philosophy of Matthew Ruarke, who rode the stage into Mule Canyon at noon and stood a moment before the depot, putting his careful attention upon the town before he entered it. Then he moved through the thin traf-

fic to his own place, the California Saloon and Palace of Chance, and pushed up to the bar. He caught the barkeep's attention. "Leroy around?"

The bartender began to shake his head, but then he looked at the door and pointed and went back to glass-polishing.

Leroy Hamlin came into the saloon with a vacant expression on his hammy face. Ruarke signalled to him, and Leroy came up and awaited his instructions like a patient dog.

Ruarke said, "Get Donovan and Boone." And turned away from the man. He went into his office in the back of the place and sat in his deep chair, and thought about Leroy Hamlin wryly: Leroy was an inanimate tool.

Presently the office door opened and two men came in, markedly in contrast to one another. Stacy Donovan, who owned the Palace Saloon, was lean and had a false air of silver-haired dignity; while Jacob Boone was fat to the point of obesity, florid, and cruel-faced, with heavy jowls and beady eyes sunk into pudgy cheeks and flesh-folds about his brow and nose; his lips were thick and insensitive. Jacob Boone owned the Canyon Paradise, a den where everything was permitted and where nothing heard was repeated.

"Keep smiling, Jake," said Ruarke. "It makes me wonder what you've been up to."

Boone uttered a coarse appropriate burst of laughter and pulled a chair forward, dropping his bulk into it. Stacy Donovan sat down easily beside him and pulled a golden toothpick from his pocket, and played with it during the conversation. "Well, Matt?"

"It's about time we started moving," Matthew Ruarke said. "Are we ready for it?"

"Holliday's crew is still out on Silver Creek. If you don't think that bunch is enough you can always use Leroy to help."

Ruarke grimaced. "Forget Leroy. He can be recognized two miles away in a blinding snowstorm." He settled in his swivel-chair, imported all the way from Mobile, beneath a large gilt-framed painting of a bosomy woman reclining on a couch, wearing only a sheer scarf. The woman, ample and pink-fleshed, wore a seductive smile on her heavy red lips.

Jacob Boone eyed his fingernails and crossed his legs; he ran fingers along the pouched flesh of his face and wiped his brow with a handkerchief. He said, "How many men does Holliday have?"

"Three."

"Is that enough?"

"Sure."

"They messed up that stagecoach thing pretty bad. Did you like being set afoot?"

"I chewed him out properly for that," Ruarke said. "It won't happen again."

"That Calhoun's a tough customer to handle," Boone said. "What do we do about that saloon of his up on the hilltop? It'll be open in another few days."

"We'll see how he does," Ruarke said noncommittally. "That's the least of our worries." He toyed with a cigar in his slim, white hands. He looked sharply at Stacy Donovan. "Did you get a man in the express office at the depot?"

"Vinnie Warner."

"All right," Ruarke said. "Warner will get word to us of worthwhile shipments going out, and we send Leroy to Holliday. Holliday will grab the bullion and put it somewhere—not in town—where we can get at it if we have to make a run." He added, "There's always that possibility."

Jacob Boone said, "I like that painting. I'll give you three ounces for it. A hundred dollars."

"Shut up, Jake," said Stacy Donovan.

"Two hundred," said Boone.

Ruarke craned his neck around to regard the painting. "I paid more than that for Lily. She came out of the saloon on one of the biggest Mississippi packets before the war." He made a gesture that dismissed Jacob Boone's offer. "I talked to John Rand in St. Louis. He'll buy this gold in bulk but we've got to get it to him. He wanted us to send it along as we got it, but I haven't got men to spare and besides I don't trust Rand where I can't see him. So we'll let it pile up till spring. I've seen these towns before, and they rarely last. By spring we'll be pulling dregs—and that'll be the time for

all of us to get out. They'll organize for law and order, they'll tighten up on their shipments and hire gunnies to ride shotgun. I just want the easy pickings off the top, and then we'll move on. Why get involved in a blood bath? We'll clear out in the spring. We can take pack animals—they're easier to handle than wagons—and pick up the gold on our way out of the country. Suitable?"

Donovan nodded. Jacob Boone said, "All right. Say, I'll give you three hundred for Lily."

"Shut up, Jake," said Donovan.

Ruarke chewed on his cigar. "Has Holliday got plenty of horses and provisions? He'll be in the hills all winter?"

Donovan frowned. "I hadn't thought of that."

"Naturally," Jacob Boone commented drily, wiping his brow.

Ruarke said, "I'll send Leroy up with them. I think I'll tell Holliday to pick up another man and post him here in town for a contact. I don't know that I want Leroy taking messages to Holliday all the time—he'd be an easy man to trail."

"That's a thought," said Donovan.

"Fifteen ounces of pure for the painting," said Boone.

Donovan said sharply, "Never mind, Jake!"

Ruarke said, "It's not for sale, Jake."

Donovan said, "How do we know we can trust Holliday not to run off with the bullion?"

"I trust nobody," Ruarke said, looking straight at Donovan. "I plan to keep stringing Holliday along with the promise of a great big granddaddy bullion shipment in late spring sometime. He'll stick around for that. By the time he finds out it's a hoax we'll be long gone with the gold."

Donovan grinned. "Smart." He got up and walked out of the office.

Jacob Boone started to follow. He turned in the doorway. "One thousand dollars for Lily, Matt."

Ruarke smiled helplessly. "All right, Jake."

Boone grinned. "I'll send my swamper by to pick it up."

Phil Mercy had pulled a total of forty dollars in gold out of his claim in two weeks' time. He was no carpenter: he had to spend hours patching leaks in the sluice that would not have sprung had it been built properly. Work, disappointment, and the increasing chill of the coming winter had their way with him. He was gaunt and nervous, he drank a good deal, his eyes were hollow and rimmed. On a chill morning he heard a horse coming down-canyon, and stopped working, hungry for conversation and welcoming an excuse to get away from toil.

Leroy Hamlin appeared around the canyon bend, his huge bulk overshadowing his struggling mount. His short legs made him bounce precariously; he was no horseman. Leroy rode up and sat heavily. "I heard you was down here."

Apprehension held Mercy in frozen stillness. Leroy grinned at him in the way an old lecher would grin at a girl. Leroy said, "You're workin' on my claim."

Mercy took a step backward. "It doesn't look that way to me."

"You're a claim-jumper, Mercy."

"That's pretty raw."

Leroy came clumsily off the horse and said, "We don't tolerate claim-jumpers hereabouts."

Mercy held up one hand, palm out. "All right. Hell, you can have the damned claim. It's no good to me."

Leroy was momentarily taken aback. He peered at Mercy through small round eyes. Mercy noticed the man's hairy knuckles and the reach of his arms, and again stepped away from Leroy.

Leroy's slim excuses for pleasure had been dashed, and he sought another. "You and that Calhoun fella, you both the same breed. You're a friend of his, huh?"

"Not especially," Mercy said, and was immediately sickened by his own betrayal.

"You're a liar," Leroy said. "Calhoun jumped me in a saloon a couple weeks ago. You put him up to it."

"The hell I did!"

But looking at the loose hungry hang of Leroy's face,

Mercy knew it was no use. His resignation must have showed on his face. Leroy took a shuffling step forward, bending his blunt head. Intent on escape, Mercy leaped backward and fell awkwardly into the sluice. Leroy laughed dumbly at him: Leroy's laugh was a gravel sound in his belly and there was nothing good-humored about it.

A sudden frustrated wrath came upon Phil Mercy. He pulled himself out of the muck and said, "You Goddamned ape," and turned to run toward the road. Leroy wheeled, a great mass in a bulky sheepskin saddle coat; Leroy's long arm snapped out and caught him by the elbow and whipped him around like a puppet on a string. Leroy's fist came up; terrified, Mercy heard the quick, greedy in-and-out grunts of Leroy's breathing—and Leroy's fist ripped Mercy's lips across his teeth. It rocked him, stunned him; a red glaze flowed across his vision.

With a loud grunt of contempt, Leroy spun Mercy away from him. As Mercy turned, Leroy's fist rammed into his kidney; Mercy felt the sharpest, most unbearable pain shoot through him. Something slammed the back of his head. Bright pinpoints of light stabbed through the haze. He bent double and Leroy's knee came up into his bowed face.

He felt smothered in pain and terror. He fell to the ground clawing and scratching, intent only on getting away; he cried out, he whimpered. Leroy's hand came out of the gloom, bunched his shirt-front, hauled him to his feet, arms flapping; he kicked out desperately. His foot slid past Leroy's invulnerable shin, but somehow got behind Leroy's leg and tripped Leroy. Leroy fell flat. Mercy saw the man's evil face and kicked at it.

Leroy's giant hand shot out, grabbed his foot in midair and turned it savagely; Mercy toppled. Leroy was on his knees, looming over him against the sky—Mercy saw the fists coming at him like falling trees. His senses became vague. He was hurt; he was a chunk of meat on a block and the butcher's mallet and cleaver came at him and worked their way with him.

He lay on his face, blinded. Leroy's boot ground into his

arm. He jerked, twisting away in a half-unconscious spasm. Leroy kicked his buttocks and hips. It came to Phil Mercy that Leroy was going to kill him.

He scrambled with his legs until he had purchase, and then he rolled over quickly, rolling fully around twice; he searched frantically in his pockets and brought out his little nickel-plated revolver. Leroy was only a wavering shadow in the fog of his vision. He pointed the revolver at it and somehow cocked the gun.

Leroy stopped and stood, head bowed, watching the gun stupidly. Phil Mercy's breath heaved in and out of him like blasts of desert air, burning his lungs. He said, "All right—all right."

Leroy growled, considering the gun. He said nothing; in time he turned to his horse, climbed up clumsily, and rode up out of the canyon.

Phil Mercy lay on the ground feeling frustrated and useless. In a rage of suffering, he groped to his feet and stood swaying; he moved into his shack and collapsed on the cot.

VI

CALHOUN STOOD among the crowd, looking pleased with himself; his ragged-boned face was settled in a gentle smile. He wore a suit of clothes with a dark coat and a flashing silver-brocade vest; his hair was combed neatly in front of his hat, which was tipped far back on his head. He stood with thumbs hooked into the armholes of his vest, a cigar between two fingers.

At the far end of the tremendous room, a blaze of sunset light reddened the opening above the ornate batwing doors; the dazzle of it all but obscured the chandeliers. A tall, slab-sided shape pushed in through the flapping doors—Shelby Long. The Texan weaved gracefully through the crush of the crowd, made his way to Calhoun's side, and said irreverently, "It's disgusting how Goddamn prosperous you look, you son of a bitch."

Calhoun grinned at him. "Come on," he said, and made a path through the knots of people to the long, polished mahogany bar. Six bartenders sweated and hurried down the trough behind the bar; cases of bottles stood half-empty. Shelby Long said with a measure of awe; "Like opening night at the opry house. God, Sam, you're making pikers of the rest of them."

A *vingt-et-un* dealer called tonelessly, "Nineteen, pay twenty." The steel ball rattled across a roulette wheel. There was the scrape of chairs, the clinking of bottle and glass, the thud of boots, the dissonance of the band—banjo, guitar, fiddles, piano—and the hearty familiar lift of a thousand voices, all talking at once. Shelby Long said, "Open two hours and it stinks like a saloon."

A bartender set drinks before them and stood back beneath a huge lithograph of *Custer's Last Stand,* grinning owlishly at Calhoun. Calhoun said, "Keeping you busy, MacAviney?"

"I guess they are," the barkeep said fervently, and rushed away.

Price Goodfellow emerged from the multitude. "You did it right, Sam. This will turn Ruarke green as grass."

"Better hope he stays as docile," Shelby Long said.

Goodfellow said, "Someone outside to see you, Sam."

"You're a sly buzzard," Calhoun told him, and pushed toward the door.

There was a constant heavy flow of traffic in and out through the entrance. He went through on the crest of a wave and turned aside on the porch. Below the steps the hill angled down into Mule Canyon. Directly opposite, on the far slope, were the stacks and derricks of Goodfellow's Acropolis mine. The lights of town sprawled up either side of the gulch—even now the camp had swelled far beyond its population of two or three weeks ago.

It was chilly in the dark; he put his hands in his pockets and went down the path on the fringe of the crowd until, a little way along, a shadow detached itself from the scrub-oak and blocked his path. Catherine said, "It's impressive, Sam."

"Sure," he said. "I'm glad you came." He was in a fine mood.

She said, "You look well-fed, like a cat. You know, you're almost handsome when you smile."

He laughed. "Thanks for the gallantry."

She had a white shawl about her shoulders, gathered under her folded arms. She said, "Winter's coming on. You look hale and strong—wood chopping must be good for you."

"I guess it is," he said. "We're thinking of buying a few more wagons and opening a full-time freight line between here and Yuma. There's more than enough room for it."

Her mouth turned into the faintly quizzical line that was characteristic. "You're a very practical man—even on a moonlit night."

"What's wrong with that? You won't get far chasing moonbeams."

It silenced her, saddened her; she turned to look away.

From the saloon came the noise of trade; from the town below came the hawks of shouting barkers, the occasional gunshots of drunken revelers. From up here the town was like a toy, lighted and merry on a cool night.

Someone came out of the crowd and walked toward them. Men streamed up and down the hill like endless teams of mules. The solitary figure advanced and emerged from the dark—Matthew Ruarke. The thin northeasterner said, "A smart place you've got here, Calhoun."

Calhoun made no reply; he only watched Ruarke, who disregarded Catherine's presence altogether and said in a quiet way, "Some of the boys don't like the way you're putting on the dog up here. It would have been politic if you'd had a talk with us before you decided to build this place. It doesn't pay to antagonize your neighbors when you don't have to."

Calhoun pulled his hat down until it made a level shadow across his eyes. Only then did he answer, and when he did, he spoke with deliberate care, choosing his words and clapping them wickedly against Matthew Ruarke:

"I don't have to answer to you or any of the scum you travel with, Ruarke."

Ruarke displayed a thin smile. "All right," he said, "you're tough. I've given you your chance." He wheeled and started away, shoulders squared.

"Ruarke!"

The northeasterner halted, turning his head. Calhoun's hand swept up, leveling his big revolver. He eared the hammer back: the series of crisp clicks carried across the night in brittle warning. Calhoun's finger, tight on the trigger, hung a sixteenth of an inch from Matthew Ruarke's death. Calhoun heard the girl's quick intake of breath. He said, "If anything happens up here—anything at all, Ruarke—I'll lay it on your doorstep. Understand me?"

Ruarke sneered gently. "What do you take me for, Calhoun?"

"A greedy fool."

Ruarke threw his head back. "You don't know when to quit, do you? Calhoun, I can make life miserable for you."

"You can try," Calhoun said.

Ruarke turned and went away with a glint of teeth. Calhoun holstered his gun and heard Catherine's words lash out at him: "I should have known, Sam. You're an evil, arrogant man. I should have seen it by this glorified cantina of yours—built up here where everybody can see it and say, 'That's Calhoun's place.' You had no good reason to treat Ruarke that way, except that it feeds your vanity to ride roughshod over other men. You want to force him to fight you, don't you? You want him to start something, so that you can kill him and prove what a great man you are. All right, Sam. Ruarke was right—we all know how tough you are. What you don't seem to understand is that it doesn't make a damn' bit of difference to anybody except yourself. They said you used your badge as a license to kill when you were a marshal. I didn't believe it then, but I do now. You're no good, Sam." She turned and went away then, walking downhill into the crowd; her head was lowered as if to hide tears.

Calhoun's lips pressed together tightly. For a long time he stood on the hillside, his eyes burning brightly.

Phil Mercy washed his tin plate and dipped his hands into the water, feeling the warmth seep into his bruised fingers. He dried them on a burlap sack and moved stiffly across the dingy room. He could feel dull steady pain where Leroy had struck him, which was almost everywhere on his body.

He had lain motionless on his cot for two days after the beating; every time a sound had reached his ears, his hand had tightened on the sweat-soaked grip of his little nickel-plated gun. He had traveled through Limbo and Purgatory and Hell.

Rummaging through his meager belongings, he found a passable shirt, and put it on. His poke was hidden beneath the mattress; he hefted the weight of it, and his face turned even more sour. He replaced the poke and left the shack, starting the long walk to town with slow steps.

When he came by Henry Vendig's claim the bearded miner came out and said, "Going to town?" and fell in beside him. "Ain't seen you around the last couple days."

Mercy didn't answer. Oblivious to his companion's dark mood, Henry Vendig said heartily, "I'm just about through here. Not much longer at this. Pretty soon I'll be heading back to Anna and my kids."

Mercy said, without much interest, "Hadn't you better wait until spring?"

"And lose six months? No, I'm pullin' out pretty quick. You're welcome to what you can find in my ground after that. Besides, my Anna's been writing—wants me home. I feel the same way."

"You're lucky having somebody who wants you," Mercy said morosely. "It's good to have roots."

"Yes, sir," said Vendig cheerfully. Mercy nodded and left the miner at the edge of town and made his way along the tent street to the Palace Saloon. Vendig's bright outlook had dashed whatever had remained of his self-confidence: he saw men all around him striking it rich while he grubbed miserably. It was not enough.

He went to the bar and asked for a bottle. Silver-haired Stacy Donovan, who owned the place, spoke to him: "On the house, Mercy. How are things with you?"

Mercy shook his head, saying nothing. Donovan put on a bland and patronizing smile. "Take care of yourself," he said, and went on about his affairs.

Mercy took his bottle back into the room and found a chair at the wall; he pulled it against a small scarred table and sat down. He noticed rain falling outside the door and thought idly, "That will soon become snow."

A rider drifted up through the gray rain and entered the small clearing. Jack Holliday stooped as he came out of the log cabin and then stood warily, watching Leroy Hamlin come up through the mist, an incongruous shape in the saddle like a loose sack of flour. Leroy got down and ducked into the cabin, rubbing his hands, saying, "A Goddamn bad day."

"Menendez," said Holliday, "strike up the fire."

A skinny emaciated man dropped dry wood on the fire and watched it catch and flame; disinterest and boredom were written on Menendez' drawn dark features. He had the look of a desperate man on the prowl.

Leroy warmed his paws over the fire, happy with its warmth; he was bundled into an improbable number of clothing layers—protection against the chill, which he feared greatly. After a moment he jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Grub on the pack horse."

Holliday regarded the four men slouched around the cabin in various poses of discomfort. "Bill, Tom—bring it here," he said, and came in closer to the fire. The two he had named shrugged into their coats and went out into the rain.

Leroy said, "Mr. Ruarke says I got to tell you the stage is leavin' Wednesday."

"What's today?"

"Saturday. Stage got about five thousand in gold from the Acropolis." Leroy hunkered on his heels, long arms wrapped around his knees, his face somber; Leroy was a cheerless man.

Jack Holliday went out of the shelter and looked up into the rain, not blinking. The two men carried sacks inside, going past him silently. Holliday was tall and well muscled, his weathered face largely concealed by hair and beard. He turned back into the cabin and said, "Hope it clears by Wednesday."

Leroy said, "Mr. Ruarke wants your new man to come back to town with me for a contact."

"That's you, Thorpe. Stay sober."

A tall, soft-faced man went after Leroy, entered the woods and shortly thereafter came back with a saddled horse. He mounted and rode out with Leroy, never speaking; the night and the rain soon swallowed them. "Cook up some coffee, Tom," said Holliday, and sat down by the fire again.

Holliday and his three-man crew came down out of the hills on a chill Wednesday morning, wearing heavy coats and

low-pulled hats. They met the stage in Wolf Pass and relieved it of its bullion cargo, and faded into the misty hills, covering their tracks in a creek bed.

It took the driver two hours to tool the stage back over the winding nine miles into Mule Canyon. When he reached the depot he shouted the holdup news with waving arms.

The nearest sheriff was at Sonoita, so there was no real hunt. A few town loafers formed a posse and rode two miles until the chill turned them back. At the same time a man came loping out of the hills on a bay horse, dismounted before the Palace, and strode inside. He nodded curtly to the bartender and went on into the office without knocking.

"Hullo, Thorpe." Stacy Donovan spoke without raising his eyes from his ledgers.

Thorpe closed the door. "Well, it's all right."

"Fine. I guess Holliday knows where to cache the gold. Did anything go wrong?"

"No. We've got three new men didn't come along this trip. Boys from Nebraska. Jack wants to know what and when we hit next."

"Stick around town. I'll talk to Ruarke and let you know."

"Jack's a little impatient," Thorpe said mildly, and left the office.

Calhoun pulled his collar tight around his throat and blew ineffectually on his gloves; he grabbed his axe and swung it against the tree. Behind him, on the slope, Shelby Long was loading cut wood into the wagon. Long said, "Must be an easier Goddamn way."

"If you like," Calhoun agreed.

Long loaded a final log and came up, standing away from Calhoun, watching him swing the axe. The claps of Calhoun's chopping rang across the canyon in metal echoes. Long said, "You got a knack for pickin' trees that chop easiest and lift heaviest."

Calhoun grinned at him. "Bring the saw up here and get the wedge."

Long grumbled good-naturedly and went after the tools.

In a little while the wagon was full, and they brought it careening down-canyon onto the road. The wagon rattled with a great racket. They unloaded in the woodshed, fed and stabled the animals. Long said, "Axle needs greasing," and went into the shed again.

Calhoun walked away, went up through town and stood a moment below the massive silhouette of his big saloon, The Hilltop. He smiled tightly, went inside and called for a cigar at the bar. While he was puffing pleasurably on the heavy smoke he went over the previous day's accounts with the head bartender.

Price Goodfellow dropped in, with an unhappy look. Calhoun said, "Let me buy you a drink."

"I can use one, by God."

"Something wrong?"

Goodfellow gestured with his hands. "I lost five thousand in bullion this morning."

"Card game?"

"Stagecoach robbery." Goodfellow took his drink and swallowed it whole. "Holdup in Wolf Pass. Four bandits. Driver didn't recognize them."

"Then it's started," Calhoun said. He frowned through his smoke. "What do you figure to do about it?"

"What can I do? There's no worthwhile law around here for forty miles. The only thing I can do is hire an army of shotgun guards at my own expense and hope they don't take off with the ore themselves."

"It might work."

"It might," Goodfellow said, without conviction. "Hell, I don't ordinarily cry on shoulders. Sorry, Sam. I've got to get back up to the mine. Come by for supper when you feel like it."

Calhoun dipped his head and watched Goodfellow go out. The bartender said, "I've seen it before, boss. Pretty soon you'll have vigilante committees and toughs hangin' by their necks from every other tree in town. It don't promise to be pretty."

During the week that followed, four of six stagecoaches were held up on the outbound run from Mule Canyon. Two of them carried good payloads; Goodfellow and other mine owners lost almost seventeen thousand dollars to bandits. Calhoun and Long bought two mud-wagons and inaugurated a freight run to Yuma. Phil Mercy refused Calhoun's offer of a wagon-driving job, saying he was no team driver. Two miners were waylaid in the hills and relieved of their pokes; a drunk was stabbed one night in the alley behind Jacob Boone's saloon and robbed of a three-dollar watch. The population of Mule Canyon grew by six hundred heads. Someone tried to light a fire at the back of Calhoun's Hilltop saloon, but a passerby found the smoldering kindling and stamped it dead.

VII

One of the crew, a hardcase called Bill, rode into Jack Holliday's camp with a mule deer tied across his saddle. Bill dismounted and said, "Give me a hand here, Menendez," and began to undo the lashings. Menendez came out and said, "Fresh meat, all right," and helped Bill cart the animal inside the log cabin. They set the carcass down; young Tom came in from the trees and said, "I'll skin that," and fell to work with his knife. Tall Jack Holliday's shape blocked out the doorway. He turned, looked at the clouded sky, and spoke:

"Maybe we ought to move camp. I don't like stayin' in one place too long."

No one answered. Bill hunkered by the fire with his hands toward it, palms out. "I could use a bottle of whisky."

Menendez said, "Tell Thorpe, next time he comes up."

Young Tom stopped skinning for a moment, long enough to pull his coat tighter about him. "Build up that damned fire. I cut you plenty of Goddamn wood, didn't I?"

"Hell," Menendez said, "it's already hot in here."

"I'm a cornpone and chitlin' boy," young Tom drawled. "This cold don't agree with me none at all. I know how that spook Leroy feels."

"Shut up, Tom." Menendez was harsh with his voice; he was a haunted man made irritable by days of inaction.

Holliday advised, "Ease up, boys. Sit tight. By the time we pull out of here we'll all be rich."

Young Tom grunted caustically. "By time we get it split up there won't be enough to buy a ticket to the Yuma pen. I'm thinking on headin' east." He stripped the hide expertly from the mule deer, went outside and flung the skin atop the cabin roof. When he came inside again, Menendez spoke sharply:

"You ain't runnin' out on us now. You're as much up to your neck as any of us."

"Hell, Menendez, I's just griping."

"Do it someplace else," Menendez advised. "Hurry up with that carving, I'm hungry." And went off into the trees to look after his horse.

Jack Holliday went again to the door and looked up, jutting his square beard out. "Weather's going to hit us soon. I guess we'll have to stick right here. No shelter anyplace else."

Young Tom cut a haunch from the mule deer and speared it on a rifle-cleaning ramrod, and held it over the fire, turning it slowly. He sat on his heels, his hat pulled low over his young face, which was not as toughened as it should have been. His eyes rested at the bottom of deep pools; young Tom had turned bad early in life, and now disliked what he was in. He said, "You know what I mind, Bill? Those sons of bitches down Mule Canyon, sittin' warm and comfortable on their fat butts while we do their work for them. By God, if I don't get a fair split out of this take, somebody is going to get hurt. I ain't taking these risks for nothing."

Bill spat on the ground, not looking at young Tom.

Jack Holliday said, "Stop cryin', kid."

Not long afterward, the band's three newcomers entered the clearing and dismounted. A trio of Nebraska toughs, they looked much alike: they carried a common haunted, suspicious expression. The biggest of the three, Kearns by name, said, "Goddamn cold up there. Let's have a bite, kid."

Young Tom cut a slice from the haunch. It was almost raw. He skewered it on his knife and held it out to Kearns.

Jack Holliday said with deceptive casualness, "Where in hell have you boys been?"

Kearns swiveled on his bootheels, gnawing on the strip of meat: "And just what the hell business is that of yours?"

"I run this outfit," Holliday said, toughening up. "If you don't like that, maybe you got a better way?"

"Maybe," Kearns breathed. "Maybe I do." He let the slice

of venison fall to his side; his right hand touched his gun-butt. He said again, "Maybe I do, Jack."

Holliday's eyes narrowed to slits. "There's only one top dog here, bucko. If you don't see it that way, drift on. I can get some other hairpins to take your places, easy."

Kearns didn't lift his hand from the gun. His head shifted around; he weighed the scene: young Tom sat quietly by the fire, his hand near his pistol and his eyes mild. Tom was young but he had the wisdom of his kind, and couldn't be discounted. Menendez was over there in the trees, watching brightly, and Bill was at the far end of the cabin, a dark shadow watching alertly. Holliday said, "Counting up the odds, Kearns?"

"All right," Kearns said. "You ain't my top dog, Jack. We're pulling out."

"Go ahead," Holliday told him.

The three Nebraskans walked stiffly to their horses and swung up. Kearns gave Holliday a long, sober regard, and then the three wheeled their horses and drummed into the timber.

Holliday stood flat-footed near the door and said, "Those three could make trouble for us. Ten to one they decide to muscle in on our jobs." He swung around and went into the cabin for his rifle. "Be back," he said definitely, and went to get his horse.

Menendez said, "Want company, Jack?"

"Naw." Holliday grinned. He rode away, finding Kearns' trail easily enough and keeping to it until he was reasonably certain the three toughs were heading for Mule Canyon. Thereupon Holliday cut away from the tracks and put his horse into a run, traveling swiftly through the timber. Scrub oak and gnarled conifers covered the hills when he dropped to lower altitudes, and here and there a desert mesquite spread itself thickly in the rain. A brisk forewarning of winter was in the air; it put energy into his horse and he didn't take much time in crossing a small series of wind-swept hogbacks and finally dropping into a wide canyon.

Holliday climbed off his horse, concealed it well, and took

up a position behind a round-domed rock. From here he commanded a good view of the wide waterhole not far ahead on the canyon floor.

Short of ten minutes later, the three Nebraskans dismounted by the waterhole to let their horses drink. Holliday waited until they were all three kneeling by the water. Then, with cool deliberation, he aimed his rifle and fired.

Somehow he missed. Shaping a curse in his mouth, he saw the three men, startled, jump apart.

The small man behind Kearns dived for the cover of his horse, his hand clawing at his revolver. Holliday's first shot took him in the shin and the second, better placed, in the heart.

The third man panicked and ran. Kearns shouted something at him; Kearns had spun behind his horse. Holliday drove a slug into the third hardcase—it spun the man face-down into the waterhole. The body lay still while ripples, begun in violence, slowly disappeared on the surface of the pool.

But while Holliday had been occupied with that man, Kearns had made his dash, and now the Nebraskan was sprinting into the rocks. Holliday swung his rifle around. Kearns snapped a shot at him, driving Holliday back behind his shelter. Holliday called, "Come out in the open."

"This is all right," Kearns answered. "You Goddamned son of a bitch."

Holliday flipped cartridges into his rifle; he peered over his rocky cover. A shot placed Kearns for him. He crawled swiftly through the boulders toward that position. After a while he stopped; Kearns would be shifting around, always moving and watching for a break, and it wouldn't do to give him one.

Holliday snapped a quick shot, but it drew no response. "Kearns?"

"Waiting for you."

"All right," Holliday said mildly. He put his head up, and when he drew no fire he ran toward the sound of Kearns' voice, legs pumping fast against the uneven ground. The

barrel of Kearns' gun came up over the peak of a rock, and Holliday sprawled flat, skidding to cover with a bullet screaming away, leaving a white strip of ground near his boot. There was only a few yards between them now and he knew it would end quickly, one way or the other; that was the way he wanted it.

He snapped a quick shot, changed position, and became quite still; he could hear Kearns' coarse breathing. Coolly Holliday came around the rock, running into the open. Kearns fired: Holliday felt the bullet slam his right arm like a sledge, half-turning him around.

He came on running, shifting the rifle to his left hand; he could see the glint in Kearns' eyes, the rise of Kearns' gun. Holliday fired then. The buck of the big rifle almost opened his hands. He saw the bullet strike below Kearns' nose. The Nebraskan went over backward and fell from sight.

Holliday wheezed and holstered his pistol, and sat down upon a rock. He wrapped a bandanna around his bleeding right arm and went around to have a look at Kearns; he put his boot under Kearns' ribs and rolled the body over, and spat into Kearns' dead face. He turned and walked back toward his horse, picking up his rifle on the way.

Winter came suddenly—white and glistening on the slopes. It split hollowed rocks and burst the staves of full barrels. The creek in Mule Canyon froze over and had to be hacked open, and prices climbed, as the difficulty of freighting supplies became greater.

With first snow forming a crackling layer on the earth, a group of disillusioned bankrupt men formed a large party in town and elected to travel overland to Tombstone and then Benson, to pick up the railroad there. They walked, most of them, because they had sold their animals. There was little money among them, but they feared the toughs nonetheless. They left in a large crowd, subdued, accompanied by a few who had made their little fortunes and wanted the protection of the group's numbers.

Phil Mercy stood on the porch of Matthew Ruarke's saloon

nd watched them begin their trek. Ruarke came out and poke to him with a curled lip: "I've never pitied failures. It'll erve them right to die in a blizzard."

"You're a bastard," Mercy told him, and went away.

One November morning a shifty man paused behind Calloun's Hilltop saloon. He had a handful of rags that smelled f kerosene; he was lighting a match when Phil Mercy came long, drew his tiny gun and said, "Hold it."

Mercy took the man into Calhoun's office and said, "What lo you want to do with him?"

"I'd like to hang him," Calhoun said, "but I guess I won't." Ie considered the shifty man. "Who put you up to this?"

The man gave him a stolid look and kept silent. Calhoun aid, "You're more afraid of Ruarke than you are of me, is hat it? Or maybe it's Leroy that's got you spooked. Well, ou'll talk."

"No," said the man. "No, I won't talk."

"What's your name?"

"Armandero."

"You'll talk," Calhoun said. His face was utterly blank. 'hil Mercy fidgeted uncomfortably and finally put away his un. "I guess I'll go on," he said.

"Thanks, Phil. Thanks."

"Yeah," Mercy said. "Well, you got Leroy off my back nce. I guess I owed you one." He left the room, looking sorowful.

Calhoun sat back, not bothering to draw his gun; Armanlero was unarmed. Calhoun said conversationally, "Make a reak for that door and I'll cut you in half."

"I ain't that stupid."

"All right," Calhoun said. "I intend to tie you up outside /hen it gets dark. It'll snow tonight. Your toes and hands /ill freeze on you and within a few days they'll turn green nd rot off. Frostbite. Eventually it will kill you by gangrene lood poisoning, but it'll take time and it'll be painful."

"You're tryin' to scare the wrong man," Armendero said.

"No," Calhoun said, "I think it will soften you up, friend.

I want you to tell me in front of witnesses who hired you to set my place afire."

"It was my own idea."

"Sure it was," Calhoun said.

Jacob Boone waddled up the street, beaming jovially at those he passed, and turned into the Palace, advancing directly to the back of the room, where Stacy Donovan sat nursing a glass of whiskey. The place was almost empty. Jacob Boone said, "Howdy," and sat down uninvited.

"Your Goddamn dumb good nature irritates hell out of me, if you want to know, Jake."

Boone grinned and then chuckled; his corpulent chins wobbled. He disregarded Donovan's testiness and only said, "Storm brewing up."

Donovan said shortly, "What do you want, Jake?"

The fat saloonkeeper smiled blandly. "I just dropped around to find out how things are going."

"My business is all right," Donovan said.

"Not what I mean. How much are we getting out of our little side interest?"

Donovan looked around quickly, but no one was in earshot. He moved his shoulders. "You could find that out by asking anyone at the shipping office."

"No," said Jacob Boone. "Those boys have a habit of stretching the size of the take. I wanted an accounting of just how much I've got coming as my share. There's a surprising number of people got their thumbs into this pie."

"There are," said Donovan drily, laying his eyes upon the fat man.

Boone became uncomfortable under the gray-haired man's eyes; he said awkwardly, "Well, I gotta be going," and left the saloon hurrying on his stubby legs. Donovan sat smoking for a few minutes, then finished his drink and got up and went out, and walked directly to Matthew Ruarke's saloon. Ruarke was working behind the bar, examining his liquor stock. Donovan said, "See you a minute, Matt?" and went on into the back room.

Ruarke followed him into the room. "What's up?"

Donovan was looking at the new picture over the desk: the Battle of Gettysburg in gray and blue. He said, "I liked Lily better."

"So did I. What brings you over?"

"Jake Boone. The fat moron's itching for his cut. What the hell, Matt, we don't need him—we never did. He makes another split, that's all. Besides, he'd open his mouth and let a river spill out the first time some joker roughed him up a bit."

"Don't worry about Jake," Ruarke said, very quietly. "Anything else on your mind?"

"Yeah. What's happened to that Mex—what's his name, Armandero?"

"I wish I knew," Ruarke admitted.

"Probably decided to back out," Donovan observed. "It's a good thing we only paid him half in advance. I haven't seen any fires around the Hilltop. Say, listen, Matt, what do you know about this Phil Mercy?"

"Not much. Leroy doesn't like him. He's a friend of Calhoun's."

"Exactly," said Donovan. "And everybody knows Calhoun's an honest man."

"He's a fool."

Donovan said, "Folks probably figure Mercy's honest too, with that kind of friend. But I think Mercy's pretty close to the wall—I think we could use him."

"Possible," Ruarke said. "I'll talk to him."

At noon the storm was still holding off. The stage rattled in from Ten Springs under a bleak sky; its only passenger was a young man, obviously eastern and obviously uncomfortable. He went immediately into the depot, where he stood warming his hands over the stove until the hostler brought his carpetbag in; the young man gave the hostler a coin and inquired, "Is there a hotel in town?"

"No. Town's jammed to the limit now."

"Where can I get a room?"

"Mister," the hostler said, "you're lucky to find a tent you can buy." And went away, leaving the young man alone.

The young man took his carpetbag up into town and stopped a man on the street. "Do you know a girl named Catherine Goodfellow? Tall girl, ash-colored hair—"

"Sure," the man said, and flung an arm upward. "All the way up by the top of the hill, there. Fair-sized house, you can't miss it."

"Thanks." The young man struggled through the cold mud and went up the hill lugging his carpetbag. He had a little trouble finding the right path; he had to ask directions again. Finally he found the house and knocked.

Catherine answered his knock. When she saw him she brought a hand to her mouth. "Jimmy!"

He smiled lopsidedly. He was slim and young, blond and quite pale, with lake-blue eyes tired from long travel. He said, "May I come in?"

"Of course." She stepped back and allowed him to pass. He dropped his carpetbag inside the door and stood rolling this hat around in his hands, a round hard derby hat of the same conservative gray color as his suit.

Catherine said, "This is quite a surprise."

"Yes, isn't it." He seemed at a loss for words, now that he was here.

"Can I get you a drink?"

"No." He looked up, down, and finally at the girl. "I've graduated. I have a good job." He blurted it out and his flesh turned red.

"That's very nice, Jimmy."

His eyes widened; he licked his lips. "Is that all you can say to me?"

She turned away from him and walked across the room to the big fireplace. "You must be tired. Sit down."

He moved obediently to a chair and sat on the edge of it, looking curiously about the place. He said, "I came all this way for just one reason."

She shook her head; she looked tired. The young man said earnestly, "I love you very much, Catherine."

She was silent. In a while she sat down and let her shoulders slump. She said, "I'm sorry, Jimmy."

The young man's face fell. "I've traveled so far with your image in my head. You can't just throw me away."

"I never intended to encourage you. You knew that."

"But I always thought I could—" Someone knocked at the door, cutting him off. Showing her relief, Catherine got up quickly and went to open the door.

Phil Mercy began to speak to her, and then saw the young man in the parlor. "Sorry," he said. "I didn't know you were busy." He started to turn away.

"No," she said. "It's all right, Phil. Come in."

Mercy came into the room; the girl shut the door. Mercy looked at the young man and for a moment the three of them formed a silent triangle. Catherine moved toward Mercy and stood near him. The young man drew his conclusions from that, and stood up slowly, picking up his derby hat. He said, "I see."

Catherine said nothing, letting the young man think what he wanted to think. He said softly to Mercy, "I was just leaving." Torture and pain crossed his face. He crossed the intervening space, and standing no more than two feet away he laid his level glance on Phil Mercy, who regarded him with bemused surprise, understanding none of this. The young man nodded once, and walked through the door and down toward town with his carpetbag dangling from his fist.

Phil Mercy said, "What the devil was that all about?"

"A mistake," Catherine said. She seemed to shake herself. "I haven't seen you, Phil. How have you been?"

"All right," he said. "Do you have any whiskey in the house?"

"Of course."

She went across the room; Mercy said apologetically, "I just about can't afford to buy my own."

"Why don't you go to work for Sam? You're a good faro dealer."

"I was. My hands are caloused now. Besides I can't stand the thought of that kind of work anymore."

"Nothing's got any better, eh Phil?"

"That's about it," he agreed, and took the glass from her. He didn't drink right away, but turned away from her and sat down, holding the glass between both palms. He said, "I thought there wasn't much left inside me, but I guess there's always room in a meek man for compassion. I know what pain is."

"What do you mean?"

He raised his head. "I caught a Mexican trying to set Sam's place on fire this morning. I turned the man over to Sam. I get the impression Sam doesn't much care what he does to the Mexican as long as he forces the man to admit that he's working for Matt Ruarke. If I know Mexicans, the fellow will keep his mouth shut until he's been hurt pretty bad."

Catherine was biting her lip. Phil Mercy said, "I thought maybe you could go to Sam and try to talk him out of it. He might listen to you."

"It wouldn't do any good," she said. "Sam's set in his ways, Phil. Nothing I can say will change his mind. I've learned that."

Mercy shrugged. "It was worth a mention," he said, in a tone that suggested he didn't really care very much. He lifted the glass and drank.

The young easterner, Jimmy, walked through town without seeing it, and went into the stage depot. "When does the stage leave?"

"Eastbound or westbound?"

"East."

"About twenty minutes," the hostler said.

The young man sat down on the carpetbag, elbows on his knees and eyes on the floor.

VIII

THIS WAS a harsh land; these were tragic times.

The wind howled down off the peaks, carrying flakes of snow.

"Watch that, son," said Menendez, grinning narrowly at young Tom as he walked past. "Don't stand in my way."

"There's two halves to a road," young Tom said angrily. "You don't have to take yours in the middle. You can walk around."

"When you cast my size shadow," Menendez said, "I'll walk around." His grin widened as he deliberately stepped aside and walked slowly around the kid. Young Tom pivoted on the balls of his feet, keeping Menendez continuously in front of him. Menendez laughed at him.

Jack Holliday had watched silently; now he said, "Cut that out, Menendez. We've got better things to do."

"Sure," said Menendez, still grinning. "Sure."

"I mean it," Holliday warned. "Come on—get saddled."

The fourth outlaw, Bill, drifted into the camp, and Holliday watched them saddle their hardy animals under the lowering sky. They mounted up and at one point Menendez' eyes rested thoughtfully on Holliday's injured arm, which the bearded outlaw was still favoring. Menendez smiled softly and settled comfortably in the saddle. Holliday put his eyes on Menendez for a flat moment and abruptly said, "Menendez, you ride ahead."

Menendez shrugged and whirled his horse out of the clearing. The others followed closely. Bunched tight, they ran through the trees, down off the mountain slope and across a long ridge that carried them lower, at an easy pitch to the canyon bottom. Setting up a loud echoing clatter, they galloped through the gorge with a heavy wind whipping their collars about their faces. An angling side canyon chuted them

through a series of looping switchbacks to the flat floor of a narrow valley; they drummed across and entered a heavy stand of timber, which they followed through its full length of some three miles until it brought them to the edge of the main road going east out of Mule Canyon.

The stage rattled up through Wolf Pass, going slowly on the slippery roadbed and the high slant of the hill, the mules kicking up a steady struggling gait. On the box, the shotgun guard gripped his rifle and tried to burn away the thin mist of rain with his searching eyes.

"Jeremy," the driver said, "I don't know but what we ought to turn back. This is goin' to hit pretty quick now."

The storm advanced across the sky, a marching phalanx of black thunderheads and rolling thunder. Jeremy said, "We can make O'Boyle's station all right."

A rifle shot came from the rocks above the road; before its echoes died, the shotgun guard, Jeremy, was face-down across the dashboard, his arms hanging free. The driver raised his whip; a voice came from ahead of him in the strange noon-night, saying easily: "Leave them lay, driver."

A muffled figure dropped to the top of the coach from an overhang on the trail; the bandit pulled four heavy boxes from the boot and tossed them one by one to the ground. One of them split open. A second man came out of the swirling half-dark and called, "All right, all passengers—outside. Hurry it up, I ain't waitin' on no tea party."

The coach's only passenger stepped out: a young blond dude in a gray suit and derby hat. The taller outlaw came up to him, snatched away the dude's hat, and held it upside down. "Put it in here. Watch, money, ring, whatever you got."

Suddenly the young man began to weep. He sat down in the thin crust of snow and cried. Menendez' voice cut harshly through the mist: "Jesus Christ." Menendez shot the young dude three times through the chest.

Holliday dropped the overturned hat and said, "Goddam it, you had no call to do that!" He went to the pack

horse and began tying the bullion boxes aboard the animal. He called, "Get out of here, driver."

"I want to put those bodies on board."

"Then be quick about it." Holliday mounted his horse and took the pack animal's lead-rope; he said, "Let's get the hell out of here," and rode into the storm.

In the swirling mist of snow, Phil Mercy battered his way along the tent streets. He was talking to himself: *It's my curse, my mind is too damned realistic.* He had just passed the graveyard on Apache Hill and the sight of those snow-drifted mounds had unnerved him. He saw them, the men, dying, and their dreams with them: big dreams, little dreams, it made no difference. Every man was sand, and eventually the tide came that washed him away from shore. Mercy saw his own grave in the cemetery.

The cold knife of the wind slashed across his lowered face. He fought the breasting force of the storm and found his way to the California, and went inside; the place was full of refugees from the snowstorm. Someone shouted testily: "Shut that Goddamn door, you fool." Mercy wheeled and put his weight against the door and got it shut against the wind.

The room had the dank smell of wet clothes and close, stove-heated air; the atmosphere was slightly steamy. Someone said, "What time is it?"

"Six."

"Christ Almighty."

Mercy squeezed through to the bar. The doors and windows were shut; the tent-roof flapped like an angry bird, making the lamps flicker violently. Matthew Ruarke came out of the crowd and bellied to the bar alongside Phil Mercy; Ruarke said, "I'd like to talk to you."

Without awaiting an answer, Ruarke went back toward his office. Mercy frowned after the man's back. He said to the bartender, "A bottle of sour mash," and paid for it with almost the last of his money.

When the bottle arrived, Mercy studied the half-open door of the back office. In a moment he shrugged and went that

way. Someone bumped into him and he almost dropped the bottle; he swung with a vicious curse, but the man had gone on and didn't hear him. Mercy went into the office and elbowed the door shut. "Well?"

"Sit down," Ruarke said in a smooth voice. He sat behind his desk, under a picture of battle.

"A social visit?"

"No," said Ruarke. "Maybe an offer."

"I don't want to deal cards," Mercy said.

"Not that."

"I might not be too sociable on anything else. Leroy works for you."

"Unfortunately," Ruarke agreed. "But Leroy didn't jump you on my orders."

"He's your pet dog. It's your responsibility to keep him on a leash."

"All right, all right," Ruarke said irritably. "Maybe I owe you something for that. He knocked you around pretty badly, did he?"

"I couldn't move for two days."

Ruarke was obviously trying not to smile. He reached into a desk drawer and took out a small poke. He weighed it experimentally in his hand and tossed it to the corner of the desk. Mercy picked it up.

Ruarke said, "That ought to be five or six ounces—maybe a couple of hundred dollars. Think that'll compensate for your injuries?"

"If you think I'm too proud to take it," Mercy said, "then you're wrong." He put the gold poke in his pocket.

"You're not pulling much gold out of that claim of yours, are you?"

Mercy shrugged. He said, "I don't know if I'd like working for you."

"If I were in your place I might feel the same. But I'm not in your place. I can use you."

"There are plenty of stronger backs than mine in this camp."

"Mindless ones," Ruarke said.

Something made Mercy say, "No, thanks, Ruarke. I haven't slipped far enough yet. You'd better keep your job for a while." He turned and walked out of the office.

The storm rushed past, and was gone by nine o'clock, at which time Shelby Long came out on the porch of Calhoun's Hilltop saloon and fired up his pipe. The air was cold and a little damp, but it was fresh after the soggy interior of the saloon.

The night was deep and still. Voices from the saloon ran through it in an easy murmur. Bundled in a man's mackinaw, Catherine Goodfellow emerged from the dark and climbed the stairs. Shelby Long moved into a window's shaft of light. The girl turned toward him. "Why, hello, Shelby."

"Howdy yourself."

"I like the smell of your pipe."

He inclined his head courteously; humor sparkled in his eyes. He said, "This is no night for you to be out, is it?"

"The storm's gone," she said. She looked at him with conjecture. "You ought to have a girl, Shelby."

"I got one. Down in El Paso. Soon as I build up my stake I'll fetch her."

"What's her name?" Catherine asked.

"Lucy," he said, and the way he spoke the name made Catherine smile.

She said, "I'd like to see your partner, if he's around."

"I'll fetch him." Shelby Long started toward the door.

"No, that's all right. It's cold out here—I'll go inside."

Long frowned at her. "Ain't exactly the proper place for a lady."

She said, "You ought to know me better than that, Shelby. I'm headstrong, remember?" She smiled coyly and went to the door and waited for him to open it.

"This ain't fittin'," Shelby Long grumbled, but he opened the big storm door and pushed one of the batwings aside so that she could go in. As soon as she entered the great room, a silence cut through the crowd like an abrupt intake of breath. She ignored it; she walked straight-backed across the

length of the saloon to the back door, and latched it open without knocking.

Calhoun was alone in the room, sitting in a chair by the stove with a cigarette that had grown a tall ash, half-forgotten. He looked up and a mixture of expressions crossed his craggy face—pleasure, surprise, but something withheld, some reservation. He said, "Well, well."

She closed the door behind her. Immediately voices started up in the saloon, louder than before; it made her smile. She said, "I've always liked breaking the rules."

He was on his feet. "Take a chair."

"Perhaps there isn't time."

"What's your hurry?"

"I came to find out about that Mexican," she said. "The one who tried to set the place on fire."

"How'd you hear about him?"

"Phil Mercy told me this morning. He was afraid you were planning to torture the man."

A slow smile changed his expression. "I didn't know Phil had that much compassion in him."

"It was just a passing impulse to be a good Samaritan, I think. What about the Mexican, Sam?"

"What about him?" he replied.

"Have you done anything to him?"

"Nothing much."

She shook her head in exasperation. "Phil wanted me to come down this afternoon and try to talk you out of whatever you had in mind. I told him it was no use. But I kept remembering that man you shot the day our stagecoach was held up. You could have killed him but you didn't. I haven't figured you out at all—the way you talked to Matthew Ruarke that night changed my whole picture of you."

"That's simple," he said. "Sometimes it's smart to talk a bigger brand of ruthlessness than you own. It didn't hurt anybody to throw a scare into Ruarke—if that's what I did. I tend to doubt it had much effect. He's just as tough as the next man."

"What happened to the Mexican, Sam?"

"I threatened to tie him up outside in the freeze-up. I let him have all day to think about frostbite and gangrene. He came around. He told me what I wanted to know, and I let him go—told him if I ever saw him in this part of the country again I'd hang him. I think he believed me."

"What did he tell you?"

"Nothing that helped very much," Calhoun said. "He was hired by Jack Holliday."

"The outlaw? I didn't know he was in Mule Canyon."

"He isn't, far as I can find out. But he's somewhere around here, in the hills. My guess is it's Holliday who's been raising all the rumpus with bullion shipments. He highgraded another shipment this afternoon—killed the shotgun guard and a passenger, some young dude."

Catherine's breath caught in her throat. She said in a low tone, "Do you know his name?"

"Who?"

"The passenger who was killed."

"They identified him by his papers," Calhoun said. "I heard the name but I guess I've forgotten it. Why?"

"Was it James Latimore?"

"I think it was."

She pressed her hands to her temples. "Oh, God," she whispered. She moved toward the door like a groping blind man.

Calhoun got there ahead of her and put his hands on her shoulders. "What is it?"

"I sent that boy to his death," she said hollowly.

"Well, hell, you can't take the blame for that. How could you have known—"

"Let me go, Sam," she said, and rushed out.

Shelby Long drove up out of the gulch and along the ridge until it groined into a higher mountain, whereupon he put the wagon perhaps a quarter-mile farther through the new snow before he pulled up and ground-hitched the mules. He took down the axe and wedge and began to cut a trench into the trunk of a lone aspen that stood on the slope;

its white bark cracked and chipped off and rolled back under the jarring of blows. With the slice half through, he put the wedge in it and went around the far side, and then paused, his eyes on a slope across the narrow valley. Something disturbed the brush over there, whipping it back, pushing through. Soon a rider appeared on the edge of the bushes and ran steadily along the slope at a high speed, angling downward in Shelby Long's general direction. The running horse kicked up small flurries of snow which hung in the air for some time before sinking back to earth. Shelby Long frowned and stood motionless while the horseman continued to the bottom and came running up the near side, not sparing his horse. When the rider came within fifty yards the Texan stepped out from behind the tree.

The rider, startled, hauled his horse in and laid a heavy-browed glance on Shelby Long. The rider was dark and gaunt; he wore a ragged beard and his cheekbones, showing through, were covered by a bare, hard-stretched parchment. The emaciation of the man arrested Shelby Long for a moment. "Where's the hurry, friend?"

The rider's lips curled back and he jerked on the reins and wordlessly wheeled his horse around Shelby Long, continuing at a hard gallop until he crossed a far ridge. That was odd to Shelby Long, as town was in the other direction; for a while before he resumed chopping, he kept his speculative glance on the point where the horseman had disappeared.

Menendez only reluctantly let his horse slow when he saw that it was lathered and panting. It took him another two hours to pick a trail back through the barrens, and find a ford to cross the upper reaches of the Horn. He then continued around the tip of a ridge and dropped down into the timber, and offsaddled in Holliday's camp. Holliday came out of the cabin and cast an eye at Menendez' lathered horse. "Are you preparin' to eat that animal or do you plan to ride it again?"

Menendez narrowed his lids. "In a hurry," he said.

"I guess you were," Holliday observed caustically. "I guess you were."

"I met Vinnie Warner on the trail. He let it drop that Jacob Boone got real dead sometime this morning. Strangled to death."

Holliday showed no surprise; all he said was, "That's a hell of an excuse to kill a horse. Rub him down good."

Menendez frowned. He might not have had too good an intelligence but he had a streak in him compounded of shrewd stubbornness and cruelty; he said, "I wouldn't trust Ruarke any too far, Jack. Jacob Boone was one split too many, so Ruarke maybe sent Leroy to take care of him. Who knows we're not next?"

"Doubtful," said Holliday. "Ruarke needs us. He's got no reason to cross us just now. What he's got to worry about is us crossin' him. We've got the gold."

"Yeah," Menendez said, "we do, don't we?" He unstrapped the cinch and began rubbing the horse down with the soiled blanket.

The door opened and shut again before Stacy Donovan could swivel around to see who had entered. Caught by surprise and unwilling to admit it, he turned slowly in the chair until he was facing the door, and only then lifted his eyes. "Afternoon, Matt," he said, and leaned back in the chair.

Matthew Ruarke moved forward and sat down. "I suppose you heard about Jake?"

"Yes."

"Unfortunate, wasn't it? Some drunk must have rolled him."

"Sure," Stacy Donovan said. He smoothed back his silky gray hair. "A crying shame," he added.

Ruarke said, "We are about through, Stacy."

Donovan didn't know just how to take that, and so he kept the smile on his face and said, "Do you mean we, Matt —or me?"

Ruarke looked at him, and Donovan sat up straighter in the chair. Donovan said levelly, "Matt, there's one thing that may not be clear between us. I'm no Jacob Boone. And I am not your man. I'm your partner, no less than that. You don't give orders to me any more than I give them to you."

"Take it easy," said Matthew Ruarke. He made a small gesture with his hand. "You and I are alike—we're both after the same thing and we don't make excuses for ourselves. But you have much less to fight with than I do and if a showdown ever came you'd have no chance. There is that difference between us, Stacy."

"If it came to that," Donovan replied, "I have a gun under this desk that I could use right now."

"That's bluff. You've got no gun." Ruarke was smiling easily.

"Maybe. Don't count on it."

"I wasn't threatening," Ruarke said. "The plain fact is I'm stronger than you, Stacy. But that's not my reason for coming by, and I don't propose to quibble all afternoon over whether you'll shoot me or not. I've got enough trouble without worrying about you—and I hope I don't have to worry about you." Ruarke smiled blandly, indicating that he did very definitely worry about Donovan but didn't dare show it.

Donovan raised his hands from beneath the desk. He was holding a cigar in his left hand and now held a match to it. Matthew Ruarke's smile broadened; he said, "I thought so."

"Get down to business, Matt."

"Last night Price Goodfellow's mine foreman was in my place. He was pretty drunk and he let some things slip. It looks as though Goodfellow and some of the others are preparing to form a vigilance committee. You know what that means. If they get me, they'll get you. Just so long as you want this little treasure-island of ours to stay above water, you're going to have to stick tighter to me than a corset. I want no trouble from you, Stacy."

"I don't see your worry," Donovan said imperturbably. "There aren't enough backbones in this town to start a ladies' aid movement."

"You'd be surprised, I think."

"I'll handle my end," Donovan said. "What do you intend to do about the vigilantes, if it comes about?"

"I'll handle it," Ruarke said, and left as abruptly as he had come.

Donovan leaned back, closing his eyes and frowning, wondering just what had been Ruarke's real reason for coming here. And then he thought he had it; and without mystery, he felt a little safer, and allowed himself to relax fully in the seat.

IX

BEFORE SUNSET, Calhoun went inside the cabin and found Shelby Long preparing a simple meal—potatoes, salt pork, onions. Calhoun let the odors come into his nostrils and said, "You'll never make a cook."

"You can always fix your own," Shelby Long said, and smiled.

Calhoun pulled a packing-box up to the table. "We're successful enough to afford better than this. Maybe we ought to build a house."

"Not me," Shelby Long said. "I don't figure to plant roots in this camp. I dunno what in hell you got in mind—everything you do makes you look like you figure this town's permanent or something. Judas Priest, another couple years is all I give Mule Canyon."

"You're wrong," Calhoun said. "You think Price Goodfellow's mine is temporary? He'll be taking ore out of those shafts ten years from now. It's only the placer and singlejack stuff that will pan out. The veins are buried deep in these hills. It's too low-grade for small operations, but with big enough equipment a man could make it pay year after year."

"You're a Goddamn gambler, all right," was Shelby Long's observation. He spooned food into two plates and set them on the table. Then he pulled up a chair and sat on it spraddle-legged.

Calhoun said, "I've been buying claims from placer miners who think they've played out. It won't be too long before I've got the whole east side of the gulch in my pocket. That's when I'll move in core-drilling equipment."

Long looked at him, a little startled. "Hell, you're thinking pretty damned big, aren't you?"

"Why not?"

Long shrugged and said, "Well, count me out of it. I'm

too easygoing, I guess. Too restless to stick around after the boom."

They ate silently until Long said, "By the way, here's something maybe you can use. I was chopping along the back end of Hutch Peak today. A fellow came by fast enough to bend the trees with his wind. Skinny as all hell. Looked like he hadn't changed his underwear in some months. Just might have been one of Holliday's bunch. That posse never did get near them, did they? Hell, it's gettin' pretty raw when they can gun down two men and ride away scot free."

"They're pretty near the end of the line," Calhoun said. "None of us can afford to let it go on."

That was when someone rapped knuckles at the door. Long looked up, eyebrows arching. Calhoun got up and opened the door.

A miner stood outside. "Calhoun? Mr. Goodfellow'd like to have you come up to his house about nine, if you can make it."

"All right," Calhoun said.

Goodfellow shook hands at the door. "I heard you were out in the weather yesterday."

"I got caught in a little blow," Calhoun said. "Brought the wagon in all right."

"How's the freighting?"

Calhoun took a chair and accepted a cigar from the mine owner. "I've got six drivers working full time. It's paying."

Goodfellow said, "Sam, I'm losing half my bullion to these damned leeches. When they killed those two men on the stage, they got close to six thousand dollars—half of it mine."

Calhoun said, "Maybe you shouldn't ship it out on the stage."

"That's what I had in mind. I want you to smuggle my next shipment out."

Calhoun looked up, saying nothing. Goodfellow said, "With a canvas over the load, nobody'd know what you were carrying. We can load it at night."

Calhoun said, "It might work. When do you want to take it out?"

"Bring your wagon to the Acropolis tomorrow night. We'll load it after dark and you can keep it in your wagon shed overnight."

"I won't sleep too well," Calhoun said.

Goodfellow smiled. "I hope you don't, Sam."

Sunset made a red splash and gave way to darkness. In the thickness of the night, bundled up in heavy layers of clothing, Leroy went into the California's office. Ruarke was there and so was Stacy Donovan. Ruarke said, "Leroy, Sam Calhoun just tooled one of his wagons up to the Acropolis. Go up there and keep an eye on him. Don't get near him, but if he does anything unusual, come around and tell me."

Leroy swung around clumsily and left. When he was gone, Matthew Ruarke said idly, "I sort of admire Calhoun. He's tough. Too bad—if this is what I think, he'll probably drive that shipment himself. Find that hardcase Thorpe and tell him to stick around on tap. We may want to send him after Holliday in a hurry."

"All right," said Donovan, and got up.

Calhoun guided his mules between the sheds and workings of the Acropolis. A plume of red-glowing smoke rose from one of the stacks against the night sky. The steady brisk pounding of steam engines filled the air with sound. Price Goodfellow came out of the foreman's shack with a quartet of heavily muscled miners. Calhoun followed them in the wagon to a log shed. For the next quarter hour they loaded bullion onto the wagon, not speaking.

Unseen in the shadows, Leroy Hamlin watched with interest; presently the wagon backed away and Leroy followed it into town, then went around behind the main street and entered the back door of the California. Ruarke was not in his office, and so Leroy went on through and found Ruarke at the bar. "Calhoun loaded bullion up at the Acropolis. Put the wagon in his own shed. He's sittin' on it with a shotgun."

"All right, Leroy," Ruarke said. "Have a little fun." He dropped gold coins on the bar within Leroy's reach and pointed to the gaming tables, and went back to his office.

The outlaw called Thorpe guided his tall bay horse between a pair of canyon walls, alternately gray-blue and white with snow patches. The ground was rocky for a time, and then became soft with a covering of soil and pine needles as he climbed. The dawn light grew stronger as the towering walls fell away, and then dimmed again when he entered the trees, so that the morning alternated between noon and dark. Thorpe went through the pines at a trot and presently reached Holliday's camp and called Holliday's name.

Holliday stepped out of the cabin; at the same time three others—Menendez, Bill, and young Tom—came from various positions in the trees, all holstering their revolvers. Holliday said, "Step down."

Thorpe dismounted. He looked around, then squatted down on his heels and poked a sprig of pine needles in the corner of his mouth. "This morning a gent name of Calhoun's takin' a canvas-covered mud wagon out of Mule Canyon. It's loaded with bullion. Reckon I'll sample that coffee." He stretched out his arm to the blackened pot.

Phil Mercy was drunk; he sat on a rock humming softly and watched his shack burn to the ground. This morning he had kicked over the lamp, and instead of trying to put out the fire he had snatched up his whiskey bottle and gone out to sit at a safe distance and watch the blaze with owl-round eyes. He had rescued his poke, too, but only a few grains of dust clung to its fabric; he had drunk through his own stake and the poke he had got from Ruarke. There wasn't a coin in his pockets.

The last wall fell in, half smothering the flames, and in time the ashes glowed; that was all. He tossed the empty bottle into the coals and turned, hunching in his ragged coat, to walk up-canyon.

He staggered a little as he walked. Once he stumbled and

fell flat, bruising his palms; he got up and lurched on. He came abreast Henry Vendig's claim and saw the bearded miner strapping a pack on a burro. Phil Mercy paused, trying to focus his eyes. "Leaving, Henry?"

Vendig turned around. "I am. I've stayed in this God-forsaken gully longer than I had any right to. My wife's stopped writing."

"Well, you've made your pile at least."

"I guess so," Vendig said.

Mercy wiped a palm across the stubble of his jaw. "Good luck to you, Henry," he said in a hollow voice, and stumbled on up the trail.

Henry Vendig tightened the straps on the burro pack; he had a look at the sky and went into his shack for a last look around. He took a handful of matches from the windowsill and dropped them into a pocket; he blew out a candle and took that too, and walked out of the place. He left the door open behind him.

Gripping the rope to the burro's halter, he clucked and led the burro over the ridge, cutting across country with the plan of intersecting the Tombstone road within a few miles.

The sun crossed half the sky before he came onto the road. His legs began to tire, and he sat on a rock beside the trail, watching the burrow browse. He heard a sound in the brush; he made out someone moving forward, a shadow in the brush beside the road. The fright of the unknown touched Vendig; dropping the burro's reins, he stepped softly into the brush and retreated from the road.

Moving sluggishly, his eyes a little clouded, Phil Mercy ran swiftly across the road and into the brush. He stopped to tie a kerchief around his face, over the bridge of his nose, as a mask. He heard nothing, and knew that Vendig was hiding somewhere. The little nickel-plated gun was cocked in Mercy's sweating fist.

There was a creek nearby, in the bottom of the canyon; it made quite a little racket. A hunch took Mercy off the high ground and into the leafless trees below at a deliberate jog. He stopped again, feeling on his tongue the stale bitter taste

of drunkenness. He knew that later he would use his drunkenness as an excuse for his actions, but right now he was clearheaded enough to know it would be a false excuse. He was half a mind to quit and walk back to Mule Canyon, but that was a long walk.

He should have stopped by the burro to see whether Vendig's gold was packed on it; but the chances were that Vendig had the gold in a pouch or money-belt; it wasn't the kind of thing one trusted away from one's person.

The creek was near, below him; at the point where the ground sloped off to meet it, Mercy stopped and surveyed the white water with a good deal of care. He didn't see anything; with a tautness in his groin he sweated out the silence, searching all the visible pockets of ground with renewed attention. He had Vendig cornered in the sense that if Vendig ran, he would be caught. The miner had to be around here somewhere, not far away. Mercy was pretty sure Vendig wasn't armed; there was a rifle on the burro.

Henry Vendig shivered as he crouched between two trunks, half concealed by a bush. His head turned slowly; he looked through the bare gray twigs and branches. A bird floated across the sky, and that was strange, for it was too high and too cold for birds. Something disturbed Henry Vendig; it was a definite bristling of the hairs on his body.

He heard the shot that killed him. By the time Phil Mercy came into the open with his little gun smoking, Vendig's life had bubbled out of him in red foam on the lips. Mercy stumbled a couple of times. He laid the gun aside and rolled Vendig's corpse over, and stripped a canvas money-belt from beneath Vendig's coat. Draping the money-belt over his shoulder, Mercy sat in miserable, cold silence. His eyes brimmed with tears.

Calhoun climbed up on the wagon and lifted the whip out of its socket; he released the brake and heard the cabin door slam. Shelby Long came down drawing on his gloves, saying: "Sure you don't want me to ride shotgun?"

"We'll be late if you don't deliver that firewood today," Calhoun told him.

"All right. Keep your gun handy." Shelby Long went up to the woodshed.

Calhoun settled the reins between his fingers and cracked the whip, hollering at the mules. They broke the wagon out of the muck and hauled it down the slope.

A little way along, a buggy caught up—Price Goodfellow, who called across from the buggy seat: "Didn't you get any sleep last night?"

"A little doze now and then."

"Damn it, you ought to have a relief driver. I'll send one of my men to catch up."

"Never mind," Calhoun said. "It's not that long a run to O'Boyle's station. I'll lay over there."

Goodfellow said, "I didn't mean to use you as bait, Sam. Don't do anything risky on my account." He lifted his reins and added, "Keep up a good speed until you reach O'Boyle's. After that you shouldn't have trouble. Good luck, Sam." He drew in his horse and fell behind.

Calhoun drove the wagon around tortuous curves on the first two miles of the road until the eastbound trail dropped him out of the rough canyon country into a long, narrow valley which took him up past Washington Camp and Harshaw toward the long grassland of the Sonoita country along the Rio Santa Cruz. At this lower altitude the temperature was markedly warmer; there was no ice on the river. He kept the mules to a high trot.

The day was cool and clear; the sky promised to hold open for at least a day or two. Calhoun unbuckled his coat collar and drove briskly along the road, keeping constant watch on the cottonwood banks and the brush country southward. He took the glove off his right hand and placed his rifle beside him on the seat.

The road led him into a rugged path of barrens. This broken section was not large and he was soon across it, negotiating without trouble a sharp bend into the hills.

He noticed a jerk of movement on the slope to his right;

but before he could raise the rifle, something sliced along his ribs; he heard a report from the hillside and saw a wisp of smoke up there. He threw himself out of the seat and into the brush beside the road; he rolled twenty feet down a slope and came to a hard stunning rest against a tall rock that thrust up out of a brush clump. He had lost the rifle in his spill. He lay silent and waited for the ambusher to come down—and he cursed under his breath when he found that his revolver was gone. It must have fallen out of the holster. He lay against the boulder and felt the hot pain of the bullet-burn begin to ache, and waited for the sharpshooter to come down and find him and finish the job.

Matthew Ruarke opened his office door and called into the saloon: "Leroy." And went back into the office. Leroy came in shortly and stood obediently silent, and Ruarke said, "You remember Jacob Boone? Remember what happened to him?"

"Sure." Leroy's face broke open into a pleased smile.

"Donovan's been bothering me. I don't want to have to worry about him. Understand?"

Leroy nodded and Ruarke very plainly saw the light change in Leroy's eyes. Ruarke followed the heavy man out of the saloon. Leroy drifted away, and Ruarke quartered across to the Palace. Stacy Donovan was talking to a businessman; the businessman left and Ruarke went up to Donovan.

"Morning, Matt."

Ruarke stopped and glanced at him and nodded. Ruarke's eyes narrowed thoughtfully at the corners. He had one drink with Donovan and walked out.

Phil Mercy walked bleakly past the burned-out ruins of his claim. His hands were thrust into his pockets. He went right up the canyon and over the lip. The first building to catch his eye was Calhoun's Hilltop Saloon, and so Mercy went into it and ordered a bottle at the bar, and took the bottle in his grip, turning toward the tables in back. But before he could move, two men came in, one of them Price

Goodfellow, the other Harry Scott, who owned the big Metro mine a few hundred yards up the bar from Goodfellow's Acropolis. Goodfellow said, "Evening, Mercy."

"Why," said Mercy, "good evening." He was all of a sudden very much aware of the weight of the money-belt; he caught a bartender's eye and said, "Three whiskies, barkeep."

"Obliged," said Harry Scott.

Goodfellow nodded when he lifted his drink. Mercy said, "Have you had trouble with those road agents lately?"

"They're cutting our profits to nothing," Goodfellow said.

Scott said, "We're becoming desperate, if you want to know the truth. You small fellows are lucky—they don't bother you."

"They've got to be stopped," Goodfellow said. "That's what the Vigilance Committee's organizing for." He lifted his glass and proposed: "To the end of the toughs."

Harry Scott had a preoccupied look. "I've got to work out a way to get my shipments past them. Maybe I'll send the gold along in unmarked freight shipments. That way no one will know when I'm sending gold and when it's just a wagon-load of worthless rocks."

Mercy noticed a secret kind of smile cross Goodfellow's face. He looked absolutely pleased as he finished his drink. "It's something to consider," said Goodfellow.

Phil Mercy stood by for another minute, fighting out something with himself; and then with a wry and sardonic private smile, he nodded to the two men and stepped out of the saloon. He stood undecided for a moment and then, his face carefully masked into blankness, he headed downhill toward Matthew Ruarke's saloon, with his bit of possible news.

Calhoun lay dead-still against the rock, screened from the road by brush. He had crawled around behind it, but now he saw that he had left a spoor of blood; if anyone came down too close, they would have little trouble finding him. He heard two men scraping down the slope on sliding bootsoles to the road; one of them said, "Way he flopped, he's dead or close to it."

"Here's his guns."

"Then he'll freeze anyhow, come nightfall. Hell with him. What do we do with the wagon?"

"We can't cart that stuff all over the territory on horseback. We'll take the wagon up into the high country as far as it'll go." Calhoun heard some squeaks and scrapes, and then the wagon rattled up and drove away. A couple of horses came down and followed the wagon until both were out of earshot.

He pressed an arm against his bullet-trenched side and struggled up the slope. They had taken his guns, evidently; the weapons were gone. He walked along the road until the pain in his ribs became intense, and he sat down by the roadside. When that did little good, he lay back prone. The burn-sensation subsided, and he got up, removed his mackinaw, and pulled the shirt out of his waistband to look at the wound. The bullet had cut a furrow along his ribs: stinging and painful, but it shouldn't incapacitate him unless it became poisoned. He ripped up his shirt and wished there were a drift of snow to wash the wound. The river was only a few miles; he would go there. He bound a ripped half of his shirt tightly about him and slid into the mackinaw. A slight dizziness swept him when he stood up; he rested a few minutes against a rock and tried to shake the weakness off, and walked on along the road.

It was three hours before he came in sight of a house—Oxley's ranch, set back a mile from the road; he turned at the mailbox and walked up the trail past adobe-post corrals and a big lumber barn. Coming into the yard he thought for a moment the place was deserted, but then he heard the kicking of horses inside the stalls, and in one of the sheds the ring of a hammer on anvil started up. Calhoun went straight to the main house—squat and brown, with the butts of massive log rafters studding the front of the adobe. He banged on the door.

Oxley's fat Indian wife answered, holding the door open only a crack, peering out at him suspiciously. Calhoun said, "I'd like to see Oxley," and when she didn't seem to under-

stand him, he tried repeating it in Spanish: *"Yo quiero el señor, por favor."*

"Momento," she snapped, and slammed the door in his face.

Calhoun wrapped an arm about his chest and side, grimacing, and waited with enforced patience until presently the door swung wide and Oxley stood there grinning, looking ferocious. He was a squat man, slightly hunchbacked, with a wild black beard and long hair and a caking of dirt on his cheeks. But his eyes twinkled merrily in their hollows. "Well, well. Calhoun. What in hell you doin' down here without a horse?"

Calhoun stumbled over the doorstep. "Got shot off my wagon," he muttered.

Concern came instantly to Oxley's face. He put out an arm to steady Calhoun and led him toward the bunk at the far end of the room. The place was full of smells—old harness, stale cooking, lye soap, straw-tick pallets, unbathed flesh. The Indian wife stood over in a far corner, watching; suddenly she began to chatter like a magpie in Spanish, too fast for Calhoun to follow her. Calhoun said, "What's she saying?"

"Complaining," said Oxley good-naturedly. "She don't want you drippin' blood on her fine floor. To hell with her. Sit down here and let's have a look."

Calhoun got out of his coat. Oxley unwrapped the shirt-bandage and looked at it. The wound had stopped bleeding and Calhoun sat still for fear of reopening it. "Not bad," Oxley said, "but it'll have to be cleaned." He pulled the rest of the torn shirt away with sensitive fingers; the cloth stuck to the hardened blood. Oxley examined the furrow with a critical eye and muttered, "Big enough—forty-five, maybe fifty caliber. Have a drink."

He handed a jug of whiskey to Calhoun. "A long one, lad. I'm about to hurt you."

Calhoun took a pull from the jug and felt it sizzle down his throat. It was strong corn whiskey; he felt its effect from head to toe. "Go to work," he said.

Oxley told him, "Lie down there so I can see what it is that

I'm doing." Calhoun lay down on his uninjured side; Oxley had another close look at the wound and said, "Shut your eyes."

Calhoun dragged up a grin and looked steadily at Oxley, who said with high humor, "Ah—ah. Tough, huh? We'll see about that." And poured the whiskey upon the wound.

Calhoun clenched his teeth. The alcohol made a searing fire that rolled undulating waves of pain through his system. Cold sweat stood out on his body; he squeezed the bunk's iron frame with a grip that whitened his knuckles and made the tendons stand out all along his arms.

Oxley chuckled and said, "There, now," and wrapped a cloth around Calhoun that he had produced from somewhere. "You'll be a little stiff, maybe. No great harm."

Calhoun pulled himself upright and sat quite still on the cot for a moment, squeezing his eyes and blinking. He stood up and walked slowly around the cabin. The Indian wife stood with her feet planted and arms folded; black stringy hair fell in strands before her square face. She did not speak. Calhoun's ribs were sore but it was not an injury that would lay him up and he was thankful for that.

He said, "Anything you need, Oxley, you let me know."

Oxley tugged his disreputable beard. "Sure, now. Well, mebbe you can buy me a drink sometime I come into your highfalutin' saloon."

"I'll set you up to a week's drunk."

"That'd be fittin'," Oxley drawled. "Now, then, I suppose you'll be wantin' the loan of a saddle horse."

Calhoun nodded. Oxley warned, "Don't start right out playin' leapfrog, Calhoun—a bullet hole's no joke. Well, you'll have a horse, but you'll eat something first." He turned and bellowed: "Woman!"

X

HALF DRUNK but clear of vision, Phil Mercy sat at a table in the California, playing solitaire. All afternoon he had been casting sidling glances at the door to Ruarke's office; thus far, he had not been able to make the decision whether to tell Ruarke what he had heard this morning in conversation with Goodfellow and the other mine-owner. He finally decided not to do it; it was the weight of Henry Vendig's money-belt that swayed him.

He swept the unfinished game together, evened the deck and turned it in to the bartender; afterward he turned up his collar and went outside, with nothing particular in mind. It was a gray, dreary day. He had heard Leroy in the saloon talking to someone about the late and unlamented Jacob Boone, and something about Leroy's tone of voice had told Mercy who Boone's murderer had been. It had taken a powerful pair of hands to wring Boone's fat neck.

He thought of Henry Vendig, although he had tried to put the incident from his mind. It was no good pretending to himself that he had been too drunk to know the difference; the long cold walk, trailing Henry Vendig, had sobered him enough to put disgust in him even before he had killed. What frightened Mercy now was the way the act of killing had acted as a trigger in him, like a sexual release. Now he had to get away from Henry Vendig's ghost.

When he saw Shelby Long driving the woodwagon down past the creek, an impulse turned him toward the Calhoun-Long cabin. By the time he got there, Long was half done unloading the wagon bed of cut firewood. Mercy said, "Let me give you a hand," and Shelby Long looked at him, surprised. "All right, sure. Obliged." Mercy fell to, and there was no more talk until the wagon was empty and the wood stacked against the side of the shed. Shelby Long said, "I saw where your shack burned down. Accident?"

"Yes," Phil Mercy lied. "The claim was played out anyhow, it made no difference. And I'm no miner."

"Tough luck," Long said. He towered over Mercy when he came nearby, offering his pipe tobacco to Mercy, who shook his head and walked across the yard to sit on the cabin step. A few flakes of snow drifted across the air. Long said, "Funny how it can cloud over up here and stay clear as a bell down in the valleys."

"Clouds get hung up on the peaks," Mercy said. He shifted his weight to get rid of the money-belt's pinch. "Listen, I'm thinking of moving on east. If you've got a wagon I could drive up to Benson, I'd be glad to take it up there for you. I could hire you somebody there to bring it back."

Long shook his head. He was packing his pipe. "All the wagons are out on the road except this one, and I need it for wood hauling. Wait a few days, maybe we'll have one outbound."

"That's all right," Mercy said. "I'll tag a ride on somebody's hack." He didn't want it to get out that he had money in his belt. He got up and waved absently and went up into town, touched with a sudden deep sense of urgency.

Calhoun sat his horse narrow-eyed at the spot where he had been ambushed. His side was stiff and tight. A little distance up the road he found where his wagon had been driven off it, within half a mile of O'Boyle's way station, and climbed up into a small pebbled canyon. Calhoun rode cautiously, his hand on his borrowed revolver, scanning the slopes overhead. He came to the head of the canyon and found he had lost the trail, whereupon he turned back and found where the wagon had turned up across the rim of the canyon and onto a parallel ridge, leaving a winding path of tracks through the brush and rocks.

He climbed steadily into the afternoon until the tracks led him into a heavily timbered mountain area. The bandits had had a bad time of it getting the stolen wagon through here; their trail doubled back several times after coming against windfalls and close-packed groves.

The pines grew stouter as he climbed; they hung heavy with snow. Drifts on the ground made the tracks easy to follow; he ran along at a canter. The intertwined treetops formed an almost solid matted cover which shut out most of the sky and made a dim gloom that dulled color and detail. It was half an hour's steady ascent through this forest. Then he crossed a bald saddle, dropped into a crosscanyon, and forded a creek running shallow with a thin ice overlay that the wagon had cracked into diamond-sparkling splinters. The trail going along the farther bank was a pair of ruts, with the mules' hoofprints between and the tracks of two or three horses alongside. One of the sets of horse tracks in some places came on top of the rest, and by this sign he knew that one outlaw was hanging behind to watch the backtrail. He rode with increased care.

The tracks headed south-southwest across the head of the canyon. Calhoun stopped to drink, watered his horse after breaking the ice, and went on over the top. On the southern slope the windswept side was more barren; when he looked back at the timbered canyon behind, he marked the contrast between the two sections.

From the summit he could see the country ahead, all bends and rough breaks, and after considering it carefully he dropped off the ridge, coming immediately down between the flat red walls of a gorge. The trail wound along the bottom; it seemed to be a game trail they were following, or an Indian route. The high dusty-red walls restricted his view and shut out warmth. He put his coat on. The sky was clouding up as he moved deeper into the mountains. The horse's jogging bothered his wound.

The walls fell away to the sides and he rode up a long easy swell, studded with manzanita and scrub oak. In this way, up and down, he pressed deeper into unknown territory until in the late afternoon he came up the spine of a razorback mountain and found the wagon, abandoned, at the crest: the land beyond was too coarse for the vehicle. Tracks of two additional horses appeared now, and together with the unharnessed mules—which had probably been used to carry

packs—the whole crowd had cut away to the west, into the most rugged part of the peaks. Spindle traceries of yucca and century plant made spires on the round mountain domes.

A light snow then began to drift earthward. He turned west, intent on the tracks, but in twenty minutes the snow was coming down in steady sheets and he knew it was no good: the trail was even now drifting over with snow. Wearily he unsaddled Oxley's horse and made a cold camp, and was soon asleep in a quickly manufactured brush shelter, wrapped in poncho and saddle-blanket.

At seven Leroy Hamlin came into the Palace and ordered a beer. He toyed with the mug until Stacy Donovan came out of his office and headed for the street. Leroy gulped his beer and left without paying for it, following the gray-haired man out. Donovan went down to the Chinaman's and turned inside for dinner.

Leroy took up a post on the porch of the California and kept his eyes fastened dully on the restaurant door across the street. One of the mine-owners came down-street and strolled into the Chinaman's; not long thereafter Shelby Long wandered past and looked into the place and went on to the Palace. Leroy stood stiffly, his small eyes holding on the restaurant door. Traffic picked up on the dark street. The saloons shed lamplight from every window. Lost in thought, Phil Mercy walked down the other side of the street and did not see Leroy; Mercy pushed into one of the small Mexican dives, and immediately afterwards Hewitt, the barber, came out of his shop and locked the door and went on down to the Chinaman's.

Leroy waited for another twenty minutes, at the end of which time Stacy Donovan finally came out of the restaurant, wiping his lips across his sleeve. Donovan paused and looked idly around him; if he saw Leroy he paid no notice. Donovan turned up toward the Palace; Leroy cut across the street behind him and closed the distance rapidly between them. Donovan swung into the alley beside the Palace and

went along the wall until he came to the back door, and put his hand on the latch.

Right behind, Leroy said softly, "Just a minute, Stacy."

Shortly after noon, Calhoun arrived in Mule Canyon with a stiff raking ache along his ribs. He put up his borrowed horse, went to the cabin and lay quiet for an hour, after which he got up and built a fire in the stove. Its warmth built up, and penetrated his bones; he relaxed a few minutes longer before he stripped off his coat and had a look at the bullet groove. Red stains were dark blots on Oxley's bandage but the wound had scabbed over. He put on a fresh shirt, washed his face and walked out. The tightness around his lip corners told of the edge on his temper, the fine point to which his patience had been drawn.

He went uptown and took an easy pace to the ridgetop; he knocked on Price Goodfellow's door.

Catherine showed her surprise. "You're back quickly, Sam."

He dragged up a smile. "Didn't go far. I want to see Price."

"He's at the mine. Will you come in?"

He gave her a searching glance; he said in measured tones, "I don't know what purpose it would serve, Catherine," and turned to go down the porch steps.

"Wait, Sam."

He turned. Catherine said, "Perhaps we both started on the wrong foot. I've had time to think and so have you."

"You can't pretend the past didn't happen."

"No," she said, "you can't. But should we let a few mistakes destroy something good?"

"Maybe there's nothing to be destroyed." He spoke the words carefully and watched for her reaction. He had one foot on the ground, the other on the first step; he had to tilt his hat back to look at her. He couldn't quite decide what her expression meant, and so he said, "I've got trouble right now. I'll come back and talk to you. Don't count on anything." He went over the hump of the ridge to the Acropolis buildings and met the foreman coming out of a shaft elevator;

the foreman gave him a curious glance and Calhoun inquired, "Boss around?"

The foreman nodded and jerked a thumb over his shoulder, and went on into the shack. Calhoun picked a path across the fall of slag rubble behind the reduction mill and went toward the assay shed, the big steam-driven pistons almost deafening him. He found Goodfellow inside, bending over a looking-glass with a little man in glasses. Goodfellow straightened and said, "What happened to you?" and came around the table. He looked Calhoun over and told him, "You look beat. Sit down."

Calhoun settled into a chair, took off his hat and put it on his knee. "I didn't make it."

Goodfellow repeated, "What happened?"

"The toughs jumped me this side of O'Boyle's, took a shot at me and knocked me off the wagon. I borrowed a horse from Oxley and tracked them until the snow wiped out the tracks. But I think I know the general area where they must be camped. I lost them above the badlands on that mountain in back of Silver Creek. They're somewhere up in that district."

Goodfellow uttered a mild oath. "It leaked out somehow. I didn't talk, and you didn't talk. Did your partner know about this?"

"I trust him."

"How about that Mercy gent?"

Calhoun shook his head. "He didn't know about it. It could be someone spotted us loading the wagon."

"Possible." Goodfellow slapped his hands together. "I'll call the Vigilance Committee together and we'll get some action. I've had enough. Come up to the house tonight."

Phil Mercy woke with a headache and squinted at the sun coming down through a crack in the tar ceiling; he rolled back into the hawmow again and shut his eyes for a few moments. Finally he got up on his knees in the loft and pulled the money-belt away from his body. He took the heavy gold-poke out of the belt pouches, distributed the pokes in his

pockets, and wadded the belt into a crumpled ball. He went downstairs and looked around carefully. The stable hostler was out back, rubbing down a horse in the corral; no one else was in the livery barn. The stove was hot. Mercy opened the grate and dropped the empty money-belt into the fire and watched it catch, obliterating the initials "H. P. V." that had been branded into it at one time or another. This done, Mercy went outside and bought breakfast at a café. The food was plain and not to his liking; he ate it without hunger and immediately afterward walked into the Palace saloon. There was no crowd. Mercy got a bottle and thought, "All I do lately is live in a saloon," but nonetheless he poured a tall drink from the bottle and drank it straight down before he took bottle and glass to a table. His mind played with him and, as he had feared, the ghost of Henry Vendig haunted his thoughts. He saw the door of the back room standing open, and a half-vicious impulse turned him into that room.

He tilted his shoulder against the door's edge. A current of air pulled stale tobacco smoke through the doorway and Phil Mercy said, "I thought I'd find you here."

He tried another match to the cigar in his mouth. An amused look came into his eyes and slid over the edge of his cupped hands. Matthew Ruarke sat loosely behind a desk that supported a litter of papers, a bottle, glass, and lamp. The light of the lamp—the room had no window—cast its yellow glow against Ruarke's face, giving it a pale blandness that was wholly superficial. With an unusual arrogant casualness, Mercy pushed the door shut with his elbow and moved into a chair. The smell of tobacco and whiskey and unseasoned cheap lumber strengthened and became plain. A dark skepticism lay inside Mercy's look when he observed:

"It took you no time at all to take over this place. They haven't even buried Stacy Donovan yet."

Ruarke had a way of dropping a curtain over his feelings. His quiet glance was insolent and self-assured, that was all. "Phil," he said, "don't make a mistake."

"No," Mercy said, still amused. He lifted Ruarke's bottle, having left his own outside, and drank from the mouth of

he bottle. Afterward he considered the amber vessel and said, "Someone in the café said Calhoun came back this noon with a bullet crease. I don't want you riding him too hard, Ruarke."

"Who the hell are you to threaten me?" Ruarke demanded with sudden heat.

But Phil Mercy had a gloss on him that couldn't be shaken just now. He only smiled briefly. Ruarke leaned forward and said crisply, "When a man gets on the ground in front of me I step on him."

"Sure," Mercy said. "But it won't be long now before this town gets mad enough to sweep the dirt off the streets. That means you, my friend."

"Their streets are made of dirt," Ruarke answered. "Get the hell out of here, Mercy. If you're smart you'll run like hell for leather until you're clear out of this country. Nobody likes you, fella—not me, and not the honest ones. Run while you can."

Price Goodfellow sat in a rocker on his porch, waiting for the guests to arrive. Calhoun came up the walk, first to show himself, and sat down on the top step. "It's beginning to look like Holliday has his outfit pretty well organized. He must have a spotter in town, to have known about that load I carried."

"I'm wondering," Goodfellow said, "if what happened to Boone and Donovan has anything to do with it. Matt Ruarke's got a hand in this, or I'm a white-haired Eskimo."

"That'll be hard to prove."

"Donovan was strangled the same way Boone was. Leroy Hamlin, or I miss my guess."

The crowd began to show up. Calhoun knew most of them. He moved around the lamplit parlor, talking to people. Several knots of conversation formed, broke up, and reformed. The outlaws had plundered to the point where a current now ran through the town, sweeping along all the ordinarily mild-mannered men, some of whom would usually be frightened even to discuss the subject. Goodfellow ob-

served in a quiet voice to Calhoun, "I hope something comes of this. If we can get even a few good men to pull together, we can clean this up shortly. Otherwise it promises to be a long fight full of grief and blood."

In a little while Goodfellow called the meeting to order. He made a few preliminary remarks and then said, "I've called the Vigilance Committee tonight because the time has come to act."

Harry Scott, owner of the Metro mine just up the bar from the Acropolis, stood up and said, "That's all good and fine, Price, but standing around here making noise ain't going to do anything but lose us some sleep."

Wheelwright, the blacksmith, said: "Shut up, Harry, and open your ears up. This meetin' can do no harm." Wheelwright was a bit of a sea lawyer, and so the others listened to him attentively.

Price Goodfellow said flatly, "I want to run every thievin' outlaw so far from this country that this district will be poison for them. Those we don't hang."

"The government," Scott pointed out, "has got no liking for vigilantes."

"To hell with the government," said Wheelwright. "If they cared about us they'd have sent us law. We're our own Goddamn government."

"Harry's got a point," said Belding, the mercantile storekeeper. "If we start banging around here and raise too much dust, we might get a government marshal shoved in here to make it rough on us."

Calhoun pulled his cigarette from his mouth and put in, "That'd do us no harm. If we draw a marshal in here, we can use him."

Goodfellow said, "I don't much like the idea of taking law into our hands myself—I've seen what can come of it. Look at the Jayhawkers. But we can't sit by while these damned toughs walk off with everything we've worked for. Including our Goddamn lives."

Wheelwright said, "I reckon we're pretty well decided what we want to get done. Question is, how to do it."

Goodfellow answered, "I give the floor to Sam Calhoun."

"They tripped this time," Calhoun said. "I know the area they're camped in—or I've got a pretty good indication of it, at least. But they're a shrewd bunch and if we go in there after them, they'll spot us coming. All we'll find will be the ashes of their campfire. Another thing would be to bait a trap, but that could backfire—your bait might get shot to pieces. It's my feeling that the best way to kill a snake is to cut off its head. Ruarke and Leroy Hamlin are the men you want."

Scott spoke immediately. "How do you know that? Can you prove it?"

"No," Calhoun said, in an easy voice. "But I don't think there's a doubt of it in this room."

Scott said firmly, "That's not good enough, Calhoun, and you know it. You're a rough man and you stand for a rough brand of justice. Too rough for me—I can't buy it."

Calhoun said angrily, "How many murders will it take to get you off your butt?"

Goodfellow held up both hands. "Hold on—simmer down. It's easy enough to settle this. How many of you agree with Sam Calhoun?"

By a show of hands it appeared that roughly half the crowd agreed with Calhoun. Goodfellow said, "Not enough. What we do has to have unanimous support, or close to it."

Calhoun said, "Then you're not ready. A few more murders and you'll start coming around. I know this business—I've seen it before. You might run Holliday down, but Ruarke will just bring some other sharpshooter in to take Holliday's place. The poison sacs are in Ruarke's head, not Holliday's."

Harry Scott said, "If you had a single scrap of evidence to tie Ruarke up with these crimes, I might go along with you, Sam. But you haven't."

"All right," Calhoun said, and headed for the door with his hat. "Let me know when you make up your minds." He went out and closed the door.

Catherine was on the porch, bundled in a windbreaker. She said, "I've been eavesdropping."

He stopped to look at her. His hat made a black shadow over his face. Catherine said, "I can't make you out, Sam. Everything you do changes my mind again."

"Well, then," he replied, "what am I supposed to do about that, Catherine?"

"Do you really feel you have any right to demand Matthew Ruarke's life without evidence against him?"

"If you were listening, you heard my answer to that."

"Then you're a fool," she said. "A fool and a criminal. You're no better than he is."

"That may be," he said. "But you're the one who loves the wild country, remember?"

"That's got nothing to do with it."

"You can't act the same in a bucko camp as you would in settled country. You ought to know that as well as anybody. Every man's an animal up here, Catherine—and when one animal goes wild, the others have to protect themselves. There's no time for niceties."

She said in a small voice, "You can be very gentle when you choose. But I think there's a hard core at the center of you."

"I didn't ask your approval," he said, and went away from her. She stood on the porch alone with a cool wind whipping around her, hearing the rise of voices within the house; she watched Calhoun's tall shape move down toward town. Her eyes became moist, she put her face in her hands; her shoulders shook but she kept her lips pressed together and did not make a sound.

XI

THE HARDCASE called Bill finished eating his beans and went out in the snow to wash his plate. Young Tom came out and put snow on his face, rubbing it in, and said, "I don't feel right, Bill. Holliday's got a crazy streak in him somewhere. I don't like the way he looks at people—I don't like the way he looks at me."

Bill sat back on the sloping bank and looked across the noon-glistening dunes of snow. "Jack's a little kill-crazy. Keep out of his way and you'll be all right. Just don't irritate him none."

Young Tom said, "He's turned meaner than he used to be. I don't like the smell in this camp lately. Thinkin' of pullin' stakes. You want to come with me?"

Bill shook his head. "You go ahead. Don't look for trouble from me. But get out easy—and do it when Jack and Menendez ain't around. Don't try to take any of the gold if you pull out before we all do."

Bill stood up and batted his hands together against the mountain cold. He was thirty years old, thirteen years bad; he had ridden with Jack Holliday longer than any of them, longer even than the evil Menendez. He said, "You're still a kid, Tom. Find yourself a girl and settle down and raise a crop of corn and a crop of kids. You ain't hard enough for this kind of trail."

Young Tom dragged his fingers through the snow, his face heavy with thought. "I don't want to leave without my gut."

"Don't push your luck, kid."

Tom stood up. "I don't know," he said, and went back to the cabin.

Menendez was sprawled on his cot reading a dime novel by the light of a lamp. The stove put a soporific warmth into

the room. Bill came in and broke out a deck of cards and began to lay out a game of solitaire. Tom sat with his chair tipped back against the log wall, chewing on a straw. Menendez put his magazine down and said, "What the hell you lookin' at?"

"Not at you."

"Ain't you got nothin' to do?"

"No."

"Quit lookin' at me," Menendez said.

"I wasn't looking at you."

Bill said irritably, "For Christ's sake lay off him, Menendez."

"Jesus," Menendez said, giving it the Spanish pronunciation. He sat up and rolled a brown-paper cigarette together. He had a flint-steel mechanism which he used to send a spark into a slow-match fuse; he put the red sputtering end of the fuse to his cigarette, got it going, and pinched out the fuse. After this elaborate ceremony he looked at young Tom again and said, "Kid, you watch your Goddamn step."

"Sure," Tom said uninterestedly. Jack Holliday put his head in the door; he had his hat bound down over his ears with a bandanna and his sheepskin coat was buckled up. "I'm goin' down to Washington Camp. Figure to pick up a few jugs at Maldonado's. Anybody need anything?"

"Tobacco," said Menendez.

"All right," Holliday said, and withdrew. In a little while they heard the tramp of his horse going away.

Menendez batted ashes out of his beard and lay back to read.

In time, with quiet cursing, the three men made ready for sleep. Menendez blew out the lamp. Young Tom lay on top of his blanket, fully clothed except for his boots, and stared upward into the darkness.

He was still like that, wide-awake, hours later when the other two were both snoring. A sudden decision sat him bolt upright. He reached down carefully for his boots and tugged them on; he got up, moving slowly and soundlessly, and took his coat, hat, and gunbelt down from the wall peg.

Outside, he put them on, and went on his toes to the rral. He had a difficult time catching his horse without ıking noise; finally he tied it up to the rail and put on sad- ɜ and bridle. The night was cold enough to stiffen his ɔved fingers and make it a difficult job.

He rode down the slope, through heavy timber, to a patch boulders. Dismounting carefully, he pushed aside a screen brush and reached under the overhang of a rock. He took ɜ first sack his hand fell on—it weighed around thirty unds. He poured half the gold-dust into his left-hand ddlebag and put the depleted sack into the other saddle- g, mounted and rode away, after replacing the covering brush.

He had gold in his saddlebags; he would ride to Benson d sell his horse and saddle, and buy a ticket to Texas.

Preoccupied, he did not notice until too late: Holliday was ling up the trail toward him. Tom lifted his reins, then ıyed his hand. Holliday stopped within a few yards. Where you going, Tom?"

"I'm pullin' out," said Tom, chilled down his back. "Makes e less to split the loot with." He scrutinized Holliday's ɔe and repeated weakly, "I'm ridin' out."

Holliday said, "Sure, kid," and thumbed his hat back. He lled his horse off the trail and let Tom ride past. Tom ɡged his horse and said, "So long, Jack," and rode on down ɜ trail.

Holliday let him get fifteen yards down the path; Holliday d softly, "So long, kid." He pulled his gun and shot Tom ɒm the saddle.

The night was dark and oppressive. Phil Mercy saw only e thing to do: get out, find another place and another me. He tramped the hills in torment, and finally set out ward town. He climbed to the hilltop and crept over to the stern slope and descended quietly to the creek.

"Who's that—who's that?"

Mercy pulled up short, catching his breath.

"Who's that, damn it?"

He recognized the voice of Wheelwright, the blacksmith; he remembered that Wheelwright lived down here in the groves of the bottoms. "Phil Mercy," he said. "That you, Wheelwright?"

"Yeah," said the big man, and appeared some distance away in the shadows. "Not a night for wandering. What you doing down here?"

"Looking for formations," Mercy lied. "It was a wild goose chase." He asked himself immediately why he hadn't told the truth.

Wheelwright came closer; Mercy could see the curiosity in his look. "At this time of night?"

"I've been out since noon. Been planning to pack up and go east tomorrow—this was a last try. I've made no money here, so there's no reason to stay."

Wheelwright nodded, accepting it. "Sorry I jumped you," he said, and trudged away. Mercy shuddered and went on up toward town, his heart racing. He skirted the town proper and went into the stable, climbed into the loft and made a bed in the hay.

In the morning he awakened and kicked the hay off himself. He saw when he came outside that the sun was well up —nine o'clock or after, he guessed. He had breakfast, not hungry, but knowing he had to eat; he drank a pot of strong black coffee and wandered the town. He bought two candles for no reason and put them in his pocket, and just after noon he found himself in the California saloon. He fought down the urge to buy a drink and took instead a cigar; smoking, he braced his elbows on the bar and stared morosely into its polished surface that had no bottom. The afternoon crowd began to swell. Sounds and smells filled his senses—saloon odors, the rataplan of horses outside, conversation and laughter. The bartender drifted down toward him and inquired, "How about a drink, friend?"

Mercy shook his head. Matthew Ruarke came out of his office and walked along the bar. Seeing Mercy, he said, "Good afternoon," in a tone of exact courtesy. Mercy looked at him blankly. Ruarke showed him a hooded expression and

disappeared through the door; it made Mercy remember the fate of Jacob Boone and Stacy Donovan. The bartender came back and wiped glasses with a towel, making conversation: "Hear about the vigilantes?"

Mercy shook his head. The barkeep said, "They've organized to run the undesirables out of town. I hear there was some argument at first, one or two of them walked out. But they came around to deciding to clamp down. They figure if they run all the bad ones out, they're bound to shoo out the payload outlaws in the process."

"That so?" Mercy said casually; but it chilled him inside. If the vigilantes were out in the open, it meant they must be ready to move. He turned right away from the bar and walked up to Calhoun's Hilltop saloon. For a moment he thought Calhoun wasn't in the place, but then he saw the tall man having a beer at the back of the bar, his eyes playing over the crowd. Mercy went to him and said, "Can we get a table, Sam? I want to talk to you."

"How about my office?"

"Fine—fine." He followed Calhoun to the office and shut the door. The room was makeshift—all it had was a couple of straight chairs, a small stove, a plank-on-sawhorse table and a few packing-boxes that seemed to serve as filing drawers for receipts and orders.

Calhoun was looking at him expectantly, faintly curious, faintly disturbed. Mercy said, "I hear the vigilantes are going to run all the undesirables out of town."

"So I understand."

"You run with that bunch, don't you?"

"I walked out on them," Calhoun said. "Maybe that's what put backbone in them. They made the decision afterward."

Mercy put a careful glance on him and then said, "Pay attention to this, Sam. The night O'Hara's stage was held up, I was in the express office. Goodfellow consigned the ore-shipment to the stage line and as soon as he left, one of the stage-line hands went over to the California. A fellow called Thorpe. He talked to Ruarke and Ruarke sent Leroy out of town on a horse. That mean anything to you?"

"It may."

"Ruarke is the head man. He had some kind of partnership with Stacy Donovan. Jacob Boone was in it too, but he got itchy fingers I think—I heard him complaining to Donovan one night before he was killed. Jack Holliday has a bunch of three or four men in the hills, working for Ruarke—I think Thorpe must be the contact between them. The gold is with Holliday."

"None of this is new, Phil."

"You don't get this," Mercy said. "You may have guessed something, Sam, but I'm giving you facts."

"Nothing more substantial than I had before. Why did you come to me with this, Phil?"

Mercy looked down. Misery tautened his face. "Maybe I'm just trying to do penance," he muttered. "You make it damned hard, Sam. I just thought you might be able to use the information. I'm clearing out of here."

Goodfellow said, "It was your play from the start, Sam. It took some of them a while to come around, that's all. When we talked Harry Scott around, the others fell in behind us. We're ready to move now, and I don't think there's any question who's to handle it. We're all behind you."

"All right," Calhoun said, and added abruptly, "We do it my way or not at all, Price. Understood?"

"Yes," Goodfellow said flatly.

The two men turned out onto Goodfellow's porch. Catherine came after them; her hand was lifted and formed into a loose fist. She showed pride, anger, confusion; she stood before Calhoun, her head thrown back, and he saw that she was near the weakness of tears. It was nothing she did; it was just a feeling that moved from her to him. It made him say a strange thing:

"I'll be back when this is over."

"Take care," she said. She wore a fresh dress; it showed her shoulders and arms, it lay round against her breasts. She touched him with her hand, and immediately he remem-

bered a good many things—night camps along the Gila, trekking through the desert.

She came a little nearer; her words were not so certain: "Will this finish it?"

"Nothing ever finishes," he said.

She was somber and still. Her lips were even, composed; but listening to the run of his voice she seemed to hear those feelings that he could not quite hold in; that hint got the best of her and at last she said, quick and broken, "Sam, why do we have to—"

Her father was watching, baffled. Catherine shook her head and rammed back into the house. Goodfellow went down the steps and turned; Calhoun had not moved. Goodfellow said, "What was that all about?"

Calhoun said, "When I'm sure I'll let you know." He smiled slightly. Goodfellow was at the foot of the steps, waiting for him, and they went into town together. Calhoun saw Shelby Long across the street and signaled to him; Long came over and the three of them went abreast into the Palace. Calhoun walked to the bar, thrusting men deliberately out of his path, and put his hands flat on the bar, saying to the bartender, "Where's Ruarke?"

The bartender became nervous. "I dunno," he said. Calhoun walked back to the office door with Shelby Long. Goodfellow hung back a moment; he said to the bartender, "You stick right here. Keep quiet and keep your hands where we can see them." He leaned over the bar and tapped the man's wrist. "Do I make myself clear?"

"Sure. Sure, Mr. Goodfellow." The barkeep nodded vigorously, not understanding all this, but afraid. Goodfellow turned to go back, but Calhoun and Long were returning. "Not there," Calhoun said. "We'll try the California and then the Canyon Paradise and then his house." But when they got out of the saloon and turned down-gulch, Calhoun thought of an improvement on the plan; he said:

"No. We'll get Thorpe first. He may tell us where to find Holliday's hideout."

Seeing the three men marching abreast, looking deter-

mined, a couple of men crossed the street from the café. Both of them had been at the vigilante meeting last night. Without losing stride, Calhoun said, "You two round up Wheelwright and some others, and start scouting for Leroy Hamlin and Matthew Ruarke. Travel in bunches—both of them are tough enough to fight their way out of a box if they see half a chance."

The two men acknowledged these instructions and fell away, turning up a side avenue. Calhoun went on down toward the express office, trailed by Shelby Long and Goodfellow, who wore a troubled frown.

The Irishman O'Hara, who was head hostler, was out in front of the office. O'Hara grinned broadly at Shelby Long. "Come to horse-trade me out of another wagon, you Goddamn skinflint?"

"We're on serious business today, O'Hara," said Long. "Thorpe around?"

"Ought to be pitching hay out back about now. Why?"

"We want him," said Price Goodfellow.

O'Hara's eyes widened and he took a quick step backward. The three men walked around the express building and found a tall man with a strangely soft, round face, heaving hay into the loft. Goodfellow stood in the barn door with his head thrown back and Calhoun, going into the barn, said, "Come down, Thorpe."

Thorpe's glance traveled from one to another, hardening with slow comprehension. He wore a gun but did not try for it. He put his pitchfork down gently and walked to the ladder, and came down backwards. When he reached the ground he turned slowly on his heels. He said in a smooth and oddly cultivated voice, "What can I do for you?"

Goodfellow said, "It's up, Thorpe. We know about you. You and Ruarke and Jack Holliday."

Thorpe's face showed no surprise. His mask was calm. "Well," he said, "I didn't really expect we'd get away with it."

Shelby Long said to Calhoun, "He's cool enough. Something wrong here." Long had his hand on his gunbutt. He eased back into the shadows of the barn.

"It's all right," Calhoun said to him, and swung his attention back to Thorpe. Goodfellow was saying, "Why'd you do it then?"

Thorpe said, "I'm a gambler. The stakes were high enough. It's been an interesting game."

"While it lasted," said Shelby Long.

Calhoun said, "We want just one thing from you, Thorpe. Where is Jack Holliday?"

Thorpe shook his head and smiled lightly.

Goodfellow put his hand on his gun; Calhoun stepped forward and lifted Thorpe's revolver from the holster. Reversing it in his fist, he cocked it and trained it on Thorpe. He said, "You'll hang anyway."

"And if I talk?"

"It depends."

"That's not good enough," Thorpe said, maintaining his composure.

"He's small potatoes," said Goodfellow. "We can—"

"I'm running this," Calhoun said, cutting him off. "How about it, Thorpe?"

"I hang if I talk and I hang if I don't talk. That it?"

"Maybe."

"Make it definite," Thorpe said.

"Yes," Calhoun answered. His eyes were level; a muscle rippled at his jaw.

"Then I've no reason to talk," Thorpe said. He smiled. "If a man lives by crooks he may as well die by them."

Goodfellow said, "Wait a minute, Sam. He'll tell us what we want to know. We can afford to let him loose—he'll never come back into this country."

"No," Calhoun said. "Turn him loose and he'll ride to warn Holliday."

"Then tie him up until we've finished—and let him go afterward."

Calhoun turned on him. "Price, the man's a crook. Either we hang the crooks or we don't. Which is it to be? I'm running this and I want no more argument."

That was when Wheelwright walked into the stable with

half a dozen vigilantes. "No sign of Leroy," Wheelwright said. "And no sign of Ruarke. News travels fast around here. I wouldn't doubt they got the word. We going to hang this jasper?"

"That's it," Calhoun said.

Wheelwright called over his shoulder, "Somebody get a rope."

Goodfellow sighed. "I suppose you're right," he said to Calhoun.

Shelby Long came forward from his post in the far shadows; he had his gun out, and only now holstered it. Harry Scott came into the barn with a rope, and Wheelwright took it, giving Scott an odd glance. Two men stepped forward and pinned Thorpe by the arms. Someone tied his hands. Price Goodfellow pointed at Harry Scott. "Harry, get us a horse."

Wheelwright made a knot in the rope and went up the ladder into the loft; he pitched the end of the rope over a rafter and let its end drop until it hung nine or ten feet above the floor; then he secured the rope around a pillar and climbed back down. As he came he said, "Make that two horses, Harry."

Thorpe stood without expression, watching the activity. He spoke suddenly, addressing himself to Calhoun. "Ruarke gave it to Donovan and Boone in the back. He's probably halfway to that gold by now. I don't see giving him the gold. You go up that big mountain behind Silver Creek. The camp is in a small pocket about two-thirds of the way up the slope. You can see the hollow from the road—cut through the back way or they'll spot you. You can get there in two hours if you cut off on the old wagon trail in back of Kitchner's place."

Shelby Long said challengingly, "What do you think that will buy you, Thorpe?"

"Not a damned thing," Thorpe replied, looking him in the eye.

Harry Scott came forward with two saddled horses; the crowd parted to let him through. Wheelwright got up on one

horse and reached up to pull the hangman's noose down; it hung taut at about the level of his shoulders. Goodfellow looked on grimly. Wheelwright said, "Come up on the horse, Thorpe."

Thorpe's hands were bound behind him. Two men boosted him into the saddle. Shelby Long stepped forward to grasp the reins of Thorpe's horse. Wheelwright reached across and slipped the noose over Thorpe's head, fixing the knot just behind the ear. He said, "Got anything to say, Thorpe?"

There was a hot, rash temper in the crowd. Thorpe looked them over. "Well," he said, "maybe I tolled a few into traps, but I never killed anybody, so I don't see how I deserve this." He turned to give Wheelwright an utterly blank and emotionless stare. "Let her go," he said.

Wheelwright stepped down and walked around in front of Thorpe's horse. The crowd was silent. Wheelwright slipped the belt out of his trousers and looped it once, and raised it to quirt the horse out from under Thorpe.

Calhoun said, "Hold it. Thorpe, if I point you south to Mexico I want your word you'll never come back."

If Thorpe was relieved he didn't show it. "You've got it," was all he said.

"All right," Calhoun said. "Cut him down."

XII

PHIL MERCY felt the weight of gold in his pockets. He saw a crowd going away from the express office and waited for it to move out of sight; something about the determined stride of the bunch made him linger in the doorway of Belding's mercantile until the crowd broke up—some of them riding up-gulch on horseback, the rest dividing into little knots of two or three.

Mercy went over to the express office and found O'Hara and said, "I want to buy a horse."

"Come on back," O'Hara said, and led him into the stable aisle. He pointed into a stall. "How's that?"

"Fine," said Mercy impatiently, hardly looking at the horse. "I'll need a saddle. Please hurry."

O'Hara gazed at him, puzzled; he shrugged and led the horse out into the runway. "Ain't you going to be dickering money?"

"I can't be bothered."

"Well, now, that is too bad," O'Hara said. He grinned: "You're forcin' me, sir, to give you an honest price." He rigged the horse with a bridle while Mercy slapped a blanket on it. O'Hara cinched up an old saddle on the animal.

Mercy said, "What do I owe you?"

O'Hara figured in his head; his lips moved. Afterward he said, "I'll be makin' it around seventy dollars."

"Got a scale?"

"I have."

Mercy followed the Irishman into the back door of the express office, where O'Hara weighed up a small mound of Mercy's dust and said, "Thanks and good luck to you."

Mercy nodded and took the horse by the reins to lead it out of the stable. Mounting up, he noticed O'Hara's wave and answered it, and put the horse up the steep pitch to-

ward the head of the gulch. The afternoon was definitely wintry; he tightened his collar and slid his hands into his pockets, and bowed his head against the wind. It occurred to him abruptly that he had no provisions and, in fact, hadn't even had lunch. He cursed and off-horsed in front of the Chinaman's café.

After a quick meal he went into a small mercantile store and bought a sackful of non-perishable food, a canteen and a box of matches, and a spare blanket. While the storekeeper was adding up the bill Mercy added to the pile a knife with an eight-inch blade, a box of ammunition for his little revolver, and other items he thought of as his eyes swept fitfully over the shelves. He bought a frypan and a small lidded pot that would serve both as coffeepot and drinking cup; he bought a can of peaches; finally he bought a Winchester rifle and ammunition for it and a leather saddle-scabbard.

His purchasing done, he loaded his horse with the provisions, tied them down, and rode only as far as the Palace saloon. He went inside and had it in mind to have one drink, but he ended up buying a keg of whiskey and taking it with him.

He was climbing onto the horse when Catherine Goodfellow came down the walk and called to him. At first he pretended he hadn't heard her voice; but when she called him again he looked around, reluctantly, and trotted the horse across the street to her.

She said, "You're all packed up, Phil." Her tone made a question of it.

"I'm moving on," he said lamely.

"Why?"

The question struck him oddly; it put him off balance. He said, "Well, I haven't made a go of it here."

"Will any other place be any better?"

"Catherine, you have an embarrassing way of prying under a man's skin."

"You were the one," she reminded him, "who confided your secrets in me."

He said soberly, "I wanted you. I wanted you then and I

still do. But I haven't made a go of that, either. What have I got to stay here for? This place is only a bad memory. You'd be smart to get out of it yourself. Sam's got his vigilantes out roaming around—you can't tell who's going to get hurt."

"Have you seen him?" she said quickly.

"He rode out of town with your father and some others. That was an hour ago, maybe more." He rested his palms on the saddle-horn and leaned down toward her. "Catherine, if I were you I'd make up my mind to fish or cut bait. Calhoun wants you, but on his terms, not on yours. If you want him you'll have to make up your mind to that."

"Why," she said, "where did that bit of wisdom come from, Phil?"

"I've always had plenty of time to watch the world go by," Mercy said. "I see what I see, and draw my conclusions. I'm glad if I had to lose out, it was to someone like Sam. At least he's a better man than I am. But maybe it was all in my head. Still, it might suit you to remember you had the love of a man like me. There was a tart little chippie in San Francisco who loved me once. She was worthless, but I've always remembered she offered it to me. If you're like me you treasure that kind of memory."

She said softly, "I don't envy you your loneliness, Phil. I wish I could say something that would help."

"So do I," he said, with a crooked smile. He looked around and said idly, "I've watched this camp grow from a few thousand souls to this. Ten, twelve thousand maybe. Growth hasn't improved it any." He shook his head. "Take care of yourself, Catherine," he said, and rode away.

By the time he got to the top of the gulch it was starting to snow, in little feather-flakes. To one side, up the hill, was Goodfellow's clattering mine operation; to the other side was Calhoun's Hilltop saloon. Lamplight bloomed from its windows even now; it was a dull, overcast afternoon. Inside, there would be warmth; there would be the illusion of refinement in the felt table-covers, the polished woodwork, the ornate chandeliers, the big mirrors, the easy comradeship. Out here

it was blue-gray, it was cold and Mercy was all alone. He sat his horse at the top of the town, feeling very morose and left out of things. It came to him that he had never in his life made a close friend.

He turned his horse toward the saloon. He didn't plan to go inside, only to ride by the place and perhaps feel the touch of its warmth. But when he drew near he saw someone back away from the outer wall as if startled, straightening up—a huge block of a man that could only be Leroy Hamlin. Mercy was too close to turn away, and so he said, "What the hell are you doing out here?"

Leroy moved away from the wall and stood there, his hunched frame eerily half-concealing the light from the window. Leroy said, "Well, tinhorn, I'll tell you—Calhoun's on the warpath and by God he's going to pay for it. He thinks I'm halfway to timberline by now." Leroy chuckled. He had a handful of matches in his grip.

Mercy got down. "This isn't the first time I've stopped a man trying to set this place afire," he said. He tugged out his little nickel-plated gun. "I think the boys want to hang you, Leroy. And I think I'll just turn you over to them."

"You ain't thinkin' right, then," Leroy said. He took a quick pace forward, shuffling. Mercy swore. He cocked the little gun and aimed it point-blank at Leroy and pulled the trigger.

The bullet sent a little puff of dirt up from the heavy padding of Leroy's clothing. Leroy rocked a little on his feet but then he roared with rage, and while Mercy was trying to cock the slippery hammer of the gun for a second shot, Leroy closed.

Leroy kicked at Mercy's hand, deflecting the shot; Leroy produced a knife from the back of his belt and lunged. Mercy uttered a shrill scream; he leaped back but the wall stopped him. Leroy raised the knife with a deep and sensuous pleasure and drove it to the hilt in Mercy's neck. Mercy's eyes glazed; he clutched at the knife and fell limply.

Leroy took the knife out of Mercy's neck; jugular blood pulsed out thickly. Someone had come out onto the porch,

around the corner of the saloon, and was shouting questions into the air. Leroy grabbed the reins of Mercy's horse, hoisted himself aboard, and kicked savagely; the horse bolted into an immediate gallop, almost unseating him. Leroy muttered, "He shouldn't of pulled a gun on me." He was all the way back into the timber before he remembered that he hadn't set the saloon on fire.

"This is as far as we take the horses," said Calhoun. He got down and tethered his mount to a tree. "On foot from here."

The others—Goodfellow and Shelby Long and three or four more—tied their horses and joined him. Goodfellow jerked a big Springfield .45-70 rifle from the boot as he came off the saddle, and said, "Just over the rise through the trees, right?"

"That's it, I guess," said Calhoun. "Make a spread line and wait for my signal."

He hung his rifle over his arm and walked across the side of the mountain, moving on soft sure feet, threading the trees with no great hurry. Shelby Long was near, walking along to the right of him, and Calhoun heard Long murmur, "Easy now," as they approached the little hump of ground, just beyond which should be Jack Holliday's camp. Calhoun waved an arm to caution Long to silence; he moved at a crouch after that, careful not to crack the snow-cover with any sudden plunges.

They reached a row of storm-gray rocks surmounting the hump. Snow was drifting down in individual flakes out of a slate sky. The boulders cut a wide swath between two rows of standing conifers, making natural breastworks. Spread out in a spaced line, the men to either side of Calhoun worked carefully across the open stretch and bellied down behind the parapet. The ground was cold and damp where his body began to melt the snow. Calhoun wormed forward until he had command of the hollow. He heard a scratch to his right and saw Shelby Long's mouth forming a word; he made it out: "Smoke." Long was pointing off to a side of the hollow,

and when Calhoun looked that way he saw the thin wisp, a rising signal drifting across the treetops below. Continuing his unhurried survey, Calhoun finally picked out a pair of horses grazing in the timber. He looked for quite a while but he could see no more than two horses, and that troubled him.

He drew back off the skyline and crawled over to Shelby Long's position. "One of us better get those horses. We can't have them running out from under us on horseback while our animals are a quarter-mile behind us."

"I'll do that," Shelby Long said. He grinned. "I used to be pretty good at this kind of game when I was a kid. Only the other kids didn't have guns." He bellied backward twenty yards, stood up and walked quickly along behind the others, who watched him, their heads turning curiously to follow as Long went down into the trees and started to make his way around through the timber.

Calhoun stayed put. The rest of them seemed fidgety: the aborting of the Thorpe lynching had only whetted their taste for violence. Calhoun glanced at Goodfellow, who shook his head slightly. The snow began to flutter down with a greater thickness and body, and that worried Calhoun, it put an edge on his patience. The light was bad enough as it was.

But presently Shelby Long appeared, small in the trees below, and took up the reins on the two bridled horses. The lanky Texan waved a hand.

Calhoun nodded to Goodfellow, who got up and moved across the slope to the left. Calhoun angled into the trees beyond the boulders, moving to the right; he went downhill as fast as he could without waking echoes. Most of the others followed except for two or three who kept their posts at the breastworks with rifles. Calhoun slipped noiselessly on the pine needles and snow, both hands on his Winchester.

Jack Holliday lit a cigarette and held it cupped in his calloused hand. He dropped a dry log on the fire and moved a short distance from the blaze, habit prompting that cautious act. The cabin sat away from him; disliking enclosures, he

spent much of his time out here in the clearing. He lay down, propped on an elbow, and said, "Relax, amigo."

Menendez turned his head to look at Bill, who said, "Doing nothing has got me down. I wish Tom hadn't pulled out on us."

Menendez stood by the head of his saddled horse, chewing on a strip of jerked beef. Bill said, "We should've heard from town by now."

Menendez said, "What in hell is eatin' you?"

Bill shrugged. "Just a feeling."

"Conscience botherin' you?" Menendez' voice was tinder-dry.

"Last time I felt like this," observed Bill, "we got chopped up all to hell at Dallas. Remember Richards and Pima John? Both of 'em bought out at Dallas."

"Long time ago," murmured Holliday, and jabbed his cigarette into the ground. "I'm beginnin' to wonder myself where Thorpe is."

A voice plummeted down from the nearby slope: "Stand up and keep your hands clear of your guns. We've got you pocketed."

It was Menendez whose brain registered it first, Menendez who made the first move, gathering the reins for a quick vault to the saddle. But someone up there was ahead of him. A bullet, evidently aimed at Menendez, whacked into the neck of the horse. The horse uttered a sharp scream and reared away, and thundered into the woods. Menendez was dragged off his feet before he could let loose the reins.

Sprawling, he got purchase with his legs and leaped, half-rolling into the trees. A shot drove across the clearing, tracing a path near him. He saw Bill, gun half-drawn, double inward as if hit in the belly by a heavy fist. Bill cursed and drew his gun up level; he pointed it into the far line of trees and deliberately thumbed it dry—five spaced shots. And fell hard against the earth, his face contorted; the gently smoking gun lay gleaming dully.

Holliday had disappeared somewhere, into the cabin or into the trees. Menendez turned and ran cat-footed into the

deeper timber, going up-slope, slipping on the wet ground. A snowflake stung his eye. He got to the top of the saddle and looked behind. He could still see Bill stretched awkwardly on the ground. Two men were walking cautiously into the clearing from opposite sides with drawn guns.

Up above, at the rock parapet, a rifle opened up abruptly. Menendez threw himself flat, scrambled behind a tree, and made a dash along the flank of the slope, keeping to the thickest timber. There was a lot of calling back and forth and an occasional gunshot. He had no clear picture of what was going on. He made a wide circle, running like a cat, and reached the top of the saddle again at a point several hundred feet away from his first dash. No one seemed to have seen him; he ran on down the back slope, thinking: *Their horses must be over here someplace.* And whirled among the tree poles, searching.

In time, out of breath, he encountered a pack of saddled horses. He got into a saddle and flung a look behind him, to discover a tall lanky figure running downhill. That one paused to take aim, and fired.

Menendez felt the lash of the bullet near his face. He bent low over the horse and made for the nearby pines. Another shot whacked solidly into his arm, half-turning him in the saddle; but then he was in the safety of the pines.

Shelby Long ran full-tilt into the clearing, windmilling his arms for balance; he jumped aboard his horse and lashed it after the disappearing rider. He entered the timber, galloped forward for a reckless minute, and then stopped to listen.

He heard no sound at all; then there was a crashing off to his left. He swung that way and suddenly the crashing stopped again: Menendez was waiting.

Too impatient to wait the man out, Shelby Long made his choice and dismounted. He crouched, running low through the trees.

Slowing down, he had a glimpse of a horseman sitting still, gun muzzle playing warily over the forest. That rider lifted

his boots to spur the horse, and Long said quickly, "Over here, friend."

Long stepped out of the trees, resting his gun on Menendez. Long's face had a kind of melancholy expectancy on it; he was a Texan and no fool. Menendez spun toward him fanning the revolver, getting off three quick wild shots before Long's calculated shot caught him in the chest and lifted him off the saddle.

Long came over and stood above him, kicking the gun away. Menendez looked up, his straggly beard fluttering; blood foamed at his lips. "Got any water?"

Long bent down and gathered a handful of snow and dribbled it a little at a time into Menendez' mouth. Menendez lay looking at the sky, watching the snowflakes drift down, and a film made a curtain across his wipe-open eyes.

Long hoisted the body across the saddle, turned and led the pony back through the trees.

Price Goodfellow turned away from the one called Bill. "This one's done," he said, and shook his head.

Calhoun said, "Shelby went after one of them. That leaves one more—I think it's Holliday. He's got no horse; we'll get him." He swung immediately into the timber, leaving the others flat-footed. Holliday had to be somewhere on the mountainside. He could not have gone downhill without crossing an opening, and thus exposing himself—so he had to be above. Calhoun began to climb.

When Thorpe was released, it took him the better part of the afternoon to find Matthew Ruarke, who was as it happened just coming back from a trip to Washington Camp; Thorpe met him on the road and said, "It's all done. The vigilantes have gone after Holliday. They caught me but they let me loose—I'm supposed to be on my way out of the country."

"They're soft," Ruarke said contemptuously. "And that being so, they'll be easy marks for Holliday and his bunch."

"I wouldn't count on that. Calhoun's leading them."

"Calhoun's just one man."

Thorpe shrugged. "All right. It's no skin off my nose what happens to Holliday. Listen, I want my split."

Ruarke said, "Then see Jack Holliday. He's got the gold."

Thorpe rested his hand on his holster. "Don't fool me, friend. I've seen that safe in your office. You've got enough in there to pay off half a dozen of us."

Ruarke shook his head. "You're crazy."

Thorpe grinned. He palmed his gun and said, "Maybe. Let's go for a ride."

"Where?"

"Town. The California. Your office."

"You're crazy," Ruarke said again. "Hell, if the vigilantes are around they'll nail me to a wall."

"They're all chasing after Jack. We've got time—it'll be dark by the time we get into town. Come on." Thorpe gestured with the gun.

XIII

THE SLOPE WAS steep and thickly grown with lance-tall pines. There were a few saddles up above, but to the right was a cliff and to the left the mountain rose some three thousand feet further, standing high and bald against the clouds, preventing escape that way. Calhoun considered the ground and knew Holliday had to be ahead of him. The only risk was that he might expose himself to an ambush or pass Holliday in concealment, and give the outlaw a chance to swing down and get completely out of the district.

He moved ahead. A movement caught his eye, slightly to the right and up above; he searched the area carefully, but the movement was not repeated. Nonetheless he had his hint, and went that way, keeping to the trees and moving as quickly as possible without exposing himself. The way was up, then downgrade for a short distance, thereafter rolling up toward the high saddle.

Behind him he heard the occasional crackling and footfalls of the vigilantes, coming up in a wide swath after him.

As he advanced, the ground became steadily rougher, with the root systems of occasional uprooted deadfalls lying fan-shaped in the forest. He had lost sight of the position ahead but kept it in mind as he climbed. Other than the small echoes of the men behind him there was no sound in the dense timber. The lag of time built in him a tension that made him feel that somewhere a rifle lay sighted on him. He caught himself bracing his muscles against an awaited bullet.

When it came, he was moving past a tree, and it was the thickness of the timber that saved him: a twig or branch, somewhere along the bullet's path, deflected the missile and sent it screaming past Calhoun's shoulder.

He wheeled back into the protection of the tree. Holliday

was up there, then, within revolver-range; he drove the pine-bark of Calhoun's tree with two thumping bullets. Calhoun placed the man's position by muzzle-smoke; he answered Holliday's fire and then spoke:

"This hill's crawling with my men, Jack. Give it up."

There was no answer. Someone called from below; it sounded like Goodfellow. Holliday fired a couple of shots, one of which splintered the bark of Calhoun's tree. Holliday had fired five; he was probably reloading now. With that in mind Calhoun stepped out and cut a quick half-circle toward the man, seeing Holliday then, at the same time that Holliday saw him.

Holliday had lost his hat and his gray hair lay matted; he was in the act of thumbing a cartridge into the gate of his Colt. Calhoun said, "Drop it now, Jack."

Holliday had the gun pointed earthward; its gate was open and it would take him time—too much time—to get it working. He let the gun drop and stood up straight, rolling his shoulders back. His eyes glinted. Calhoun said, "Walk down here."

"So you all can hang me?"

"I guess that's it," Calhoun said.

"Hell, what did I ever do to you?"

"You're a butcher, Jack. You always were."

"Too bad," Holliday murmured. "You and me, on the same side we could have made hash of this country."

"Come down."

Holliday started to walk forward. Behind Calhoun, men were beating upward through the trees, making a good deal of noise. Holliday passed near a tree and as he breasted it, he began to wheel aside. There was, suddenly, a gleam in his fist that could only come from a little gun, a sleeve gun. It was coming up when Calhoun pulled his trigger.

Holliday was dead when he fell.

Calhoun walked to him and kicked away the little gun, a double-barreled .41 Remington derringer. Holliday had been a killer to the last.

Goodfellow came up and said, "Sweet Jesus. It couldn't have been worth this. Sweet Jesus."

Thorpe had his gun, and his hand, in his coat pocket when he followed close behind Matthew Ruarke into the California saloon, going in the back way to avoid being seen; they had taken all the shadowed alleyways getting here. Thorpe lighted a match, put it to the lamp, and then closed the door. Hefting his gun suggestively, he said, "Open that safe."

Ruarke said, "Damn it, I've told you there's not more than a hundred dollars in there. We're both wasting time—we could still get to Holliday's cache."

Thorpe said again, "Open it."

"There's nothing in it!"

Thorpe lifted a corner of his lip and said, very softly, "Prove it."

Ruarke crouched to spin the dial. It seemed to take quite a while. Finally he swung the ponderous door open. He looked up. "All right," he said in a low tone, and stepped away from the safe.

"Fine—fine." Thorpe moved around him cautiously and knelt to look into the safe. The two shelves were littered with untidy stacks of papers. Batting these away with his hand, Thorpe rummaged through the back of the safe. He took a good deal of time at it. When he turned, the floor was scattered with sheets of paper, and Thorpe had in his hand a single little pile of coins, gold eagles, and an empty gold-dust poke.

"Is this all? You son of a bitch."

"Wait a minute," Ruarke said unsteadily.

With a violent curse, Thorpe shot to his feet and brought the barrel of his revolver down with full force against the side of Ruarke's head. Ruarke folded loosely, thumping the floor with his head and boots and elbows when he dropped.

Thorpe yanked out the desk drawers one by one, finding nothing of value; he rattled back the roll-top and went through the pigeon-holes; he prowled around the room,

searching, and even tried to pry up a couple of floorboards, without success. His eyes went dark and heavy. With a bleak oath he turned, sighted down the barrel of his gun, and shot the unconscious man through the head.

Leroy was moving along the outside wall of the saloon, in the alley shadows, one hand braced against the wall. His body was tilted a little to one side and the front of his coat-shoulder was stiff with a thickness of half-congealed blood where Phil Mercy's little nickel-plated gun had shot him; most of the bullet's force had been taken by the thickness of Leroy's many-layered clothing.

Leroy heard the shot just as he reached the back door of the saloon. He flung the door open and found Thorpe standing over Matthew Ruarke's body.

Thorpe's gun came around quickly. "Take it easy, ape."

Leroy scowled; he felt a little light-headed and it took him a moment to register what his eyes saw. He looked at Ruarke on the floor, and the gun in Thorpe's hand. There was a steady gleam in Thorpe's eyes; Thorpe said, "Move away from the door."

Sluggishly, Leroy said, "You killed him."

"Stand aside, ape. I'm going out the door."

Leroy used a trick he had used once before: he kicked at Thorpe's wrist when Thorpe turned. The gun flew out of Thorpe's hand. It bounced hollowly on Ruarke's chest, slid off and thumped upon the floor. Thorpe cursed between his teeth; his wrist hung at an odd angle; his face screwed up in pain. Leroy grabbed Thorpe's head between his hands and smashed it against the corner of the desk repeatedly; he finally let the man slip to the floor and sat down, forgetting about Thorpe, looking at the dead Matthew Ruarke. Leroy began to weep in great shuddering spasms.

After a while he picked up Thorpe's pistol, slipped it into his waistband and went out through the side door into the alley; he crept away from the town into the bottoms, and walked through the snow-drizzling woods. He trudged aimlessly, trying to understand, trying to bring himself to realize.

The bartender of the California was talking excitedly: "We heard a shot and a couple of us went back to the door but it was locked. Time we got it open, somebody'd gone out the back way."

"Leroy," said Price Goodfellow.

"Maybe." The bartender stood in the office doorway, scratching his beard.

"God—God," said Price Goodfellow. "If I'd known what kind of blood bath this all would lead to, I'd never have started it."

Calhoun said, "Wrong. You didn't start it, Price. Neither did any of us. It's an old game and it's never played to a finish." But he was brooding upon the corpse of Matthew Ruarke. Two men shouldered past him and picked up Ruarke's body; the thickening crowd made way for them as they carried it out. The back door of the office was open, spilling a shaft of lamplight into the dark alley, and they could see snow coming down, fairly thickly, in the night.

Beyond the office door there was an abrupt hush in the crowded saloon; boots shuffled, forming an aisle, and Catherine Goodfellow pushed the bartender out of the way. Her glance rode around from her father to Calhoun, and then dropped to lie upon the body of Thorpe, its skull crushed into a pulp; her whole body stiffened and her eyelids trembled. Goodfellow spoke to her angrily:

"You ought to know better than this, daughter."

She made no answer; she said, "Who did this?"

Her father said, "Leroy, most likely. This is no place for you, damn it."

Shelby Long stepped forward and said gently, "I'll take you home."

But Catherine had turned to look at Calhoun and did not take her eyes from him; if she knew of Shelby Long's existence she gave no sign of it. Wheelwright, the blacksmith, came into the room with a dark expression and said, "I don't know if you heard—they found Phil Mercy up by the Hilltop with a knife in his throat. He'd fired one shell. Somebody saw Leroy down in the bottoms with blood all over his coat."

Then Wheelwright saw Catherine and his mouth clamped shut.

She was looking directly at Calhoun when she said, "I don't suppose you can let him go, can you?"

Calhoun's studied gaze was lowered. This news of Mercy had hit him hard; it tightened him up and heightened the day's bowstring tensions. A sour expression distorted his mouth. Wheelwright said, "If Leroy's got a bullet in him he'll want shelter. Ain't too many places he could hide down in the bottoms, unless he's circled back into town. I guess we better not quit before we get him. God knows what he'll do if he's left to his own devices."

"Maybe he just wants to die in peace," Catherine said in a low voice.

"I don't think he's hurt that bad," Wheelwright said. "Blood poisoning might eventually kill him if he don't get it tended to, but by itself it ain't a mortal wound. Otherwise he'd have folded up before now."

"Then," Goodfellow said flatly, "he's hurt just enough to make him crazy mad. Look what he's done to Thorpe."

"What I want to know," Wheelwright said, "is how Thorpe come to be here. He should've been halfway to Sonora."

He was looking at Calhoun, but it was Goodfellow who answered: "I don't think there's much profit in speculating about that. Sam, it's still your decision. About Leroy."

"We'll have to run him down," Calhoun said, but it was evident he had no taste for it. "Get a crew and start beating the bottoms."

Goodfellow nodded. He paused by his daughter to squeeze her arm and look into her face; her eyes had gone moist. Saying nothing, Goodfellow turned, picking up Wheelwright and some others, and went out through the saloon; when he reached the front door he stopped and called for volunteers. A large body of men filed out into the cold snowy dark behind him.

Two stooped men carried Thorpe away, leaving a great dark stain where his head had lain. Calhoun took out his gun and plugged fresh cartridges into spent chambers. He looked

at the gun for some time with a strange expression on his face; finally he put it away. Shelby Long said gently, "Best be at it."

"I'll be along," Calhoun told him. Nodding, Long went out.

Catherine said, "You hate it."

"What do you expect?"

"It's what I wanted to see," she said. "I couldn't be sure what this kind of thing would do to you. It stimulates some men."

"Like Leroy," Calhoun said.

"Yes."

"And you thought I might be like him," he said, with a wry musing turn to his lips.

"In the end," she said softly, "it wouldn't have mattered. But it helps to know, Sam. So that there are no reservations." She was looking at him soberly, all the unsaid things crowding into her eyes.

He smiled slightly. "I have a feeling," he said, "that I've been going through a series of inspections and trials. But I can tell you this. Your opinions have no effect on what I do. You understand that?"

"Yes."

"All right," he said, and went out.

Goodfellow came puffing up the slope, snow bending his hatbrim. He saw Calhoun coming down, and rushed over, grabbing Calhoun's arm. Snow whipped around them and between them, and Goodfellow had to lift his voice. "One of Sanderson's horses is gone. A big bay, sixteen and a half hands."

"Any other signs?"

"No. They're combing the bottoms now."

"Maybe—maybe," Calhoun said thoughtfully. "I'll need a fresh horse."

"We'll go down to O'Hara's."

"It's going to blow," Calhoun said. "No point in both of us taking the chance."

Goodfellow's grip tightened on his arm. "Sam, listen—the

man's got a slug in him, he won't be thinking straight. He's just like a wounded cougar. He'll jump anything that moves."

"I've handled him before," Calhoun said. "This has got to be finished. But you've got no business in it, Price. I used to carry a badge—I know how it's done. You keep those crews beating the bush. That missing horse may have just wandered away."

"But damn it—"

"It's my show," Calhoun said. "I'm telling you what I want. On the run, Price." Turning away, he batted through the gusting snow toward the express office.

Nobody was around; O'Hara must have joined the posse. Calhoun was throwing a saddle on a sorrel gelding when the stable door opened, sending a shaft of cold wind down the aisle. Shelby Long said, "You'll be needing company."

Calhoun glanced at him. "All right. Hurry up."

The place was thick with damp air and horse smell; when they rode out into the night the frigid wind hit them on the cheeks and bent their heads down. Shelby Long said, "Which way?"

"Leroy hates cold weather. He'll head for the desert by the shortest route."

"Down toward Ten Springs?"

"That's my guess. Stick close to me," Calhoun said, and put his horse down the trough of the gulch.

At ten, by Long's pocketwatch, they struggled into the yard of Oakley's ranch and breasted the snow up to the horse barn. Calhoun said, "No point in going on before morning. Can't see your hand in front of your face."

"What about Leroy?"

"He'll hole up for the night. He's freezing cold by now and he can't stand that—he'll find a hole and build a fire. We'll have our chance at him after daybreak."

"What if he goes on tonight?"

"He can't see any better than we can—he'd break his neck."

"All right," Long said dubiously.

The morning broke gray and cold. Riding away from Oakley's, Calhoun tied his hat down and said, "This is just a lull. We're in for a blow."

"Think we're close to him?"

"No way to tell. He may not even be on this road."

"Too many long chances—I don't like this," Shelby Long said. "What if he pulls off the road to watch his backtrail? We could get bushwhacked easy on this road." Thick stands of pine ran down either side of the snow-banked road.

"Turn back if you want," Calhoun said shortly.

"To hell with you," was Long's cheerful reply.

Bundled in his mackinaw, Calhoun felt the bite of the wind. As he had prophesied it was not long before snowflakes came riding on the wind and the speed of it whipped up around them. The road had a soft crust of snow that made hard going. The sky was dark and growing darker; the air was quite dry but, in spite of that, the clouds were so low that he could see no great distance at all: visibility was limited by a low fog and the drift of snow through the lashing air. Straight ahead was a marching wall of blackness—the visible front of the storm.

Light drained steadily out of the morning. The wind took up a deep-throated rattle like the drum of a stampede, whipping their collars up, stinging their faces. The force of it disturbed the horses and put them into a nervous trot. When Calhoun looked across, he saw a white grin of strain on Long's face. The storm churned toward them and, in time, it seized them, shook them, shouted in their ears, stabbed and rocked and buffeted. Calhoun reined close to Long and leaned half out of the saddle to yell directly into Long's ear:

"Get down and walk. Grab the tail of my horse and hang onto it."

"What?"

Calhoun put his mouth against Long's ear, peeling the hatbrim away, and repeated his command. Long nodded his understanding and dismounted.

Calhoun got down and waited until he was sure that Long

had the sorrel's tail twined securely in his glove; then Calhoun pushed ahead on foot, leading his horse.

The snow came in sharp blades, like hail. Frost formed on his jaw and he scraped it away. The wind took away the steam of his breath. As he walked, he stamped his legs up and down to keep them from numbing; they began to tingle sharply. To either side he could see the vague shadows of trees being bent by the wind; the storm was a swirling fury that all but blinded him. It was a lucky thing the road was so well defined by its timber borders. Occasionally he blundered off to one side or another; once he bruised his face against a tree, walking into it bluntly, not seeing it at all.

The road turned into the teeth of the wind and Calhoun's horse stopped, standing stiffly braced, rooted to the spot. He hauled it after him and in that manner, groping blindly at a snail's pace, they progressed through the howling storm.

The storm thrust an unspeakable terror into Leroy. He cringed before it. His body was beaded with cold sweat inside the heavy laminations of his clothing—his shoulder throbbed dully, he had fits of dizziness when a red film glossed his vision and his muscles would not obey him. He batted through the blizzard in a state of half-panic, spurring the horse mercilessly until it refused to go on, whereupon he finally had to dismount and lead it, his great shoulders hunched protectively like those of a coward threatened by an upraised fist.

The wind blasted him with an exceptional gust and for a moment he thought he had gone blind; then he realized the wind had pinned his hatbrim over his eyes.

He did not engage in very much conscious thinking. His one goal was to outrun the storm, to get down to the flats where the sun shone and where it was warm. His strange world had fallen down around Leroy's ears—Ruarke was dead, there was no one whose decisive mind Leroy could cling to as a buoy; someone had surely seen him running away from Mercy's body. He thought not so much in terms of escape or of revenge; his brain was fogged in a misery of

chill and fear. Once in a while a vague flicker of hatred and anger traveled through him and he would mutter, "I'll show them, I'll show them," without ever defining the idea.

The wind swayed him like a drunk. He was half numb, he staggered on legs that had little feeling in them. His foot plunged down through a softness of snow and there was no bottom; terrified, he clutched the reins with a death grip. The horse's head came down and Leroy slid down a smooth cliff of snow, scrambling for purchase with his feet, crying out—his voice was carried away on the wind. One boot snagged a foothold—a root or a rock; he stood on that foot, balancing by his grip on the reins, siezed by a great tremor that almost shook him off the mountainside.

Putting the cruel mass of his weight on the horse's bridle, he hauled himself up. He found where the road turned around to the right around a switchback. The breath that heaved into his lungs was hard and fast; it seared him like steel blades.

XIV

THE FORCE of the storm alleviated slowly but the temperature held to a low point. Calhoun stopped once and walked back to see that Shelby Long was still there; Long's glove was meshed stubbornly in the hair of the sorrel's tail and Long dredged up a grin from some deep resource.

Calhoun's legs were almost dead; his nose was stiff and his cheeks raw. But then, as abruptly as it had begun, the wind died away and the snow quit falling. On the far horizon a blue patch of sky broke through the mist. The road ahead was suddenly visible for a length of several hundred yards before it curved around a cliff turn and dropped out of sight beyond the slope.

They made a stop and dug down beneath the snow-cover with numbed hands, finding wood; Long had a sheet of paper in his pocket and with that they managed to get a little fire going. The damp wood made a lot of smoke; it sizzled and burned badly, but it was enough to warm their hands and faces. Long said, "Suppose Leroy's around here—he'll see the smoke."

"Can't be helped. If it comes to shooting we'll need to be able to use our hands."

"Damn it, I wish I knew how you stay so damned cool about it."

"Old habit," Calhoun said. "Never let the other fellow know how scared you are." He smiled.

Long said worriedly, "Maybe we ought to just let him go. If he's headed down this road he's on his way out of the country."

"If he gets away," Calhoun disagreed, "he'll be back to make trouble. Matt Ruarke treated him like a dog but that's the way Leroy liked it. He'll remember Ruarke and he'll figure it was the town that caused all this. One night we might find the whole camp in flames if Leroy's not stopped."

"Maybe you're right. Hell, I'm pretty damn sapped and I need a drink and a good meal. I don't know how the hell you keep right on rolling along like a stinking rock."

They rode on around the bend, dropping down a steep stretch of road that wound between great boulders. Here Calhoun kept watch with redoubled care. The road climbed over a narrow pass and Calhoun scoured the breaks below for sign of Leroy, but caught no sight of movement from this high place. Long said, "Maybe it's a wild goose chase. You're only guessin', after all. Maybe they've caught him in the bottoms—maybe he went over the pass to Mexico. Maybe he's holed up in a cave someplace dying."

"Maybe," was all Calhoun said.

The temperatures climbed sharply with the passing of the snow storm, but Leroy paid it little notice. He was still shivering violently when he got down off the exhausted horse and tugged Thorpe's heavy revolver out of his waistband. He used it as a hammer to break the ice on the surface of a little creek; he then set the revolver aside in the snow while he dipped a hatful of water and gave it to the horse, and drank of it himself. He squatted by the creek, cold to the bone, debating whether he should build a fire here or keep pushing down toward the plains.

He took off his gloves and rubbed his hands together with great speed until the friction set up a hot pain in his palms. He started to get up and then noticed the revolver where he had dropped it in the snow. Creek water had formed a frosting of ice on the metal. He reached out and picked up the gun.

Gripping it tightly, he picked up his gloves with his free hand and turned toward the horse. He lifted his coat to put the gun away, and found that his hand was frozen to the metal.

Incoherent fear clutched him. Instead of slowly peeling the glue-stuck gun away, he grabbed it with his free hand and ripped it out of his fist. The gun took a patch of flesh with it; his hand began to bleed.

With a great oath he hurled the gun far away into the snow.

The road crossed a canyon-bottom creek at a shallow ford. Calhoun pulled up frowning and Shelby Long said, "Ice busted there. Somebody went across since the storm."

Calhoun nodded; he searched both banks minutely before he put his horse into the creek. Pausing again on the far side, he searched for tracks and finally found them. Long came up, a rifle across his arm, and they went up the side of the canyon at a trot, leaning forward in their saddles. As they approached the top a thick cloud moved above them and a light snow began to fall, flaky and dry. Long said, "Blue sky over the desert. If that's Leroy ahead of us, he'd headed for it straight as a bee."

When they reached the summit Calhoun raised his arm, pointing. There was motion below them, something moving through the trees on the road perhaps a mile below. Calhoun stood up in the stirrups.

Very small at that distance, a horseman appeared at the edge of the pines, paused evidently to look around him, and ran quickly across, disappearing into the timber on the far side.

Long said, with veiled excitement, "That could be him."

They put their horses downslope, lifting them to the canter, and ran directly down the road. The ragged edges of the country swallowed them, destroying their view of the land ahead. Calhoun cut away from the road and rammed through the trees, running straight at the place where he judged the horseman would reappear from the pines. It was more than a mile and took them a good deal of time to reach that point, and the horseman was still ahead of them when they reached it, somewhere in the timber beyond the road. Calhoun said, "He's spotted us—he left the road here." He ran right across the road, wheeled into the trees and stopped to look for tracks in the new snow. He took the glove off his right hand, readying it for the gun, and put the hand in his coat pocket to keep it warm.

There was a tangle of brush and deadfalls; they circled for several minutes, eyes on the ground, and finally Shelby Long called softly, "Over here." They put their horses into the trail and lifted to a trot, watching warily, riding a few yards apart from each other.

The tracks were easy to follow in the new snow and they ran along, alternating between trot and gallop as the terrain dictated. The feather snowfall quit as its cloud passed on, and for the first time in several days they had sunshine. The tracks moved down through the canyons, headed for the foothills; Long said, "He's moving fast or we'd be up with him by now."

They wasted ten minutes picking up the trail where the horseman had floundered around a rock shelf; it was Calhoun who found a fresh white scrape on the granite that only a horseshoe could have made. But the break gave the horseman time to get well ahead of them, and it settled down into a long steady chase.

The tracks dropped into the foothills, ran across hills studded with creosote and cholla cactus, and dropped them toward the Santa Maria River, not a mile upstream from the Ten Springs stagecoach station. It was midafternoon, the sky was bright and clear; down here on the edge of the desert the temperature hung comfortably up in the fifties.

Calhoun pulled up a hundred feet short of the river, holding up his hand in cautioning signal. The tracks went straight into the river and came out directly on the other side, curling into the thick brush at an indeterminate angle.

Calhoun raised his gun and pointed it ahead of him and rode toward the Santa Maria. Nothing stirred; he put the sorrel into the river and came up out of the swollen flow with his pantslegs dripping. When he achieved the rim of the brush cover he scouted around for a few minutes and then waved to Shelby Long, who came across with his rifle cocked.

The tracks ran out to a point perhaps two hundred yards from the bank and then turned directly toward the stage

station, paralleling the river. They came upon a place where the rider had stopped and watched his backtrail, the horse fidgeting around making a confusion of milling tracks.

Long was looking around him nervously. Calhoun said, "He's gone on into the station."

He dismounted in the brush, palmed his gun and said, "You take the station-house, I'll take the barn."

"Well," said Long, "all right." He was plainly worried; he didn't like the scent of it. They moved through the brush until they reached the cleared area surrounding the station. The road came up from the river here, wide and sandy. Sunlight put a gleam on the desert: shafts of light glinted painfully from particles of mica and pyrites in the ground. "Good spot for him to cut us down," Long said.

"Cover me, then."

"Wait a minute," Long said, but by then Calhoun was gone, sprinting across the open ground.

The nearer building was the station house. Calhoun reached the wall and spun flat against it. Horses milled around in the corral and a farther pen contained mules. The ground was a little damp from rain. No sounds broke the stillness. Calhoun raised his leg and kicked the door in.

"All right—all right. Come on in."

The voice was hoarse and weak. Puzzled, Calhoun swiveled in and stepped immediately aside so that he would not be silhouetted in the doorway.

The station hostler was slumped in a chair, rubbing his head; he issued a low groan. Calhoun said, "Somebody buffalo you?"

The hostler raised his head slowly, grimacing. "Leroy Hamlin," he said, and looked around the room. "Nothin's missing. I come inside and Leroy batted me over the head with his Goddamn fist. Like a puking axe it was. I come to and got into this chair."

Calhoun went back to the door and waved to Shelby Long, who darted forward with his gun cocked and came inside breathing fast. Calhoun said, "I'm going to the barn. Cover me from here."

"Maybe we ought to both—"

"My way," Calhoun muttered, and went outside.

The barn door stood open, yawning; it was dark inside. Calhoun was in no hurry as he crossed the yard. His gun leveled, he stepped boldly inside. "Come on out, Leroy."

A scratch of sound turned him. Leroy was just inside the door, beside it. Leroy brought his pitchfork down heavily. It hit Calhoun across the forearm and numbed his whole arm from the shoulder; the gun dropped to the floor. Leroy rammed forward, thrusting with the pitchfork. His eyes were wild; his coat was dark with blood.

Calhoun rolled frantically aside, batting at the fork, and got a grip on it just above the tines. His weight brought the fork down into the sod floor. The fork rammed tine-deep into the ground and its handle caught Leroy's belly; Leroy's breath whooshed and he bent double over the implanted handle. Calhoun came up from the floor and swung his fist powerfully into Leroy's face.

He felt a flash of pain in his hand. Leroy went up and back, striking the wall hard enough to make the building shudder. Leroy looked dazed; his left arm was not working very well. Calhoun said softly, "You may as well give up now."

"You—Goddamn, I'll get you!" Leroy roared. He thrust himself away from the wall and charged with his head lowered like a bull. His stride was uneven; he swayed from side to side. Fresh blood was now pulsing from his wounded shoulder. Halfway to Calhoun he stumbled but kept his feet and came on. Calhoun easily sidestepped the blind charge and whacked the edge of his hand against Leroy's neck as Leroy roared past.

Leroy's feet began to collapse; he staggered on past Calhoun and then, abruptly, he dropped like a lead sinker. His head clanged on the anvil and he rolled violently away, going loose at the hinges before he hit the floor.

In the doorway, Shelby Long said, "Like a pole-axed steer. What happened?"

"Blood loss, I guess," Calhoun said. His voice was low and

weary. He wiped a hand across his face and rubbed the sore knuckles on his right hand. They walked over to Leroy together and bent down. Leroy was not breathing; his skull had cracked against the anvil and Leroy was dead.

"Jesus God," Shelby Long whispered.

"That bullet of Mercy's must have nicked an artery—Leroy should have been dead a long while ago."

They walked to the barn door. The sun was dropping toward the high passes to the west. When it went, the desert would turn bleak and cold. Calhoun pushed away from the door and walked stiff-legged across the open ground.

Catherine was standing on the porch. Calhoun climbed the steps with heavy legs. She had her eyes on his face but for a while neither of them said anything. Price Goodfellow came out of the house smoking a cigar and looking relaxed for the first time in weeks. He had a close look at Calhoun and then at his daughter, and went back into the house without talking to either of them. It brought out Catherine's gentle smile.

A horseman came up the gulch and paused below the porch. That was Shelby Long. Hands folded on the saddle, he nodded to Catherine and said, "Any more papers I got to sign?"

"No," Calhoun said.

"Figure I'll run some cows down south Texas," Long said. "You get tired of this country, come on down and see me. Both of you." He grinned.

"You're leaving now?" Catherine asked.

"Had my fill," Long said. "Sam bought me out. I got enough money to start a nice little herd."

Calhoun said, "Careful taking that gold out of these mountains. There may be other rats in the walls."

"Nobody's gettin' my stake," Long said. He grinned suddenly, touched his hatbrim, and gigged his horse away, going up over the top of the gulch. He stopped and waved to them, then rode past the Hilltop and went out of sight.

"All gone," Calhoun said soberly. "Phil Mercy and now

Shelby. I seem to go through life losing friends, one way or another." He smiled briefly.

"You haven't lost me," she said.

"I wasn't sure about that, either."

"What about it, Sam?"

He looked into her eyes and shook his head; he said, "A lot of ghosts around here, Catherine. I need time to sort it out."

She only watched him. He searched her eyes for a moment and then dropped his head and tasted the warm sweetness of her lips. When he drew away he said, "Time to think, maybe."

"I'll wait."

"I can't make any promises."

"All right." She made it a statement, but there was a question in her gaze, and in answer to it Calhoun said: "I don't know." She nodded soberly and turned, going into the house. Calhoun dropped off the horse and walked up to the Hilltop, kicking up little scuffs of snow as he strode the mountainside.