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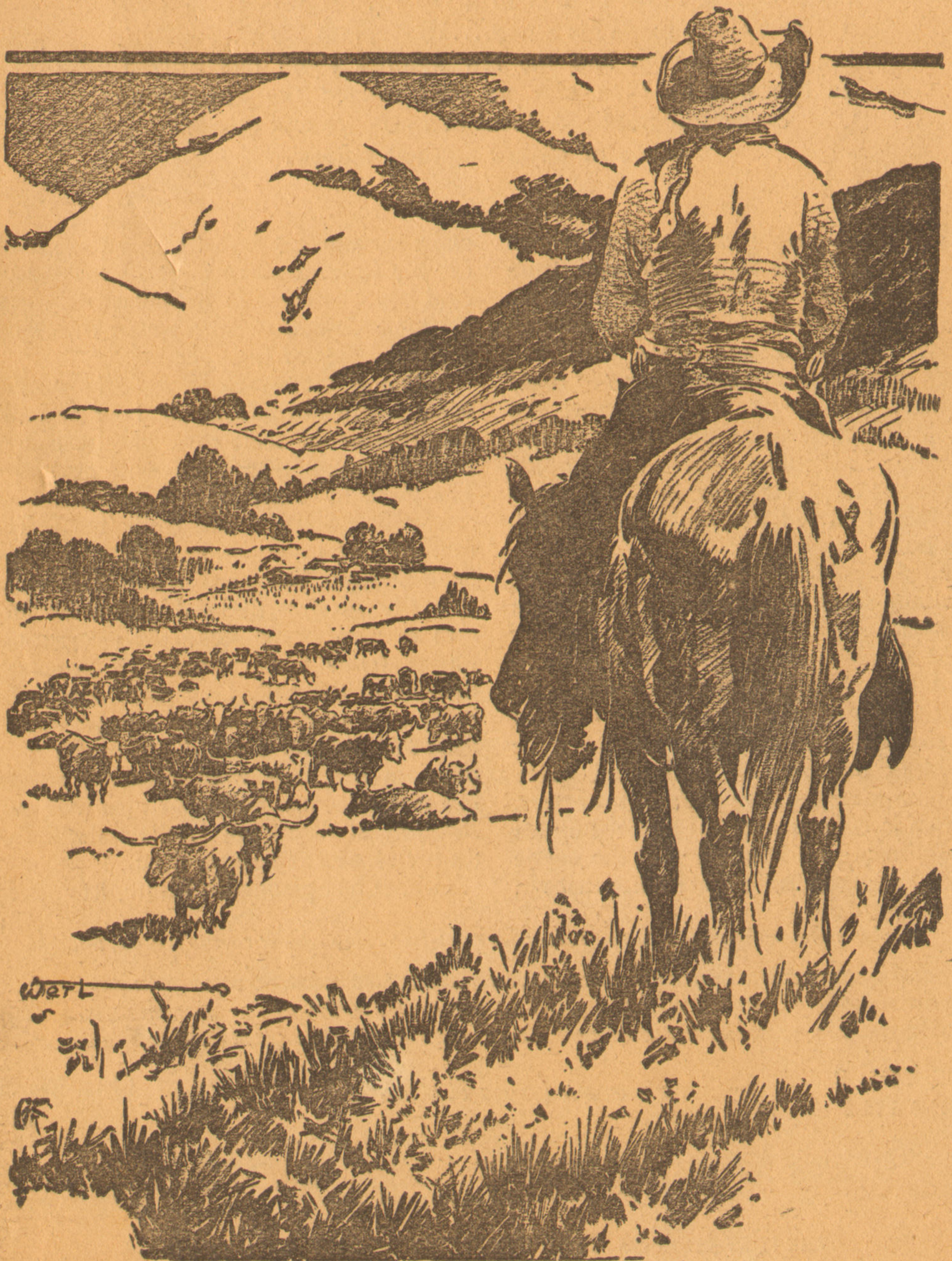
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DRUMFIRE RANGE

By TOM J. HOPKINS



DRUMFIRE RANGE

By TOM J. HOPKINS

The killer-trail led to the valley known as "a hundred and sixty square miles of hell in a hollow." It was there that Hasty Grimes made his stand.... Hasty, and his hard-bitten, lawless crew who had the law against them but prayed justice was on their side as they ranged the murderous corners of Robbers' Roost in a strange and bloody battle of outlaw against outlaw.

THEY were eight tough and wild men and they rode south and west from the pine-covered ridges near the Black Hills. The trail was known only through hearsay, landmarks and signs men had spoken of over the dimming flames of many campfires. But they followed it truly and without mistakes. Grim, hard-faced, beards thickening as the days followed each other, but the horses—their one care and worry—were kept well fed and ready for the next day's trail.

And always Hasty Grimes was in the lead. A medium-sized man but a bull for strength and with a quick driving energy that always sought an outlet except when he was sleeping. A fast-moving fellow, quick and sharp in speech, keen and wise in the ways of man and animal in the country he loved, he had bleak moments of soft-voiced quiet. And those were the danger times for others.

Often in cold gray dawns he sized up his men following his keen study of the saddle horses. Each man had a spare horse that ran

easily through his day of rest, getting ready for the load he carried on alternate days. And being satisfied of his horses each gray morning, Grimes swept his men with those cold blue eyes of his.

Three of those men he could be sure of through life and into death. Four he could not, because of their past. But he had to trust them and take them with him now. The three he could trust were Arch Harigan, Slim Semple, and Dolly Dahl. The four he had to watch were Tom Sistrom, Skull Duggan, Jack Martin, and Ben Peters.

Yet he grew to like and trust those four men as they swept along the country the wagon trains had crossed not too many decades in the past. Like them and to be fairly sure of them—up to a point—when their first fighting came. It was near a little cowtown that they were sweeping around late one afternoon when five men rode out, shooting as they came. Bullets slashed at them and whistled about them.

Grimes had planned it before, hammered

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JACK O'SULLIVAN, Editor

JACK BYRNE, Mang. Editor

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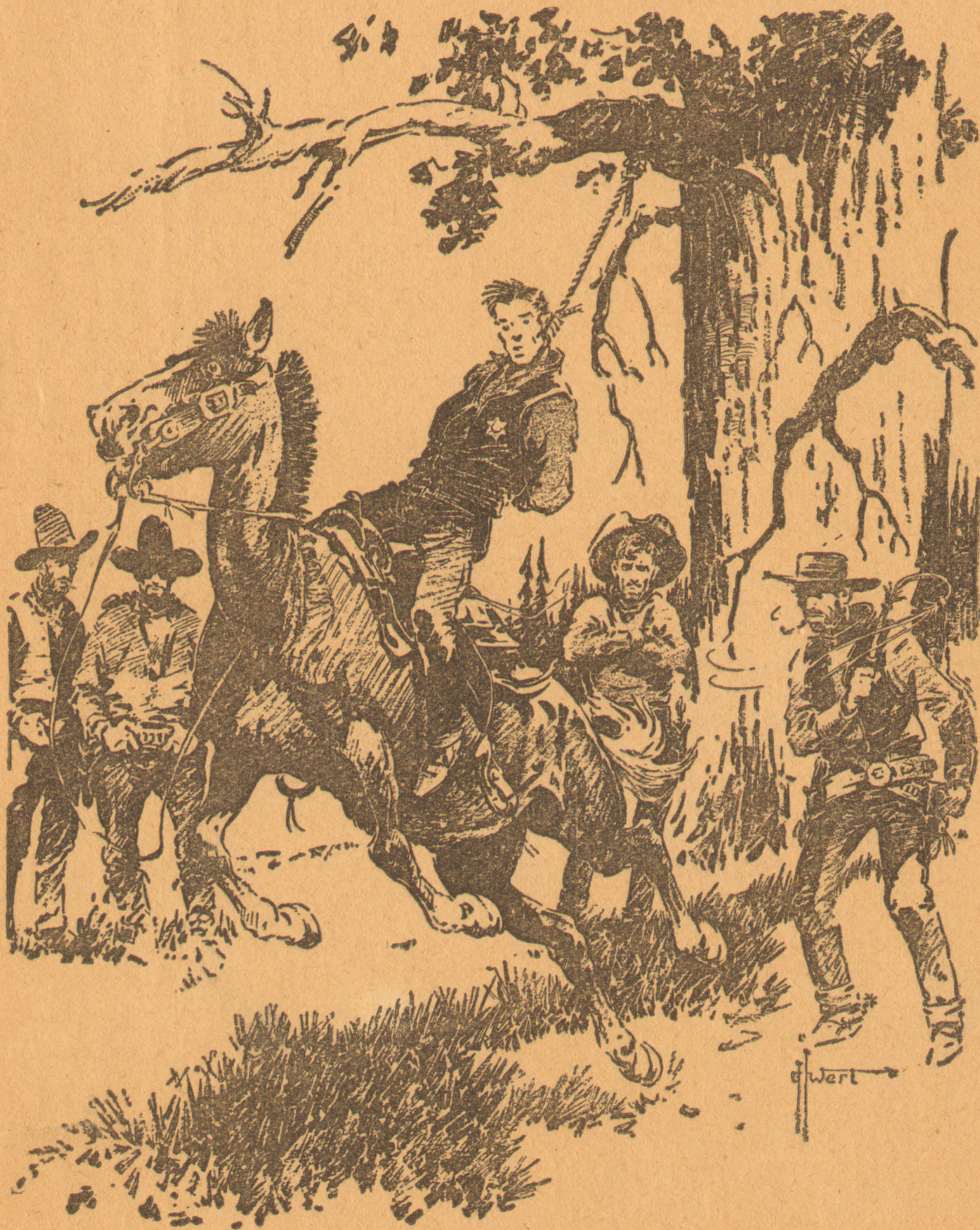
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it into his men often and harshly, so they did not speak or waste a move. Peters and Dahl rode on with the spare saddlers while Grimes and the others turned in their saddles, pulling their Winchesters from under their left legs as they turned. They kneed their horses into a walk and rode slowly back and forth, sending whining feelers of lead back at the five men. Lead that

whispered softly past them, kicked dust, slapped rocks and trees. And all the time the lead warned the five men to turn back—now!

And turn back they did while Grimes and his seven men rode on. "Why?" said Arch Harrigan when they came together again. "How could the word get passed along so soon?"



Grimes shook his head. "We're on the Outlaw Trail," he explained. "Decent people near it don't want strangers around them. It's too damned dangerous to them and their belongings." He grinned as though to hide his bitterness.

They rode on, day following day, and one night when they started cutting due south they edged into some hills to make their night's camp. And again lead bit at them. A herd of cattle was boxed in a big meadow and the men holding them were being certain no rider got near enough to read the brands. Those shots were warning shots, over their heads. Grimes waved his hat and turned back with his men, seeking another camping place. He did not have to tell them it was a stolen herd, one of the dozens that went up or down the Outlaw Trail each year. Handled by hunted men who wanted no contact with outsiders, known or unknown.

They slashed through the hills and into the mountains. They talked little. It all had been said before they started. Now it only remained to do the job. A grim job. A hellish job in the minds of some of them. But it had to be done.

DAYS later they cut through the mountains and came out near the old stage road that went south from Rock Springs. They crossed it, not wanting to be seen, and rode for the banks of Vermillion Creek. They followed it warily into a small valley. It was growing closer and closer, that thing they had come to do. And the hours, minutes, and seconds even, carried more and more danger for them. They crossed the small valley near the western ridges, swept into the large valley at its northeast corner, and rode on down Vermillion Creek until it ran against the grim wall of the mountains and turned northwest to join the Green River.

"Now," demanded Skull Duggan almost angrily, "how will we know? You wanted to cut down off the trail, Grimes. Now, how the hell can you tell whether they're north of us or south of us?"

Grimes grinned at the thin-faced, worn, and gaunt-bodied man. Skull was sick, that was plain. He was sick and weak and he never should have come. But he had refused

to stay home in safety and Jack Martin, who almost worshipped him, had added his word. "Hell, Grimes, let him come. Let a man die fighting, not in bed."

So Grimes had relented and let Skull come along, and now he thought sadly that Skull could not live through even two days more of their tough and wild riding.

"We'll slide into the crossroads store and saloon," Grimes said to Skull. "We can ask questions maybe."

So they turned north and west toward the junction of the two stage roads where a small community was growing in the valley that was sometimes called "One hundred and sixty square miles of hell in a hollow."

Skull rode loosely, his feet swinging at times, with his head down a little on his thin neck. But his tired eyes were alert and it was he who first noted the sign of a horse herd. He called out, "Here," and pointed.

Grimes pulled up, and their horses snorted and pushed against their bits as the men stared about and read signs carefully and wisely. Calling on their cumulative years of experience, they stared here and there and counted mentally. Grimes saw something on a clump of brush and rode over to it. He came back holding some tawny hair from the mane of a horse and said clearly, "This looks like it. About a hundred head, and some palominos in the herd. It'll be them."

"Maybe," growled Skull, and they rode on toward the buildings clustered at the crossroads a mile away.

Grimes suddenly cursed heavily and spurred his horse to one side. He rode a hundred feet at a gallop and then pulled up. As the others rode toward him they could see his lips working mutely as he stared down into a hollow. What the coyotes and buzzards had left of a colt lay in the hollow, but what lay there was enough. It was a palomino colt and it bore the small iron, neck-branded under the mane, of a horse ranch in Texas that they knew only too well.

Skull Duggan looked at Grimes and spoke slowly, thickly, and with great effort. "You win, Grimes. I thought you were loco to take that short cut off the Outlaw Trail. But you were right."

And having said that, Skull curled limply in the saddle, sighed wearily, and pitched headlong to the ground. His horse stepped gingerly away from him, looking back as he trailed the reins a dozen feet before he stopped.

Grimes was first out of the saddle, "For God's sake, Skull," he said, as he crouched by the limp man.

Jack Martin was swearing softly but there were tears in his eyes as he hit the ground, knelt, and spoke. "Skull, you ain't dead, are you?" And when he saw Skull was still breathing he looked up at Grimes and growled, "Do something, damn you. You're the boss man of this crowd—do something!"

Grimes smiled at him. "Take it easy. Make camp over there by the water. I'll ride into town and see if there's anybody knows anything about medicine in that joint."

He swung into the saddle again, and Arch Harrigan pulled his horse over to ride beside him. "You ain't riding into that town alone, fella. There's been too much shooting going on, and there's going to be more. You ain't riding into that place alone."

So the two rode shoulder to shoulder along the mile of dusty road.

Harrigan jerked his head back in a quick gesture. "You think he's gotta chance, Hasty?"

Grimes brooded for a time, his eyes shifting and keen as he studied the land opening before them. "Not for long," he said quietly. "It's been coming on for years. My brother wrote me. The doctors gave him three years and it's six now."

At the mention of Grimes's brother their eyes clouded momentarily, then cleared.

"All you can do," added Grimes, "is to make it easy for him. Paregoric, or some of those baby medicines like that one they paint on the barns, Mrs. Winslow's Soothing Syrup. It helps him."

The low valley was flat rich land through which the river had cut a wide, hard gash, and cattle grazed all about them. Ranches showed in dotted spots of houses and barns, corrals and outbuildings. Some clear and distinct, others dim in the distance on the first rising benches of the mountains that closed in the valley. Smoke rose from most as they neared the half-dozen buildings that made the settlement.

THEY stepped down from their horses almost warily, standing for a brief time as their eyes sought sign of trouble. But no one looked at them. A blacksmith was shoeing a horse down the road a piece at his forge and as he shaped the shoe his anvil rang heartily. A hen squawked and ran across the road although no horse or man was near enough to trouble it. A fat man standing in the saloon door, coatless despite the cold, spoke to no one in particular.

"Hens are damned fools," he said.

Grimes's voice was a soft, low whisper. "He's gabby. Get a drink and whatever news you can, Arch. I'll get the medicine and join you."

Harrigan nodded and went into the saloon, the fat man following him. He noted above the door, "Biff Klingens Place," and on the inside over the bar was another sign. "We don't ask or answer questions here." He grinned coldly. There were other ways to get information besides asking questions.

Klingen, whose sleeves were rolled up to his elbows showing a thick length of red flannel underwear, balled the fist of his right hand and put it down on the bar with thumb sticking straight up. He looked at Harrigan and his eyes seemed to change faintly. He rolled the hand over and put it flat on the bar, saying, "What's it going to be?"

Harrigan knew that he had missed a sign, a signal or code of some sort, and he grunted in disgust. "Thought you didn't ask questions here?" he said sourly, nodding at the sign.

Klingen grinned, but there was nothing friendly in it. He waited until Harrigan grunted a word, "Whiskey," and then slapped a bottle and a glass in front of the bearded fellow.

"Two," said Harrigan. "My friend's coming in."

Another glass joined the first and Klingen stood there, hand out for the money. He took a fifty-cent piece, nodded, and shoved it in his pocket. Harrigan smiled and said, "Have one?" as he pushed out another quarter dollar. "No," said Klingen, and leaned back against the backbar. His elbows hooked on it and he waited, unsmiling. But Harrigan didn't pour the drinks. He knew

the man would take the bottle and move off when he did, and he wanted him there for a moment.

"Got a sick friend," said Harrigan. He seemed to be getting talkative. "Our boss is in the store getting medicine for him. There's eight of us, and only one is sick," and his words were a warning to Klingen.

Then, slowly, Harrigan said, "We seen the trail of a horse herd on the road. And a dead palomino colt." His fixed gaze was something Klingen did not like.

Klingen's eyes jerked very slightly away and came back. "Well?" he said evenly.

Harrigan said as evenly, "That's all. Just mentioned it. They were going north through your valley a couple of days back by the sign. If we wanted them, we wouldn't have to ask questions. We got eyes. We can read signs. There's eight of us, Klingen." He nodded. "None of us are young. So you know we can take care of ourselves or we wouldn't have lived this long. That sounds reasonable, don't it, Klingen?"

"That's right, mister," said Klingen without change of expression. He heard the thud of bootheels and shifted his eyes to the door, then back to Harrigan's face. The newcomer who joined this stranger, he noted, did not wear spurs either. Riding men who didn't wear spurs didn't want jingles to be heard in case they were being quiet for some reason best known to themselves.

Harrigan poured two drinks and Grimes nodded. "Pills," he said. "They had some pills that are better than paregoric, the man said. He ordered a bunch for a fellow that died six years back. I got what he had left."

He drank and poured a second, adding to Harrigan's glass. He looked at Klingen, and the bartender said, "That was Jeff Coutts. He suffered a lot before he died. Your friend here says you got a party of eight. I charge a dollar fifty for a quart of that stuff you're drinking, if you want one. Not that it's any of my damned business."

"Uh-huh," said Grimes, and shoved out a dollar and fifty cents. He nodded to Harrigan, took the quart Klingen handed him, and then walked out with Harrigan close beside him.

Klingen walked to the door and watched them ride off. He shook his head in a curious

quick gesture. Somebody is going to get hurt, he brooded as he watched. They're tougher than hell and they want that horse herd. Somebody is going to get hurt.

He saw Joe Starkey the blacksmith staring after the two men. Then Sam Bonham and Karl Sutro, two ranchers from the upper end of the valley, came out of the store and stared fixedly after Grimes and Harrigan. Tex Tieters, the storekeeper, came out and stood beside them. Black Boyd, the wild Negro who lived up on Dead Cow Flats, came around the corner of the store and stared. Mrs. Jensen standing in the side door of the Maunders home, where she cooked and kept house for Maunders and his seventeen-year-old son, also stared after the two riders.

Bonham said slowly, "They're camped down by the dead colt, he said." Sutro nodded. Both men had the same idea. They mounted and rode toward their ranches in the upper end. By dark half the valley knew it, and by dawn all did.

Eight tough and wild men in the valley. After the horse herd that had passed through two days back. Black Boyd had told them all the herd was being held on the bench near Dead Cow Flats. Over near Ewing Canyon. The men shook their heads and the womenfolk worried and told them to keep out of it. Keep out of it. That was the way they kept alive and herding cattle in that valley. Mixing into things was dangerous that close to the Outlaw Trail.

"Hell," said Colis Kerlee, the transplanted Britisher. "What else can a man do when he doesn't know about his neighbors?" That was it. Whom could you trust? If you said something to your neighbor about driving out the rustlers and bank robbers, you might find your home burned some night. Or you might not live to see it burned.

So the word passed in the valley but stopped before it reached up onto the bench where the horse herd grazed. And the four men guarding the herd lazed about camp smoking and playing cards, wondering why the hell the boss had ordered them to wait there.

The sun lacked an hour of hiding behind the grim western mountains when Grimes and Harrigan rode up to the small camp in the willow bottom. The men had made a

soft bed and shelter for Skull Duggan, had built a fire and warmed some food for the pale, quivering-lipped man.

TOM SISTROM, mean and ornery and fighting discipline whenever Grimes gave an order, knelt beside his friend and fanned him slowly. Sistrom's voice was bitter as he looked up and said, "It took you two buzzards plenty long. Getting drunk, I s'pose, while Skull here suffers like hell."

Grimes's voice was low and soft and his smile almost that of an angel as he said, "Get up on your feet, Sistrom, and say that again." He stepped down from his horse and stood squarely in front of Tom Sistrom. "Get up, I say, and speak your little piece again," and still his voice was soft and gentle and he smiled sweetly.

Sistrom stared for a time, and his small, dark eyes never stirred from Grimes's face. His chunky body seemed to be alive with the wild desire to come to his feet, fighting. He was a dark man, a set and stubborn man. Discipline irked him, and that was why he rode the night trails and hated men who wore stars. But he was on a job now. He knew it, and knew the boss when he saw him.

"Later," said Sistrom, quietly and evenly. "Later." And he fanned Skull steadily with his hat.

"Aw, hell," said Ben Peters with a cold smile. "Take a chance, Tom." He nodded. A gambler in all things, he said it again, swaying his small and wiry figure against the wind. "Take a chance. George Washington did, and look at this country now."

Jack Martin chuckled. He was the clown of the party usually, and now he laughed after his chuckle. He said, "Ain't we the damned fools now? We're four men against four men, instead of eight against the world. Let's just shoot it out between ourselves and to hell with that nice big herd of a hundred fine horses!"

And he laughed again, his clowning as it so often did, giving them something to think over.

Grimes did not join in the somewhat sour laughter. He poured a tin cup full of whiskey and took two pills from the small bottle. "Here, Skull, this'll fix up that pain. Wash

'em down with this, and I'll give you the bottle to suck on after the boys get their shots."

Skull did as ordered, drinking the whiskey like water. He eased back on his bedroll and sighed. "Quit fanning me, you son," he growled at Sistrom.

As Sistrom stood up, putting on his hat, Grimes was doling out the whiskey. "We had two drinks and each of you boys get the same," he said flatly. "The rest of the bottle goes to Skull. He really needs it."

"Gimme an hour, Grimes," said Skull weakly, "an' I'll be riding with you. We can make some miles yet this day. We can get closer to that horse herd we want."

"No." Grimes said it flatly. "You rest."

"To hell with that rest stuff." Skull started to struggle to a sitting position.

They heard the pound of horses on the stage road a hundred feet from them. They turned slowly, warily; even Skull shifted and got on his left elbow so he could draw his right-hand gun if need came.

There were four riders on the road—three men and a girl. And as they stared, the group swung over toward them. One of the men, a big, bearded, unctuous-voiced fellow, spoke heavily. "Stay back, Kate. There may be trouble herel"

II

GRIMES stood stiffly and watched them come. His steady eyes swept the three men swiftly and settled on one rider. The Law. There was something that could not be hidden on that man, even though he did not wear a star.

"This is it," said Grimes in a low voice. "Take it easy and don't start anything. We can't start anything. We've got to get those horses."

Yet it was not the man Grimes had picked who did the talking. It was the big bearded man who had ordered the girl to stay back—and who had not been obeyed—who spoke first.

"Move on. You're on owned land, private ground. Move on. We don't want your kind camping near us." His voice had the heavy oily sound of a preacher yet he wore a pistol hanging from a belt well filled with cartridges.

Tom Sistrom took a quick step forward and his dark jaw jutted out. "That sounds like an order, mister."

"It is an order," said John Maunders heavily. "This is my land you are camping on and while I'm ready and willing to share my worldly goods with my fellow man, as the Bible tells me I should, you men"—he paused dramatically, then went on—"you men are not the kind I want to share with. I can read in your faces that you aren't. You're the kind we've had trouble with in this valley. It's high time that was ended. Move on. Now. That is an order!"

Grimes had stiffened a little when Sistrom broke his orders and stepped forward. He had laid his hand on Sistrom's shoulder to quiet him. But it did not. Sistrom, always against discipline and orders, broke out angrily.

"And what backs up that order, mister?" He spoke roughly. "We're eight to three. What backs up that order?"

Grimes's hand tightened on Sistrom's shoulder and the man winced, so hard was the grip. But he did not take his hard and angry stare from Maunders's face.

"What backs up my order?" Maunders spoke sharply now. "The law backs it up!"

"What law?" It was none of Grimes's men who said it. It was the tall man who sat easily in his worn saddle beside Maunders. "What law, Maunders? Since when have you any law in the valley?"

Maunders looked at his companion for a moment, ignoring the boyish young fellow who sat beside the girl. Then his small eyes shifted to Grimes, Sistrom, and the others. "God's law," he said solemnly. "I don't mean your kind and my kind of law. But the Will and the Word of God. The righteous and the good shall survive and prosper and the evil shall be punished and die. So it is written in the Book. So I say again, move on. You are evil men, and we want none of you or your misdeeds in our valley."

"That's not what I've heard about this valley," said Grimes quietly, his voice soft and easy. "It's on the Outlaw Trail, men tell me. And nothing has ever been done about it by any man in this valley!"

"I tell you—" Maunders started to speak heavily.

"Wait," Grimes interrupted. "I listened to

you, now you listen to me. This man of mine is sick, very sick. We've been riding hard and he needs rest. We're camping here tonight, we're going to rest tomorrow until some time in the afternoon. Then we'll move on. And not before. If you want to move us on before that time it means fight. You'd better go get some more people to help you, mister."

Maunders seemed to stiffen in the saddle and his eyes turned hot and angry. His son, a young fellow in his late teens, touched his spurs to his horse and moved up near his father. Maunders turned to him angrily.

"Get back, you fool," he said heavily to his son. "Get back, I say. If there is a fight you'll just be in the way. A child like you!"

Jack Maunders turned a dull beet red under his tan and his lips trembled a little. He backed his horse the six feet or more to join the girl, and he whispered something to her. She put her hand on his arm for a moment, but she was staring past Maunders and Burton, her eyes on Skull Duggan.

"Maybe I'm sick," said Skull Duggan grimly, "but when the fight starts you'll find I ain't dead yet."

"I—" Maunders started to speak, but stopped.

Kate Kerlee had suddenly touched heels to her horse's ribs. She rode forward, around Maunders and his companion, Burton, and stepped swiftly down from the saddle. Her eyes and expression were warm, friendly, as she knelt beside Skull.

"You are sick, very sick. Why don't you lie down, man?" She spoke gently. "I studied nursing for a while. You should be in bed, with good care. You shouldn't be out this way."

Maunders tightened his hands into fists and unclenched them. But Burton, easy and relaxed and taking no part in the matter, sat his saddle with his hands clasped lightly on its horn.

Maunders took in a deep, gusty breath. He shook his head as though to clear it and steady himself, then spoke. "I've given my orders. Move on. But we don't want a fight. So stay until tomorrow. But no longer. If you do, I'll rouse the valley against you!"

He turned and said almost harshly, "Kate, get on your horse and come with us."

She turned, still kneeling beside Skull. "I won't." She said it flatly. "You can't order me around the way you do Jack. I'm going to see if I can help this sick man."

"Girl, do as I say, or I'll tell your father."

"Good. Tell him. And at the same time tell him I may bring a sick man home with me to nurse."

Maunders's hands worked for a moment, his eyes almost snapping with anger. But when he spoke his voice was controlled. "A willful girl comes to no good end, and the Good Book says so." He turned his horse. "Come, Burton, Jack, we'll ride on."

As they trotted his horses up the road toward Maunders's house, Burton was eyeing the big bearded man rather curiously. It was a long, studying gaze, and at last it drew Maunders away from his thoughts. He looked at Burton and waited.

Burton smiled easily as he spoke. "You almost told them I was a peace officer, didn't you? Are you asking me to take up your troubles for you, Maunders?"

"No," said Maunders harshly. "I'm a peaceable man. A religious man. Not a fighting man. But I can fight for the good if I have to."

"That's just what I wanted to hear," said Burton with a quick grin as they stopped their horses in front of the Maunders house. "That's why I rode up here without letting anyone know I was the newly appointed sheriff. I wanted to look the valley over, to choose a good man from the ranchers. A man to serve as my chief deputy in this area. The valley must be cleaned out, Maunders. We've got to break up this Outlaw Trail stuff. I'll appoint you my chief deputy, with power to deputize others. When you need more help, send word to me!"

Maunders stared off into the distance and seemed a man searching his soul.

"I'll accept," he said at last. "I'll not be the first religious man who has armed himself in the battle for the Good Word and the Will of the Lord."

"Fine, fine!" Burton spoke heartily, hiding his thought that he was doing a crazy, witless thing. "I'll come in now and use your own Bible to deputize you!"

As the two men stepped down from their horses, Jack Maunders spoke excitedly. "Gosh, Mr. Burton—Dad—make me a deputy too. I want to help!"

Maunders turned on him almost angrily. "You young, witless, unstable child. Will you never learn to keep your prattle out of men's affairs?"

Again the dull red flowed under Jack Maunders's tan. His hands tightened and he fought to keep boyish tears out of his eyes. Suddenly, speechless and angry, he spun his horse and rode off through the dusk toward town.

His father, not looking after him, turned and walked into the house followed by Burton. And Burton thought: It's crazy stuff, what I'm doing. But it may bring it all into the open. Then he looked back through the dusk toward the eight men, his thoughts going to them.

"Maunders, two of those men I *know* are wanted. And the leader, the soft-voiced man, I'm sure I recognize him. I'll let you know if I find any reward bulletins on him. I know him, I'm sure. And he's dangerous."

GRIMES was standing looking down at Kate Kerlee, eyeing her beauty almost hungrily, yet making his voice cold and forbidding. "Young lady, that man gave us all good advice. Especially you. You should ride on."

"But your friend is sick, he needs nursing."

"As your bearded friend would say, isn't there something in the Good Book about nursing a viper and getting stung?" Grimes smiled coldly. "You're not our kind, missy. You'd better ride on and join your friends."

"But I want to help. This man needs nursing that you men cannot give him. I can. Either let me stay for a while, or bring him to our ranch. It's—" She started to point, but a curious sound interrupted her.

Skull Duggan had started to get up and protest to her, to Grimes, that he was all right and ready to ride on again. Instead, he fainted. And as he collapsed the whiskey bottle rolled away from his limp hand.

"There!" Kate Kerlee's eyes were hot, angry, as she faced Grimes. She pointed down at the whiskey bottle, the small bottle

of pills he had brought from the store. "You fool. You've given him a sedative, opium, and then poured whiskey into him! It's a wonder you haven't killed him. It proves what I said—you don't know enough to nurse a really sick man."

She dropped to her knees and put her hand on Skull's wrist to feel his pulse. He moaned once and tried to draw his hand away from her. His left hand fumbled for his gun, the curious, primeval gesture of an animal, dying but still fighting. Kate spoke swiftly, sharply: "Coffee, quick—now!"

Jack Martin poured a cup of coffee from the pot on the fire and brought it to her. Grimes stared down at her in curious anger as she spoke gently to Skull and got the semiconscious man to drink the strong coffee.

"I told you, missy." He laid a hard, firm hand on the girl's shoulder. "I'll take care of my friend. You get on your horse and ride."

His fingers tightened on her plump shoulder yet did not hurt her. And despite the firm gentleness Kate felt she was being lifted to her feet; carried upward by a hard and stubborn nature that dominated her.

It was a final word from Grimes and she knew it.

"I wonder if you're as cold, heartless, brutal as you sound? I don't think so. I have a feeling that you're all here to do something terrible and cruel. And back of that feeling is a conviction that you won't do it. Or that if you do, it will not be what it seems."

Tom Sistrom waited for Grimes to say something, and when the leader did not, he spoke up. "Missy, we're killers with a price on our heads and you don't belong near us. Get out. Get out now before we forget ourselves."

Kate Kerlee laughed suddenly. It was a haunting laugh that jarred them at the moment and was to stick in their minds for some time afterward. And when the laugh died, words came after it.

"Forget yourselves? No! You just think you can forget yourselves. But you can't!"

In the slow silence that followed her remark Kate got on her horse, turned him, and rode off toward the blinking lights of the town.

III

YOUNG JACK MAUNDERS rode away from his father and the sheriff, his face whitening with his fury. He was seventeen and knew that he could make a hand on any man's ranch with horses or cattle. He was a slender and not very tall youth, taking after his long-dead mother in mental as well as physical traits. An excellent shot with a rifle, his hands were delicate and slim-fingered and always seemed to fumble in drawing the heavy Colt revolver he wore. Once it was in his hands, however, he was a good, steady shot at any target and he knew it.

He was cursing softly as he rode toward the lights of Biff Klingens's saloon. His dad, talking to him that way not only before Kate Kerlee, but before the grim-jawed lawman. That, added to the whippings when he was younger, the almost constant mouthing of preachments and prayers and admonitions to live decently, had stirred something in him. There were things about his mealy-mouthed father that he did not dare think about. He had wanted to talk to Kate when the first doubts came, but had dared not do it. He was not in love with Kate Kerlee. But he worshiped her and needed the feminine hand to guide him. And his father seemed to take an almost devilish delight in cowing him before Kate and other people he wanted to impress.

There were three riders dismounting in the darkness just beyond Klingens's saloon when Jack Maunders rode up and stopped in front of it. He caught a quick glimpse of a huge hulking fellow who stood with a half stoop, but even so was at least six feet tall. Beside him in the dim night light Jack Maunders could see two other men—lean fellows who wore black Stetsons pulled low over their faces. He thought he caught his name mentioned but wasn't sure. His thoughts were too mixed up to make anything of it, anyhow.

Sourly, tasting his own futile rage, young Maunders tied his horse in front of the saloon and walked into it. He was tired from a long ride that day and had had nothing to eat since morning. So the first drink of Klingens's raw whiskey hit him like a club and the second drink smacked

him back the other way. He thought: I mustn't drink any more until I get some crackers.

So he turned to walk toward the store door, and found himself bumping full into the two tall dark men he had seen outside in the night. And he knew them. Jeff and Jerry Jaynes, two breed Crow Indians who could be summed up in one word—bad. He had seen them riding through the valley at times, sometimes alone and sometimes either with their squawman father or Soogan Charley. And he had heard whispers that sometimes they rode with the Wild Bunch.

Young Maunders shivered a little as he stopped and stared at the two riders. He not only could see them with their black and beady eyes, dark skin, and flashing teeth between almost purple lips, but could smell them. They had been on the trail for long days, he suspected, and had slept in their saddle blankets like sheep herders. And as he shivered Jack Maunders wondered if the tremor was the whiskey in him or just plain fear of these two men?

He had to know. And he had to know now.

"Get the hell out of my way," he snapped at the two breeds, knowing it could easily be his death warrant.

The breeds looked at him for what seemed an endless time. But they did not speak, did not make a move to draw, though each man wore a pair of guns, holsters thonged down to their legs.

"Maunders's whelp," said Jeff Jaynes finally.

"Growed up and growling," answered Jerry Jaynes, his eyes fixed on Jack's taut expression. "Makes rough talk and wants to fight. Hell."

He slapped out with his left hand and knocked Jack to one side with a quick blow on his cheek. His brother slapped Jack back without giving him a chance to draw his gun. And they did not even try to take the gun from him. They simply slapped him back and forth for a moment, wordless and calm. His hand came away from his gun as he tried to protect himself, and as he swung a wild blow, Jeff caught his arm and spun him.

A heavy-toed boot caught Jack in the seat of his pants and drove him toward the door.

A second kick sent him sprawling out the door and into the street.

As he slowly got to his feet Jack Maunders could feel the boiling bitterness jell and take shape. He knew he could not hope to get even one of them with the revolver he carried. But the rifle would be different. He could get one at least—before he died.

JACK climbed into the saddle and turned his horse toward home. He rode almost blindly, his rage and pain were so deep. The horse picked its own way, not to the front of the house but around to one side and to the barn, a hundred yards from the kitchen door. When the barn door almost swept him from the saddle he realized where he was and got down. He unsaddled and turned the horse into the stall, still almost blindly, then turned and walked toward the kitchen door.

He neared the door and was about ready to open it when he heard the mutter of voices coming closer to it, on the inside. Something made him turn, take two quick steps, and then drop behind the cellar door.

"—and the sheriff is going to spend the night here," Mrs. Jensen's voice came in a low tone. "They're eating supper. Keep out of sight, all of you, until the sheriff leaves."

The huge, hulking figure of Soogan Charley showed in the light now. And his growling voice came, "We'll get some bottled licker at the saloon and go back to the horse herd."

"No. Get your licker and hide out. There's something damned queer about all this, Charley. Why did he tell you boys to hold that herd on the bench? Why is the sheriff here? And why is Maunders going to act as deputy?"

"How do I know?" grumbled Soogan Charley.

Mrs. Jensen spoke sharply and with crisp authority. "Well, until we do know, don't go back to that herd! Let the others hold the horses on the bench. You keep away from the herd until we know where you're to take it."

Soogan Charley said briefly. "All right, It don't make sense to me, but you're the boss."

The kitchen door shut and Jack heard the heavy clumping of Soogan Charley's boots as the man walked off into the night. Jack drew in three or four deep breaths. It made him sick, for it confirmed some things, doubts, fears, he had often tried to keep out of his brain.

Mrs. Jensen, their housekeeper for ten years. Soogan Charley, the two breeds, that herd of horses. His father.

He moaned like a child and walked off blindly into the night. He was stumbling along the road, not knowing where he was going, when a hand dropped on his shoulder.

"Look out, Jack, you'll fall in that hole!"

It was the man known as Black Boyd, the Negro; grinning, happy, friendly old fellow who seemed ageless yet astonishingly old to Jack Maunders.

There was something about the wide grin that made Jack gulp. He blurted out, with growing rage, what the two breeds had done to him. And he ended with, "I'll kill them, kill them!"

"Sure, sure, you'll kill 'em, Jack!" Boyd spoke softly, almost eagerly. Even the thought of shooting stirred him, while the sound of gunfire drove him almost wild. He had fought through the Civil War with the northern troops, had come West when the shooting had stopped. And always seeking the sound of guns. He grinned widely. "Sure, kill 'em. But you ain't good enough now, Jack. Later. Later."

"Teach me to draw and shoot, will you? Make me a good gun hand!"

"No, sir! I ain't good enough. You gotta find a good man with a gun to teach you, Jack. Somebody like them eight men who camps down there tonight. They're gunmen, they is! Get men like that to teach you, Jack, not old Black Boyd. Say—"

He stopped short, his mouth opening and his eyes widening in the night. "Listen, Jack. Hear them horses going down the road? Just like cannon in the night!"

The horses' hoofs hit the wooden bridge, and the sound turned into a deep, hammering jumble like the drumfire of cannon.

"That's it! Cannon and rifles, Jack. Shooting!" Black Boyd's mouth began to drool. "Shooting, Jack. It drives me wild. Get a good man to teach you, Jack. There ain't

nothing to set a man up like the sound of shooting! I'll help you find a man to teach you, Jack. I'll help you, and all I ask for pay is just to know when you're going to kill 'em, Jack. Just lemme hear them guns go off, Jack. That's all Black Boyd'll ask of you, just to hear them guns go off!"

GRIMES and his men rode on at sundown of the following day, and as they passed the store, Tex Tieters was standing in the doorway talking to Kate Kerlee and her father. Colis Kerlee tried to stop her, but the headstrong girl ran down and blocked the eight riding men.

"Leave that sick man here!" she stormed at Grimes, her voice rising. "I don't care who you are or what you are doing. You have no right to kill that sick man by taking him with you. Leave him here to get well!"

"Can't we make you understand?" asked Grimes helplessly. He felt nothing he could do or say would make her change. "He wants to ride with us."

"To his death. Can't you see he is almost dead now? Let him rest and be quiet in bed."

Skull Duggan moved his horse up a little and leaned forward. He spoke in almost gentle tones as he said, "Missy, maybe I can make you understand. You been good to me, missy. It's a long time since a decent woman has been good to me. It's the last time. I'm going to die soon, and I want to die like I lived—fighting. Don't ask me why, missy, 'cause I don't know why. It's just something I got to do. Good-by, missy, and thanks."

There was something so definite in his voice that Kate Kerlee stood aside without speaking.

As the eight men rode on Colis Kerlee and Tieters walked out to join her. All stared after Grimes and his riders, mute, wondering. And when Tieters looked at Kate he read something in her expression, saw the glint of tears in her eyes. He thought bleakly: I'd give anything I own to make her look after me like that.

Colis Kerlee, transplanted Britisher who had ranched in Texas, New Mexico, and Wyoming before settling in the valley, nodded slowly. His voice was heavy and rich as he said, "Texas men, all of them. I know the breed and I'm almost sure I've

seen the leader some place. I wonder, now?"

John Maunders and Mrs. Jensen, too, had seen them pass. The woman, squarely built and hard and cold of emotions, stood for a time staring through the dusk and brooding. Her strong arms akimbo, her dark eyes half lidded, she thought and thought, and did not turn the thoughts into words. She knew John Maunders and knew that he would have to break the silence. And at last he did.

"Burton and I made plans most of the morning," he said. He spoke very softly. "I rode south with him for an hour and when we were certain no one could possibly overhear, we made more plans." He whispered now. "He will get in touch with the sheriff at Vernal, Utah, and someone in Wyoming. You see, the Pinkerton men are closing in on Butch Cassidy and the Wild Bunch. They're going to get them and smash them. The sheriffs in this area are going to co-operate as best they can."

Mrs. Jensen turned and looked at him, and Maunders smiled oddly.

"What they don't seem to understand," said Mrs. Jensen grimly, "is that there'll always be a lot of wild men who'd rather fight than work for honest money. And," she added coldly, "someone to lead them."

When Maunders did not speak she added sharply, "Now, about this horse herd and those eight men."

"The herd can stay where it is for a few days. And I don't think those eight men will touch it. They're on the run. Probably driven out of Texas or New Mexico by the Pinkertons. They won't waste time on a herd of horses."

Mrs. Jensen said "So?" and walked away.

MAUNDERS stared after her for a moment, his hand dropping to rest on the big Bible that was closed and lying on the table beside him. He moved his hand slightly, and then looked down at the Bible as though puzzled. He spoke in something less than a whisper, hardly framing the words even to himself. "Strange. At first I couldn't understand the Book. And now I do. It grows on you. Grows and grows. Until you believe it."

Grimes and his men rode swiftly now with Diamond Mountain a black and

ragged mass on their left. No one spoke.

Later, as it passed midnight, they came to a road. As they stopped there briefly to eat a quick meal, a voice came from the darkness.

"Mister men," the voice said pleadingly. "Mister men, can Black Boyd talk to you?"

Grimes stirred briefly and felt muscles tighten in his back. But he answered quietly, "Come in. Show yourself."

The old Negro rode out into the dusty tracks that soon were to sweep up Ewing Canyon. He rode a fine gelding.

"You white folks'll just have to excuse old Black Boyd. I just want you to understand. A fight sets me crazy. The shooting does something to me. I love it, misters, it's like a drink to me."

"Well?" demanded Grimes.

"The word passed in the valley," said Boyd. "Folks thought maybe you was after a horse herd they're holding on the flats above Ewing Canyon. That means a fight, and Boyd does love to hear the shooting! Can I go along, misters? Can I show you where the herd is, and then drop out? I just loves to hear the guns go off, misters."

Grimes looked swiftly at the others and caught quick nods. He knew all held the same thought. It might be a trick, but somehow the old Negro's words carried a sense of truth. And if they sent him away now, he could easily warn the men at the herd.

Grimes said, "Come along. And I don't need to tell you that at the first false move I'll kill you."

Black Boyd answered "Yes, sir," and automatically fell in between two groups of them as they mounted to ride on. It was more than an hour's ride to the mouth of Ewing Canyon and they made it in silence.

"Misters, you can go on up the canyon a piece and then ride to the bench, or I can show you two-three other ways to get there. Take your pick. Just let me hear the shooting and I'll be happy."

Grimes did not answer at first, then he asked, "What got you this way, Boyd?"

"It was the cannon. I was wounded at Antietam and they moved the cannons up. They shot over my head before the Johnny Rebs began to run. It was like drums. It sets me wild."

His voice changed suddenly. "You ain't

going to send me back, are you? You're going to let me hear the shooting?"

Grimes moistened his lips. "You can listen," he said flatly. "But it ain't your fight. It's our fight. You keep back and don't ask for any part of it, or any part of the herd afterward!"

"Yes, misters," said Black Boyd. He chuckled eerily. "Going to be some shooting tonight!"

"Take us up the best way," said Grimes. He spoke without emotion apparent in his voice. "The best way for what we want to do. We want to kill every man there at the herd, and we want the horses. Understand—all of you?"

Nobody said a word. Grimes went on, "The best way, Boyd. I trust you."

"Thank you, misters."

He turned his handsome gelding and rode toward the left, leaving the main road. He picked up a cattle trail in half a mile and followed it up a draw, dry and scattered with clumped brush and thickening pines. Soon they were on the bench, and Boyd pointed to a pin point of light almost a mile away.

"That's their campfire, misters. It's cold on this bench and they keep it up all night. Most of us," he added quietly, "would do that too. If we wasn't worried about being seen." And he grinned suddenly.

Grimes nodded. He turned in his saddle and swept them all with his eyes, seeing them in his mind despite the darkness. He spoke flatly, almost jerkily. "We'll hit them at dawn. Remember, no man there is to live afterward." He took a deep breath and exhaled it. He spoke again, and his voice sounded angry. "Damn that girl. Why the hell did she have to tell us we couldn't do it? We've got to do it!"

Grimes looked at each one of his men in turn before he spoke again. A long look. Then, "Each one of you think back now to what Skull told us. Just keep thinking about that, and we'll fool that girl. We *can* do it!"

He stepped down from the saddle and the others followed him. All sat around in an open circle, smoking, letting their horses rest and graze to the end of the short tie ropes only. And they thought. All of them. But Grimes had the most bitter thoughts.

He could see Skull Duggan, Tom Sistrom, Jack Martin, and Ben Peters riding into his newly bought range there in the lands near the Black Hills. And he listened again to the story, working it over in his mind.

"There's no sense in waiting for the herd, Hasty," Skull Duggan had told him that bitter day. "Your brother and his men started north all right with it, but they got jumped by some horse thieves. Me and the boys here was heading north on the Outlaw Trail with the lawmen about twelve hours behind us when we came across their bodies. They was shot while they slept, all but your brother. He got to his knees, it looked like, but they got him from behind. We buried 'em, Hasty. We figured we owed you something for the past. You always treated us good, Hasty. So instead of heading along for the Outlaw Trail, we cut straight north to find you."

As he heard the last words over again in his mind, Grimes felt that sickening sense of loss, of bitterness and hate for men who could murder so ruthlessly. And he looked at Skull Duggan, at the three others who had come with him. Outlaws, train robbers, rustlers—but not the murdering kind. Crazy damn fools who had taken the wrong turn through pure hellishness in their natures. But fair fighters always. They had proved that by risking their safety in coming direct to him and telling him about his brother's murder, with his crew, and the loss of the herd. And they were ready, willing, to help now.

Grimes came to his feet suddenly. "By God," he swore heavily. With their eyes on him he sat down again. "It's hard to wait any longer," he explained simply.

But they sat until a half-hour before the first hint of gray would sneak over the distant ridges. They rode, then, silently, toward the camp where the horse thieves held the herd. They stopped a few hundred yards away and waited. Black Boyd looked at Grimes, and Grimes shook his head. So Boyd did not leave.

They could see four sleeping men at the dying fire. They could hear the muffled sounds of horses grazing, and one snorted twice. But it was not a disturbed sound. Now grayness was coming over the ridge, and Grimes signaled to Black Boyd to leave.

The Negro turned and rode off.

When the Negro had gone Grimes touched his rifle stock and shook his head, warning them not to open the fight with the long-range weapons. He touched his pistols and nodded; it meant "get close enough to use these!" Then he made quick, pointing gestures with his hands as he showed each of his seven men where he should ride in. He dropped his reins over his saddle horn and drew both pistols as he spoke briefly and softly.

"Let's go kill them all."

And then they drove their heels into the horses' ribs and started on a driving run for the sleeping men about the fire.

IV

BLACK BOYD stopped under some trees and dismounted. Now he could sense the sudden drumming of the hoofs as the racing horses pounded them into the ground.

"Hear 'em," he wailed softly. "Lord God, hear 'em!"

It was the banging, crashing sound of black powder exploding in sixteen heavy Colt pistols, and it bit into Black Boyd's brain, etching memories deeper and deeper until he shouted with wild laughter.

He stood and watched it in the gray light that was widening and changing to a faint pink tone. His body lurched and swayed and his big balled fists beat the air. "Drums! War drums!" he shouted now. His horse nickered and stepped away from him, but he ignored it.

The beat and the crash of the shots, echoing and re-echoing from cliffs just beyond the camp, made an almost continuous roll in the wild brain of Black Boyd. He shouted once as he heard a wild, high-pitched scream from a man who but seconds before had been asleep and dreaming.

Hasty Grimes hated what he was doing, and somehow sensed that all his men felt his emotions also. Sudden, hammering death. But it was justified and called for. The kind of death that had come to his brother and the others who had been bringing the Texas horse herd up to his ranch. Death, agonizing and cruel, without a chance to fight back.

His horse hammered forward and his

guns bucked in the palms of his hands, one after the other. He saw dim, rising figures before him, and twice he saw red flashes come from one of them before his own lead cut the kneeling man down to the ground in his bloody blankets. He jerked his horse to a stop now and saw seven other men doing the same. And still their beating roll of shots hammered into the still bodies and the twitching ones.

It was cold, ruthless slaughter. Yet it was retribution.

Grimes turned away almost sadly, and was just in time to see the man next to him start to slide slowly from his saddle. It was Skull Duggan, and before Grimes or Jack Martin could reach him to ease the fall, Duggan was on the ground.

"Check the bodies and see they're dead," Grimes called as he dropped from the saddle beside Duggan. He knelt and then shook his head sadly.

Duggan's eyes were open, his mouth drained a little blood from a chest wound, but it was the small blue hole in his forehead that told the story to them all. Martin, tears coming and fading quickly, reached for the blanket behind Duggan's saddle and started to untie the whang leathers.

Grimes opened Duggan's coat and felt for his heart in an automatic motion. His fingers touched something that stiffened him and held him so, hand under Duggan's coat as he puzzled over what his find could mean. Then he heard Martin's voice speaking flatly.

"So, *now* you know. Leave it there, Grimes. Button his coat again. He'd want it buried with him."

Grimes buttoned the coat and stood up slowly. He gestured flatly toward the other men who were inspecting the four dead horse thieves. "Do they know?" he asked. Martin shook his head.

"Just me and one other man," he answered. "Now you. Can you keep your mouth shut?"

"I'm happy to know it, and I can keep my mouth shut." Grimes spoke softly. He stood for a moment as Martin rolled Skull Duggan's body in his blanket. Things were churning in Grimes's mind. Little things and big things chased each other round and round as he thought and stared about him.

He looked at the four dead horse thieves, at his six remaining men; at the horse herd that was feeding a couple of hundred yards away, scattered and still a little nervous over the sudden shooting and its sudden ending. He shifted his eyes to where the golden rays of the sun slashed through a break in the ridges and outlined Black Boyd near his horse. He could see Black Boyd swaying and beating the air, and he signalled the man with a sudden sharp wave of his upraised right arm. Grimes noted the Negro stop swaying and turn to his horse.

His eyes shifted now toward the flatlands beyond Ewing Canyon, the sweep of the turgid river where the sun hit its tumbling surface and the rolling mountains beyond. And thoughts roved, twisted, turned, and shoved ideas into his brain. He looked down at the blanket-wrapped figure and he seemed to see straight through to the thing his fingers had unwittingly found. And in his mind Skull Duggan grinned up at him sourly and mockingly, and also his mind told him Skull was saying things.

"Fooled you, you son. Fooled you and all the others, didn't I?" Skull would say things like that, of course. "Why? Hell, a man has to live his own life, don't he? Even if he dies for it."

"That's right, Skull." Grimes was answering him in his mind. "You taught me to ride and you helped teach me to shoot, and I never could understand why you went hog wild and did the damn-fool things you did. Now I know. It took nerve, Skull. More nerve than most men have. It's too damned bad you didn't live to the finish, Skull. Maybe you'd like to have us finish this for you?"

Grimes waited a moment, unaware that Martin was looking at him. Grimes nodded slowly and smiled very gently. "I thought you would, Skull."

Martin asked crisply, "What did you say, Grimes?"

"I said I thought maybe Skull would like to have us finish this deal," and, because the others were gathering now and might suspect something, he did not add "for him."

Martin knew, though, and a friendly light came into his cold eyes. "I think he would."

Grimes looked at the others. All were slowly reloading their emptied pistols. He

met eye after eye, nod after nod. Hoofs pounded and Black Boyd rode up. He seemed almost exhausted by his emotional spasms, but he shook his head sadly, staring at the blanket-wrapped figure of Skull Duggan.

Speaking evenly, ignoring the Negro, Grimes laid it before them. "You know what it means," he said. "We'll not only have every rancher in the valley against us, but the Wild Bunch as well. Butch Cassidy, Elza Lay, Harvey Logan and his two evil brothers, George Curry, Ben Kilpatrick, and the rest!"

Having named the dread names, he paused. "Men like that," he added coldly, "aren't going to like our getting into this."

Tom Sistrom shrugged his thick shoulders. "They didn't ask me when they robbed the U.P. train in Wyoming. What makes you think I'd ask them permission to do what I aim to do?"

"You got something there, Tom," said Jack Martin, forcing a grin and a jest that was almost pitiful as he stood beside the body of his best friend. "But you know Butch Cassidy and his Wild Bunch might slap our wrists if they caught us."

Ben Peters said, "Hell, take a chance," and then Slim Semple laughed and said, "If you say again that George Washington did, it means fight." Tall, lanky, he dropped his big hand on little Ben Peters's shoulder to show he was kidding. They grinned sourly at each other.

Grimes saw it, and it brought a warmth into his mind. Something was growing in this tough bunch of his, and he liked the idea.

Grimes drew a deep breath and said to Black Boyd, "You bury these four men for us. We'll take care of our own." He thumbed a gleaming ten-dollar gold piece toward Black Boyd and added, "We're taking over this horse herd. We're going back into the valley to rest for a few days. You don't need to offer that information to anybody, Boyd. But neither do you need to lie if they ask you what you saw or heard." He paused, added with a slow smile, "I reckon you understand?"

"Black Boyd don't often find friends," said the Negro, smiling almost sadly. "But he shore knows when he do find 'em." He

nodded his head slightly. "You ain't mad, misters, at my saying I found some friends?"

"No, glad to hear it," said Grimes. And the quick nods from the others told that he spoke for them.

HE LOOKED down at Skull Duggan's body, and lifted his eyes to sweep the flats and hills about him. Black Boyd spoke almost pleadingly.

"My cabin is four-five miles up that canyon. If you buried your friend and mine up on that little hill he could feel the sun all day. And I could ride past and see he was doing all right. I'd be mighty proud if you did." He thought for a brief moment, yet could offer no more. So he repeated it. "I'd be mighty proud to ride past each day."

Jack Martin swallowed and said, "You made yourself some friends, Boyd."

Boyd kicked at the hard ground. "I better get me a spade from my cabin. You misters take our friend up on the hill, and then I'll find you there in a little piece of time."

So they took Skull Duggan for his last ride across his saddle and left the horse herd and the dead bodies on the bench. An hour later Black Boyd appeared with a spade across his thighs. They had cooked and eaten some breakfast and told him to finish what they had left while they dug the grave. They dug it deep and put Skull Duggan in it without words from any of them. They shoveled in the dirt, each man taking a turn, and they piled the biggest rocks they could find on the mound and around it. And Black Boyd helped them.

Tom Siström spoke almost heavily. "Boyd, someday when you got time and a chisel, the name is Duggan." He looked questioningly at Jack Martin.

"J. E. are the initials," said Martin stiffly.

Black Boyd nodded and picked up the spade. They all rode down, and without a word he started digging graves for the four dead horse thieves.

Grimes stared at the four dead bodies and spoke at last. "There was the leader we didn't get, and a couple of others if I remember rightly."

Tom Siström said, "A big paunchy devil who stood with a slouch but still looked bigger than most men. And two others, looked

like brothers. Black, ornery devils, part Crow Indian and part squawman. You can't find a much worse combination than that."

They saw Black Boyd raise his head, lower it suddenly, and then tighten his lips. Grimes's lips twitched a little with almost mocking amusement. "You don't have to tell us who they are, Boyd, or where we might find them. We know. They're devils. Cold, cruel, killing devils. That's who they are. And we know where to find them if they ain't in the valley. We'll find those devils in the Badman's Heaven."

Dolly Dahl, the little Texan, puzzled over that and then asked with a sly grin, "Where is the Badman's Heaven?"

"Hell," answered Grimes flatly. And he laughed without humor. "Where else would it be but in hell?"

Black Boyd looked up and licked his lips. He thought of the shooting that would come when these seven men found the ones they sought. He shivered in anticipation. He looked down and went on digging. He did not even look up or wave to them when they rode off. He didn't warn them of things to come. Why should he? They knew what they had started.

They pushed the horse herd ahead of them across the flats, driving it slowly and easily. They went on down over the rolling land into Ewing Canyon and out into the flats. There two riders cut away from the road and swam the river in plain sight of them. Two big, dark men who were joined by a third on the far side of the Green. They opened fire from their rifles and lead slanted past through the air, whining.

"Drive them off," said Grimes simply to Semple and Siström. The two men spurred their horses toward the ford and threw lead as they rode. There were a few spatters of shots from the far side and then the three men rode up the narrow, winding way that a creek had found from the high hills. Semple and Siström came back, reloading silently.

Within a mile they passed the slanted roofs of a barn, a saddle shed, and a log cabin from which early morning smoke still drained out of the chimney. Two miles past it they saw a box canyon and put the herd in it. By noon they had their camp made and a brush fence built across the canyon mouth.

They also had inspected the canyon walls to make certain the horses could not drift out of it. Also, that mounted men could not come into it behind them. Mounted men could not, but men on foot could.

Grimes noted that fact aloud, added, "But we got to take a chance. A lot of chances. The first one is just staying here for even a few days with this horse herd and what we already know."

Nobody answered. There was nothing to add to what they had decided. They were going to see it through.

And in the silence that came over them as they thought bleakly that all or most of them could easily be buried in the valley to join Skull Duggan, they heard the click of shod hoofs on a rock and knew someone was coming.

SAM BONHAM was just an average sort of rancher with a steady smile and an easy manner. He wore a small hat, battered and bent from long use, and had it pushed back on his head as he rode toward the camp where he saw seven men and his box canyon fenced in. He wondered for a cold moment of doubt if he should have gone for Karl Sutro, whose log cabin was a half mile from his own. And then he thought darkly, what could two men do that one could not against those seven fellows?

So he rode on with his easy smile and his straightforward manner and did not stop his ugly-lipped roan gelding until he was not ten feet from Hasty Grimes. He spoke easily. "Howdy, gents?" and he got down from his horse and dropped his reins.

"What d'you want?" demanded Tom Sistrom.

Grimes started to speak, but before he could Dolly Dahl had crowded forward a little. "I seen you looking at our drift fence," said the small man, his hands on his hips. His voice and manner were truculent. "Maybe this is your box canyon and maybe you want to do something about our fence, huh?"

Sam Bonham hadn't lost his smile. He widened it a little and said easily, "Now, now, don't get proddy. I killed me a beef three days back. It was a yearling and not so tough as some mossy horns I seen in my time. It eats good. I got a quarter hanging

in the breezeway of my cabin, another quarter in the springhouse. The rest is jerking. Come over and be neighborly."

Dolly Dahl grinned. "Next time a gent comes over to our camp, I'll mind my manners, mister. And—thanks for the invitation."

"We could use some fresh beef," said Grimes. "We been on the trail for a time, and traveled fast. We're resting up for a while in this valley. And we're heading in pretty soon to buy supplies at the store. The horses"—he jerked a thumb backward over his shoulder without taking his steady stare from Bonham's face—"the horses are ours—now."

Bonham grinned. He was picking up the loose reins as he spoke. "From the way you said that, I reckon you don't mind if I pass the word along?" He swung into the saddle and sat there for a moment. He still smiled, but something tired and brooding came into his face. "You're resting up here. You're going to buy supplies, and the horses are yours. Now."

Grimes nodded, and the move was almost a jerk of his head. He watched Sam Bonham pull in a deep breath and then he heard him say in a tired voice, "This valley has seen a lot of fighting and trouble. That's why I never brought a woman here. I'm sick of living alone. But this place has got to calm down before I'd bring a wife here. So long."

He swung his horse and headed away through the trees, calling back, "I'm heading for town too. But if you want fresh meat before dark, go over and cut it off."

He waved to their thanks and disappeared through the trees.

"He's right neighborly," said Jack Martin, grinning. "I s'pose he figures it cheaper to give us beef he killed than to have us slow-elk his cattle."

Grimes had his eyes on the ground near his battered boot toes. He stared briefly, as though seeing plans in the pine needles at his feet. He frowned and moved his hat back off his wrinkling forehead. "Maybe," he said. He thought it over a while longer and then he went on with his thoughts aloud.

"We got the horse herd that belongs to us, and we could go on and figure the deal done. We killed four of the seven men who jumped the herd down in Texas and killed

our friends. And my brother. But we said up there on the bench that we want more. We want the top man. Some of the reasons for that are that we don't like to leave a half-done job. And Skull Duggan, he's another reason. And what that rancher said about not wanting to bring a wife into this valley until it was peaceable is another reason. There's been too damned much killing and robbing in this man's country. It'd ought to be tamed."

"There's only one way to tame it," said Tom Sistrom thickly and angrily. "And that's to kill off the fellows who make it rough and tough. And you know, Grimes, there ain't one of us that hasn't done things he shouldn't. And you know, too, that Duggan, me, Martin, and Ben here all had labels on us. Wanted labels. Maybe there's some on you, Grimes, and Harrigan, Semple, and Dahl here. I wouldn't know about that, I ain't seen you four or five years now. Not since you went North, Hasty, with the herd your daddy left you and your brother. So I wouldn't know how you been behaving in Wyoming and Dakotas. Maybe you been adding to your herds the same way Skull and the rest of us—and a lot of gents before us—tried to do. If you have, you maybe got an outlaw label on you like the rest of us. Now, I'm asking you—where the hell do we get off at? Outlaws, trying to clean up other outlaws? It just don't make sense!"

"Put that way," said Peters, "it makes sense to say we're damned fools. I'm for cleaning up on the boys that stole the herd and killed our friends. When that's done, well—live and let live. I ain't lost any of the Wild Bunch. They never bothered me, why should I bother them?"

GRIMES said slowly, "Look—this Outlaw Trail thing. A man can travel from Canada to Mexico on it and be easy. He can raid horse herds or cattle and move them along without trouble. Steal them and add to them and end up with a lot of stuff that ain't his. It hurts all the ranchers. You boys have done wild things. We all have. But the country is taming. The days when you could rustle yourself a nice start in the cattle business are about gone. Butch Cassidy and his bunch know that, and you know what *they're* doing."

"I got drunk with Butch and Harvey Logan once," said Tom Sistrom. "They ain't so bad."

"I've heard about him," said Grimes evenly. "He's a good gent with a lot of friends. He learned his trade by stealing small bunches of critters over near Henryville, in Utah, and working with a lot of other boys. They'd hide their stolen stuff in small bunches in a lot of places. When they figured they had a big enough bunch, they started moving 'em from ranch to ranch hideout. Every rancher that was in the deal added a few stolen critters until they had a dozen small bunches. Then, out of the country where it was safe to form a good-sized trail herd, they threw the bunches together and some of them drove to the nearest shipping point."

"But Butch Cassidy has brains, and he wants big stuff. He's got the Wild Bunch organized and people helping him all over this part of the West. It's like a company organized to operate on banks and railroads. And when a bunch like that organizes and gets so big it can operate all over the West, something happens. Somebody organizes to stop them. And," he added solemnly, "don't forget this. There's an outfit called the Pinkertons that was organized before Butch Cassidy was out of three-cornered pants. The Pinkerton men are *men*, and the railroads and banks hire them to run down the boys who try to cut themselves some gravy that ain't theirs!"

Sistrom grunted angrily. "To hell with the Pinks! I told you I got drunk with Butch and Harvey once. Skull and me. They had a saddlebag full of gold they didn't work for and they was willing to spend it on getting us drunk."

Martin opened his mouth and then shut it, after a sharp glance from Grimes.

Grimes spoke bluntly and sharply, for it was time to bring on the showdown and get things settled. Sistrom was headstrong, stubborn, and quarrelsome. And whatever might come of his growling against authority might as well come now, thought Grimes. So he spoke up.

"*Bueno*, Sistrom. You side with Butch Cassidy because he got you and Skull drunk. But Skull is dead. He died fighting some men who also died. But the dead left some

folks to carry on both sides of this man's war. Us on one side, the horse thieves' friends on the other. So you, Sistrom, ride on and leave us here to clean up the little details about this Skull Duggan killing." His voice soured a little as Grimes added, "So long, Texan."

There was something so mocking in the way he said the last word that Sistrom reached slowly for his gun, his big hand hardly seeming to move. But it crept slowly, evenly, down and back like a crawling spider edging for the leap that would bring death.

"I'm a *Tejano*," said Sistrom thickly. "Skull Duggan was my friend. You can't order me out of this like that, Grimes!"

Now Sistrom closed his fingers on his gun, but he made no effort to draw. He waited, steady, tensed as a spring is tensed before uncoiling.

"Sistrom," said Grimes flatly, "someday you and I are going to tangle. But I don't reckon it will be before we finish this thing. That wouldn't make sense, would it—before we'd squared things for Skull Duggan?"

Tom Sistrom battled himself for a time. Then he eased his fingers on the gun butt and yet failed to take his hand from it. His voice was harsh when he answered. "No. It wouldn't make sense for us to kill each other before we square it with whoever raided your herd and killed your men and your brother—and Skull Duggan. Up to then you're the leader and I'll take orders from you, but no more and no less than this: we get the boys who got Skull Duggan right up to the top man. Then, when that's settled, you and me are going to find who's really the boss man!"

Grimes answered evenly, "Bueno, that's agreed. But," and his voice became soft and slow, "what if the top man is Butch Cassidy himself?"

He laid that one down for them to think over. Not a man, woman, or child in the West but had heard a lot about Butch Cassidy and his men. The Wild Bunch. From the top peace officers through ranchers and homesteaders, bankers and storekeepers, and the very lowest helper of the outlaws everyone knew, respected, or feared Butch Cassidy and his Wild Bunch. The men who wanted to tangle with them were few and far between, and they all knew it.

A slow stirring went through the men Grimes faced, and a slow, mocking smile came over Tom Sistrom's face. The smile changed to a chuckle, a dry, sarcastic, and cynical sound. And as the chuckle ended, Sistrom said, "It won't lead up to Butch Cassidy. I know. I know, I tell you; Cassidy and his Wild Bunch are organized to rob trains and banks. They're big. Too big to waste time on piddling little bunches of horses and cattle."

Grimes stared at him for a moment and then shifted his stare to Jack Martin's face. Martin had a puzzled expression and had caught one corner of his lip between his teeth. But he did not speak.

"Then I can depend on you, Sistrom, Peters, Martin—only to help with the men who killed our friends. And not then if it leads up to Butch Cassidy?"

Sistrom surged forward a step, his hand tightening on his gun. "Damn you, I didn't say that!"

Grimes answered sharply, "But you meant it, didn't you?" He waited for the answer that did not come and then spoke again, and even more sharply. "Sistrom, either let go of that gun or draw it!"

Sistrom pulled in a deep breath, let it out slowly, and let go of the gun. But every man there knew it was not settled.

V

SAM BONHAM came in about sundown with three thick steaks wrapped in an old Denver newspaper. Without dismounting he handed the package to Grimes with the simple explanation, "I seen you hadn't been over to cut some for yourselves."

"Get down," answered Grimes as he took the steaks and tossed them to Martin who was tending fire at the moment. "Unless you'd rather eat alone?"

"Hell, no," said Bonham as he stepped down and loosened the cinch before tying his horse to a jackpine. "I'd rather be friendly with you boys than tangle with you," and he smiled cheerfully. He stepped nearer the fire and warmed his hands a moment.

Talk was idle and general after they had eaten in silence and had to do with cattle and horses for the length of time it takes tired men to smoke two cigarettes and then

yawn at their blankets. Sam Bonham started home then with brief good nights for them all. He thought he saw a dim figure moving swiftly ahead of him through the trees, but he wasn't sure. Probably just a shadow.

As Bonham stopped at his gate and leaned down from his saddle to untie the thong and open it without dismounting, he heard Karl Sutro's thick, sullen voice.

"So. It was you who told them where the horse herd was?" And then something hit Sam Bonham.

As Bonham slid from the saddle and rolled over on his face another bullet hit him.

Grimes raised his head from the blankets at the two shots and waited. Satisfied that trouble was not coming at the moment, he dropped back, sighed, and went to sleep almost at once.

In the morning, remembering the two shots, Grimes circled the camp four times. The circles were in widening arcs. He finally found the prints of two boot heels, and followed in the line they pointed. More tracks showed, and he at last found where a horse had been tethered, a quarter mile from their camp. Its tracks and those of Sam Bonham's horse led in the same direction.

Grimes and Martin roped out two spare horses from the herd and brought them to the rude fence. Grimes walked back then, whistling softly through his teeth. His whistle became a little louder as he neared a bunch of eight horses, three mares and five geldings. One of the mares, a beautiful palomino, raised her head and looked at him. But it was the powerful, sleek-muscled palomino gelding who nickered and started forward first.

"Even five years won't make you forget, will it?" said Grimes, rubbing the gelding's nose. Then the mare nuzzled him, and as he turned and walked back toward the rude fence both horses followed close beside him. The others bunched, stirred, and then—with their usual curiosity—followed twenty steps behind. They watched while Grimes saddled the gelding and started off with Jack Martin and two led horses.

Grimes led the way toward Sam Bonham's, paralleling Bonham's tracks but keeping well out of them. They passed Sutro's ranch and saw no sign of life, and

then later reached Bonham's, stopping under some willows a hundred yards from the gate.

"A murderer," said Jack Martin sourly, "is bad enough. But a murderer who leaves a saddler out all night with a cinch tight around his belly just plain makes me heave. Hanging is too good for that kind."

Grimes nodded, his expression frowning. Bonham's body was close to the gate but the horse had drifted a hundred yards, trailing the reins. It nickered now, seeing them, and came trotting up. Its belly was swelling on either side of the tight cinch and it plainly was in pain. Grimes stepped down from his horse and gently eased the latigo loose, dropping the cinch and sliding the saddle and blankets off. He set them on a nearby stump as Martin gently rubbed the horse's belly for a time. Then Martin stopped and slapped the horse's flank. It trotted off to join four others a half mile away in the creek bottom.

"We'd better take his body in with us," said Grimes. "The best way to meet trouble and things like this is to get the jump and face it."

SO THAT was the way they reached the small town, Grimes and Martin riding, leading the two pack horses, one of which had Sam Bonham's body draped across it.

Biff Klingen stepped out onto the sidewalk before his saloon. Girding his apron about his waist so he could reach his guns without trouble, he stood there in stolid silence. Karl Sutro stepped up onto the store porch and stood about six feet from Tex Tieters, his dark face brooding and somber. The brawny blacksmith, Joe Starkey, stopped on the ground not far from the porch and slowly wiped his forehead with a hairy arm, and his eyes seemed small and puzzled.

Colis and Kate Kerlee were trotting their horses now as they neared the thickening group of people, and only the fear of starting the seemingly inevitable gun battle kept them from spurring their saddlers to a gallop. As they hammered steadily closer Jack Maunders waved to Kate. He caught up with his father and Mrs. Jensen but did not join them. His face as he glanced from Grimes and Martin to his father and the housekeeper was morose, bitter, and harden-

ing into lines that aged and matured him.

Jack was near enough to hear a whisper from Mrs. Jensen and it almost staggered him. He was to remember that whisper for a long time and add it to the many other disturbing and haunting things which seemed to have changed his whole life. For what he heard the stern-faced housekeeper whisper to his father in a commanding tone was, "This is your chance. Start it now with the others to help. Kill these two and there'll be only five more to kill."

John Maunders shook his head slightly, impatiently, and the whisper came again, softer, but with even more venom and power. "Do it I say—now."

THE night just passed had been a bitter and trying one for John Maunders, Soogan Charley and the squawman sometimes called "The Cannibal." Sutro too. All had come to his home the night before and the scenes had piled up, become bitter and harsh and almost at the killing point.

Sutro had spoken grimly in his thick, guttural voice. He had told of seeing Sam Bonham in the camp of the strangers who had the stolen horse herd—and friendly with them. So he had killed him, he ended.

Then the grim, harshly worded questions had been flung at John Maunders. Why had he ordered the herd held on that bench? What was back of it? What was he going to do now? Was he going to allow that killing bunch to go free with the horses? Or would he start something and let them finish it? Why, why, and again and again, why?

Maunders had fought them down, refused to explain, had stood on his rights as the leader of their especial gang on the ill-famed Outlaw Trail. "Why didn't you let the boys go on north to sell the herd?" the ugly squawman had growled at him. "We lost three-four thousand dollars on that deal. If my boys had been there, instead of called off at your orders, we'd still have the herd."

Soogan Charley put in his word, coldly and venomously. "It looks bad. You tryin' to get rid of some of us, John? Figuring to take over when Butch Cassidy makes his pile and pulls out?" He grinned sourly. "Hell, you ain't man enough."

And John Maunders, standing before Grimes and Martin with his own son and all those others to back any play he made, somehow felt doubt. Was Soogan Charley right? Was he man enough? Big enough and strong enough mentally to go ahead and put his plans through to a conclusion? He doubted it. He reached out in a strange, groping gesture, as though feeling for something. The Bible. He needed it now.

The thought no longer sickened him. He needed the Bible and its strength. Strange how sudden the turn and change had come to him. For years he had quoted and misquoted from the Bible, confident that not one man in a thousand in those wild days and that wild land could say he was wrong. Quoted and preached in his strong, melodious voice and mocked inwardly at the fools he tricked.

Then one night it happened. He realized as he thought back that it had been growing for some time. Yet the shock and jar was that of an instantaneous flash of light in his brain. He believed. He could put his flat palm on the Bible and feel the warmth and the comfort of the glow that came to him through its words and even the very contact with it.

So now he stood, rifle in hand, cold and wondering, and trying to feel his way out of the horrible mess he had made of his life. Robberies, raids, stolen horses, cattle, stages robbed, and miners killed for their pokes.

Maunders shifted his eyes once from Grimes and Martin. Then they came back and rested on the two men again after that fleeting sweep to the roof of the blacksmith shop. Soogan Charley was flat on his belly there, with his rifle cuddled to his cheek. Waiting. Cold fright chilled Maunders. Was Soogan there to help them—or to kill him if he failed?

Jack Martin backed his horse a little and let it crowd the two pack horses forward. Grimes nodded slightly; a good move, allowing them to make the pack horses jump into the gathering group and so confuse them when the shooting started. As it now seemed almost certain to start.

Grimes saw Colis Kerlee and Kate riding down the side road on the trot and then pulling their horses to a walk near the

junction fifty yards away. And they came on, eyes fixed, but not hurrying.

He totaled them swiftly in his mind. Not counting the two women, there were seven men against him and Martin. And without thought Grimes knew that he must take the play away from them, not let them get the jump with words or guns. He spoke loudly, yet in a curiously even and unaccented way that made his booming voice seem quiet.

"Hold it, everybody!" Grimes slapped both hands down sharply against his gun butts and held them there. The slapping sound was echoed as crisply from Jack Martin's hands. But neither man drew. Grimes's eyes flicked back and forth at the men, skipping the women. Yet he saw Mrs. Jensen backing up a little, and saw Kerlee signal Kate to stop where she was. And Kerlee came on ten paces closer. "Hold it, I said."

Grimes flung the order crisply at Colis Kerlee and saw the red-faced Britisher pull in his horse.

"Murderers! Flaunting your dead in our faces—" Maunders got that far and stopped.

Grimes shouted at him, "Shut up, you loud-mouthed fool! This man was murdered all right, but not by us. He brought us fresh meat last night and ate with us. I heard the shots that killed him after he rode home, but didn't track it out until this morning."

He swept them with cold, half-closed eyes, hands still resting on his gun butts. "The sign was easy to read. Someone had seen him with us at our camp and followed him. He was shot down at his own gate. There wasn't much wind last night, and we tracked out the horse sign to the next ranch, and then thought we saw it on the road to town. But we ain't sure."

He kneed his horse a little and it crowded one pack horse forward two steps. The one with Sam Bonham's body across the pack-saddle. He knew he had to make someone break before a move was made against them.

"Well, you peddler of cheap rotgut, are you going to let a good man's body roast here in the sun with the flies and wasps all over him?" And with the cold, flat words Grimes fixed his eyes on Klingen's face and waited.

Waited as the seconds ran out and be-

came dragging, gripping things that seemed to claw at them all.

Klingen seemed to sway backward slightly, as though to place himself for a shooting moment. He swung forward, still wetting his lips, and his thick shoulders hunched down slightly. "Well," he said. He shifted his eyes to Tieter's face and away. "Well." He said it again. Then, in a puzzled voice as though wondering at himself, "All right."

But it was not over. Grimes saw Klingen move well forward, stepping gingerly as he neared the blanketed body, saw him from the half-set corners of his eyes as he tried to keep all the others in his sight.

"Listen," said Grimes flatly. "We're stacked up for gunplay right now. And it's crazy to start it. We came in with the body of a good man, and we want to go out with some grub for me and my riders. Make your choice right now. Are you going to bury one man? Or maybe four-five of us? Providing"—he paused significantly—"that anybody's in shape to do any burying if *you* start things."

Maunders spoke at last, almost brokenly. It was plain to all of them that the man was strangely stirred, and no one quite understood why. He held his rifle in his hands and twice he moved it, twice steadied himself as he saw Grimes and Martin so ready. His words stumbled at first, then steadied into a smooth and almost unctuous flow.

"The mark of Cain is on you. Murderers and thieves. Begone. Get out of our peaceful valley and leave us in that peace. This is no place for men like you. Take your loot, the horses you murdered to get—and begone." He moved his hand enough to touch his breast with one thumb. "Under my coat I wear the badge of the law. A deputy sheriff, duly sworn in and authorized to deputize others. This to protect our valley from the likes of you thieves and killers. I'm warning you—begone, or I'll rouse the valley against you and drive you out. Or kill you all!"

"We'll take some killing," said Martin flatly. "And it's a poor time to start it, with women here and a dead man being carried into the store."

Grimes spoke harshly, crisply. "Bar-tender, put that body down inside the door and come back out. With your hands away from your guns!"

Klingen cursed softly but did as ordered, and then Grimes's voice came again. "Good. Now make your decision. Do we get supplies and pay for them in real money, or do we start shooting?"

There was a long pause, and during it Mrs. Jensen leaned toward Maunders and whispered something. Maunders shook his head, and his eyes shifted to the roof where Soogan Charley lay flat with the rifle laid on the coping. His mouth opened, slowly closed without words.

The silence was so tense, so complete, that it seemed to Grimes he could hear the click of someone cocking a rifle or pistol. And before the thought could more than flick through his mind the flat-sounding boom of a rifle came echoing across the flatland and around the buildings.

Grimes and Martin, with the flicking hands that showed long training, had both guns out and swept the muzzles back and forth, covering the startled men and women in the street. A yell sounded from the roof of the smithy and Soogan's rifle hit the dust of the road. He went headlong, swinging his feet over the coping and dropping to the ground where he stood rubbing his numbed hands and cursing.

Grimes spoke again, his voice smooth and steady yet somehow very commanding and warning. "Take it easy. That was one of my men hiding in the willows. Now—do you want to fight, or do we get our supplies and pull out of here without any more shooting?"

VI

THERE are certain signs that men grow to know almost instinctively. An instinct bred through years of training and watchfulness. And now Grimes and Martin both saw the signs in the faces about them. Colis Kerlee saw the signs also, and when Kate said softly, "Dad," he motioned sharply for silence. And so they waited.

Three men, spaced about ten yards apart, came riding out of the willow thickets near the river bottom, and stopped their horses. And each man had a rifle in his hands, the right hand cuddling the trigger guard and the left part way out the barrel, testing the moment and ready to fire at the first sign

of trouble.

"Meet my friends." Grimes spoke mockingly. "Slim, Arch, and Dolly. Texans. Good shots too. It seems we didn't ride down here alone. Now, who makes the first move?"

Maunders pulled himself together. "Thieves, killers, murderers. The mark of Cain on you all. The very way you've handled this proves what you are. Only men long-lived in the ways of the devil could have done it. But it won't save you for long. The days of retribution and punishment will come soon. It's not my word, it is the word of God. It will come to you evil men and you will pay in fire and torment!"

Mrs. Jensen whispered caustically, "You fool," and turned her back to walk away. She was mouthing something under her breath as she strode through the dust of the road toward the Maunders home.

It broke the tension. Maunders backed off toward Kerlee and the group about him, still holding his rifle but making no effort to use it. Grimes turned to Tieters and said, "Well, storekeeper?"

Tieters shrugged and waved his hands. "Come in and get your supplies," he said gruffly. "It won't be the first time I've sold to outlaws."

"And knew it," said Martin thinly. "How the hell do you folks in the valley get like this? For ten years half the range country from Texas to Arizona to the Canadian border has known this was a stopping place on the Outlaw Trail. How the hell do you get so law-abiding all at once? Did we step on your personal toes when we took over that horse herd?"

"My toes," said Tieters, swinging through the door, "are in my boots."

Klingen came in through the door into the saloon and stared at them angrily. He had been whipped by Grimes without speaking a word and he dully resented it. Across the street, Kerlee and the others waited, talking in low tones, and Klingen wondered if he dared start something here.

Colis Kerlee, rolling a cigarette and staring into the store, spoke in low tones to those about him. "I'm sure I know the leader of that crowd. It goes back to Texas. I'm sure of that, and I think some of those others

are wanted too. I'm going to write to an old friend of mine, Pete Smeathors, he's sheriff of a certain county down there. He's been around for long years and I'm thinking he can tell me about these men, or perhaps even send reward dodgers on them. I'll write him in time for the Thursday stage."

"It will take a week or more to hear from him," said Maunders. "And in that time, if they're not gone, much can happen."

Kate spoke almost to herself. "I wonder now?" And Joe Starkey looked at her curiously. He had a strange and almost instinctive liking for Grimes, watching him face down and outguess all of them. And he wondered briefly if Kate felt the same way.

With the supplies stacked in a big pile on the counter, Grimes suddenly turned and flicked out his gun, held lightly in his right hand. With his left he gestured. "Bar-tender, I don't like your looks, and I like even less the way your lips keep framing words I can't hear but can guess at. I know those cuss words too. So shut up, or draw."

Klingen said angrily, "You got us in a pocket. Our time will come, brother, don't forget that."

"Don't bother me," said Grimes roughly. "I've killed men for less than that!"

"Talk tough, don't you?" said Klingen.

"To a tough man, yes," was the easy, half-mocking retort from Grimes. He stood with his gun in his hand. "Jack, get the horses and lead them around to the back door where the boys can cover us. We'll pack there."

Ten minutes later Grimes and his four men were jogging out of town toward the upper end of the valley with the two heavily laden pack horses ahead of them. Dolly Dahl rode half sideways in the saddle, looking back.

"Hell," he said grumpily, "there ain't a fight in the whole bunch. Reckon so that Slim's shot knocked it out of them. Why the hell didn't you kill that big ambushin' son? Why just knock his rifle out of his hands?"

"Look, little man," said Slim in a growling voice, "I licked you the last time you got uppity and talked tough. Don't start it again."

"You can't do it again," said Dahl, his voice almost a whine. "I slipped and you hit me when I was falling. You can't do it

again, damn you, Slim."

"I'll referee," Grimes said, chuckling. "We'll break it up into rounds like Sullivan and Kilrain did. Save it for Sunday, when we got less to do."

THEN, slowly, the laziness and the kidding passed out of their faces and voices. Twice, three times in two miles, Grimes saw quick glances of the others swing toward the willows that bordered the Green. And once one of the pack horses half swung its head and pitched its sharp ears toward the river bottom.

"Swing out," said Grimes flatly. "We'll avoid it if we can."

"Why?" demanded Dahl, his voice a little thin and querulous. "Why not start cutting them down right away? It trims the odds, don't it?"

"Maybe, and maybe it trims people who are rightly on our side." Grimes explained it patiently. "If we can hang and rattle until we know where we stand, who we want, and what folks should rightfully be on our side, we can do a better job."

"Horses have tails and chickens have feathers," grumbled Dahl. "Hell, I saw one of them then. Let's beef him!"

They were riding two hundred yards off the road now, rifles slanted across their thighs and eyes wary and eager for sign. Now Grimes was certain that he saw two and possibly three riders on the gallop through the willow thickets. Forging ahead of them, laying an ambush?

They were four miles from their hideout where the horses were with Sistrom and Peters. Now the thin lines of the two creeks that fed the Green from the benches above it showed plainly. And offered a possible ambush. Grimes changed his mind and his plans suddenly.

"All right." He snapped it out so sharply that even the horses seemed to snap into an alert. "Let's beef them. Come on!" His reins ended in a braided hide romal and now he lashed out at the two pack horses with it.

As the two pack horses broke into a trot he left them and led the way in a long, slanting ride toward the river bottom. His men swung into an oblique file and rode galloping as they left the pack horses. Above

the thudding of the hoofs they heard a quick, sharp yelling in the river bottom. Then, flatly, the drumfire of three rifles broke out and thin whistling sounds passed their ears.

"Don't waste it!" yelled Grimes. "Get to that cutbank and then let 'em taste it!"

He swung sharply to the right and pitched his horse down into a dry gully. As he went he looked back and saw his men plunging down and disappearing. Something touched his hat lightly and then he was in the gully, pulling in his horse with a stiff draw at the reins. He slid out of the saddle and made a scrambling climb to the cut-bank's crest and flattened there under some stiff-branched sage. The smell of its broken branches and crushed leaves as he settled himself was sweet in his nostrils. And then powder smoke, bitter and acrid, replaced it.

The dull crash of the heavy rifles and carbines broke steadily for a few moments, then dwindled as some men reloaded and others finished out their magazines full. Again it broke in drumfire, wavered, steadied. A shrill cry came into it and died curiously. The thought came to Grimes, as he reloaded, that a man had died then. The same man who had given the almost Indian-like war cry earlier in the fight. He wondered bleakly, Who? and then peered out, seeking a target.

Two men were bolting at the top speed of their horses, shooting back in a wild throwing of lead that meant almost nothing unless a chance shot scored. A third riderless horse was trotting aimlessly about in a willow thicket near the bumbling surge of the yellowed river.

As the shooting died and the two men disappeared a half mile or more away, Grimes went back for his horse. He rode up the cut-bank, after three sliding tries, and reached the crest to see Dolly Dahl coming out.

"You sure as hell changed your tune about letting them go and finding out who our friends are!" Dahl glowered as he rode closer, and the others came out in scrambling, snorting bursts from their horses.

"They shot first, didn't they?" said Grimes, grinning. But he was riding toward the willow thicket, rifle ready. There was a man down there, dead perhaps, perhaps

only wounded. And, if wounded, ready to shoot again. Now they could see him, half curled behind the thick, rough trunk of a willow.

He was a big, powerful man, hatless and with a bandanna tied around his long black hair. His clothes were greasy buckskin hunting jacket and pants that ended in wound leggings and moccasins. He was curled curiously, but his belly and face were flat on the ground and his outstretched right hand—limp and motionless—was an inch or two from his pistol.

Grimes started to get down from his horse and something clicked in his mind. It was not right. The range had been too long for pistols. He threw himself sideways as smoke suddenly blossomed at the muzzle of the pistol and he heard two booming crashes of sound.

In the sharp and sudden silence a curious sobbing sound came, died.

"Got him, Grimes," said Jack Martin flatly. And he levered another shell into his carbine.

"Thanks; it was close," said Grimes. He stepped forward and looked at the dead man. "More Injun than white, and showing it. What a specimen."

The face was mean and cruel and death had not softened it. Ugly lines drawn by hate and venom seamed the dirty, unshaven features under the long, black, and greasy hair. A scalping knife was in the belt and another larger knife hung by a thonged scabbard on the left side.

They stood for a time staring at the man. "Anybody know him?" asked Grimes at last. When none spoke, he added, "Let's tie him on his saddle and turn the horse loose to take him home—or to hell."

He spoke bleakly and harshly. There was murder and cruelty and hellishness written so plain on the dead ambusher's face that no softness was drawn from any of them.

Semple walked, softly whistling, to the dead man's horse and brought him back. They tied the dead man like a sack across his saddle and fastened up the reins. They slapped the horse, and he trotted off a dozen steps—and halted. He looked at them, pitched his ears toward them, swung them back, and still waited. Grimes fanned his hat at the animal, and the horse blinked,

nothing more.

Grimes put his hat back on his head, pitched it over his eyes, and scratched briefly at his hair. "Hell, it looks like we got another dead body on our hands."

"If he follows," put in Martin with a sharp grin, "let's take him to that other ranch, near Sam Bonham's, and dump him there."

Grimes nodded. He and the others mounted in brief creakings of saddle leather and rode out of the willows to pick up their pack stock. The saddle horse with the swinging dead man came with them. Grimes chuckled briefly, but there was no mirth in it.

An hour later they rode up to Karl Sutro's ranch and found him, white-faced, in the doorway staring at them. The gateposts were tall and had a crossbar between them, oddly like a wide gallows. Grimes noted it, unhooked and swung the gate without dismounting, and rode on toward the house. The saddler with the dead body was back of him, Semple and Harrigan rode behind them, and Dahl and Martin waited by the gate. And then they stopped, silent, staring at Sutro.

"You were in town," said Grimes. "You're Sam Bonham's nearest neighbor too." And there he stopped grimly.

Sweat broke out on Sutro's face. And more came as the silence held. Not a word came from Grimes or his men, and they let Sutro sweat and stare about him, his eyes returning again and again to the dead man. At last he spoke, his voice thick and shaky.

"I—I rode out fast from town," he said. "I wanted to get home. Where, where did you kill The Cannibal?" He swallowed.

"You know where," said Grimes easily. "You were there. One of the three that jumped us. Who was the other man? Is he around anywhere?"

"I don't know. I don't know what you mean, I mean." Sutro floundered helplessly.

Grimes grinned thinly at him. "Who is this man you call The Cannibal?"

"He, they, he's the squawman they call The Cannibal. He married a Crow Indian and got two sons. Jaynes, his name is. His sons, Jeff and Jerry—Say, they'll kill you for this!" Sutro seemed suddenly to gather courage as he realized he was not to be shot

at once. He stepped forward out of the doorway. "You can search the place if you want—there's nobody here but me. They—" He half turned to look toward the south, across the Green to the mountains beyond—the Diamond Mountains with the big canyon leading up through them.

"You mean," said Grimes crisply, "they're up there in the canyon, using Butch Cassidy's old cabin hideout?"

"How, how do you know about that?" asked Sutro. A sudden light seemed to come into his eyes. "Are you part of Butch's crowd?"

"What do you think?" asked Semple.

Sutro swallowed and did not answer.

"That gate would make a swell gallows, Hasty," said Harrigan, jerking his thumb in a backward gesture. "With his own rope," he added. "It would pay him for ambushing us. I know how to make the knot. You lay a double loop at the end of the rope, make thirteen twists around it, and—"

He began to laugh at Sutro's face.

Lazily, Grimes eased in the saddle. Then he spoke. "Look, fella. This squawman here was one of your crowd. I know that much now. You say he's got two breed sons. Good. You're on our list now. So are the two breed sons of this dead man. Get this straight. We're sticking around this valley till we straighten some things out. You're numbered. So are the two breeds. There'll be more. Don't worry about that."

He paused to give emphasis to his words, then went on. "Now we're leaving The Cannibal and his horse to you. You come out to the gate and you stand there under that gallows bar and you stand there until we're out of sight, see? If we look back and don't see you standing under that gallows bar, we'll come back and hang you to it—permanent!"

SUTRO stiffened his back and walked out with them to the high gate and waited there. He did not speak as they rode off, glancing back from time to time. He did not move. His thick-necked body swayed once and his bullet head sagged slightly. Then he straightened again. A cruel, cold light came into his eyes as he grew more and more certain that they were not fooling him.

They were going to leave him alive.

A curious exhilaration came to him, and he had to control himself to keep from shouting. But he could not keep his words down completely, and they came out in a harsh, rasping whisper. "So, you leave me alive? You damned fools."

They were gone now, and he turned to look at the dead man on the horse. He walked to the body and he nodded and spoke as though the greasy squawman could hear. "I'll take you up to the cabin to see what your boys and Soogan want to do about this. Maunders—" He stopped. "Damn Maunders! I think maybe he's quitting us."

He stood for a time brooding, and then went and saddled a fresh horse. Mounting, putting the dead man's horse on a lead rope, he rode off.

From a distance Arch Harrigan watched Sutro ride around the Bonham place as though wanting to avoid it. He picked him out easily as he forded the river and disappeared up the canyon toward Butch Cassidy's old hideout. And then he rode back to their camp in the mouth of the box canyon to report.

Grimes nodded. "It'll begin to worry them. It'll pile up in their minds, and they'll show their hands. We just gotta wait until it breaks," he ended.

"And in the meantime," grumbled Tom Sistrom, "we're dead beef for anybody who wants to pot us from behind a tree or rock?"

"What's new about that?" demanded Arch Harrigan roughly. "For any of us?"

"Shut up," said Grimes sternly. "We're going to hang and rattle until it breaks."

That was Tuesday, and the night, day, and second night followed without sign of anyone near them. Then Thursday, not three hours after dawn, they saw a horse and rider swinging through the flats a mile or more away.

"Heading our way," said Grimes. "Riding openly. Trying to make us watch him, maybe, instead of some more sneaking in on us. Scatter, boys, get in the rocks and trees, and don't show yourselves."

They were gone, swiftly and silently as Indians move. Grimes stood alone by their dying breakfast fires and rolled a smoke

and watched Kate Kerlee ride up to him and pause with an oddly strained look on her face. She seemed to fumble for words, and then came up with a puzzled question, "You're not alone?"

"Well," his lips twitched slightly, "not exactly. You see, missy, we're sort of in enemy territory, and we act accordingly."

"I heard what happened," she answered slowly. "And there's talk in town that you killed someone on your way home with the supplies."

"That's right." He answered her with a haunting note of gruffness in his voice. "And before we're through in this hell valley we'll be killing a lot more."

A quick change of emotion flitted across her pretty face before she spoke. Then, quietly and determinedly, she said, "You might as well ask me to get down, for I'm going to do it anyhow. You see, I want to talk to you. I want to try to understand you. And I'm not a spy for Maunders or anybody else—except, perhaps"—and she smiled fleetingly—"for myself."

"Trouble is, missy"—Grimes went on as though she had not spoken—"we don't know who we're going to have to kill."

"I'm getting down anyhow," she answered almost bleakly, as though fright now was coming at what she had said and done. And she dropped lightly from her horse, letting the split reins fall to the ground.

A sudden, sharp antagonism rose in Hasty Grimes. He knew that all of his men could see what was happening, that some of them at least could hear the talk. And it stung him. And her cool manner stung him the more. So he had not answered, simply stood and waited for her to get down from her horse alone.

Standing there, leaning back against the skirt of her saddle and rubbing her horse's shoulder, her eyes locked on his and held them, not briefly, but for what seemed a very long time. She was tall and slender and had the strong brown hands of a born horsewoman. Her figure gave the odd impression of being ready to move, swiftly and surely, in any direction, yet had the casual, relaxed ease that seemed to belie the tension. Her eyes were light and dancing with life under the low-swept lock of her hair, and suddenly now they turned warm and friendly, and

Grimes was reminded of how she had looked at Skull Duggan.

"It won't work, my fine and angry-looking man." She laughed softly at him. "I'm going to talk to you and study you and understand you and your motives whether or not you want me to. To get rid of me you'll have to put me back in the saddle and lead my horse away."

And she laughed again, softly and quickly, at Grimes's almost sulky expression. But it left his face swiftly, and he smiled. He turned and said, not loudly, "Come on in, boys."

Silently, grinning a little, the six men came into sight from behind trees and rocks and clumps of bushes.

A quick expression of pain swept across her face and she said, "So he was the one who was killed when you got the horses? I'm sorry. He deserved something better than that fate, something more peaceful."

"He tried to make you understand," said Martin, defending his friend's death. "He wanted to go that way, fighting a man's fight against something he hated."

"I see," she answered briefly, and let her eyes run from face to face.

"I'm afraid you don't," came almost sharply from Grimes. "Even in dying Skull Duggan furthered his ends. It was a man's game he played, a man's fight to the finish. And I'm proud—we're all proud, missy—to have known that man and seen him die."

"I'll try to understand because it will help me to understand you all." She smiled quickly and turned. "Can I see the horses? That palomino you rode to town was a beauty, and I'd like to see the others."

"Of course." Turning, Grimes walked with her to the rough brush fence.

SHE stared for a moment at the horses grazing or idly standing in pairs, head to tail so one could switch flies for both. Palominos, bays, a couple of blacks, two or three bayo coyote mares that looked oddly out of place with the others; but all good stock for breeding or saddle in that rugged range country. And she smiled. Her eyes shifted until she saw a place to get through the drift fence where it was made with rope strands, and she walked swiftly there. Before Grimes could more than open his

lips to protest, she was through the fence and walking toward the horses. He sensed instantly what was coming but knew of no way to stop it now.

So he followed her through the fence after a bleak look back at his men. He saw heads shift and eyes turn as he glanced back and knew they had been watching and had figured out, as swiftly as he had, just what would happen. And it did happen before he and Kate Kerlee had walked thirty yards into the box canyon.

The palomino gelding nickered and trotted toward Grimes, still nickering softly as he came closer and closer. And back of the big, sleek-muscled gelding came four other palominos, two mares and two three-year-old horses whose backs only then were beginning to know the feel of a saddle.

The big gelding stopped a foot or two from Grimes and almost pushed him over with his muzzle as he shoved at him. Grimes stood idly, rubbing the gelding's ears and staring intently at Kate for any change of expression. But none showed on her face. She looked at the mares and spoke gently to them, but they backed off a little. The two three-year-old horses snorted and stamped as she held out her hand to them, and she shrugged.

She smiled and looked at Grimes. "They're beauties, aren't they? And that gelding!" She moved closer, and the gelding swung his head away and backed one step.

"Steady," said Grimes softly, and the horse stood motionless. Grimes watched as Kate rubbed the big animal's nose, and suddenly her eyes shifted from the horse to him—and he knew.

She had outguessed him. She had planned the whole thing to learn something, and she had learned it. They were *his* horses. She was horsewoman enough to realize that it was almost a certainty that no sensitive, high-strung horse like that gelding would become so devoted to a stranger in the scant time Grimes had had the horse in the valley.

Grimes said, with her eyes on him, "So?" "So—he's beautiful, and he loves you, Mr. Hasty Grimes," she answered quietly. "So—I've told you, I'm not spying for anyone."

She patted the horse once and then turned and walked back.

The six men looked at her, at Grimes, and at one another. And Grimes answered the unspoken questions. "Yes, she outsmarted me." He said it without malice. "She knows now that the herd belongs to us, like we said it did."

She smiled at him. "You're a good loser, and to prove I like good losers, why not come, all of you, to the big dance two weeks from last night? At the schoolhouse. You'll have a chance to look the whole valley over if you come. Even the children. Everybody will be there."

"It sounds fine." Grimes smiled back, but somehow he was not certain his smile was as pleasant and friendly as hers. He knew what his men were thinking about her visit and the way she had tricked him about the horses. He knew that he would hear about it in no polite and considerate words.

"I hope you'll all come," Kate said, nodded briefly, and turned to walk toward her horse. Her hand fumbled briefly at her belt where a letter was held, and then she walked on.

Grimes followed. The six hard-faced men dropped back into their seats on the ground, against rocks, and glowered. Tricked, they were thinking, by a damned skirt.

At the horse Kate looked at her wrist as though it itched slightly, and then rubbed it against her belt. The letter fell, sifting down face up, and landed at Grimes's feet. She made no move to get it before Grimes did.

Grimes leaned over and picked it up. It was automatic that he should glance at the address as he picked up the letter. And he did.

His eyes flicked up to Kate, and saw what he read not as fear, but as a quick, intent interest, a desire to learn something from him at that brief second as he read the address. And so he read it aloud.

"Peter Smeathors, Sheriff of Palo Pinto County, Palo Pinto, Texas." And then he smiled suddenly.

But that smile almost choked Kate Kerlee. It was so different from the other smiles he had casually tossed at her. There was a warmth in it, a quick and almost friendly glow.

A glow she felt with increasing strength

as she heard him speak evenly.

"Thank you, missy. Thank you—and trust me."

He handed her the letter and stepped back. "You'll want to mail that today, of course."

She drew in a deep breath, exhaled it swiftly, and then said only, "Yes, I will." And she tucked the letter into her belt and gathered up the reins. She half turned to swing into the saddle—and stopped.

Grimes saw what had caught her eyes, and swore softly. "Hell," he said bleakly, "it follows us around."

There was a man riding toward them, weaving and sagging in the saddle. A man quite plainly at the end of his strength. He came on, barely staying in the saddle as his horse went through the trees. At times his head came up, bloody and hatless. His face looked pulpy, and with the blood on it his features were not distinguishable at first. He stared, as though wondering if his strength would carry him, and then sagged in the saddle. Almost falling each time after looking up, he fought for the last dregs of strength and came on.

He came up to them as they stood stunned and staring silently at him. His head was sagging lower and lower as his horse paced on.

His shirt was half torn off. They could see that as the horse carried him past them and his closed eyes did not see them. Slim Semple was the closest and he came to his feet to catch first the horse and then the falling body as the rider rolled limply out of the saddle.

"Lordy!" Semple's voice rose in almost prayerful tones. "What a horrible beating he's had! Who do you suppose whipped young Maunders like this?"

"Maunders?" Grimes started forward.

But Kate raced past him, almost sobbing, "Jack, Jack!"

His bloody hand pushed her aside as young Jack Maunders saw Hasty Grimes running up. And that same bloody hand reached out, the fingers clutching, seeming to pull Grimes closer as Jack Maunders's piteous, pleading voice came in a low, sobbing tone. "Teach me to shoot and kill him." He choked and moaned, "For God's sake, man, teach me to kill my father!"

VII

EARLIER that day young Jack Maunders had been in a bitter and almost sullen mood. Things were boiling up and almost over within him. He was seventeen and a strong and healthy fellow to everyone but his father.

He walked from the house and toward the store. Biff Klingen was on the saloon steps sunning himself, and on a sudden impulse he brushed past the saloonkeeper, saying curtly, "I want a drink, Biff."

"You're starting early, bub," said Klingen mockingly. His eyes were cold and cruel and somehow seemed calculating now. "But you ain't the only double-danged idiot to drink before noon. What's your father goin' to say, though?" He shoved out a glass and the whiskey bottle. "He's going to raise holy hell with you, young 'un."

Klingen closely and intently eyed Jack as he talked. He knew it angered the young fellow to have his youth thrown at him, and he was ragging him deliberately. Things were boiling in Klingen's mind also. It made him rage inwardly every time he thought of the poker game in which Maunders had won a one-third interest in the saloon. Now Klingen did all the work, furnished all the capital, and paid more than one third of the profits to Maunders. And in the depths of his mind he was sure that Maunders, the Bible-preaching son, had dealt a crooked hand that last time. So things boiled and came slowly to a head, dangerously close to spilling over in Klingen's ratty mind as well as in Jack Maunders's.

Klingen opened his mouth three different times to start talking and each time closed it again as he watched Jack take four drinks, one after the other. The first two rapidly, the second pair more widely spaced in time. And Jack never spoke. When the final drink had been downed Jack looked at Klingen for a bleak moment and then spoke.

"There." He laid down a dollar for the four drinks. "And my sanctimonious dad gets one third of that, I suppose."

Klingen's cold eyes gleamed for a moment. "Oh, you've learned that, have you?" He thought briefly. His eyes shifted, and he saw Soogan Charley going into the back

door of the Maunders home. The two breeds, Jeff and Jerry Jaynes, disappeared at the same time into the barn back of the house. His cold eyes gleamed again.

"That ain't all you've learned, Jack."

"How do you know that?"

"It ain't enough, alone, to start you drinkin' this time in the morning." Klingen shoved the bottle back at Jack. "This one's on the house," he added.

Jack took a drink and shivered when he swallowed it. He stood for a time, brooding and sour-minded and Klingen did not speak to break the mood. The saloonkeeper looked out once, toward the Maunders home, and then he grinned briefly.

"So you've learned things about your dad, but you ain't sure enough to do anything about it." He made it a flat statement and laughed softly when Jack Maunders cursed him briefly. "All right, Jack. If you don't want to prove it to yourself, get on your horse and ride off those drinks. If you *do* want to prove it to yourself, sneak around your house and find out what Soogan Charley and your dad are talking about—right now."

Jack Maunders cursed him again, harshly, and Klingen grinned. He still grinned, thin-lipped and wise, as he walked to the window and stared out. In a moment he heard Jack's booted heels hitting the floor, heard the swinging doors creak, and then he saw Jack walking toward his own home.

Klingen thought sharply, "I wonder now?" He saw Jack start for the barn, and he swore softly. "Goin' to get his horse." His trick had failed. And then he almost shouted. Jack Maunders turned away from the barn and walked around the corner of the house.

Klingen stood waiting. He fixed his eyes on the barn door and in a moment he saw movement in its shadows. He could see the two breeds dimly, leaning forward and peering after Jack Maunders. He waited a moment longer and then saw the breeds sneak out of the barn in swift, half-running steps on their toes, as though trying to move fast but silently. And Klingen threw back his head and shouted with raucous laughter.

It was something Jack Maunders would not have done if he had been cold sober. But five drinks of Klingen's strong whiskey

were more than he could stand. He was not accustomed to drinking, and it was the first time he had ever taken even one drink so early in the morning. And it dulled his usually keen brain. He made no effort to conceal himself, simply walked around the corner of the house and stood beside the window of the room where he knew his father usually received visitors. And he was right.

He could hear first Soogan Charley talking, then Mrs. Jensen.

"I guess we just don't understand this, Maunders," said Soogan harshly. "And it's damned well time you made us understand. So start talking."

But Maunders made no answer, and it was then that Mrs. Jensen spoke, harshly, angrily. "Make it clear, Maunders. Make us see why you had the boys hold that herd on the bench until that bunch of men got to them and killed some of our boys. What did you have in mind?"

"I told you," Maunders answered angrily. "The man who was to take that herd into Montana heard things were getting too hot on the Outlaw Trail. He said the Pinkertons and half the peace officers in the West were getting together to break up Butch Cassidy and his gang. And I—"

"And you want to wait," said Mrs. Jensen angrily, "until Butch and half his gang get killed off, and then you take over. You, running a gang like the Wild Bunch! You fool. You aren't half the man needed—"

It was then that Jack Maunders either heard or felt the thump of booted feet close to him. He spun around, hand dropping to his gun. But he was too late. One of the breeds, closing in, hit him a flat blow with his fist. It struck Jack's right wrist and numbed it beyond movement. The other breed, grinning cruelly, smashed a heavy blow straight out. It crashed full into Jack's face and drove his head against the wall. It brought blood from his nose and split one lip badly. He tried to push up and out with all his strength, and again a smashing blow drove him back against the wall.

As though from a great distance, he heard one breed say: "Caught him listening." And Jack wondered dully what would happen now.

Then he heard his father's cold, angry

voice as though from a great distance. "I wonder how much he heard?"

JACK fought to turn himself around and face his father. He had a curious feeling that it was the end, and he did not care. He was dazed, half drunk from the whiskey and the curt confirmation in the words of the three, including his father, that had come through the window. All he had guessed and suspected came home as the truth now.

"I heard enough," he blurted out wildly. "Enough to tell me that you're the rottenest crook left unhung! You, preaching and talking of good and honesty and love and faith and fine deeds. And all the time—"

His father broke in, "The boy is mad!"

"An' half drunk too." Jerry Jaynes said it with a grin. "Hell, Maunders, I got half a load just holding him here an' breathing his breath!"

"Why shouldn't I get drunk? Learning my father is a crook—"

Maunders leaned out of the window and struck a heavy blow at his son's already bruised and bleeding face. "Liar! Liar! Fool and trickster and listener at windows for no good! I'm not a crook. I'm a legally appointed deputy in this county making plans to clear out the outlaws. I'm planning to make these men my deputies, and you listen at the window and accuse me of plotting crimes. Liar and fool!"

Maunders shook with sudden rage. "Take him out to the barn and whip him. That is the fate of an ungrateful, lying child. A fool who suspects his own father of wrongdoing. Whip him, boys, as though he were your own evil son and you wanted to drive the devil from him!"

"You, you—" A big hand clapped over Jack's mouth and silenced him. He tried to scream and could make only scrambled sounds. He tried to get at his gun and they knocked his hand away time and again. They were dragging him now toward the barn. They took him into its cold, shaded gloom.

He hardly knew what they were doing at first. It was something about his hands and wrists, and then he seemed to be hanging with his toes only touching the ground. At the first blow of the whip he screamed.

At the second he moaned and choked. The third vicious, sweeping blow brought blood and oblivion to Jack Maunders.

It was an hour after they cut him down when he gained strength to saddle his horse, crying like a child at the horrible agony of his raw, bleeding back. He crawled into the saddle and started to ride. He knew where he wanted to go. What he wanted to do. . . .

And he moaned and whimpered again as he looked into Hasty Grimes's pitying eyes and spoke pleadingly. "Teach me to kill him!" He screamed as Semple tried to take some of the tattered shirt from his horribly cut back. "He's not fit to live and I want to kill him." And then he fainted.

"Get a fire started, boys." Grimes spoke swiftly. "Get hot water to soak that shirt off. Move fast; it's going to be hell for him when he wakes up. We gotta get something on his back first." He snapped his fingers. "Martin, ride for Sam Bonham's place and see if there's any salve there. Bring old shirts, anything that will do for bandages, flour sacks, anything. Ride, damn it!"

Martin was running for his horse as the last shouted words reached him. Semple was steadying Jack and laying him down on his stomach, easing his bruised and battered face sideways onto a clean sack.

"No!" Kate's voice was sharp and commanding. "No, put him back on his horse while he's still unconscious. Give me what's left of those pills you bought for your friend. We'll take him to my house where I can nurse him—"

"No," Grimes broke in crisply. "It stands like I said. He came to me. He stays here until he wants to leave."

His voice sounded flat and almost cruel. His eyes gleamed and seemed to dance with some deep fire. His fingers twitched a little as Kate half stooped, as though to pick up Jack. He caught her shoulder in his hand and none too gently raised her until her eyes met his and she stood on her feet.

"No," he said again.

"You, you—" Her voice broke angrily. "You'll let him die here. You hard, bitter man. Can't you see that? He needs care, a clean bed to sleep in, decent, sterile bandages. You can't keep him here to die!"

"I'm not keeping him here to die, missy,"

3—TWO WESTERN BOOKS—Spring

said Grimes in his flat, cold voice. His lips were twisted into an odd expression that gave his hard, unshaven face an almost brutal look. And his eyes glowed with an almost unholy glee as he spoke on. "Like I told you, missy, we came here on business. That business ain't near over yet. We been sitting here waiting for a break. It looks like a break. Right now. So I'm telling you, we ain't keeping young Maunders here to die. We're keeping him here to get well and maybe tell us what he knows. What we want to know before we go ahead with our little killing jobs."

"You—brute!"

"Yeah, brute. Mean. Hard. Cruel. Killers." Grimes spoke bitterly. "I know all those words, missy. I know a lot of others. Like thieves, killers, rustlers, murderers, bank robbers, and stage stick-up men. I know 'em, and I've heard 'em. So you don't need to go on. Go mail your letter, missy. Send it to the sheriff of Palo Pinto County. I'll have my little job done before you can get an answer!"

"But Jack will die." Her voice broke.

"No, he won't die, missy. He's going to get well to talk, and maybe learn a lot from us about guns and how to handle them. Maybe he's going to change his mind about killing his daddy. Maybe not. Anyhow, I aim to find out why this happened!" Grimes pointed down at the torn, blood-clotted back where the remnants of the cut and torn shirt seemed actually mingled in shreds of flesh. "So, missy, go mail your letter. And if you want to tell folks Jack is here, all right. We'll be waiting for anybody that comes, and we'll know how to welcome them too."

VIII

KARL SUTRO'S fat lips were quivering as he crawled out from the rocks. He had been hiding there for hours watching and sometimes being able to hear what was said in Grimes's camp below him.

Now he mounted and rode hard. He must get to Maunders and make him do something. He accented it shrilly in his wild mind, *Do something!*

And he hammered on through the rough ridges of the Cold Springs Mountain, slanting down toward the valley. Then he saw

Kate Kerlee riding toward town on a slow lope, easing her horse along.

Sutro raised his rifle, his lips thinning into a strange grimace. She had been there at the camp talking to Grimes and his men, had been friendly with them. And he misread her parting scene with Grimes—thinking the man had urged her to a run to go to town for some strange reason. They were going to kill him, and he'd kill someone first, so he would.

Someone. Kate Kerlee?

The thought jarred him. Did he dare? Wouldn't they find who had done it? Killing a woman. Even a girl who sided with the men who were going to kill him. Well, what of it? What if they did learn who did it, he'd be dead anyhow, and so what the hell?

He raised his rifle and tried to steady himself as his horse galloped along. It was more than two hundred yards, and in a more normal moment he would have known the almost impossibility of hitting Kate at that distance, when both were on moving horses. But now he raised the rifle, sighted it, and almost pulled trigger.

The horse swung sideways, careening around a thicket of low brush, and Sutro cursed it heavily. He raked it viciously with his spurs and rode on another two hundred yards, closing the gap somewhat between him and Kate.

Then he raised his rifle again and steadied for a shot as best he could. The moving figure in front of him rose and fell as Kate's horse loped along easily. They were in sight of the little crossroads now, with its huddle of buildings.

Sutro edged his horse toward the nearest willow thicket, knowing he would have to race for that after he pulled trigger. He was half wild now, thoroughly panicked by his own terrors. He watched the figure rise and fall before his sights, timed it again and again, and thought: if I shoot low and she rises it won't kill her and if I shoot high and she drops I'll miss. He steadied, drew a sight between the rise and fall, and pulled trigger.

As the smoke blossomed out and away he jerked viciously to swing his horse over a cut-bank and into the nearest willow thicket. And he risked one over-shoulder look.

Kate Kerlee was leaning forward over the horn of her saddle and seemed to be sliding out of it.

Then Sutro jumped his horse down into the thicket and rammed the rifle back into the saddle scabbard. His lips were parted and his teeth showed. He laughed, choked, and then broke into a queer, sobbing cry. He pulled up his horse at the stream and washed his face and his hands, as though to take the blood from them. Kate Kerlee's dying blood, he thought. Then he got back on his horse and rode for the river bottoms. He must get to Maunders's house. Get there before it was learned that Kate was dead.

He knew just what he would tell Maunders and the others, and there would be no one left alive to contradict him. Not with Kate dead and Jack Maunders unconscious back there at the camp. He would tell the truth up to the time of shooting Kate. And then he would change it to fit. Kate had tried to take Jack Maunders away with her and the outlaws had shot her. It seemed very simple with no one but the men at the horse herd to give him the lie. And the valley people, stirred by Maunders, would believe him. He laughed as he rode up to Maunders's house. He pulled up, called loudly, "Maunders!" and then dropped from the saddle heavily. He wished to hell he had cleaned his carbine on the way, but he hadn't.

Karl Sutro turned to tie his horse to the hitch rack, and stood there for a long moment. His eyes widened and his mouth opened and closed four times. Then he swallowed twice and stared unbelievably. It was true. And a wild surge of relief broke over him. He hadn't done it. She was alive. She was unhurt. She was getting down from her horse and hurrying into the store. Kate Kerlee.

He thought wildly: I'm crazy. I wanted to kill her. I thought I'd killed her. And now I'm glad I didn't.

Sutro tied his horse and half staggered the first few steps toward the Maunders porch. He called again, as his gait steadied, "Maunders!" And then he reached the front door and shoved it open.

Mrs. Jensen was walking toward him, face set and angry, and Maunders was walking toward him with a puzzled expression.

He came in, kicked the door shut behind him, and quickly blurted out what he had seen and what little he had heard at the horse camp. He left out only his own panic and his crazed attempt to murder Kate Kerlee.

When he finished Mrs. Jensen said roughly, "This ends it, Maunders. You've got to move and move fast. Get the boys together and clean out that bunch. Now!"

"No!" Maunders seemed to have gained sudden strength. He was not going to tell them now. For that would tip his hand to them, and they must never learn. Never, that is, until it was too late for them to do anything about it. His voice was harsh and stern as he said again, "No."

Mrs. Jensen stared at him, and Sutro said slowly, "Well I'll be damned." She made a sharp move to silence Sutro and waited.

Now Maunders spoke on, and his voice was no longer oily and smooth and preaching. It was harsh, sharp, commanding. He somehow had found himself, they knew it as they listened.

"This is to be handled in my own way. I'll get rid of the men, and by the proper ways and means. I'm a legally appointed deputy now. I can swear in other deputies. I can and I will. I'll rouse this valley against those men and move with due process of law to get rid of them."

"Due, hell," said Sutro angrily. "That's crazy talk. They've got your son there and they'll find a way to make him talk. How in hell do you know what Jack will tell them about you and us?"

Maunders winced. He winced again as Mrs. Jensen said, "And can he tell them! And *will* he tell them, *now* after the beating he got from the breeds—at your orders, Maunders!"

Maunders drew in a deep, gasping breath and held it for a moment. He exhaled slowly, steadily, as though calming himself. Then he spoke. "My son. A whipping he deserved. And he will obey my orders. I will go there and take him away from those men. They won't dare hold him nor he dare to disobey me!"

"Maunders, what are you up to?" Mrs. Jensen stared at him, her expression bewildered yet somehow fighting for understanding and almost reaching it. "What are you

up to, Maunders? Explain. Tell us what this change in you really means."

"It means I'm going ahead with my plans—mine and yours—in the way that seems best." He hesitated, then went on. "Can't you understand my value to the band is greater now? I'm a deputy sheriff, I'm the law in this end of the county!"

"I wonder now?" said Mrs. Jensen mockingly. "I wonder if Sheriff Burton was tricking you just as you're trying to trick us!"

"I've made my plans." He spoke briefly and coldly. "First I'm going to get my son out of the hands of those men before he can tell them too much. And that means a fight, of course. For they won't let him go peaceably, I'm sure." He turned his hard, almost blazing stare on Mrs. Jensen. "Who is at Butch Cassidy's cabin on the road through Diamond Mountain?"

"Soogan went up there with Jeff and Jerry," she answered curtly. "Some of the other boys were to be there, but I don't know who. Montana Jack, probably, perhaps Elza Lay. Lay, Dave Lant, and some others were to case that bank in Idaho—"

Maunders broke in sharply. "It's enough. Karl, you ride to the cabin, keeping in the river bottom so you won't be seen. Take a fresh horse from my barn if you want. Get the boys. Tell them to spread out around the camp of those men at the box canyon. I'm going in there and get my son. If he won't come with me, if they won't give him up"—Maunders seemed to force himself into saying the rest of his thoughts—"we'll have to fight! I'll push my hatbrim back with my left hand. Remember, my *left hand*—that's the signal to start shooting."

Karl Sutro shook his head, disturbed. "You'll be right in it," he said. "You're taking a hell of a chance in there alone with that bunch when the shooting starts!" An almost cruel grin broke on his face. "Those buzzards don't like you much, Maunders. And Elza Lay—"

"I'll take my chances," said Maunders grimly. "And my son will have to take his also. If he dies—" He waved his hands quickly, as though brushing it off. "Now, get out. I'll give you three hours to get the boys and get set. Then I'm riding in." He

looked at his big watch, snapping open the hunting case, closing it. "That will make it three-thirty and give us more than an hour of good light for the killing of those fools!"

AT THREE-THIRTY that afternoon Hasty Grimes was standing by the fire where a pail of water bubbled and a bean pot full of soup was steaming. Arch Harrigan lounged against a rock, his rifle across his knees, and Jack Maunders moaned and tossed a little as he lay flat on his stomach on some piled blankets. The others of Grimes's hard crew were not in sight.

"Easy, Jack," said Grimes gently as the young fellow moaned again and seemed about to roll over. He reached into his pocket and brought out a small bottle. From another pail away from the fire he dipped a cup of water and knelt beside Maunders. "Swallow this, fella; it'll ease your back."

Arch Harrigan's eyes fixed on something coming through the trees toward them. He nodded to Grimes and stood up, leaning back against the tree with his rifle across his folded left arm, his right hand cuddling the trigger guard.

John Maunders rode up, his eyes glowing and a feeling of mingled relief and anger in his mind. Just two men for him to face. It would be easy. But somehow he felt angered at the thought of not having the others there to be wiped out also. From a distance he had seen Sutro, Soogan Charley, the breeds, and one other man sneaking around and taking positions for the ambush. Sutro had signaled and pointed toward the ridge, and he guessed from that signal that others, perhaps Montana, Lay, and even more, were working around that way. A good trap. Too bad all of them were not in it. But if the others were in the box canyon, they could not escape. He grinned, wiped the grimace from his face, and rode on.

"I've come for my son," he said coldly. "I'll not have a child of mine living in the camp of outlaws and murderers."

Jack Maunders shivered. "Your son." He almost whispered it. "Your son!" His voice rose in a cry. "No! No! Not now. I won't go with you. You let those brutes beat me and cut my back to ribbons. You're not my father now. Do you know why I came here?

Why I won't go with you? Because they're going to teach me all the tricks and cunning and skill they know. With pistols! So I can kill you."

"You're mad." Maunders eased in the saddle and kept both hands on the horn of his saddle. He felt very sure of himself, and his son's bitterness against him only made him feel again, and more strongly, that Jack's death would somehow help straighten his own sins and set him on the right path. The way of God, he thought unctuously.

"One more chance to come peaceably," said Maunders. He felt oddly cold, steady, now that the moment had come. Grimes and Harrigan and his son—dying in that first hail of bullets. He steadied himself to give the signal. "Will you come with me?"

"No. Never."

Maunders had raised his left hand as though in a pleading gesture. He thought bleakly, I'll shove my hatbrim back, wait for the first shot from my men, and then kill Grimes. It was going to be easy, he was certain. Neither Grimes nor Harrigan seemed more than idly interested, smiling a little in mockery at his efforts to get his son away from them. It was time they were taught a lesson.

"On your own head, then," said Maunders grimly. He moved his left hand to shove back his hatbrim, and turned his eyes on Grimes. Grimes was laughing at him. He'd surely change that in a moment!

The shots did not come, and he shoved his hatbrim back again. And still the shots did not come. A slow, deadening fear began to creep over Maunders. What had gone wrong? Where were the men he had seen moving up into position? They had left him alone there with those outlaws—and the son who hated him. He shivered, and for the third time shoved back his hatbrim. And then Grimes laughed at him, a sharp, rising sound of real mirth.

"So that's the signal," said Grimes as he stopped laughing. "That was to start the shooting? You fool. Do you think we don't keep watch? We saw you coming and saw that bunch cross the river on the Vernal Road. Do you think we don't know about Butch's cabin up there being a hideout for

anybody that wants one? We saw them come, and I placed my men. Go ahead, start something yourself, Maunders. Your men must see where my men are on the ridge and be afraid to start it. Why don't you? Open up, man; you've got your hand on your gun!"

Maunders stared for a moment, fighting for control. He took his hand away from his gun butt and said grimly, "Lies. Lies. But this is not ended. He who lives by the sword shall perish by the sword. You have been warned. From here on you stay in the valley at your own peril. Peril of death!"

He wheeled his horse and rode off without a backward glance. Grimes and Harrigan stood, alert and ready, half-smiling as they watched him go. Then a sharp sigh turned them.

Jack had turned on his face, his strength giving way. "Let me get well," he said brokenly; "let me get well enough to kill him."

Then he lay there quietly, breathing deep. In a few moments Slim Semple's voice floated down from the crest of the ridge. "They've all pulled out, Hasty! All but two. We got them here, roped and hog-tied. Shall we throw 'em off, or kill 'em, or what?"

"Bring 'em down and let's see what they look like," Grimes called back. "Some of you boys keep out of sight in the rocks and watch that bunch, though!"

In a few moments they could hear scrambling, cursing, the rattle of rocks as men came down the ridge. Semple and Dahl had their two prisoners, disarmed but not bound, in front of them. "We took the ropes off so's they could climb down," explained Semple when he and Dahl herded the two tough and bearded men down to the camp. "Look sweet, and stink like hell, don't they?"

One of the men cursed Semple fluently and expertly, from hell to breakfast and back again. Semple laughed at him. But the other, a sour-faced man of medium build, only grinned coldly.

Tom Siström came into sight, and Ben Peters called, "Me and Jack Martin'll stay up here and watch."

Siström chuckled at the two men. "Elza Lay and Dave Lant, meet my friends." He grinned sourly.

"We ain't friends of yours or anyone else who cuts themselves into our party," said Elza Lay roughly. He had done the cursing and now he talked without swearing. "Git it over with. What are you going to do with us, anyhow? And who are these buzzards, Tom?"

"That," said Grimes, shaking his head at Siström, "is none of your business." He studied Lay and Dave Lant for a moment, then said, "I know you fellows. You run with Butch and the Wild Bunch. Look. I'm turning you loose, there's no sense in asking questions of you fellows. Take your guns and get out. Let us alone and we'll let you alone. Tell Butch that, will you? And keep out of our way for a week or two."

Dave Lant still was grinning a little. "Sure. We're just passing through to take word to Butch and the boys about some business matters. We was at the cabin and just came along for the ride. We didn't figure to get caught so damned easy, either." He turned and looked at Semple and Dahl. "You boys got some Injun in you to sneak up on us as easy as you did. No hard feelings, though."

"Are you moving on, then?" said Grimes.

Dave Lant looked at Elza Lay and got a curt nod. He nodded also. Shrugged his shoulders and adjusted his gun belt carefully when Semple handed it to him. Elza Lay did the same and growled, "Now we gotta climb that damned hill again to get to our horses." He grumbled, swore, said, "Come on, Dave," and started off for the bottom of the cliff.

Dave Lant followed with a curt, "So long."

As they disappeared Tom Siström turned sullenly to Hasty Grimes. "There you got it, brother. You can't take a step in this valley without finding some of Butch's Wild Bunch under your feet."

Grimes had called down Peters and Jack Martin as dusk dropped and now he ordered Semple and Dahl out for the first watch of the night. He watched them go in opposite directions, carrying their carbines, and sat down near a tree, brooding. For the first time he was beginning to feel doubts. Not about the finish for them, but about the whole matter. What could a few men do at a time like this, against Butch Cassidy, the

Wild Bunch, and all their friends and companions? What chance did he and his small group have against an organized outfit like that?

Little chance. He knew it. But the thing was driving him on. A job to be done, and you don't stop until it is done or you are dead.

So he sat and puzzled, and suddenly came to life at some quick shouts, a hurried cry, and a cold voice saying, "Steady—hold it or I'll shoot you!"

IX

THE quick shout from Semple brought them all up and ready, rifles and carbines caught in swift-moving hands even though some had already dropped off to sleep. They waited tense and alert, eyes staring, shifting, ears tuned for the first booming crash of gunfire. And it did not come.

"Don't shoot, misters, it's me—Black Boyd," came a voice through the darkness. A pause, then he spoke again. "I got words for my friends, misters. Can I come in?"

"Sure," called Grimes. "Come in, Boyd. Semple, you stay out there."

Boyd came in quietly, trotting his horse through the trees, and they noted he was riding from the east, the direction of the settlement where Maunders and the others lived. He stepped down and stood beside his horse, dim and shadowy and black in the darkness of the night.

"She's a cloudy night, misters, and I figure the snow will fall before long. It's a good thing too," Boyd went on. "It's going to make it easier for you misters to get away and avoid the trouble."

"Name it," said Grimes, "and we'll see about running away!"

"It's Maunders," Boyd said stiffly. Then he peered about in the heavy darkness. "Is Jack here? I done heard he was—Mister Jack?"

"I'm here; go ahead. You can't tell me anything worse about my dad than I already know," came the harsh answer.

"I'm sorry, sure sorry." And Boyd's voice carried conviction. "Maunders is sure stirring things up among the folks of the valley. He's got 'em all riled. He's got

Tieters, Klingen, and the bad folks on his side for sure, and what happened to Miss Kate is stirring up all the others!"

"Kate? What happened to her?" It seemed that Grimes and Jack spoke at the same time. "Damn it, man, speak up! What happened to her?"

"Somebody shot at her," said Boyd. "She got hit in the arm, but not bad. Seems it was right after she'd been here, and Karl Sutro—him that lives near here—said he was following her to town. He took a short-cut through the bottoms, but heard the shot and saw a man riding a pale horse skinning away."

"A pale horse—a palomino!" Grimes snapped it out. "Any other palominos in this valley?"

"Not that folks know about," answered Boyd.

"Then Sutro lies, and he would, damn him! Why did I let him get away alive?" Grimes demanded of no one in particular. "I'll know better next time. The next fool that prowls our camp . . .!"

"Yes, misters," said Boyd. His teeth gleamed as he grinned in the flare of a match as Harrigan lighted a smoke. "Miss Kate says she don't know. Says she knows somebody was behind her not long after she left here. But the shooting has sure warmed the valley up. Maunders has got 'em all boiling and ready to go. He's swearing in everybody as deputies to make it legal. Then he figures to ride in and wipe you all out!"

"When?" demanded Grimes. "How much time've we got, Boyd?"

"Tomorrow sometime. Maybe not till night. Maunders, I heard tell, thinks Burton the sheriff is coming tomorrow. Says he'd like the sheriff to be here—or so somebody said in Biff Klingen's saloon. I just picked it up here and there, misters. I ain't so certain about anything but the main part—that they're a-coming for you all!"

Arch Harrigan spoke flatly. "It smells like snow, and a snow would help us get away if they really gang up on us."

Grimes snorted. "Get away—hell! That means leaving the horse herd. And I'm not certain Jack here is in shape to ride."

"Just don't leave me. I'll make out. I can take it!" Jack spoke pleadingly. "I'm

all right—now, or in the morning. Whatever you say. I can ride. I can fight with you!”

Grimes smiled at him, unseen in the blackness. “Sounds like you’d thrown in with us, Jack. And that suits me.”

A mutter of assent went up, and Tom Sistrom, sullen and mean as he was, put the thing into words. “He belongs. I’m on the side of anybody who’s taken a beating like that and plays the man afterward.”

So they sat and stood for a time in utter darkness except for the occasional glow of a cigarette as someone puffed. Thinking, waiting for Grimes, the leader.

“I’ll be damned, double-damned, and shot to hell before I’ll lose this herd,” said Grimes. His voice was even, cold, a little low in tone. “We’re in this thing to a finish. And the horses are part of it. We rode down here to get them, and we won’t give them up without a fight!”

“But if we have to?” demanded Tom Sistrom. “You’ll do it then?”

“Yeah, Grimes,” snapped Jack Martin, his mind on his dead friend. “We’re going to raise billy-hell for Skull’s sake, aren’t we? And if we have to give up the horses—ain’t getting rid of the outlaw bunch first?”

“Yes, if we have to lose the horses, we will,” Grimes answered. His voice hardened with the thought.

“Then why not now? Why not make it easier?” growled Tom Sistrom.

“I’m boss.” Grimes spoke shortly. “We’re doing it my way, and anybody that doesn’t agree can saddle and ride.”

“To hell with you!” said Tom Sistrom’s angry voice. But he stayed right where he was, growling and cursing as he waited.

“In the morning we’ll start the herd and try to get them to a bench in the higher hills.” Grimes had been working it over in his mind. “Boyd, name a place up there where the herd will find enough feed and shelter to carry through a small storm, where they won’t drift before it.”

“There’s a place near my cabin—off to the right of Ewing canyon.” Boyd spoke softly. “I could watch ’em, if you don’t want me around for the real shooting. But I sure love to hear the guns go, misters. I’d sure like to be along.” His voice was eager, soft, pleading.

“We could put them at your place and leave them, yes,” agreed Grimes. Something was stirring in his mind. The Negro seemed to know a lot, and he wanted to learn some of it. “Where could we hide, where could we leave Jack until he’s well enough to ride?”

“’Pends on how long you want to hide,” said Black Boyd slowly. “For a little mite of time, most anywheres around my place. But for a long stay there ain’t nothing like the Robber’s Roost country.”

Grimes stiffened and tried not to show much interest. “Where is that?” he asked. “I mean how do I get there? I know it’s south of Green River someplace.”

Boyd nodded. He spoke softly and swiftly, as though time meant a great deal. He described the crossing of the river near Green River, Utah, and the sweep of the trail south and west away from the deepening canyons of the Green. The break and parting of the trails beyond the great bend, and the left-hand trail was the proper one. Chaffee’s ranch, the San Rafael River crossing, the desert bare and bleak and dotted with occasional trees. Then the straight ride south toward the flat tops of three buttes rising from the more level land. Sage and stunted cedars and scattered water holes that were hard to find but could be located by smart men. Then the Robber’s Roost on the flats; trees, caves, Cassidy’s camp far to the north and east, Big John’s cabin on the Hanksville trail.

More and more details, and in the end they all had a clear picture not only of the trail south but of the whole Robber’s Roost area, including the way of escape south and east across the grim Colorado River canyons into Utah, New Mexico, Arizona, and even Mexico itself.

“But,” said Grimes slowly at the finish, even though he knew it might hurt Jack Maunders, “if Jack’s father is leading the bunch against us, won’t he know the way to the Robber’s Roost?”

BEFORE Boyd could answer they heard Semple call out. “Stop! Stop, or I shoot!”

They could hear a brief mutter of words, then Semple’s voice calling, “Grimes, I’m sending her in.”

"Her?" said Jack hoarsely.

Kate rode up and dismounted.

"We heard you were shot," said Grimes. "I'm glad you weren't."

"But I was," she answered. "In the arm and only a scratch. I'm glad I came. They almost had me convinced that some one of you shot me. And now I'm here I simply don't believe it!"

"Thank you," said Grimes. He went on after a brief pause. "I'd figure Sutro. He was the one on the ridge watching us; he followed you away, but riding on the ridges."

"But why would he do it?"

"To make trouble for us," said Grimes, and added nothing more.

"You're in trouble enough now," she said swiftly, and then stopped. "Jack—how are you?" She stepped to his side and knelt there for a moment. "Here's a shirt and jacket for you."

"All right. I'll be able to ride any time the boys want to leave here. And I'm going with them!" He added the last aggressively.

"Then you know?" Kate stood up to face Grimes. She saw Black Boyd as though for the first time, and nodded wisely. "You know they're rousing the valley to come and wipe you out? Maunders says he will not leave one of you alive; that the days of the outlaws and killers are over, in the valley at least."

"Maybe," said Grimes slowly, with an odd smile curling his lips. "Maybe the man is more right than he thinks!"

When Kate Kerlee rode away she heard Grimes and Jack say, "Good-by," but she did not answer. As she looked back once she saw a dim figure pouring water on the fire. And she wondered if she would ever see any of them again.

It was growing cold and still when Grimes went out to relieve Semple, sending Ben Peters in the other direction to take Dolly Dahl's place. He sat for a time, warming his hands in his pockets, and then walked back and forth. The air grew still and dead, and there was a strange soundless quality to the night. Soon the snow began, sifting down in small scattered flakes at first, without sound or movement in the air. In half an hour it was thickening.

He made his decision within half an hour as the snow thinned, thickened, and the wind rose and fell. Better move out now while the new-falling snow would hide their trail. Once it stopped, they could be trailed without trouble. But a trail hidden by falling snow was lost forever.

Grimes rose and stamped out his smoke in the snow, walked swiftly toward the camp. There he woke them all and called in Ben Peters. "Pack," he ordered curtly. "Some of you come with me to break out a gap in the brush fence. We're riding now."

Ten minutes later they were packed and saddled and ready to go. Grimes and Semple had broken out a fifty-foot gap in the brush fence and they rode back into the box canyon with Martin, Peters, and Dahl following. Sistrom, Jack, and Harrigan waited by the fence, a hundred feet out from it, to hold any horses that might break away from the bunch.

It took them nearly an hour to get the horses all stirred out of the brush thickets and moving toward the break in the fence. The snow sifted, the wind whistled at times, and when horse or man hit a branch a shower of snow resulted. They moved the horse herd, bunched and going easily, toward the break in the brush fence. And they were only fifty yards from it when the first crackle of rifle fire brought them up short.

A dozen rifles were crashing out there beyond the fence. They heard a yell, another. Then a familiar voice calling to them. It was Harrigan, but they could not understand his words. Someone shouted more distantly. They could hear the shooting but could see no flashes through the thick snow flurries.

"Hold the herd! Hold the herd!" Grimes shouted the order at the top of his voice. He was riding the big, fast-moving palomino, and now he raced forward toward the break in the fence. If they were trapped in that box canyon, it meant the finish. There was little or no chance for horse or man to get out of it alive, he was certain.

As he reached the break in the fence he could see flashes in three different places. Then more flashes, some seeming to come closer. He held up his restive horse and called,

"Sistrom? Arch?"

They called back to him over their shoulders, still shooting and cursing at times. "They jumped us! Get into this, damn you all!"

Grimes spun his horse and shouted, "Up here, boys; get shooting!"

Then he sent the palomino out a dozen steps, pulled it up, and got his rifle into action. The rifles were crackling and crashing all around the mouth of the box canyon now. Closing in too; he sensed that grimly. It was coming. They had no chance to break out. They had to back up and get trapped in the box canyon with the horses, or die there. And they backed up. Foot by foot, step by step, snorting horses and cursing men moved back.

And the deadly half circle of blazing spots in the storm moved closer to them. Grimes found shelter behind a tree and heard Jack Maunders's voice calling something. The voice sounded strong, angry, and he thought bleakly, A good kid; too bad he has to die here.

THE snow fell steadily, driven by a whipping wind that howled through the trees, and small light patches flared now and again as some man fancied he saw a target. But the steady rattle and beat of firing had died down before the common-sense thought that shooting in a blinding snowstorm was pure folly.

Grimes moved along the line of men twice, seeing that each was dismounted, his horse tied and near by, and that he was saving his shells for a break. He was standing near Jack Martin when he saw a rifle flash and fired at it. Instantly a half-dozen shots rained about them. Martin cursed and crawled back and away from his tree trunk and found another close beside Grimes. "Look, Grimes. There's a chance to get away but it means giving up the herd."

"I know; I've thought of it," answered Grimes. "I hate like hell to give up the horses."

"They're the small end of this deal, Grimes. Skull Duggan's dead, his job is unfinished. And we got things to do now. We ought to do them. If we live through this, we can always breed more horses."

The wind whistled louder, snow came

slanting toward them, and small flashes of rifle fire showed continuously at well-spaced intervals. And Grimes thought it over. It went very much against the grain to give up the herd, yet it seemed the only way to save their lives now. He fought against it, swore under his breath, and in the end he said quietly, "*Bueno*, Jack. We'll try it."

They listened a moment to the firing, increasing now, and Martin said, "Hurry, before they rush us!"

"I'll tell the others." Grimes spoke quickly. "You get into it as they come past. If we get clear, ride for the river crossing, make it up the grade, and we'll gather on the far side of Diamond Mountain."

"*Bueno*," said Jack Martin. There was faint movement somewhere in front of him and he fired a shot. A curse came back, and then things were still again.

By that time Grimes was moving to the last of his men on the left, Arch Harrigan. He came back swiftly, trotting through the snow, and gave each man his orders. By the time he had passed Jack Maunders and warned Semple at the far left end, he was riding his horse. Jack Maunders and Ben Peters rode with him.

They circled back, hearing the firing dim and grow more muffled. Once Grimes pulled up and stared through the sifting snow while the others waited. At last he rode on, shaking his head. "I thought I saw someone in there."

They rode on and got behind the horse herd. Peters and Jack had their orders and started to swing to either side. And then Grimes called angrily, "Who the hell is that back there?" He raised his rifle. "Speak, damn you!"

"It's me, misters. I just couldn't keep away from the shooting." And Black Boyd rode down to meet them.

"Boyd, you're a fool. We're pocketed in here and've got only one chance to get out. You should've stayed away."

"Yes, I should, but I didn't. They shoot and Black Boyd just has to come and listen." He grinned almost crazily, but they could not see it.

"Ride with us, then," said Grimes. He called sharply, "Start the herd!" And he drove his horse forward, swinging his hat and beating at the nearest of the horses. He

heard quick, startled snorts, the sudden pound and drive of horses' hoofs as they wheeled away in fright.

Then into the beat of the storm with its swirling snow came the drumming sound of the hoofs as the horses broke forward and away.

"Keep 'em going and mix with 'em," Grimes called to Boyd. "Don't shoot at all—just ride, keep low—and get away!"

The rest was just a mad mess of running horses and swirling snow for a few moments. Grimes could see nothing but the backs and high-held tails of the horses nearest him as he lay forward over the horse's shoulders, crouched and low. Offering little or no target for eyes or gun.

He heard a crash near him, heard, too, a shout. A bleak thought came: Somebody hit the drift fence and is down. They'll find him and kill him. I wonder who?

But he raced on. Those were his orders to them all, and as much for himself as them. Don't risk a second man if somebody goes down. Get away!

Now only three other horses were running beside him. Barebacked horses and no sign of riders. Grimes glanced back once and still saw flashes, then he rode on. Grim and cold. He had lost his herd unless Black Boyd could save them for him until this mess was done and over with. And lost how many men back there in the snow?

In a moment, as the snow slackened, he saw something moving. A man on a horse. Then he saw something familiar as the man passed near him, groaning a little with the cold.

"Jack Maunders?"

"Yes, where are you—and who?" Jack pulled up and stared around him.

Grimes moved his horse out of the thicket. "Are you all right, Jack?"

"Yes." He swung in beside Grimes, and they rode on. "I don't believe they got anybody. It sure was a mess, the way that herd went through them. A damned good plan, I'd say."

"Yes, but it cost me a herd of good horses." Grimes spoke almost sullenly. "And I can't spare them."

"Then they were your horses, really."

"Yes."

They kept going in grim and cold silence,

with the wind beating at their backs as they went up the canyon. Somewhere along the way they passed a ranch, Cassidy's point, and his old cabin, but they did not see anything beyond the snow and the immediate trail ahead. They rode for three hours and more, and then were through the worst of the mountains and on a great sweeping bench. In daylight they could have seen for many miles, but now they could see nothing but snow that seemed to thicken all the while.

Grimes stopped Jack Maunders near a thicket of piñon and said, "We'll build a fire at the edge of the road, and wait in the thicket where we can't be seen."

It took them long moments to find a piece of pitch-filled wood to start the fire, and while they were at it Ben Peters rode up.

In five minutes Black Boyd appeared. Then Martin, then Semple and Dolly Dahl. Harrigan was next, and Tom Sistrom.

Grimes had been thinking the thing out. Now he turned to Boyd and said, "I want you to go back and try to gather what you can of my horses. I don't want you riding with us."

Boyd protested, "But, misters, it means so much to Black Boyd, all that shooting! I want to ride with you."

"There's going to be more shooting in the valley when we get organized again and come back!" Grimes spoke harshly. "Now you ride back. Save my horses if you can, and I'll come back to get them and pay you well, fella."

"Yes, Mister Man," said Boyd unhappily. "I'll do it. But I sure hate to miss the shooting."

"You were a soldier," said Grimes. "This is an order."

"Yes, sir, Cap'n. It's an order." And Boyd spun his horse to disappear into the snowy night.

They rode on.

When they neared the town of Green River in a cold, raw, and dark dawn, Grimes headed for the railroad station. The only light in town showed there, and he drew his gun as he stood beside his horse when they stopped. "Keep your eyes out for anybody coming," he ordered them all. "Martin, Peters, come on."

He had told them all what he was planning and now it moved smoothly and swiftly. With drawn guns they stepped silently to the doors of the waiting room, Ben Peters to the one on the town side, Grimes and Martin to the platform door. The only light was in the combined ticket and telegraph office where a man with a green shade over his eyes was adding figures in a big book.

The man looked up as Peters came in and said, "You're out early—" And then he stopped as he saw the gun come above the small counter.

Grimes and Martin came in fast with drawn guns. As they reached the small gate in the counter Grimes said flatly, "Raise your hands and get away from the key, man. Get into the corner and stay there with your back to us."

"You're damned fools," the agent said, quietly obeying. "Or else you're dead broke. There ain't enough money in this office at night to buy you all a half-dozen drinks."

"It's not money we want," said Grimes. He stood back of the agent and prodded him once with his gun muzzle. "Keep quiet now. Martin, can you handle that key all right?"

"Yeah, but my fingers are stiff and it's a long time."

The key crackled as Grimes spoke slowly. "Pete Smeathors, Sheriff, Palo Pinto County, Palo Pinto, Texas. Don't answer any letters about me for at least two weeks. Signed, C. F. Grimes."

X

BURTON was a more than ordinary sheriff, for mingled with his determination to do his duty was a curious stubbornness and a fine discrimination in thought. He was not a young man, and during his years he had learned that men had many sides to their characters and leanings. He had developed his brain to judge the various sides of the people he met and why and when they would show them. His discrimination of thought came to its climax in deciding what was real and what was false in men, their deeds, and the trails they left in getting away from him and the law.

So, tired and worn and rather gray of

face, but with his eyes still brilliant with life, Burton received the news of the holdup of the telegraph operator at Green River. He was in the lobby of the hotel at Vernal, and with him were a number of people with one thing in common: all were heavily armed, all looked tired but grim.

Maunders was one, and with him were most of the people of the valley, including Colis Kerlee and Black Boyd. The sheriff at Vernal was there, a half-dozen townsmen, and one stubborn-looking woman. The woman was Mrs. Jensen, and as Burton looked at her from time to time, his eyes had a very intent stare and there was plain puzzlement in his wise brain about her.

"Now we know for sure!" Burton's words came crisply and his eyes seemed to dance. "They're making a break for the Robber's Roost. We can corner them there if we work fast. You—" Burton stabbed a finger at Simpson, the Vernal sheriff—"take this party and whoever else you can get to go and head straight south for the Roost. I'll make a ride for Green River and catch the train there for Grand Junction. From there I can cut south, raise my posses, and make certain those men don't cross the Colorado at Dandy Ford and get away for Mexico. Get word, Simpson, to the sheriff at Hanks-ville to cut east from there for the Roost country and block them off there. Boys, we got them cornered!"

He turned to Maunders. "And if what you say is true, that Butch Cassidy is to meet that bunch at the Roost—we've got him! Got Butch and his worst men!"

Black Boyd's mouth opened, shut, and not a word came from it. His lips twitched a little. But he was keeping very quiet. Something queer here, Boyd thought; queer. But it meant fighting, and fighting meant shooting. So Boyd was there, drumfire crazy and not caring for much else in the world. It was too bad, he thought once or twice, about those horses. His new friends would maybe never forgive him for not gathering them and saving them. But they'd just have to understand he had to hear the shooting—if they lived to understand anything.

Simpson, the Vernal sheriff, shook his head slowly. He was a ponderous man, heavy in build and thought, and before he could speak Burton was snapping at him.

"What the hell, Simpson? Are you backing out of the deal? We all made it weeks ago—every sheriff on both sides of the river is in on it. We're to work together to break up the Outlaw Trail stuff and get Butch and his Wild Bunch. Hell, man, you can't back out now!"

"I'm not backing out," said Simpson slowly. "I want you to stay on this side of the river and lead our party. I just ain't good enough. I can fight, I can trail a man's tracks weeks after he made 'em. But I can't think fast, Cal. You can. You stay with us and lead us."

Burton thought rapidly, nodded, and spoke sharply. "All right. I'm boss. And I'm giving the orders now to all of you. Simpson, get at least six more good men to ride with us. I'll send word to my chief deputy, waiting for me at Grand Junction, to head the party south to cut them off. You get word to the sheriff at Hanksville to get his party moving in. All of them!" He grinned coldly, wheeled suddenly on Mrs. Jensen. "You're not coming with us."

"I'm coming along whether you like it or not!" she snapped back angrily. "I've got a reason to go, and I'm going."

"Tell me the reason."

"It's my business, not yours."

"The posse is my business, however, and you'll stay here or go home, if I have to put you in irons to make you."

There was a stiff and hard clashing of wills then. Mrs. Jensen broke before Burton did. She sagged slightly and muttered something under her breath. Then, speaking louder, she said: "Mr. Maunders, please take me home."

Maunders said, "I—" and stopped.

"Nothing doing," said Burton, and his expression told them nothing but determination. "Maunders goes with us. I deputized him for this very job. He started it, and he goes along."

Mrs. Jensen turned away almost blindly and walked out of the hotel lobby. Once outside in the darkness, however, she started to run swiftly up an alley. And, running, she had the long, loose strides of a man.

In the next block she stopped and whistled twice, a note oddly like the small burrowing owl of the West. Then she waited. Three men came out of the darkness: Soogan

Charley and the two breeds. She explained what Burton had ordered and his refusal to allow her to go along.

"So I can't go along and watch him, to find out what he's up to. We should have told Tieters or Biff Klingen our suspicions about Maunders. Now we got to move fast, boys. We can't let him beat us. Can you get fresh horses and ride for the Roost? Get word to them what's coming up?"

"We can sure as hell try," said Soogan roughly.

HASTY GRIMES and his crew were making good headway when suddenly a sharp slapping sound came. Sistrom's horse bawled crazily and dropped its head, shaking it and bucking wildly. With every shake of its head blood spattered from its right ear, where a bullet had torn through near the skull.

The men ducked low in their saddles as a half-dozen more shots came whining around them. Wheeling, spinning horses and cursing, each reached for rifle or carbine. Now Grimes could see where the shots were coming from, a house and barn about three hundred yards off, set angled to each other among the scattered cedars. Now, intent and staring, all could see three men come out of the barn, carrying rifles, and make a fast run to the house.

Then young Maunders spoke. "Soogan Charley and the two breeds. They've been at the house often. You killed the breeds' father the other day in the willows." He turned and looked at Grimes coldly. Somehow he seemed to have aged many years in the past few days. And his voice hardened as he added a few words. "Soogan and the two breeds were in the bunch that brought your horses into the valley. They reported to my father," he added bitterly.

Grimes's voice was low and soft. "I think we want those buzzards. I think Skull Dugan would want us to get them for him. So would the boys who died when that herd was stolen from my brother. So would my brother."

Grimes swiftly studied the land about them. A cluster of trees made a ragged line below them across an angled open space. Another cluster was near the house and the barn on the south side beyond the grove.

Open spaces broke the trees on the west, east, and south beyond the groves, and he could see a ragged wall of pink rock rising there. He thought again, and decided there must be caves there, and he wondered why he puzzled over it at the moment. Then he gave sharp orders.

"Move down among those trees within good shooting range. Keep scattered but don't get separated. Open up on the house but watch the barn."

Taking advantage of all cover, they moved on. Soon each had found a tree or rock for shelter, and a scattered run of rifle shots came from them. A few shots answered them from the house but none from the barn. But somehow they all felt the same. There were men in that barn waiting to rush them at the proper moment.

Jack Maunders was near Grimes, eyeing the house with set expression. He fired once, sitting easily in the saddle, and waited. Grimes's eyes roamed past the house and barn to the wide sweep of land and the rock wall beyond. Caves. Somehow he knew there would be caves there, and he puzzled about that conviction. Perhaps it was something he had heard, picked up with other stories of the Wild Bunch, the Outlaw Trail, that circulated so freely in the West. Something—He could not quite pull it back from deep memories.

He called now to Jack Maunders. "Pass the word to Harrigan. Tell him to pass it along. If they rush us, we break for that ridge south beyond the trees. Caves in it. We can stand them off there if we're outnumbered."

Grimes watched, alert for any sign that would hint of a rush but none came. Five horses drifted idly away from the back of the barn, saddleless, and no sign of life followed their drifting. A slow grin came over Grimes's face. Those horses had been driven off by rocks thrown at them from the barn. An attempt to make them think no men were there.

He called across to Jack Maunders, "It'll come any time now. Likely with a lot of shooting from the house to hold our attention."

Maunders signaled and sent the word to Harrigan, and it passed, as before, down the line of fighting men until it reached Ben

Peters. And then it came in a sudden burst of shooting from the house. Shot after shot hammered out and about them. Slapped against rocks and trees, knocked down small branches and needles from the cedars, and sent showers of dust up into the air from the sandy ground under the trees.

"Hold your shots and get on your horses!" Grimes shouted. And as he called it he thought he could see movement inside the barn. More lead whistled about them, and then as he watched a rider dashed out the back of the barn and started sweeping away in a half circle to the north.

Another followed, another. And one after another ten more men followed the first three. Each rode hard, sweeping out after their leader in a semicircle to the north that was calculated to cut in behind Grimes and his men. If so, if it worked, it would trap them between the house and its defenders, and the closing line of thirteen men back of them.

"Ride for the caves!" Grimes shouted, swinging his horse. "Ride for that ridge!" He spurred his horse around into a bolting gallop. Low in the saddle, he looked back. His men were lining out behind him. And beyond them he could see the riders from the Robber's Roost swinging their horses to close in after them.

XI

SOOGAN CHARLEY and the two breeds had set up the scheme and now they watched grimly as the thirteen riders began to swing in behind Grimes and his men. Soogan spat a load of tobacco juice to one side and grinned.

"It's working," he said harshly. "We got 'em now. What with the posses coming from Hanksville and the Colorado side at Dandy Crossing, they ain't got no place to go but south for Lee's Ferry. If they know the posses are coming. South for Lee's Ferry is the way we want to go too. We chase them south, wipe out all we can, and get away from the posses." He laughed. "Get your horses, boys, and get into this."

"I ain't so sure you're so damned smart, Soogan," said Jerry Jaynes thinly. "And who in hell made you boss of this party anyhow? You talk too much."

"I'll do to boss the party," said Soogan roughly, "until Butch or Maunders comes along. Any time you boys don't think so—" He opened his hands and held them a few inches away from his big burly torso. "Huh?" he questioned.

"Can it," said Jeff Jaynes. "We got things to do. I'm figuring to wipe hell out of that bunch if I die doing it. They killed our dad."

Jerry's expression was cruel and ugly. "There's things in this I can't figure. Maunders. This bunch. Now Soogan takin' over. It don't make sense somehow. I figure to do some shootin', and maybe find out what's going on. Soogan, don't talk so much."

Soogan Charley laughed at him. "To hell with you, fella. I can lick you with or without guns. But hold it now; we got things on the run. Come on, damn you."

He stepped out the door and started for the barn on the run with the two breeds following him. Horses were already saddled for them by the men who had hidden there, and they mounted with quick leaps. Outside, they took off on a gallop after the thirteen men who followed the Grimes party. They followed for two hundred yards and then Soogan swore harshly. They rode on another hundred yards and joined the milling group of riders clustered under cedars at the crest of a low ridge.

Beyond them was a three-hundred-yard sweep of almost open land that ended in a seventy-foot cliff of pink rocks. The cliff was dotted with green cedars and black openings into caves, and not a man or a horse was to be seen.

"What the hell, Sam?" demanded Soogan as he came up and stopped.

"You can see, can't you?" said the man called Sam. He was a squatty, hard-looking man with a three weeks' growth of beard on his evil face. His nose was flattened and red, and now he rubbed it idly as he glowered at Soogan. "They got into the caves. And like Butch told us to do, we put grub and water in there. It's enough," he added sourly, "to feed and water that bunch for a month. And who the hell wants to spend a month here, shooting them out while the posses get in back of us?"

"We do," said Jerry and Jeff Jaynes

angrily. "Those buzzards killed our dad, and we're sure going to make a play for some of them!"

Soogan and Sam looked at them briefly, then at each other. There seemed to be a single thought in their minds, for they turned and glanced swiftly at the caves, then back to their own men, counting with moving lips. Sam rubbed his nose again and said, "Soogan, how many men in those posses?"

"Burton had seven or eight, likely will have a few more when he gets rolling. Call it a dozen. But that bunch from Hanksville, I d'know about them. And the bunch from Colorado cutting in toward Dandy Crossing could be a hundred if'n they're mad enough." Soogan shook his head.

Sam looked at the breeds, grinned a little. Then he turned to a big, powerfully built young fellow who looked anything but the outlaw type. "What d'you say, Murphy? You're from Hanksville. Will they send a posse out from that town?"

"No," said Murphy flatly. He rolled a smoke as he talked, lounging in his saddle with a carbine resting on his thighs. "It's been tried before. They just won't go out and fight us. There's too many like Butch and some of the rest of us. Too many ranchers are in the cattle deal along with me. Hell"—he laughed softly—"you know. I can ride for three months in this country and stop at a friendly ranch each night. Send a posse out to help them northern sheriffs? That's a laugh. Not from Hanksville."

Soogan spoke harshly, as though afraid the man called Sam would take the leadership away from him. "And it'll take that Colorado posse four-five days at least to get to Dandy Crossing, let alone ford it and come up the Orange Cliffs. We got time, I'm thinking. We got all day before Burton, Maunders, and the others can get here. And I'm thinking maybe we could whip that outfit too."

Soogan Charley had been quick to see the temper of the outlaws. At the breed's hard words, the others had muttered, and now some of them yelled sharply. One cried out, "Hell, let's gun-whip the lawmen. Let's teach them they can't ride down into Outlaw Country without taking a beating.

Butch'd like us to do that, he would. Give 'em hell, boys. Let's clean out the caves by dark, and then ambush the posse. We don't have to worry about anybody coming in from Hanksville!"

Soogan nodded grimly. "Suits me, boys, and when we jump the posse we're going to have a chance to figure out what Maunders is up to!"

A YELL went up that reached into the cave where Grimes lay behind a jutting rock, watching the ridge crest. He wondered what it meant, and then in a moment he saw a thin line of riders appear at the ridge crest. There they stopped for a moment, spread out, seemingly studying the land before them.

As he watched them he heard a rustling sound behind him and turned. It was Jack Maunders, grinning in the dim light. "How did you get in here?" he demanded.

Jack laughed. "Five of these caves connect back a ways," he said. "We put our horses in, and found sacks of grub, ten of them. Some grain, too, and Martin said to tell you there's a hole in the rock back of his cave that's been filled with water. Can you beat it?"

"It's been set up for a long fight," Grimes said. "Now, go back to your cave and watch for trouble. And remember this, Jack, if the caves connect, there's a chance that there may be a way of getting in here from the cliff above us, or the flatland beyond. So watch your step, boy!"

Jack nodded and disappeared with a faint rustling that died quickly. As he left, Grimes watched the riders on the ridge break into two groups. One swung to the left, the other to the right. Grimes nodded slowly to himself. The plan was easy to see. They were not going to come in across the open land, but attack in two bunches from either side.

Well, he thought coldly, this is where it starts, and just where I'll end is anybody's guess.

So the long hours slipped past with little or no sign of any concerted attack from the outlaws. Grimes had puzzled over it at times and then given up. They must have some definite plan, he realized.

Grimes spoke quickly to Sistrom who had sidled up to him. "Wait. I heard

something." And he had. It was like a small pebble dropping, and it did not come from near Sistrom. Then he heard it again and said, "Sistrom, did you make that noise?"

"No." Sistrom laughed mockingly. "You wouldn't be gettin' jumpy now, would you Grimes?"

Grimes started to say, "No," and did not get the word out. A gun flamed, and the echoing crash of sound in the big cave was deafening. Sistrom made a strangled sound and kicked hard. His pistol started crashing, and a crazy roll of shots came from it, almost unaimed.

Mingled in the flashes of Sistrom's pistol came two more from somewhere deep in the cave. Lead thudded against the rock beside Grimes, and he rolled away. He shot twice into the darkness, rolled again, and found he was almost out of the cave. He jerked back desperately, and as he did someone shot at him from well to the right. The bullet tore through the collar of his blanket coat not a half inch from his neck. But it did not touch him.

Now he waited, both pistols drawn and flat on the bottom of the cave. Part of his body was behind a jutting rock, the rest in the open. He heard a queer flopping sound. It sent shivers down his back, coming from the darkness. Somebody moaned.

"Sistrom?" He called it again. "Sistrom?"

There was no answer. He holstered his left-hand gun and started crawling back into the depths of the cave. He felt his way along carefully, keeping close to one wall. He thought he had crawled fifteen feet when he bumped into a jutting point. As he remembered it, he was about opposite the cleft in the wall that led around and angled into the next cave.

Grimes crawled around the jutting wall and waited a moment. It was utterly black. Nothing could be seen. He turned and looked back toward the cave mouth. He could see part of it, the spot where he had been, and between him and that spot he thought he saw a huddle on the cave floor. It might be rock, or it might be Sistrom's body.

He wetted a finger and held it near the cave roof and round there was a steady current of air pulling from the mouth toward the back, beyond him.

So there was an opening.

He moved on back into the cave, expecting a shot at any moment. None came. It took him half an hour to find handholds cut in the rock on the far side of the cave. He worked up slowly, as quietly as he could. Anything might be above him: another cave, a dozen men waiting him. He felt his way in utter blackness—and then suddenly saw gray light folding about him.

Some animal-like sense warned Grimes then. He lurched sideways and felt space before him. He took a wild chance and lunged into it, landing with a thud on a small ledge. A half-dozen shots echoed and thundered and re-echoed. He heard a raging voice from above, shouting.

"You crazy son! You shot too quick. You've given it away, and we—"

The rest was lost, probably as the speaker backed away from the opening above.

Grimes waited crouched on the ledge in the rock chimney up which he had crawled.

He was just too damned helpless there, he thought angrily.

The sweat cooled his forehead and dried quickly. And he gasped a little. That meant a current of air—from somewhere. He felt about on the ledge and found no opening. He reached up, and there it was. An angling chimney in the rock leading up. Small, tight, but he could wedge himself into it and work upward by shoving with knees and elbows. He worked up ten feet and now saw above him a gray opening laced with black. It took Grimes a moment to figure that out; the opening was in a cleft from which a stunted cedar was growing, and probably concealed. Probably. Yet he might be wrong.

He tried to picture the scene above him. Outlaws huddled around the mouth of the other entrance to the caves, guns ready for him.

A cold grin crept over Grimes's face. It was worth a gamble, he decided.

He crawled up a couple of feet farther, still well below the opening, and listened. He could hear the thud-thudding of distant shots. Once he thought he heard a faraway voice calling something in a tone that was excited. And he could not help but fear that they had rushed the caves from some other

opening as well as in front. That the quickening of shots meant the finish.

If that had happened and he was out of it . . . He swore hotly. He didn't want to be the only one left. He couldn't quite face the thought of living that way. He crawled up a little farther, and his eyes slowly adjusted to the brighter light. He was just under the roots of a big stunted and gnarled cedar, in a cleft of the rolling flats. He took off his hat and shoved it slowly upward, like a man climbing. Nothing happened. So he put the hat back on his head and shoved himself up a foot. He was tangled in the roots of the cedar, rough bark rasping his face and hands.

Grimes drew a gun and edged a little farther up. Now he found he could get his head and shoulders through the twisted roots if he kept his back against the main rock and the tree trunk. He drew his left-hand gun and shoved up a foot farther, his eyes blinking against the light.

The pink sandstone rolled away from him to his left, bare and hard. Nothing there. Then something to his right drew a quick glance. There were three rounded boulders there, a small cedar, a cluster of sage in some sand. And two men. The breeds, Jerry and Jeff Jaynes. They stood staring at something just beyond one of the boulders.

Grimes suspected it was the opening into the cave, and they were debating whether or not to risk looking down for him. He edged his guns out. Just then Jerry Jaynes turned to say something to his brother. His mouth opened to show white teeth in his dark, lowering face. It opened wider as his eyes slid along and suddenly came to rest on the stunted cedar. They focused there, and Jerry Jaynes let out a wild yell of warning as he ducked and started shooting.

Grimes kept as low as he could, and started shooting alternate shots with each hand. It was something he had often practiced and never used before. He saw both the Jaynes go down, but lead still hammered at him. A bullet cut into the bark of the tree and sprayed his eyes with dust and small particles. It blinded him. He had a fleeting impression of someone crawling toward him, still shooting, as his last visible scene. And then, eyes stinging and blinded,

still holding his guns, he straightened in the narrow chimney and let himself drop.

He skidded along the steep angle of the slanting rock chimney, protecting his face as best he could. He hit the ledge and found himself half over it before he could recover his balance. Then he holstered both guns, feeling the stinging sensation of skinned knees and elbows, and started down the last descent. He dropped to the bottom at last and stood stiff and staring.

There were two men standing beside Sistrum's body, and even in the dimness he could recognize them. One was Ben Peters, the other Martin, who spoke angrily, "What the hell does this mean, Grimes? Sistrum was shot in the back. Did you do it?" And his angry voice was a threat.

XII

THE activity among the outlaws which Grimes and the others had seen arose as the result of a quick talk the breeds had with Soogan Charley. The breeds, hard and cruel men, mean in thought and actions, had been brooding and arguing with each other and whoever happened to be closest to them at the moment. It had climaxed in the quick talk with Soogan, who felt exactly as they did.

"This fight," Jerry Jaynes had argued, "is taking too long. They're holed up in a place we fixed up so nobody could run us out. Grub, water, good shelter—what the hell? They can stand us off for a week. Jeff and me want to go down through the chimney and get some of them buzzards."

"Uh-huh." Soogan nodded, thinking rapidly.

"And unless my eyes are bad, which same they ain't," Jeff took up the talk, "the buzzard in the cave where the chimney goes down is that Grimes. The one who killed our dad. We want him as our meat first."

"Sounds good." Soogan nodded his huge head wisely. He bit off a corner of chewing tobacco and worked it around in his mouth for a moment. "Go ahead. We'll throw a hell of a lot of lead and rush the place when you give us a signal you got Grimes and are in the first cave. Right?"

"Right and left," said Jerry with a sour

grin. He jerked his thumb at his lowering brother, and the two men flattened out on the ground. A few moments later they were inching away toward the trail up to the crest of the pink cliff. And that their plan had failed was due alone to the fact that Grimes had heard the telltale dropping of a rock fragment or two.

So it was that Soogan, who had crept after the two breeds to the crest of the cliff, had seen them killed in the blistering fire of Grimes's two pistols. Cursing softly, he crept forward, pistol ready for a quick shot. But there was no target for him to shoot at when he reached the two dead breeds.

He listened for a moment at the hole under the cedar and heard nothing. His eyes were fixed, though, on the mouth of the chimney just in case any of the Grimes crowd came up—shooting. Then something drew his eyes away from the chimney mouth for a moment. Soogan stared intently at a spot about three miles off, on the crest of a low roll of the sandy desert to the north. There in the clear, cold air he could see movement. Men, he was sure, on horses.

Soogan straightened up and stared about him, scanning the rolling land to the west and the south. And again, several miles away, he saw movement. Men, both west and south of them—and riding in.

His booted feet carried Soogan on the run for the crest of the cliff. Even before he was running down the trail he was shouting orders to the men below him.

"Posses coming. North, west, and south! Break for the house and barn—take the horses—" He was stumbling and leaping on his way down. "Posses—coming—"

By the time he reached the bottom Sam and the tall outlaw who had laughed at the notion of the men from Hanksville caring or daring to join in an attack on them were shouting orders also. The outlaws were racing for their horses, backing off, crawling, anything to get away. The firing dwindled to a few shots from the caves, and they, too, silenced. And the outlaws, four of them with more or less minor wounds, were on the run for the house and barn.

As they made running dismounts from their horses, the outlaws were breaking up, following Soogan's shouted order. Half to the house, half staying in the barn. As he

ran for the house Soogan Charley shouted back over his shoulder. "We'll get food and water to you right away! Give 'em hell, boys. We'll whip 'em and teach 'em not to come down into our country!"

But in his own mind as he ran Soogan was already making plans for his own escape.

Burton, the Colorado sheriff in command of the posses, had pulled up his own group on the ridge to the north of the Robber's Roost. He had made his plans well, and now he outlined them for all to hear. His voice was crisp and cold as he talked, his expression hard and stern.

"This is it," he said evenly. "This is what we've planned for and waited for. We've got a lot of them cornered, boys. Butch and his Wild Bunch may or may not be there. I don't think they will be. Butch is smart enough to have figured out that the big days of rustling and horse stealing are over.

He eyed them all swiftly, men he knew and men he did not. Most of them were rolling smokes, perhaps figuring it might be their last chance for a long time—perhaps forever.

"So, here's the setup. That's the Robber's Roost down there, and you saw the men running and riding for it. We've got them cornered in the house and barn, and we've got them surrounded. I sent word to the Hanksville posse to split in two. Some of them have come straight in to the west there. Some rode down Dirty Devil Creek and are coming up from the south. We're here."

Burton grinned thinly and pulled his carbine from its boot. "Now it's up to us to kill them or run them out. They're a bad, murderous lot of thieves and gunmen. Break up and scatter! Find your shelter and give 'em hell for breakfast, dinner, and supper!"

IT HAD taken Grimes only a moment to tell Jack Martin and Ben Peters what had actually happened. Peters had answered quite coldly that he was ready to believe it when he had scouted the chimney for himself. That shooting a man in the back was something no white man would do, regardless.

"Go ahead, Ben, climb up and see," Martin had said evenly. "Then we'll know if he murdered Siström."

Grimes snorted and answered, "And

when you know, what will you do, Martin?"

Neither man had answered. Ben Peters had disappeared up the rock chimney and in five minutes was back. "The breeds are up there, dead," he had announced. "And there're riders coming at us from three directions!"

The three, forgetting their tenseness of the moments past, now crawled swiftly to the front of the cave. There they were in time to see the last of the outlaws breaking for the house and barn and disappearing on the run. Distantly they could see Burton and his men spreading out, and by edging forward a little they could see others to the west.

"The posses," said Grimes flatly. His mind worked fast. "Pass the word to the boys fast! No shooting! The posse likely don't know about us or the caves. Keep out of this fight, hear me? Fast, now!"

He remained watching, making his plans swiftly. Possemen all about them, closing in the outlaws. The cliff was too far from the house and barn to be used in the fight. If they remained unnoticed there, escape might be easy after dark. He glanced at his watch. Two-thirty, and it would be dark before five at that time of year.

Grimes crawled back from the cave mouth, grinning a little. It was a break of luck that might mean life for them, and his grin widened as he thought it all over swiftly. He worked through his cave past Siström's limp body and into the next one. There he found Jack Maunders alone, listening to the rising crescendo of shooting outside.

"Jack, listen. Keep quiet and unseen, whatever happens. Don't let any of the posse know we're here. After dark we'll sneak out with the horses and make a break."

He moved on, working from cave to cave, giving orders to them all. Martin and Peters were with the horses and already talking of their chances of getting away.

It was getting more and more dim outside. He moved away, working into the next cave. Spoke briefly to Jack Maunders, telling him to come along. So, picking up his men as he went, Grimes made his way to the main cave, near the level of the small valley under the cliff, where the horses were.

They saddled swiftly, checked their guns and rifles, saw they had food in all their saddle pockets. They ate briefly from what was left of their noonday meal, and by that time it was dark.

"Whatever happens," said Grimes by way of a final order, "we stick together. That means if the shooting starts we can shoot at anybody in our way without worrying about killing each other. Arch," he said to Harrigan, "you go first and keep moving. We'll string out in a line if we aren't seen, and I'll be in the rear. If we are seen, bunch and ride like hell for the south—south, understand?"

Quick nods came from the men, unseen, and then they realized. "*Bueno*," "sure," "yeah," the words of assent went the rounds. Saddles creaked as weight hit the stirrup leathers. There was a moment of silence, and then one horse blew a soft whistle, exhaling against the pull of the cinch. As though it were a signal, Grimes gave the word.

"All right, Arch—move on out, swing to the right, and don't fire unless they shoot at us!"

So, silent except for the clipping sound of the hoofs, they moved out into the night, listening to the rattling sound of occasional shots as they rode.

THEY rode for twenty minutes due south, cutting across the flatland and dropping into a dry wash that had rounded rock walls edged with stunted cedars. They caught the wet smell of a small spring and then Grimes spoke sharply. "Hold it, boys."

He rode past them now, taking the lead, and without a word of explanation led the way on. The shod hoofs clipped sharply as they came up a rocky bank and out on the bench below a big gorge. There Grimes paused for a moment, and men and horses milled back of him. He was staring about, trying to visualize the country from things he had heard at a dozen different times. Suddenly he seemed to make up his mind.

"We cut west for an hour and then head north fast," he said. "I'm going back to the valley to get my horses!"

Something like a muted cheer from most of them answered that. The horse herd had become more and more important to them

during the past weeks. And they were fine horses too. All of them knew what it meant to Grimes to get all or most of the herd back, for his new ranch in the wide lands above the Black Hills country. And now they were glad. They rode with a certain elation crowding off the feeling that they had taken a whipping from the outlaws.

SOOGAN CHARLEY, by ten o'clock that night, had decided that enough was enough. The lead that hammered and pounded into the house was getting on his nerves. So were the two dead men near him in the lean-to kitchen, whose walls were thinner than the house and let the bullets whistle through them. He crept toward the back door, on the side away from the barn, crawled around the corner of the house, got into a shallow wash, and crept on.

An hour later, with shooting persisting near him, he had located the horses which some of the posse had left beyond the first low ridge to the north. Soogan crept down, teeth gleaming in a wicked grin. He had a knife in his hand, and if there was a guard there, it would be just too damned bad. Knives were silent weapons.

He crept on. There was someone near the horses. A man feeling into the saddle pockets of one of them. Soogan waited. The man seemed to find what he wanted and put it in his coat pocket. He turned to walk away, rolling a smoke and heading straight for Soogan. Soogan waited grimly, the knife ready. He would let the man pass, leap on him from behind, and then slit his throat. A fellow couldn't yell, that way, and give warning. A match flared, and Soogan sighed. He rose up and spoke softly.

"Karl. Karl Sutro," he said. "It's me—Soogan."

Sutro snapped out the match and stopped. "What are you doing here, anyhow? How did you get out?" When he had heard Soogan's explanation, Sutro grunted. "So? You go back to the valley and find Mrs. Jensen, eh? You tell her Maunders is all for the law. Maybe he wants to wipe us all out, huh? I don't like this thing, Soogan. They're going to clean out those boys and we lose lots of good men for our business. And Maunders seems glad of it. You tell Mrs. Jensen. Maybe I'll kill Maunders before he

kills me. It would be easy in this fighting. I don't know."

"All right, do what you want. Just let me get a horse and get out of here. I'll ride for the valley and Mrs. Jensen. Maybe we can get a bunch together to do something ourselves."

"Sure, sure," agreed Karl Sutro. "Take any horse but mine. I came only to get more cartridges for the fight. Say, what happened to Grimes and that bunch?"

"They holed up in the caves and I think they're still there. If they are, try to get the posse over that way in the morning."

Sutro nodded and walked off, smoking. Soogan moved up to the tied horses, checked them over, and picked out what he thought was a good one for stamina and speed. He untied it, mounted, and headed north. He could ride hard, get a fresh horse at Chaffin's, and get to the valley in good time. He was at Chaffin's just at dawn, got a fresh horse from the friendly ranchers, and rode on. Again, as before, he was within a few miles of Grimes and his men, who were sound asleep, resting from the long ride.

GRIMES and his men broke camp at sundown and rode on. They passed Green River station at two in the morning and chuckled at sight of the blinking light and the agent there.

They passed Vernal at a wide distance and headed for the dim, rising shape of Diamond Mountain far beyond. They rested all the next day and most of the night, to freshen themselves and their horses, well off the stage road between the valley and Vernal.

Then, toward dawn, they rode into the valley. Not a light showed anywhere as they came down the road and made the ford. They crossed, and rode on toward the box canyon.

"We'll take a look there," said Grimes, "before we go on."

And it was a good hunch that he had had. The brush fence that closed in the canyon had been put back in place after their escape. "Somebody else has got the herd, not Black Boyd. Well, we fought for 'em once before. We can do it again. Come on, boys!"

They surged forward in a rush with drawn guns—and found no one. Grimes pulled up

at the rude gate in the brush holding fence and stared about. No sign of a camp anywhere. He looked far into the shadows of the box canyon as the gray light of dawn started over the ridges, and was sure he could see horses.

"Harrigan"—Grimes spoke crisply—"you come with me. The rest of you stay here, scattered and ready for trouble. I don't like the looks of this."

He leaned over and knocked open the gate. He and Harrigan rode through, and he called back, "Leave it open if we have to make a ride out, boys. But watch it."

They rode on, alert and wary men, into the shadows of the box canyon. They saw horses, checked them, and smiled grimly at each other. They were Grimes's horses, all right.

So they rode on warily, looking for a camp or for men, but they did not find them. Half an hour later they were back at the gate, in the first rays of the sun, and there Grimes saw something he had missed in the dim light. It was a piece of white paper stuck in a cleft of the gatepost on the box canyon side of the gate.

He reached for it, read it aloud automatically.

"*Hasty Grimes,*" it said. "*I want to see you. There is an answer to my father's letter to the sheriff in Texas.*" And it was signed, "*Kate Kerlee.*"

Grimes's face was set and expressionless as he read. There was no hint to the others that he had hoped the answer would not come before he had left the valley. But it had. And even to himself he was not going over his reasons for not liking the note.

He spoke flatly. "We'll rest here through the day and maybe she'll come over. I don't want to be seen in the valley. We'll be pulling out for the Black Hills at dark tonight, boys."

And then Grimes saw something that had taken place before but without attracting more than a passing glance. Ben Peters and Jack Martin were close together. As though taking sides, somehow. Grimes remembered now that for the last three meals they had eaten together, a few feet away from him and the others. And twice Jack Maunders had joined them. He was beginning to make something of it. Something he did not like.

But he could not and would not bring it into the open for fear he might be wrong. He waited coldly for Maunders to move over close to Martin and Peters and felt no relief when it did not happen.

For Jack Maunders was grinning curiously as he looked at Martin and Peters and then shifted his eyes to Grimes's face.

Martin spoke flatly. "We're not going with you." He jerked a thumb at Ben Peters. "Him and me, I mean."

"Why?" countered Grimes. "There's jobs for you both on the ranch."

"Maybe, but we ain't taking them," said Martin coldly. "We got things on our minds, things to do. Things that fork back to Skull Duggan, lying up there in a cold grave. Things that ain't finished like we promised to do."

Ben Peters said, "Hell, say it, Martin. Or I will." He paused briefly, and then went on. "Damn a quitter. Damn a man who goes back on his word. You said you'd clean the valley for their killing of Skull Duggan, for their stealing the horses. You said we'd finish Skull's job for him and you're quitting, cold. Damn a quitter, Grimes."

Grimes stared at them both for a time, face set and still without expression.

Martin laughed harshly. "I know, Grimes. We're outlaws. You want to make us honest men on your ranch. Hell. What we want to do is finish Skull Duggan's work for him, and we're going to do it." He spun his horse.

Ben Peters turned his horse and rode off with Martin. He looked back with a sour grin, and flung taunting words over his shoulder. "So long, quitters."

XIII

GRIMES turned to look at the others as Peters and Martin faded into the trees where white patches of snow lingered from the storm. He was glad to see all met his eyes: Harrigan, Semple, Dahl, Jack Maunders.

"We'll make camp." Grimes's voice was even and flat. "Let's get back under the cliff where the wind won't hit us so cold. Tonight we move on. With the horses."

He waited for Jack Maunders to say something, for the kid still itched violently

to meet his old man at gun-point. But the young fellow did not speak. They made camp, turned their saddles in with the rest of the stock after roping out fresh horses in case they were needed, and started a fire.

They dozed and rested for a couple of hours, and then Jack Maunders got up restlessly. He looked about him, and at last his eyes dropped to meet Grimes's stare.

"I'm going to ride around the valley," he said quietly, but his voice made it a statement, not a question.

Grimes might have ordered him to stay, but doubt was in his mind. Jack was breaking away from him. Maybe Martin and Peters had something to do with it. Maybe not. Maybe it was just that Jack Maunders knew he, Grimes, was planning to keep him from killing his own father. But something was certain in Grimes's mind: an order would not be obeyed. So he simply nodded and said evenly, "Keep out of trouble, Jack. And tell Kate Kerlee good-by for us, will you?"

Jack Maunders rode across some flatland to find the old road and put his horse's hoofs on it.

He left the road and slanted into the willow bottoms about where Karl Sutro had left it to ambush Kate Kerlee. He rode steadily on, and twice in open spaces he could see up the valley toward the Kerlee ranch. But he did not turn toward it. He came out of the willows where Sutro had turned out, and rode straight for his father's house. He no longer even thought of it as home.

There was smoke in the chimney as he came up, and smoke rising from the chimney of the store. Every place other than those seemed smokeless and deserted. Jack rode around to the back door, and as he passed the kitchen window he saw Mrs. Jensen and Soogan Charley in there staring at him. But it did not change his plans.

His face was so set that it seemed frozen as he stepped down from the horse and dropped the split reins. He walked up the three steps to the door, opened it, and went in. And there he stood for a moment staring at Mrs. Jensen and Soogan.

"Tell my dad I'm going to kill him. That's all. Just that I'm going to kill him on sight."

He took a backward step, and started to close the door. Mrs. Jensen said nothing so Soogan took it up.

"Wait a minute, Jack," he said quietly. "I don't think you're good enough to do that."

"Watch me," said Jack. Something boyish and bragging had bubbled up in him. He let go of the door, and suddenly his right hand went down and came up. In the move the sharp sound came, slap. Then he grinned and shoved the gun back into the holster.

"Well?" he asked.

Soogan pursed his lips for a second and then said, "Maybe." He thought a moment longer. "Maybe, Jack. You're fast, but so's your dad. And he's had plenty more experience shooting when the other fellow shoots too. You ain't."

Jack Maunders brought up something from the past. "But I'm in the right," he said. He nodded, shut the door, and in a moment they saw him pass the window riding away.

Then Soogan Charley looked at Mrs. Jensen and grinned. "This sort of makes it easy for us," he said quietly. "They'd ought to be back any day now. Maunders, Burton, and the bunch. I think things will work out. It don't make any difference what Maunders is up to or what Burton guesses at. We got 'em over a barrel and the kid will help us roll it down the hill to hell!"

IT WAS an hour after noon when Jack Maunders rode into the camp under the cliff, and the only thing he said was, "I saw Kate Kerlee. She wants us all over for supper tonight. We better get started, hadn't we?"

It was in Grimes's mind that he would rather get away without seeing her. He was about to say that when Dolly Dahl rubbed his belly and said gleefully, "Oh, brother! A home-cooked, *woman*-cooked meal!"

And Grimes laughed. "It sure sounds good. Let's get saddled, boys."

It was a little more than two hours' easy riding to the Kerlee ranchhouse and Jack Maunders rode it in silence. There wasn't much talking from any of them, and the first real talk came when they saw the tall column of smoke rising from the kitchen chimney at the Kerlee ranchhouse.

"She's feeding the fire," said Dahl, laughing softly. "Grub. Woman-cooked grub after what we been feeding on for six months and more!"

They rode up laughing, and the kitchen door opened long enough for Kate to stick her head out and call to them, "Howdy. Put your horses in the barn and come on in." Then the door shut again.

They trooped in, grinning and dropping their hats in a pile on the floor near the door. And Jack Maunders was the last one to drop his hat. It rested on the top of the rude pile. The comfortable big room smelled of cooking and wood-fire smoke, and they sniffed eagerly and pounded each other on the back, grinning. And then they sobered as Kate Kerlee turned to Grimes and spoke.

"My daddy is with the posse, so I opened the letter from the sheriff at Palo Pinto, Texas. He said that *if* Hasty Grimes was riding the Outlaw Trail it was the outlaws who'd best get scared, not honest folks. He told us about your horse herd, too, and your brother. I'm sorry."

"Thanks, missy." Grimes smiled at her. "And now that grub sure smells good. What can we do to help?"

"Nothing. Everything is ready for the pot, the roast is in the oven. It'll be about an hour. Hungry?"

"Say," Slim Semple chuckled, "we got ready for this meal by not eating since yesterday!"

They chuckled and then sobered suddenly as Kate said, "What are your plans now?"

Grimes rolled a smoke, his eyes fixed on the stove. "We're pulling out tonight," he answered. "Taking the herd and moving on before the posse gets back to make trouble, Jack," he added it quietly, "is coming with us. He's going to make a good hand on my horse ranch. He's got the stuff in him."

"I'm glad," said Kate. "Very glad." There was pure happiness in her face as she smiled at Jack.

He looked at her, grinned curiously, and then eased back in his kitchen chair. He shifted his gun belt slightly, and then grinned again at nothing.

They talked of the ranch, carefully keeping away from any mention of Jack's father, the posse, or the fact that not all of Grimes's

men were with him. Kate dished up the meal and they ate in silence, wasting neither breath nor motion on anything but putting away that meal. And it ended, as Dahl had openly hoped twice, with great slabs of apple pie and chunks of ripe cheese to go with it. It was dark by the time they had smoked, cleaned the pots, pans, and dishes, and stacked things away. They smoked, idling, dreaming, wishing at times that they in the distant future might have a kitchen with a pretty woman in it.

Jack Maunders got up and said, "Be back in a minute," and went out, taking his hat with him. As the door shut behind him Kate Kerlee was saying something about her father's ranch. Dahl and Semple were almost purring, half asleep. Grimes rolled a smoke, got it all ready to light. He suddenly slammed the smoke on the floor, kicked himself away from his chair, which crashed against the wall, and went for the door.

Kate Kerlee stopped with her mouth half open. She saw him go out and saw Dahl and Semple come awake with catlike moves. Guns drawn, they in turn ran for the door. She ran after them, breathless, and got outside in time to hear Grimes shout "Jack! Jack!"

There was no answer.

They heard the quick pound of a running horse. Heard it dim and die, and then Grimes spoke again, slowly. "He fooled me. I thought I could take him away, not let him kill his dad. But he's going to stay and try it. And what can we do to stop him?"

Kate Kerlee caught Grimes's shirt front in her hands. "You've got to stop him! You've got to stay here, find him, and stop him. We can't let him kill his father. No matter what Maunders is or has done, Jack must not have that on his conscience all his life!"

She shook him, jerking at his shirt. "Get your coats, your hats. Go find him, please!"

He caught her hands and said, "Steady now," and as she quieted he went on. "You're very fond of him, aren't you?"

"Why, I love him!" And a slow flush came over her face. She added almost feebly, "Like a brother."

"I see," said Grimes, wondering at the sick feeling which came over him. "Well,

we'll stay. We'll do what we can, but I don't know what that will be. Don't forget, he knows the country and can hide. And if the posse comes back, they'll likely shoot us on sight."

"But I'll tell them all about the letter from the sheriff!"

"How much time do you think there'll be for talking," asked Grimes, "when the sheriff, Maunders, Sutro, Tieters, and some of the others get back and see us here?"

THEY scattered and covered half the valley on their ride home, looking for a campfire that might be Jack Maunders's, and they met at their own camp, shaking their heads. They were out on fresh horses before dawn, cold and shivering and hunting Jack Maunders. Hoping to God they could block him and yet certain they could not. They rode hard, benches and flats, and high meadows and canyons. Like a roundup, only trying to find a young fellow, not calves and cattle this time. All day and into the night, and failure again.

Kate gave them supper and they went home to their camp. They rode at dawn again, once more on fresh horses, and toward noon they found something. Not Jack Maunders, but a camp where *three* men had spent the previous night. They could tell that from the condition of the fire.

"Is he with Martin and Peters?" demanded Grimes, and found no answer.

Slanting back over a ridge of Cold Springs Mountain, the pass led them toward the bluffs above their box canyon camp and they stopped there to rest and smoke. High on the ridge, staring down at their camp and their eyes shifting and scanning. No sign of life anywhere; the valley seemed deserted.

"I wonder," said Grimes slowly, "if there's any sense in looking again at the old Cassidy cabin over there?"

He motioned idly with his hand toward Diamond Mountain across the valley, with the Green River, flowing at its base. They followed his idle wave with their eyes and then all stiffened. The flat-botomed ferry-boat was coming across the Green and it was packed with men and riders.

"They're back," said Dahl, breaking the silence. He and the others turned their stares on Grimes.

Grimes smoked for a time in silence, his eyes watching the distant ferryboat pull up to the shore and the cluster on its flat deck break and move. He watched the line of men start along the road to the community in the blue distance, and he saw one start away from the group.

He got up slowly, pinching out his smoke, and gathered the reins of his horse. "Come on," he said, and swung into the saddle.

"What are we going to do?" asked Semple.

"What the hell can we do?" said Grimes flatly. "We can't find Jack to capture him. He may be anywhere, even in his father's house, hiding. We don't know what Peters and Martin are doing, or what they plan. So, what can we do but ride down and risk getting killed by that posse before Kate or we can explain things?"

"And all to keep a fellow from killing a man who needs killing and is going to get it sooner or later," said Semple, his voice sounding dreary.

They rode down the slope and came out on the flatland near their box canyon and camp. And there they met the man who had left the party near the ford. It was Black Boyd.

"Misters, I'm sure sorry." His voice was soft and pleading. "But I just couldn't keep away from all that shooting. I hopes you didn't lose your horses?"

Grimes was tempted to vent his rising emotions on Black Boyd, but what good would it do? So he fought it down and asked questions. He learned of the cleanup fight at the Robber's Roost and the grim toll of dead and the wounded who lived only to be hung. The posses had not had a man killed, and the few wounded were being well cared for at Green River and Hanksville.

So they rode slanting across the valley to hit the river bottom and the willow thickets a couple of miles from town and well behind Maunders and the others. And twice, as they rode, they cut sign of a horse being ridden at a gallop toward the town.

It was such a helpless feeling. Riding along and knowing beyond question what lay ahead of them and not having a single idea as to what could be done to prevent it. And when they neared the cut-bank closest to the store and other buildings, they found

a saddle horse tied to a willow tree. It was Jack Maunders's horse.

Then they saw his boot tracks slanting up the cut-bank toward town.

Grimes went up first, and the others followed him, except Black Boyd, who stopped near the top while they went on. "They're all there," said Grimes angrily.

Maunders was walking from the porch of his house, his hand on his pistol. Behind him came Tieters, Klingen, Sutro, and two men Grimes and the others did not know. Mrs. Jensen walked back of them carrying a shotgun.

There were two men crouched near the front corner of the store building. Another pair seemed to be hiding across the street, waiting. And by the blacksmith shop, still on their horses, were Sheriff Burton, Kerlee, Joe Starkey the blacksmith—and that was all. Their faces were set, and Starkey's lips were a little white.

"I don't like the looks of this, men," said Burton. "I shouldn't have waited this long. I'm afraid Maunders knows I suspect him. But damn it all I haven't got any proof."

"They're playing it well," said Kerlee. His voice sounded tired. "There are two men riding up about three hundred yards in back of us. I saw them coming—I can't tell who they are. But look at this set-up." His eyes shifted, caught by movement. "My God, Burton, they're coming out of the river bottom too!"

Starkey spoke flatly. "We can back into the shop here, but the walls ain't thick enough to stop bullets." And the big blacksmith started to draw his rifle out of its scabbard.

"Wait," said Burton crisply. "Wait till something happens. We can't get away, we can't whip that many. And until the shooting starts there's always a chance."

"Yes," said Kerlee stiffly, and then his voice broke into a queer screech. "Kate, Kate!" He shouted again. "Kate—go back, go back!"

Kate Kerlee had come out of the store running, jumped down from the porch, and was running straight across the wide road toward someone Kerlee could not see. But he and the others could see Maunders turned stiffly and walking forward in that direction, facing the unseen man. They heard Kate

scream something. Maunders shouted, and then they heard the drum of hoofs.

Maunders was driving forward with the grim warning given him by Mrs. Jensen and the others still ringing in his ears. About his son. "Kill him," they had said. "Burton knows what you're doing and you know that he knows. Kill Jack, start the shooting, and we'll get rid of that damned peace officer in the general shooting. Do it—now!"

And Maunders walked forward stiffly. It was cold and clear in his mind that nothing could help him. He remembered something. "He has made his bed and let him lie in it." Well, he had dug the grave and either he or his son was to lie in it. He could see Jack now, and he knew it was too late to change the thing. He walked on stiffly, knowing it would happen soon. That damned fool girl getting in the way wasn't going to stop it either.

Maunders slowed a little and then he reached swiftly for the gun butt.

The sudden lash of a shot came, and Maunders stood very still. He turned slowly, as though in curious surprise, and his eyes raised briefly to try to look at something. His hands drooped, opened, his body sagged slowly, and then he fell flat on his face, dead.

XIV

"WE'RE too late." Grimes cursed briefly, then spurred his horse toward the buildings. "Cut down those two fools at the corner of the store! Open on Tieters and the others. Shoot the shotgun out of that—"

The rest of his orders were lost in the crashing of shots and the shrill scream that came from Mrs. Jensen. They raced on, shooting at the ones they knew as outlaws. They heard other rifles, and somewhere a woman screamed again. The pound of shots stopped them near the street, behind a dark shed, and Grimes debated swiftly.

Too late to stop it. Should they ride and save themselves, or take their chances in the shooting in the street beyond? He moved forward a little, raising his left hand to stop the others. He peered out and saw Jack Maunders throwing two quick shots toward someone on the roof near him. Then

Jack Maunders backed up two steps sharply and fell.

Kate Kerlee was crying out and running closer to Jack now. Her father and the others made a driving rush down the street toward Tieters, Klingen, and two men who had joined them. Their rifles crashed and then their pistols. Mrs. Jensen, one hand bloody where the shotgun had been torn from it, ran for the porch but fell before she got there. She half rose and began to crawl, looking back.

Now two more mounted men raced down the street, shooting at Tieters, Klingen, and the others. The four started to fold up like falling dolls. Grimes motioned for the others to stay back, keep out of it. He was staring, rifle in hand, at the roof not far from Jack Maunders. Suddenly he raised the rifle and shot once. A man fell, turning in mid-air, to hit the ground and lie still.

Grimes turned back, saying, "Soogan Charley on the roof. It was all framed for them." He made no explanation. "Put up your rifles, ride out after me holding your hands up."

Then he turned and rode out into the street, shouting, "Sheriff, we're surrendering."

"So are we!" came another voice, and he knew it as Jack Martin's. Ben Peters was with him, looking a little angry, but holding his hands up.

"Damn it, Martin," snapped Peters, "this is crazy. We could've got away!"

"What's the use?" asked Martin. "You'd just be an outlaw the rest of your life."

"But we'll be jailed—"

"Maybe," said Martin evenly.

Martin rode forward with Peters close to him. They came in near Grimes and his four men as Black Boyd came riding out of the willows and toward the street. Kate was holding Jack Maunders in her arms, putting her handkerchief to a wound in his right shoulder. He was smiling a little, but she looked badly disturbed.

"Jack, Jack—you killed him—"

He tried to answer but fainted. She lowered him and stood up, staring and biting her lips. Then she ran toward her father and the others. She got there in time to hear Burton speak quietly.

"I owe you men something," he said.

"We wouldn't have had a chance against that bunch if you hadn't come in on the side of the law. I'll try to make it easy for you. I guess that's why you did it? You know the thing is ended? The Pinkertons have broken up the Wild Bunch. I got a wire about it at Green River. They've got them scattered all over the country after that last bank robbery and have captured most of them."

"But not Butch, damn you!" Mrs. Jensen screamed it from where she sat on the steps nursing her wounded hand. "They'll never get Butch Cassidy."

She suddenly stood up, cursed once like a man, and then pointed a finger at Jack Martin and the others about Grimes. "You, a fine lot of outlaws, turning against your own kind to win a pardon."

Jack Martin laughed outright and then sobered a little as Grimes turned to him and spoke quickly.

"Jack," said Grimes, almost pleadingly, "it's true, isn't it? You and Skull Duggan? I never could believe—"

Martin nodded. "Yes, it was all planned, and nobody knew but Allan Pinkerton himself." He reached inside his shirt and fumbled for a moment. Then he brought out his hand, palm open, with a small gold-plated star gleaming on it. "Skull Duggan wore one too," he explained to them all. "And we helped break up the Wild Bunch, even if we didn't get Butch Cassidy himself."

"A Pink! A dirty Pink spy!" Mrs. Jensen yelled at him, then wheeled and ran into the house.

Burton sensed it first. "Stop her!" he shouted.

Grimes was nearest, but he was too late. They all heard the crash of the pistol shot in the house.

Jack Maunders was struggling to his feet now.

As they turned, he dropped flat again. Kate ran toward him and Grimes followed

swiftly, the others trailing. Jack was sitting up now, weak and faint, but trying hard to explain something. He finally got it all out.

"I didn't get a chance to shoot. It was Soogan Charley that killed him, from the roof. And I don't know why." He drew a deep breath, went on, "Unless he was tricking and lying to them—too."

Colis Kerlee and Sheriff Burton both had had a lot of experience with wounded men, and Jack Maunders soon was bandaged and resting comfortably in bed. And outside in the street Kate stood and looked squarely into Grimes's eyes as she talked quietly.

"We owe you a lot, all of us." She smiled at him. "I more than most, perhaps, for if it hadn't been for you and your men I might have lost my father and Jack too."

"I'm glad," said Grimes quietly. He had to force himself to meet her eyes and not take her in his arms. "Very glad. Glad that Jack can stay here now, though I still think he would make a good hand on a horse ranch." He forced a smile and added, "But an even better husband for you."

"Thank you." She smiled back. "This seems a time for clearing up mistakes and misunderstandings, doesn't it?" When he did not answer, she went on determinedly. "We met in misunderstanding, I thinking you an outlaw and killer. So I don't think we ought to part that way. You see, I meant just what I said the other night. I do love Jack, *as a brother*."

It took a moment for that to sink in, and then Grimes turned red as he said, "Kate, I—" He gulped and went on, "Damn it, they're all watching us!"

"And need we be ashamed of it?" She smiled as she reached up towards his face with both her hands, to kiss him.

As Grimes stooped a little to meet her lips he heard a shout from Ben Peters.

"Aw, take a chance, Grimes. George Washington did, and look at the size of this country now!"

THE MARSHAL OF MEDICINE BEND

By SAMUEL ANTHONY PEEPLES

From one wild town to the next, his fast-gun rep hounded him; set him up for target-bait. Because the reckless gunnie who outdrew Marshal Calem Ware would forever be toasted by every last lobo in the West. And now, in the sun-dried streets of Medicine Bend, the lawless breed were bettin' their last tainted dollar that the blood of the badge-toter would quench the thirsting dust 'ere sundown.

THE sound of the beast awakened him. His upper body was coated with sweat, and he sat up with a cry on his lips that was not uttered. It might have helped if he could have cried out. It might have melted the hard, nauseous knot in his stomach. But lips were tightly drawn against his teeth in a soundless snarl of fear, that relaxed only as his hand brushed over them, trembling.

It was not his first awakening like this; but each time it got worse. Calem Ware felt the growing pain of it, and wondered when he would break. It was coming, he knew. The strength of his mind would fail him, and his body would go blubbery, and the tremble would become uncontrollable. But not yet. He groaned, swung his legs out of the tangled bedclothes. His head felt hot and dry, and the hard core in his belly remained. It wouldn't be gone for hours. But there was another day to be faced, and after the nightmares of the hours just past, he welcomed it.

He sat on the edge of the bed, his body trembling, and listened. The sound was plain to his ears, the low, hungry murmurings of a beast. A beast with a thousand heads and hearts, and two thousand eyes to watch and peer at him, waiting, waiting for him to go to pieces. He tried to drive the idea away, and failed. It was too real, too clear. The town was the beast, and it was waiting for him to die, and while it was waiting it would be patiently amused by the

spectacle of Calem Ware killing another man. He could recognize the sound, the tense, thrilling quality of it. Something, someone, was waiting out there in the sun-dried streets for him. Maybe this time, the town was thinking, it will be Calem Ware's blood that quenches the thirsting dust. . . .

Calem ran a hand through his hair. It was almost white. A few darker gray streaks still ran through it, but most of it was white. Only his mustache and eyebrows remained black, with his bleached-blue eyes in between. He stood up, a tanned, thin figure in his too-short nightshirt. He peeled off the shirt and tossed it on the bed. For a moment, then, he stood naked, his body oddly white in the green-windowshade-filtered light of the room. An ugly brown scar puckered the flesh on the lower right side of his flat abdomen, and four vividly white cicatrices marked his upper arms and shoulders. Five brutal reminders of Death, waiting for him. His right shoulder was always a bit stiff, and it ached dully. He swung his shoulders rapidly to ease it, and presently the heat of the room made beads of moisture stand out on his naked flesh. He washed hurriedly, dousing his whole body as best he might from water poured from the white pitcher. The sudden chill of the water made his head clear.

He dressed in short-handled drawers, pulled on black stockings and plain black boots that encased his legs to just below the knees. He didn't ride much any more,

but the habit of wearing boots was too strong to break. He stood up again, and knocked one crumpled pillow aside. The long length of a handgun lay beneath it. On the brass bedpost his gunbelt sagged, a matching gun in a footless holster. He buckled the belt around his waist, and the gun handle thrust forward on his left side. He bent, picked up the second gun, reversed it with a twist of the wrist, thrust it home. He stood still, an oddly reversed figure, gun-butts protruding forward. Only a few men had ever troubled to learn the reversed draw; it sacrificed too much of speed for the sake of position. That was one reason he packed five reminders of death in his body; but it was also the reason five men lay in their graves instead of him.

He let his shoulders slump. His hands dangled at his sides. Then his left hand moved, back and up, and the gun was level, ready to fire. The movement was swift, without a jerk. His right hand made the same motion, and the gun was ready. He resheathed the guns. Then in swift succession, he drew them from every conceivable position, kneeling, falling forward, sidewise, leaning against a wall, spinning in a swift turn. Nothing could block, interfere, with the placing of the guns in position to fire. He nodded with satisfaction.

Calem Ware was a product of his time, a unique period, and a unique product. The mold which had produced him would never be reproduced. He sensed that, with a deep-set bitterness. But he sensed, too, the powerful need for a man like him, had realized it for years, and it was all that kept him going. He was thirty-six years old that August morning in 1881, and for the past twenty years he had known no peace. The war came first, the swift changing of men into something animalish, inhuman; and afterward he had been unable to go back to what he had known. Perhaps that was what had driven him west. What kept him there was something else.

HIS frown narrowed the space between his black brows, then he deliberately forced it away. His face was smooth-skinned, unlined, strangely mask-like. It stared back at him from the mirror above the dresser, and the look of it haunted him. It was a

grim face carved from brown wood, darker than the flesh of his body. It matched the hawk-like talons that were his hands. It went with the black Prince Albert coat, and the lace-fronted shirt and the black shoe-string tie he knotted so carefully. It went with his lean height, and it belonged with the two heavy guns he buckled about his waist beneath the frock coat.

He picked up his wallet from the dresser, opened it and stared at the picture of the woman inside. Her face was palely beautiful, topped by a high crown of blonde hair. He felt again the pangs of regret, poignant, strong. He forced them away, put the wallet inside the coat. A white fur-felt Stetson, flat of crown, broad of brim, hung on one arm of the dresser mirror. He settled it on his head, rubbed his hand over the slight stubble of beard. Then he paused. A bit of metal flashed on the dresser. He studied it; the silver plating had worn away, showing the red of the brass beneath. It was tawdry, cheap, and yet he wore it and not the solid gold badge he had been given a year before. He pinned it through the holes in the left lapel of his double-breasted vest and stepped out into the hall.

In the kitchen a heavy-set woman was bending over a stove. She turned as he came in, and her heat-reddened face was taut with worry. Calem nodded, sat down at the table in one corner. The woman came swiftly over with a pot of coffee and a brandy bottle. He filled a cup, half and half, drank it. His hands stopped trembling. The woman was watching him. He smiled, his mask-like face cracking, becoming human, softened.

"Who is it this time, Molly?"

The woman blinked. Her face twisted, "Dingo Brion." She almost spat the name. "He rode in this morning. Hiram Hays came by to tell me."

Calem Ware's eyes closed, and he built a picture in his mind. A short, stocky man, swarthy of face, his skin greasy, like he bathed in oil. Ugly, twisted mouth, and a name for reckless gunplay. Dingo Brion. He went out the back door. He moved down the alley to the end, turned and walked up Texas Street. Medicine Bend was growing, settling down. He saw the foundations of the new bank, and the red bricks of the opera house not yet faded by the

sun. In front of the latter, a gaudy playbill announced:

Medicine Bend
OPERA HOUSE

Largest and Most Elegantly Appointed
Playhouse West of Chicago Presents
ELLA, THE LOVELY BLONDE

—Four Hours—

Of Elegant Pleasures Blended With A
VOLUPTUOUS Feast Without COARSENESS

A carriage moved sedately down the street. The man driving it was big, going to fat, his face dark-red granite, with mustaches that drooped over his mouth. Asaph Dean saw Calem, raised his whip in salute. A woman sat beside him, in sober black garb, her face starch-white, unsmiling. Calem raised his hat, didn't put it on until the carriage was past. But he caught the look she had thrown past him, toward someone beyond him. Cora Dean, still darkly beautiful despite the gray in her hair—and married to the hard-eyed man who ruled Medicine Bend, and half the Territory as well.

C ALEM crossed the street. The building opposite was big and new, of red brick, with a wide portico of dangling knobs and uprights of twisted metal. A bright red banner hung across the front: *CODY CLARK NEW FRONTIER SALOON—40 LIGHTNING ACTS—NO WAITING.* A man was standing on the porch, watching Calem cross the street. He was slight of build; with a hatchet-thin face, broadened by thick black sidewhiskers. His smile was fixed, unchanging. His eyes were black coals in his pasty-white face.

"'Morning, Cody," Calem said. He stepped into the shade of the portico.

Cody Clark stared off up the street after the departing carriage. It was certain he had been the recipient of Mrs. Dean's quick look. He nodded. "Cora Dean's quite a looker, Calem," he said, thoughtfully. He wet his lips with his tongue. "Quite a looker. Too bad she's married to a frozen fish like Asaph."

"A man can dig his grave with his tongue, Cody," Calem said. Irritation, and the same reasonless anger he always felt for this man stirred inside him.



"So I've been told," Cody answered, grinning. He turned back from the street. To one side of the swinging doors of the saloon was a blackboard. The markings on it were in red chalk, in Cody's copperplate handwriting.

Odds on Calem Ware to down Dingo Brion—6 to 5.

He nodded at it. "The odds are getting shorter, Calem. Dingo's got a rep."

"You worried?" Calem's face didn't move.

"Not at six to five. Only longshots worry gamblers." Cody continued to stare at him, and Calem read hatred in the dark depth of his eyes.

Cody walked on to the barber shop in the next block. The shop was empty. Tony Cabrillo rubbed at his face nervously.

"Howdo, Mistuh Marshal," he said. "A fine morning, no?"

Calem nodded. He removed his coat, hung it on the coatstand. He hung his gun-belt beside it. Tony's razor touched his cheek, went smoothly down. Then Tony's hand jerked, and the razor cut a tiny nick in Calem's face, and red smeared the white lather. Calem opened his eyes.

A short, squat man filled the doorway. The sunlight behind him outlined his body clearly. His face was working, twisting violently. He held there, poised, then his eyes flickered toward the holstered guns beyond Calem's reach, and his lips peeled apart in a smile.

His right hand went down to his gun. It cleared leather. Then Calem fired the Derringer's two barrels at the same instant. The slugs jerked at the sheet covering him, ripped through. He saw them strike Dingo Brion. Blood spurted; Dingo's gun roared and the bullet smashed the mirror behind Calem. Then Dingo went down.

"Madre de Dios!" Tony whispered.

Calem felt the nervous energy drain away from inside him. But he had a part to act. He closed his eyes with an effort. "Finish the job, Tony," he ordered.

The barber came up. His hands were shaking as they touched Calem's face. The marshal opened his eyes, smiled. "Never mind, Tony."

He withdrew the razor from the barber's nerveless hands and finished the task, aware

that men crowded around the front of the shop, staring in at him. The barber held out a towel as he washed the last of the lather from his face. Calem buckled on his guns, after restoring the derringer to the thong about his neck, letting it dangle inside his shirt front. He climbed into his coat, tossed a silver dollar on a marble-topped shelf.

"Keep it, Tony," he said. "Get over to Doc Wynn's. Tell him what happened." He faced the onlooking men, aware of the avidness of their eyes, soaking in the tragedy, the horror of the moment. They recoiled from him, as if he weren't quite human, and that was a part of the role he must play, too. He went out into the sunshine.

Cody Clark was standing in front of the blackboard. He held a sheaf of bills in his hand. His black eyes were narrowed. "Hold-out," he sneered. "Never knew you packed one, Calem."

"Lots of things you don't know, Cody," Calem said. The mob of men had followed him. A thin smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "Cody Clark's buying drinks, men," he said. "You can take up a collection to bury Dingo later."

Clark's eyes were black beads of hate. Then he laughed. "That's right. Drinks are on the house. Everybody welcome." He turned to the blackboard. With his hand he rubbed out the lettered words.

"Odds are getting shorter, Calem," he said. "Next time it'll be even money."

Calem turned hastily away. A weakening, dizzying sickness tore at his stomach. Cold sweat mottled his face. He went up the street, turned between two buildings and was sick.

A man stood at the end of the alleyway, watching him. Then a laugh peeled out. It was Cody Clark, hate filling his laughter, making it rich, bubbling. Then he was gone. Calem stared after him.

THE City Hall was a brick building that squatted on one edge of an empty square. Three or four trees stood stiffly erect before it, and a hitchrail held a dozen mounts. Calem crossed the street, passed down the length of the building. At the rear, fronting on an alley was a low stoop, with a sign: *Marshal's Office*. The jail was

on the second floor of the building, with a stairway going up inside the marshal's office. He fished in his pocket for the key, unlocked the door. Stale air whooshed into his face as he pushed the door open and sat down heavily, wearily. A man came into the office, blinking from the morning sun. He was fat. His face was moonlike, with thick lips always glistening redly in a smile. His eyes, however, were large, clear, of a tawny yellow color, and when you looked into Dorry Dean's eyes, you forgot he was fat and awkward-looking, and saw something entirely different. Calem was aware of that oddness about the fat man now.

"You had me worried, Calem. Dingo's no slouch with a gun. He's proved that often enough. I tried to get up to the hotel to warn you, but I was too late. You'd gone."

"Thanks, anyway," Calem answered.

"Why don't you walk out, Calem?" Dorry frowned. "There's no percentatge for you. Cody's got it right. You'll last another year, with luck, maybe two. Then some crazy kid nobody would think had the guts will shoot you in the back."

"Sounds reasonable," Calem answered. "One thing you don't understand, though—it wouldn't make any difference whether or not I'm in Medicine Bend—it would be the same anywhere. You don't understand that, maybe because you don't *have* to. But I've thought it out. My name's a hard one. It's known in Texas and Montana, and all points in between. You know why? It's because I killed Ben Wryson in San Antonio in 1868. Up here you wouldn't know much about Ben. He was the leader of the Wild Bunch—men like Bass Outlaw, John Wesley Hardin and Harley Baskam—and they ran San Antonio. In 1868 I'd killed exactly two men, both of them during the War. I'd been in Santone just two months gambling on a stake I'd made in Missouri. I ran afoul of Ben Wryson twice. The third time we met in the street—and I was lucky. I got out of town before Harley Baskam could find me—but the word was out. I was the man who killed Ben Wryson. I was marked. Set apart. Men who had never paid any attention to me, singled me out. And I began to like it. I was forced into becoming—what I am. I've been marshal in Deming, Sundance,

Apache Wells, and now Medicine Bend. Three times I've quit, changed my name—and been called on the street. I've known for five years there's no turning back. I've got one chance. One only. To outlast the times. So far I'm doing it. You've seen the changes. The new City Hall, the new bank—your own Opera House. Churches going up. No gun-packing on Sunday. There'll be a time when men don't carry guns every day of the year. I'm waiting for that day."

Dorry puffed billows of smoke, waved a fat hand through it. "Sounds good, but you're fooling yourself. The first man you downed here in Medicine Bend was two years ago. Cody Clark posted odds of three to one in your favor. That first man you killed was more dangerous than Dingo Brion could ever be. Yet the odds were narrower. You know why? Because you're human, Calem, whether you'll admit it or not. You walk the street like a living legend because you're afraid men will know you're human. Cody knows that. He hates your guts, and he knows that someday something will fail inside you; call it what you want to, the urge to kill, fighting heart, murder instinct, or just guts. When that happens—" He stopped.

"Do you suppose I haven't thought of that, Dorry? Do you think I sleep well at night? Do you think I don't know that Dingo Brion was married, has three kids, and another on the way? He was no good. Somebody was sure to kill him sooner or later. But that doesn't make it any easier."

DORRY DEAN shook his head, his yellow eyes blinked. "But I didn't come over here to talk about spilt milk, and I sure as hell didn't show up to read you a sermon. It's about Gregg. You gonna let him go this morning?"

Calem stared at the building length of ash on his cigar. He nodded. "Sure, I'll let him go. He's mean but he's not a hell-raiser when he's sober."

"I suppose you know that Asaph's going to raise hell when he finds out you've kept Gregg in the pokey all night."

"I know," Calem frowned. Asaph Dean was Dorry's brother; and Cora's husband. He owned Medicine Bend, it was commonly said, and more than that. For a hundred

miles north and as many west lay Dean's land. A virtual empire of cattle and timber and mineral wealth. Seven towns were bounded by Dean's land. And Asaph Dean was Gregg Dean's father, and Cora was his mother, although he could sense little enough of Cora in the headstrong boy.

"It's your funeral," Dorry said. "I hate Asaph's guts, as he hates mine. But for Cora's sake I think of the boy. You were a mite hard on him, Calem."

"I don't like men to come in here and tell me how to run my business, Dorry. Not even you. I said I'll turn Gregg loose this morning. As far as I'm concerned, that's an end to it. If he cuts up again—"

"That's what I mean," Dorry put in, quickly. "The boy's got too much money, and too much time. He's bound to raise a little hell."

"A little hell? He tried to kill old Hiram Hays last night. Something Hiram said. You know how crazy he talks, how he spreads talk every chance he gets. I warned Hiram."

"I heard him," Dorry said. "The boy had cause. Hiram linked Cora's name with Cody Clark's. Without cause. The old goat loves to stir up trouble, especially anything to rile Asaph. But there's a limit."

A quick, light step sounded, and a small, bird-like man came into the room, mopping his sweat-streaming face with a gigantic red bandanna. "Howdy, Calem; howdy, Dorry. You did a plumb fine job on young Dingo, Marshal. It's a shore bet he ain't gonna raise no more hell."

Doctor Amos Wynn blew his nose in a raucous snort. "Yessiree-bob, you plumb tore him to bits. Nasty things, derringers. Smooth bore guns allus make sich a mess o' a man's insides. Me, I'll take a nice neat .36 grooved barrel handgun wound any time. One thing about brother Colt's weapon—it does a neat, bang-up job."

"Never carried a Colt, Doc," Calem returned. His hand slipped his frock coat back. The pearl handles of his guns thrust up. Doctor Wynn blinked again at sight of them.

"Smith and Wesson, huh?" Dorry grinned. Must have cost a pretty penny, Calem. I remember owning an old Volcanic Repeater once. My dad gave me an' Asaph each one when we turned fifteen. Old

calibre .31."

Calem nodded.

Doc Wynn snorted. "Thought you better have what I found on Dingo." He dug into his waistcoat pocket, and something glinted yellow and rang out on the flat desk surface.

"Five double eagles!" Dorry whistled. "Dingo never had six-bits to jingle in his pocket in his miserable life. Where's he get a hundred dollars?"

Calem felt a thin coldness edge up his back. Doctor Amos Wynn was watching him.

"Blood money, Calem, is my guess," he said. "Dingo'd kill his own mother for half that much gold. Somebody must 'a wanted you dead plumb bad to pay in advance."

Dorry laughed, his voice gone flat. "Looks like it, don't it?"

Doc Wynn grunted. "But I'm wastin' time. Got to do my best to make Dingo look halfways human. I sent word out to his wife an' brother. They'll be comin' in for him. I'll send 'em over to you, Marshal, to get his personal belongin's. Ain't much aside from his repeater an' this stack o' gold. An', Marshal—look out for Dooley Brion. He's big as a mountain, an' about as slow to move. But when he's started, ain't nothin' can stop him. I seen him pick up a barrel of salt over at Wakely's feed an' grain store. For a two-bit bet. He picked it up an' toted it a hundred yards. Six hundred pounds dead weight. But he's too dumb to be mean, unless you rile him. I wouldn't if I was you, Calem."

"Thanks, Doc." Calem sat down. The doctor danced away on his thin bird legs. Dorry groaned. He moved toward the door.

"I gotta be going, too, Calem. I've said my say."

CALEM went up the back stairway to the cell-block. He unlocked the heavy door and went in. A man sat on a bunk to the right. He was of uncertain age, light streaks in his dark hair. His coat was rumpled from sleeping in it, but of dark material and finely cut. His pale, long-fingered hands dealt out a hand of solitaire on the bunk.

"Chow'll be along soon," Calem announced.

"Anytime," the gambler said. His name was Charley Drew, and he'd been thrown in

jail to keep some riders from killing him. The judge had given him thirty days on a vagrancy charge to keep him out of sight. He'd been in a week. "How's sleeping beauty? You really must have laid one on him. Wish I'd seen it."

"He's just a kid," Calem said, and instantly regretted it. It sounded like he was apologizing for the boy. He went on down the row of cells. In the last a youth lay sprawled on the unkempt bunk, feet dangling over. His face was long of bone, with a heavy jaw, and just now marked with sullen brooding. A livid welt marked the right side of his jaw where Calem had hit him. He sat up.

"Damn you! It was you who hit me! Ware—I'll kill you for this!"

Calem spoke slowly. "Son, I'm going to forget you said that. A man has a right to grouse as much as he pleases when he's in pokey. I'm not going to preach you a sermon. You're not a wild kid any more. You better remember that."

The boy's mouth curled downward. "I'll remember a lot of things. You'll get yours, and I'll be there watching and laughing."

Calem unlocked the door. "Get out." With a silent snarl, the boy was past him. "Your gun is on my desk. Get it—and throw it away if you've got any sense. You're not big enough to pack it."

II

IT HAD been said that Dooley had slain a cougar with his bare hands, and the condition of his face bore witness to the truth of it. The left half of his face had been ripped away, sparing only the eye. In healing, the underfat had not returned, giving his face a queer lopsided look, the skin taut and brittle-looking over the harsh bone frame. But it was not the horror of his face that shocked the man who stood up to Dooley Brion: it was the sheer brutal enormity of the man.

Calem stood two inches over six feet. Beside Dooley Brion he was a half-grown child. Dooley stood head and shoulders above him, a battered, torn sombrero perched atop his thick wad of black curls. His shoulders were like the walking-beams

of a riverboat. His arms reached almost to his knees, ending in hands so enormous as to be unbelievable. His weight was over four hundred pounds. At the moment he stood before Calem's desk, rocking back and forth on his heels, dwarfing the roof, the furniture, like a giant in a doll's house.

When Calem came into the office, Dooley Brion turned slowly, his movement almost lumbering, and the plank floor groaned protest to his weight. His hands came up, slowly, knotted into rock-like fists, then sank slowly to his sides.

"Calem—Ware!" he breathed hoarsely, pausing between the two names.

Calem's hand dropped to one gun.

"Dooley, I won't waste time talking. Did you come here to start trouble as Dingo did?"

The giant faltered. The red of the right half of his face receded suddenly, and Calem felt a resurgence of confidence. The giant was afraid, not of him, but of the guns he carried. Deliberately he let his right hand rest on the butt of his revolver.

"No!" the big man barked out; the word had the sound of a groan.

Doctor Amos Wynn had come in behind Calem. His sigh of relief was almost audible. "Dooley, I reckon you know what happened. You can pick up Dingo's body down at my place. The marshal, here, has his things."

Calem moved to the desk. He pulled out Dingo Brion's sheathed gun, a ring made from a single horseshoe nail, and the five twenty-dollar gold pieces. They were so new they shone even in the filtered light of the office.

Dooley stared down at the meager belongings of his brother almost stupidly. Then his hand went out, took the gun from the belt. Calem's right hand went to his gun, and his body quivered. But Dooley didn't look at him.

"Guns," the giant whispered hoarsely. "Stinkin', man-killin' guns!"

His hands moved, galvanically; there sounded a screech of metal, and the gun broke in his hands. He threw the pieces to the floor, spat heavily. He turned about, rocking unsteadily.

"Stop it, Dooley!" The woman's voice cut sharply through to the giant's mind. He faltered, then stood still, his upper body

trembling. A piece of the gun had cut his right hand, but he ignored it. The cut filled with red, ran down his thick fingers.

Calem noticed the woman for the first time. She wasn't the kind a man would see at once, nor would she hold his gaze, even momentarily. She was plain, her face weathered and worn, her body work-wasted. She was big with child, and yet she stood firmly, unflinchingly. Calem sensed a strength within her he could admire.

"It's over, Dooley," she said. "Let's git Dingo an' git out o' here."

"The money was Dingo's," Calem said, slowly. "He was carrying it. You'll need it."

The woman nodded, slowly. Her eyes went to Calem's face, held there. "Yo're feelin' sorry fer me, Mister Ware," she said, her voice clear, ringing. "But yuh shouldn't. I knowed Dingo wasn't no good, never was no good. But he was all I had. Now he's gone—I'll be better off. It ain't Dingo, an' it ain't me anyone should feel sorry fer. It's you, Calem Ware—you as kilt him. It's you as folks should be sorry fer. At least Dingo's at peace—you never will be!"

She walked past him to the desk, then her reaching hand was seized, held by that of Dooley. The giant glowered down at her.

"Don't touch it!" he thundered. "It's dirty money—blood money. Yuh know Dingo never earnt a hundred dollars in his whole life."

His hand reached past, swept the golden coins to the floor. They rang out as they struck. Then Dooley and Dingo's widow moved past the doctor and Calem to the door.

DOC WYNN snorted as he walked beside Calem toward Cody Clark's *New Frontier Saloon*. "Be damned if this hain't a hell of a poor place for a man to live, Calem. Roast all summer an' freeze your tail all winter. You listenin' to me, Calem?"

Ware wasn't. He was looking at the woman in front of Dorry Dean's Opera House. She was tall; her hair ash-blonde, topped by an absurdly small bonnet. Her dress was new and reflected a style that would not be common in Medicine Bend for five more years. For a moment his stride slowed, then he turned to the frowning doctor.

"Excuse me, Doc. Thought I saw somebody I knew."

Wynn's eye behind his glasses widened, and he pursed his lips to whistle. "Wish I knew her, myself. Must be Dorry's new attraction. Remind me to get over to the Opery House tonight."

"I'll do that!" Calem promised.

They came abreast the woman, and for a moment Calem felt her keen hazel eyes slide over his face, then pause. She was beautiful in a hard sort of way. She was older than she looked, and her face was queerly masklike. That was the impression Calem gathered, and he had the same queer sense that he had known her a long time before. Then she turned, almost with studied care, and looked past them, down the dusty length of the street.

Cody Clark's place ran the full depth of the block.

The place was not full, but the bar was busy.

"Set my own bottle up, Joe." It was Cody talking to the bartender. He had moved in close beside Calem. His hand was steady as he poured the amber fluid into the two glasses. "We took your advice and took up a funeral collection to bury Dingo Brion. Want to contribute, Calem?"

Ware kept his eyes on Cody Clark's. The gambler finally looked away. "Sure," Calem said. He dug into his pocket, felt the gold pieces. He pulled them out, added another of his own.

Cody pushed it at the bartender. "Put it with the rest. That's right nice of you, Calem. Funny thing how a man softens up towards another—once he's killed him, that is."

"I don't know about that, Cody. I'd do as much if it was your funeral."

The gambler paled. His dark eyes flashed, then he laughed. "I believe you would, Calem. The feeling is mutual." He pushed one glass toward the marshal. "Shall we drink to the time we join Dingo Brion in hell?"

Before Calem could answer, a Negro boy came up. His black face was twisted with a knowing grin. "Mistuh Mahshall, suh, they's a message fo' yo-all."

Calem bent his head. The boy's whisper was scarcely audible. "They's a lady wants

to see yo-all in one hell of a hurry, suh. She said to tell yo she's waitin' ahint Mistuh Dorry's opry house, suh. An' please hurry, suh."

Calem turned down the alleyway beside the new brick theater, made his way down its length. In the narrow areaway behind it was the litter of scenery and rubbish piled there for disposal. The shadow of the buildings about it made a gloomy place. Calem drew his right hand gun, held it at his side under his coat.

Then he saw the woman standing some distance away from him. She was alone. He sheathed his gun, came towards her. He stopped within five feet, and surprise rooted him to the spot. It was the ash-blond woman he had noticed before the theater. Her smile was strained. She took a step toward him, stood there, smiling at him. Then her smile vanished, replaced by the same set expression he had noticed before.

"You don't know me, she whispered, then she laughed, almost wildly. "Look close Calem—because—*because I'm your wife!*"

III

TALEEN WARE was twenty-two years old the day she and her husband arrived in Apache Wells. Since the morning four months past when she had married Calem Ware against the advice of family and friends, there had been many changes, many adjustments she had had to make. She stole a sideward glance at Calem where he sat in a corner of the railroad seat, staring out at the appalling flatlands through which they had rattled and swayed for days on end.

"I'm wondering if I haven't made a mistake bringing you out here. Back in Michigan it was different—I was different." Calem's eyes were level, searching her face. "You know so very little about the man you married, Taleen."

"I don't care; I know all I want to know."

"Do you? I wonder?" His face was brooding, then he laughed. "But enough of that. We'll be in Apache Wells in an hour. We'll stay there two weeks. Colorado's a long way off, and you'll need many things."

He owned a ranch in Colorado. And yet he insisted the Territory would never be a

cattle land. But it was a beginning, he said. And the English-owned Prairie Cattle Company holdings included more than 3500 square miles of land and 60,000 head of cattle, so Calem's dream of empire might not be in vain. Colorado Territory! The very name sent a tiny shiver through her. Great fortunes were in the making there, cattle and sheep and gold; a thousand tales stirred excitement in the east about the Pike's Peak Country. And Calem had been an integral part of that excitement, had come out of it wealthy, or at least well off. She had met him in Chicago, where he had come to deal with a packing house; and the tall, lean figure had excited her interest. The days of their meeting had passed like the briefest flash of lightning, and then he had followed her to her home in Michigan. Within a month they were married, and now the big adventure, the return to his chosen lands. She shook her head, slowly.

Calem was watching her, almost anxiously. "Taleen, there's something you should know about me. You're going to hear stories, some of them greatly exaggerated, and some pretty close to the truth. You know I've killed men."

She knew. But somehow, now, it was different. Back home, in the bosom of her people, they had been wildly glamorous tales, and she had not troubled to sift them to find the hard core of reality beneath. Calem had been a law officer; and in line of duty he had killed men. Just words, without real meaning. But in the days of their journey she had grown a new perspective. The roughness of the land, of the people, and most especially of the hard-eyed men who made her shudder.

"But that's over, done with, darling," she murmured. "Now you're a rancher. We'll have a home—"

She had built the whole pretty picture of it in her mind, block by block, and he encouraged her, but she felt the odd reticence behind him, the anxiety.

There was a marked change in Calem the day he set foot in Apache Wells. Before leaving the train, he had removed a pair of long, heavy revolvers from his carpetbag and buckled them about him. She saw the way other men looked at him, their guarded expressions, the lowering of their voices in

his presence, their studied deference to her, and more than once she caught the remark "gunfighter." Her first blind happiness gave way to uneasiness, slight at first, then growing until it was a heavy weight upon her.

The first night in Apache Wells was a nightmare. Gunshots echoed and thundered; the hotel was above a saloon, and she heard the raucous laughter of men, the coarse squeals of women, and the ever-present rattle of glasses. She was frightened, and yet with Calem's arms about her, her fears lessened. During the days, the town seemed to sleep in a sort of drunken lethargy, but with the coming of night it came alive. The growing tension inside her, coupled with the loneliness of being away from home for the first time alone, led to their first quarrel. Calem left her in the hotel room alone that night; he was gone for long terror-filled hours, when every gunshot, every loud sound, sent chills through her; and when he returned, he had been drinking. She cried the rest of that night, and something was lost between them.

But as the time for their departure grew near, things seemed to straighten out for her, until the day Calem announced they could not leave Apache Wells until spring; the Kiowas were out again, and travel of small parties too dangerous. More than that, their money had been spent too freely buying for the new ranch home; they had little left to live on for the winter, and Calem had accepted the job of marshal. She found only one bright spot; they were leaving the rowdy hotel to share the home of the mayor, a man named Livingston. She made little protest, indeed managed a small smile.

"I'm sorry, Calem," she whispered. "I'd hoped our baby would be born in our own home."

Twice during the long, cold plains winter, she heard of gun-battles in which Calem had killed men; but they were something distant, apart from her life with him. She dared not think of them. And in the few hours each day he spent with her, he never mentioned his task, talked only of the spring, and their move westward. The weeks seemed to flow together, a kaleidoscope of bright colors, and harsh cold winds. Never, it seemed, was she warm throughout that whole winter.

Early in April she was in the town, shop-

ping for a few final necessities for their journey which would start as soon after the baby came as she could travel. She had finished in the Bon Ton store, and had stepped from the doorway when she first heard the shots. Directly opposite her, three men burst through the swinging doors of a saloon. They carried guns in their hands. She froze as she saw Calem step from the boardwalk to confront them. A scream tore from her lips.

It was a terrible stranger she saw. Calem's frock coat was pushed away from his guns. His face was mask-like. The silver star shone brightly on his broadcloth vest. The three men saw him. She saw them whirl; Calem's hands moved with blinding speed toward his guns—but too late.

The bullet that struck him might as well have struck her. She felt the smashing impact of it. She whimpered, and her eyes closed. Pain struck at her, as she ran toward the street. Calem was coming up, lying on one hip. Guns were in his hands. He fired; a man spun crazily, fell to the dirt. A second's face burst into bloody ruin. The third was firing at Calem. She saw the black frock coat jerk to the impact of bullets, then Calem's gun thundered for the last time, and the third man fell slowly backward, to crash to the earth with an audible thud.

Blinding, tearing pains went through her. She reached the street; could go no further. She fell, and the world resolved into a crazy pain-red frenzy of flashes. . . .

For Taleen the month that followed was a torture she could never forget. Of Calem she heard little. He had been sent to a hospital in St. Louis, and it was believed he would die. Then word came he would live; but she no longer had a desire to see him. Nor could she return to the life she had known. That was over, done; there could be no return. When once more she was up and around, she wrote Calem a letter, and said her goodbyes to the Livingstons. And from that day the vast turmoil of the West swallowed her up as though she had never been.

It was a month later before Calem read the letter. It was brief:

Calem:

Our son was born dead. You killed him. I can never believe otherwise. Please do not

try to find me. I am not returning home, nor will I ever see you again. I know now that I was too young, too blind, to know before; you are a marked man in the West, a gunfighter. Nothing will ever change that. For a little time I shared a dream with you; I am grateful for that. But it was a crazy dream, and could never come true.

Taleen

THE level hazel eyes remained fixed on his own, and Calem found it impossible to break away from them. "Taleen!" he breathed.

She shook her head, slowly. "You didn't know me. I couldn't expect you to after all these years."

"Taleen!" he repeated. Then his thin lips tightened. "I looked for you."

"I know you did. Maybe that's why I came to Medicine Bend when the chance came. I knew you were here."

"Ten years. It's been that long. I went back to Michigan twice in that time; your family had had no word. I'd lost you."

"Yes, Calem," she answered, softly. "You lost me. As certainly as if the bullets you fired that day in Apache Wells had struck my heart."

The change in her, the hardness of her face, it went farther than that. But after ten years, what could he have expected? "Why did you come here?"

"To see you. I wanted to see you again, Calem. I've heard of you. Even the papers back East play up the 'Fighting Marshal'." Bitterness tinged her voice. "How many men have you killed, Calem? The papers have listed twenty or more—there must have been others they didn't report."

"Is that what you came to say to me?"

She was silent. Her eyes lowered, closed for a moment. "No, Calem. I wanted you to know something. I wanted you to know that, in a way, I understand now. I understand what drove you, on and on. I know there can never be rest for men like you—as long as a man's repeater is as essential as his coat. It isn't that I forgive you for what you did—it's more that I realize now there was nothing to forgive. If I had known, before we were married—"

"You knew. I'd told you."

"Yes, you did. You told me you'd killed

men. Words, Calem, without reality. I didn't know what it meant for a man to make his living by the gun. I know now. They call you 'the safety killer'. You use your badge to back up your killing instinct."

Calem made no move. The words tore at him, and he fought down a cold anger. "You believe that?"

"What else is there for me to believe, Calem?"

"I don't know. The truth, maybe?"

"What is the truth? What are you fighting for, Calem? What peace can you ever find? Dorry Dean told me what Dingo Brion's widow said to you—that she was sorry for you, not for Dingo, but for you. Do you understand why she said that? Because you'll go on killing—until you are killed."

"Maybe she's right," he answered, slowly. His eyes narrowed. "But a woman can walk safely on the streets of any town in the territory now; her kids can go to school and not be targets for some drunken would-be gunman. A man can run a business; this country can live. Have you ever seen a town that's been treed by a horde of trail drivers? Have you any idea of what took place in Dodge and Hays City and a hundred other trail towns before a law man took over? Three years ago Medicine Bend averaged five murders a night; three children died in the streets when drunken herders drove their cattle through the town on a spree. Dingo Brion was the first man to die in the streets of Medicine Bend in three weeks. You know why? Because I've put the fear of God into them, that's why!" His voice was hard, biting. "I've heard the talk—God, how many thousands of times I've heard myself called a mad-dog killer. But this country is being tamed because there are men like me to do it."

She shook her head, slowly. "I'd like to believe that, Calem. With all my heart I'd like to believe that."

"There's nothing I can do to prove it to you. Nothing. It's too late for us, I know that. But I've never forgotten you. I never will."

She was very close to him. Suddenly she pulled back, as if she could not trust herself so close to him. Her eyes closed. "May God forgive me if I'm wrong, Calem," she

whispered. "I don't know; perhaps that's why I came here. I never forgot you, what we'd once felt for each other." Then she was staring up at him again. "We're still man and wife, Calem. I've never changed that. That's why I wanted to see you. There's another man. Dorry Dean has asked me to marry him. That's why I came out here. To tell you, to decide once and for all. When I left you in Apache Wells, I made my way as best I might. I've been on the stage ever since. I changed my name. I've done very well, Calem. I've sung in Europe, New York, and now here in Medicine Bend. I met Dorry in Chicago a year ago. He was there trying to book talent into his new Opera House. I liked him, perhaps more than that. A month ago he came to New York and asked me to marry him. I told him I didn't know, that I needed time to make up my mind."

"He knows you're married to me?"

"No. Not yet. I'll have to tell him. He knows I came here to make up my mind. What happened today—"

He nodded. "Now you know."

Her face moved, strangely, disturbed. "No, Calem, I don't know. Until I saw you this morning I thought I'd forgotten I ever loved you. I thought it would be easy, after all these years. But it isn't. I find doubts, and I know they are unreal, but I can't destroy them. I've got to be sure. Completely sure."

He nodded, slowly. Their eyes met, locked, then suddenly she was pressed against him, his arms went about her, and hungrily their lips met. Then she drew back.

"For now, then, it's good-by, Calem."

"Taleen," he whispered.

He waited a minute or two before leaving the area behind the opera house. He turned down the alley. The sun was not yet overhead, and the alley was in shadow. He walked swiftly, then paused, strung erect. Something came to him. It was a silence, thin, threatening silence. He stopped, and his hand brushed his coat back, touched the butt of his revolver.

A gun roared. Calem was moving, even as the shot was fired. His hat was torn from his head, and a burn, as of the kiss of a red-hot iron, seared his scalp. Then he was on hands and knees, gun outthrust before him.

Something moved at the end of the alley. He fired twice, then ran forward. He broke into the sunlight. The alleyway was empty. Closed doors ranged to either side at the backs of the sun-weathered frame buildings. Then a door opened slowly, hesitatingly, and a man with a blowsy-eyed look stuck his head out.

"What th' hell?" he demanded, then saw Calem. "Oh, it's you, Marshal. What's up?"

Calem shook his head. His fingers traced the scalp wound. It was slight, only a tiny trickle of blood welling forth. He sheathed his gun, slowly, frowning.

"Nothing," he answered, soberly. "Thought I saw a coyote at the end of the alley there. Forget it."

IV

JUAN TOBREZ was frightened; he was so frightened he could not breathe with ease, sucking his breath in between his clenched teeth in mighty gasps.

"Por Dios!" he groaned under his breath. This very night must he burn two candles before his patron saint for diverting the lead-death messengers that had whispered so close to him. One had touched his cloak, ripping a great hole in it; the other had missed his head by an inch! That devil of a marshal had almost been his death! Ten thousand devils, why had not his, Juan Tobrez', shot carried true? He had been certain that his shot would strike the center of Calem Ware's forehead. Instead, the shot had but torn the hat from his head.

Cody Clark was sitting behind the broad black top of his desk in the saloon when Juan Tobrez tapped lightly on the door. Stacks of silver and gold coins stood on the desk, and Cody crossed to the door, and called out sharply: "Who's there?"

"It is I, Juan Tobrez, patrón!"

"What do you want?"

"Señor, I must see you at once!"

Cody slid the bolts back. There were two of them, and the door was backed by iron plates that would stop even a .44 calibre bullet at close range. He stepped back, his gun ready. "All right, come in, then!"

The Mexican was panicky. "Ah, señor, señor!" he moaned. "I have failed!"

"Failed in what?" Cody shot the bolts,

crossed back to the desk. But he kept the gun in his hand. "What are you talking about?"

Juan Tobrez drew himself together with an effort. "Patrón—It is but that I heard you tell Dingo that the five gold pieces were his for the firing of one shot into the head of the accursed Don Calem."

"What's that?" Cody stiffened. "You heard that?"

"Si, patrón," the Mexican murmured. "I heard. Last night, I was here in the hall outside your door when Dingo came in. I—I could not help but hear what was said. It was for me to envy the greatness of Dingo that you should lavish such wealth upon him. And when Dingo failed—it was in my mind that the iron is always the softest when it has been exposed to the flame—Ware would not expect a second try so soon."

Cody was startled but his smooth-featured face was blank. "All right, what happened?"

"It was an act of God, patrón. Don Calem stumbled. My shot but tore his hat from his head. His guns—Dios! but his hands were swift!—guns spit death at me, but like a shadow I was gone."

"Did he see you? Did anyone see you?"

"No, señor! I swear it!" The Mexican read the threat in the gambler's eyes, and the sweat burst anew from his head. "Would I have come here if I had been seen? Is not Juan Tobrez' love for his patrón too great for him to be so stupid?"

Cody caught up one silver dollar, tossed it at the Mexican.

"Now hear me, Juan Tobrez. You're a meddling fool. No harm may come from what you've done, but if you talk, I'll cut your tongue from your head with my own hands."

The Mexican backed to the door.

"And, Juan—" Cody Clark's coal black eyes glistened wetly. "A gun is not your weapon. You missed Calem Ware once and lived—you're the only man alive who can say that. Think about that. And if you try again—make it a knife—and be sure! Be awfully damned sure!"

CODY CLARK went swiftly to the Opera House, stepped to a door marked *Private*, then thrust it open. Dorry Dean

was sitting at a broad desk before the fan-shaped windows that looked down on Medicine Bend and the blue mountains in the distance. The gambler closed the door behind him, crossed to stand before the desk. "You hear the shooting some time back? Three shots?"

Dorry nodded, slowly. "Shots in Medicine Bend are still common enough, Cody."

"Not common enough any more to suit me—and not so common when they're fired at our esteemed marshal."

Dorry seemed to come to life. His chair tipped forward, held there, then slowly slid back. "Another miss, eh? Must have been, or you wouldn't be here. That's two men Medicine Bend will bury tomorrow, instead of one. Dingo has company."

"Not this time," Cody snapped. "It was that damned fool, Juan. He took a potshot at Ware and missed. Ware didn't do any better. He didn't even see Juan."

Dean pursed his flabby lips in a silent whistle. His eyes darkened. "I don't like to tell another man his business, Cody," he said, softly, "but that was a damned fool play."

"You think I don't know it? That crazy Mex overheard me talking to Dingo—and he thought, since Dingo failed, he'd like to earn a hundred dollars. He'd probably have drunk himself to death in three days, but it was worth the chance to him."

"But not to us, Cody." Dorry Dean rocked his enormous weight back and forth. His moody yellow eyes moved back to the window, across the roofs to the mountains. "I didn't think you were that much of a damned fool. If I had, I would never have joined in with you in this deal."

"Talk's cheap!" the gambler flashed. "But not even you can talk a man like Calem Ware to death. It has to be a gun that won't miss."

"You said that Dingo wouldn't miss."

"A gambler knows that even a cold deck can go screwy. It happened that way. It won't again."

"Since you're here, there's something I want you to see." The pudgy hands opened a desk drawer, pulled out a folded paper. "It's from the North American Smelter people; they're accepting our proposal. I closed the deal for the land yesterday. We

paid eight dollars an acre for two thousand acres along the railroad right of way. North American is willing to lease it as a smelter site at twenty-thousand a year as soon as the deal is closed with Asaph. He'll have no reason to back out. They'll pay him as much for his ore, and he'll not have to ship it six hundred miles. Medicine Bend will be booming by this time next year. The mines will really open up. I've got options on every acre of land Asaph doesn't own, and mineral rights to some he does. All without him guessing a thing."

"You think he'll make trouble?"

"For his own brother?" Dorry's theatrical laughter rang out. "He'll burn in hellfire, but he won't say anything. He's a rich man, and this will make him richer. But for once somebody beat him at his own game. All that remains is to sew up Medicine Bend. When word of this gets out, there won't be a lot for sale within five miles of the railroad. We've bought as far as we can without getting some of Asaph's holdings. He won't sell without a reason—and it has to be a damned good one. As soon as North American approaches him he'll smell a rat. We've got to freeze him out before then."

"How much time have we got?" Cody's eyes were narrow slits. "My God, this is big, Dorry. I can see it now. I knew what you spouted out; I knew it was good, but now I see it clear for the first time."

"Then you realize how much you've risked in these damn-fool attempts on Calem's life. You can't take a chance; none at all. You can't drive Calem away. I've sounded him out. He's gone as far as he will go. He's gambling he'll outlive the wildness of this town. And the way it stands, he'll win."

"Like hell!" Clark snarled. "Not even if I have to kill him myself!"

Dorry's fat fingers danced on the desktop. He shrugged. "That's your end. I've swung the business deals. Between us we've sunk every dollar we own into this thing. The smelter will pay that back a hundred times over, but the men who own Medicine Bend will make a fortune every year. But the town has to be wide open. We'll have a percentage of every dirty pie in it. The cattle age has come and gone in this territory. Asaph's cattle are starving; he'll have to cut

his herds in size. His mines are doing well; but shipping six-hundred miles eats away most of his profit. With a smelter here we'll get ore shipments for three hundred miles in every direction. And it's not like a trailtown to live a few years and die. The mines are rich, and show signs of lasting. There'll always be mining in this territory. The town will last. You understand that? But fortunes are not made legitimately; every brothel, every gambling hall and saloon, we'll take our share from them. In two years we'll be rich men; in ten we'll own a third of the national wealth. That's not a guess, it's a fact. Silver, gold, and most important, copper. We'll own the mines, the town, the shipping point, the smelter. We can't fail. And one man is not going to stop us."

Clark nodded, slowly. "There's always some risk, Dorry, that a man has to take if he expects to win. There isn't a man in Medicine Bend—probably in the territory—who's stand a chance against Ware."

Dean's cloudy eyes seemed to clear. His fatuous smile creased his lips. "How about out of the territory, Cody?"

"There's maybe a dozen men who are Ware's equal with a gun still living. John Wesley Hardin, that Bonney kid in New Mexico, Wyatt Earp, Bat Masterson. Harley Baskam of San Antonio is probably the greatest of them all. I could name maybe six more who would stand a chance against Calem Ware."

"No need to, Cody." A smug look fixed to Dean's fat face. "I've sent for Harley Baskam. He'll be here this week. He's the only man alive who ever faced Calem Ware down; probably the only living thing that Ware fears. He told me once that he stayed in his hotel room in San Antonio the night after he killed Ben Wryson because he knew that Harley Baskam would kill him on sight. I've bought Baskam's gun, but the price will be steep. He'll want a cut unless we can handle him."

"Harley Baskam!" Cody Clark breathed the name with something akin to awe. "The fastest man with a gun who ever lived. Twenty-six known dead men behind him." He frowned. "I don't know, Dorry. But it would be worth it to get Calem out of the way."

V

CALEM WARE was ushering a pair of drunks to the hoosegow when a surrey went past. Calem saw a man and a woman, leaning back in it, as if not wanting to be seen. It was Dorry Dean's surrey, for he recognized the two matched bays. Dorry and Taleen? Calem's mouth drew down viciously, and the miner, looking back, hurriedly increased his pace.

The woman pressed her shoulders back into the horse-hair stuffed seat, pulled her face down, despite the veil that covered it. The tar-barrels in front of the New Frontier made the street almost as bright as day.

"Did you have to drive down Texas Street?" she demanded, irritably.

The man turned his head. "What are you afraid of, Cora? Calem hasn't the eyes of a cat, you know. Even if he did have, that veil would keep your secret."

"I'm not so sure," the woman returned, quickly. "Cody, this is madness. You go too far."

"Do I?" His smile widened. "But then it's a gambler's job to take chances."

"But not mine, I assure you! Sometimes, Cody, I think you're quite mad!"

"Maybe I am, Cora—at least about you." He stretched forth a hand, gripped hers. For a moment she pulled back, then let her hand remain in his grasp.

"We have to wait. It won't be much longer, I promise you that. I have a deal working—"

"Always a deal. And always they don't pan out." Her voice was bitter. "What's the use, Cody? There is nothing for us in the future. Sometimes—sometimes—"

When she stopped, he tensed. "Sometimes—what? You feel like killing him—that's what you meant to say, isn't it? Isn't it?"

"Is that what you want me to do, Cody?"

For a moment he was silent, then his hand gripped hers again. "Of course not, Cora. What sort of a beginning would that make for us? We've got to have a chance to make it on our own, in the right way. That's what I'm fighting for."

"If I could believe you, Cody. If only I could believe you!" Her hand was tight, cutting into his. "I'd kill him, Cody, if

there were no other way. I swear that to you now. If there's no other way, I'll kill him to come to you."

SHE kissed him passionately, then slipped out of the surrey in front of her mansion. He heard her light step on the gravel path, then a door opened and closed softly. He urged the team on. In the fitful yellow glow that came from the lighted window he passed, his face was saturnine, mocking. His hand came up, rubbed at his lips, then his chuckling laughter came, and he slapped the reins to urge the team into a trot.

Twenty minutes later, he turned the team into a tree-lined lane that led off to the north. The lights of a house shone out, and he pulled up in the yard. The ranch was small, the fencing in a sad state, and the clapboard shack off the plumb by two feet. It seemed to bend, to thrust a shoulder into the mountain winds that perpetually cascaded down against it. Cody Clark sat still a moment, until the door opened, and a woman's figure was outlined. Then he climbed down, slowly.

The woman called out, cautiously, "Who's there?" As she backed from the door, it was plain she was soon to have a baby.

"Cody Clark, Mrs. Brion," Cody called out. "I heard that Dooley was in town, and I wanted to see you."

"I 'spose it's all right," the woman said. "Get down an' come in."

The gambler came into the room, blinked in the fitful light of a lamp set on a battered deal table. Two moth-eaten navajo rugs, and a home-made table and bench completed the furnishings of the house. Cody cleared his throat, pulled a leather sack from his coat. It jingled metallically as he set it down on the table.

"We took up a collection, Mrs. Brion. Dooley's kind of crazy, sometimes—but we figured you ought to have it. You can hide it from him. The kids—"

She rubbed her hands nervously on her worn housedress, looked nervously at the door.

"God knows I kin use anythin' I kin get!" she said, intently. "They ain't never had no shoes, an' with Dingo gone, an' the new one a-comin'—" She closed her eyes, and tiny crystal drops formed beneath her

brown-skinned lids. "Only Dooley is plumb unreasonable, mister. He'd see yuh daid afore he'd let me—"

"Dooley doesn't have to know," Cody said, quickly. "I heard Dingo bragging you came from good folks back in Minnesota. There's more than five hundred dollars in that bag. That's a lot of money."

"Five—hundred—dollars," she breathed the words, slowly. "I don't even know how much that is, it don't mean nothin', jist words. But money will buy things; shoes for the kids, an' maybe a dress—" her lips pressed together, and she brought her hands out, slowly. They quivered as they touched the bag of money, and she drew them back, slowly. Then, abruptly, she picked up the leather bag, tucked it into her dress. "I'll keep it, mister! I don't care if Dooley kills me, I'm gonna keep it!"

Cody's smile flickered over his face. He backed towards the door, only to stop short at the sound of heavy boots on the frame porch beyond. The door burst inward, and Dooley Brion filled the doorway. His sloping shoulders touched each side, and his head was bent to miss the beam. His scarred face was twisted, his eyes moving from side to side.

"Who's rig is that outside?" he demanded. Then he saw Cody. The gambler's hand slipped inside his coat, and he backed hurriedly away.

The giant stood there, blinking in the light. He looked from Cody to the woman, then back again. Stupidity marred his face only for a moment, then his eyes narrowed.

"You fetched her the money!" he roared. "By God, you fetched her the money!"

He moved forward, and Cody's hand came out with a gun. His face was beaded with sweat. "Stand back, damn you!" he yelled. "I'll kill you, Dooley, if you try to lay a hand on me."

The giant wavered uncertainly. The woman stood very still, her strained face flushed. "Give him back the money!" Dooley thundered. "Give the dirty money back to him!"

The woman held still, then slowly straightened. Her worn face set in a mask of stone. She closed her eyes. "I won't do it, Dooley! I'm gonna keep it. I got money; money for the kids, money for me. Yuh

cain't take it away from me. I'd—I'd see yuh daid first!"

Dooley stared at her, as if seeing her wholly for the first time. His eyes blinked. Then he swung around. He started for Cody, and the gambler's gun came up, quickly. He licked at his lips.

"Use your head, Dooley!" he yelled. "I don't want to kill you, and you don't want to kill me. It wasn't my idea, you know that. I was told to bring the money out here. I was told to bring it out here when you weren't home. I was just doing what I was told to do."

The giant paused, face working. "Who told you? Who told you?"

Cody didn't answer. The woman's frightened face was staring at him. Then Dooley stepped back, slowly, as if struck full in the face.

"I know. I know, by God! It was Ware—Calem Ware. Killin' Dingo wasn't enough—ain't nothin' enough for a murderin' snake like Ware—always packin' guns, always walkin' big, an' dead men at his feet." He swung to one side, and suddenly drove his fist against one wall. The shack trembled to the blow, and Dooley stared down at his fist, where a thin trickle of blood ran down, to drip onto the board floor. Then he swung about, ponderously, almost dove through the door, and was gone.

"DO YOU know what the hell is goin' on in Medicine Bend, Calem? I'll be damned if I do! But I'm gittin' me a hunch." It was Doc Wynn talkin' as he slowly sipped some of the marshal's whiskey.

"What do you mean, Doc?"

"Jist what I say! By gum. I know you always said this ain't cattle country, an' I reckon it's beginnin' to shape up like you maintained. But there'll always be some cattle industry here, and the mines are not playing out. Gold was never much here, an' silver's droppin'. But copper—you've heard the rumors, I know. But it's more than just rumor. I ran into a drummer from Philadelphia last week an' he let it be spilled that North American is putting a smelter here in Medicine Bend. You know what that means, Calem? Medicine Bend is going to boom again—and somebody's out for the gravy."

Calem frowned. "You sure of that, Doc?"

"Hell, yes! But that ain't the half of it. There's a squeeze-play bein' made, with Asaph Dean in the middle gettin' the hardest squeeze. He's goin' to be froze out, trimmed down to size. The man who runs Medicine Bend, the railroads and the smelter and the shipping yards, can just about swing it. You follow me?"

Calem nodded. "That's a big order, Doc. It doesn't follow that all hell will bust loose, just because there's a boom coming."

"That's the way it looks, Calem, but take a squint at it from the other side. Supposin'—jist supposin', now—there's a bigwig ranny in Medicine Bend with ideas. He knows about the copper strike; he's got the assayers' reports, and he's probably latched onto every mineral right he can grab. There'll be a syndicate to work the mines if Asaph Dean goes under. And who would boss that syndicate? The man who controls the shipping and the smelting. Now if this same ranny was smart, he'd buy every vacant lot in town; he'd get every site possible for the smelter sewed up; North American would have to come to him, and he could make it tough. It's a big thing, and it'll last, Calem. It isn't like a gold strike where the fields play out. These mountains are full of copper; with enough silver and gold ore thrown in to make it a bonanza. So next thing, he'd make a play to take over the town—he'd get it comin' an' goin'—you see that? Every saloon, every brothel, every gamblin' hell in the town, would pay off to him. But the town has to be run wide-open and kept wide-open. And once he grabbed control, this ranny'd find it easy to do just that."

"Who you got in mind, Doc?"

Doc Wynn shook his head, quickly. "That's the hell of it, Calem. Even if I knew, I wouldn't say." He stood up. "But I wanted you to know the way I saw it. Maybe it won't do any good. Maybe it will. You got a way of strikin' hard an' unexpected-like. That's one thing about a man like you—as long as you can pull a trigger, you got a chance, no matter how well-stacked the game might be against you." He walked slowly to the door. "By the way, Dorry Dean's got a new gal singer." His watery eyes blinked. "Funny thing, she

asked me about you—what you were like, how you were—things like that. It ain't no secret, I reckon, that Dorry's gone on her. Reckon he's all primed for the double harness. But I was thinkin' maybe you'd like to catch her act. She's singin' tonight."

"I'll be there."

"And, Calem—" Doc Wynn's face twisted wryly. "There's talk that Cody Clark's layin' out hard cash for no-good land."

THE drummer before Cody Clark's *New Frontier Saloon* was pounding away with undiminished energy, and the tar-barrels were flaming high. Across the street, the Opera House was alight, and he saw Dorry Dean, watching him, a slight smile on his round face. He waved one pudgy hand. Calem returned the salute. Then a horseman rode up, and swung down. He looped the reins of his mount over the hitchrail, ducked under it. It was Cody Clark, and his dark face was smiling.

"Howdy, Calem."

The marshal nodded. "Hello, Cody. Been riding?"

"Sure thing." Clark hesitated. Then laughed. "I took the money we collected out to Mrs. Brion's. She took it."

"Good."

"I wouldn't be too sure about that." Cody seemed wound tight, his voice a ringing sound. "Dooley showed up."

It struck at Calem suddenly. He recognized it as fear, and shrugged it away. "But she kept the money?"

"She kept it. Dooley started to raise hell. Then he tore out of there like a bat out of hell. He is crazy as a bedbug, Calem. You know he thinks it was your idea."

"It was," Calem answered, shortly. "I'll take that drink now."

Cody led the way inside. The *New Frontier* was brightly lighted. It was clouded, but the mob was orderly, and not too loud. Men beat a steady path up the stairs to the gambling hall.

Doctor Amos Wynn was at the bar, and he saw them coming. He raised his arm.

Calem moved in beside him. Doc Wynn closed one eye, slowly. "Young Gregg Dean's here. Drunk as a coot, Calem," he said.

Cody Clark grimaced. "The drunken pup, he's going to raise too much hell one of these days."

Before the bartender came up to them, a loud yell sounded, and men backed swiftly away. Calem spun about, hand brushing his coat aside. He saw Gregg Dean at the end of the bar, facing Calem. Before him stood a short, bantam-legged cowhand. Red hair sprang out from under the battered Stetson, and he swore loudly. Gregg's face was red, his eyes bleary with drink.

"I ain't drinkin' alongside no lousy Texas sheep herder!" Gregg yelled.

"Why, yuh no-good, fancy-pants dude—"

Gregg's fist swung viciously. It caught the smaller man's jaw, and he went down. Instantly Gregg's hand darted inside his coat.

"Hold it, Gregg!" Calem shouted. He strode forward. The cowhand was out cold.

Gregg was staring at Calem. His hand was frozen inside his coat. His face was strained. His eyes moved to Calem's right hand, swinging at his side. He licked his lips. His face went pale.

"Don't try it, Gregg!" Calem warned, softly. "I'll kill you if you do."

For a moment the tableau held; the bright lights marked every face, every winding wreath of smoke against the ornate ceiling. Young Dean was bow-taut, bent backward; Calem alone was relaxed, seeming at ease.

Then Gregg Dean's face worked. His eyes clouded. He seemed to sway. His hand dropped from inside his coat. "You want it that way, damn you!" he snarled. "But I won't play another man's game—especially that of a mankiller like you!"

Calem ignored him. The cowboy was sitting up, staring about wildly. His pard had his arm under his shoulder, helping him to his feet.

"You all right, fellow?"

"Huh? Aw, hell, shore 'nuff. I been socked afore. That damned shorthorn—"

"Shut up, Curly," his pard cut him off. "It's Calem Ware." He faced the marshal. "We'll be goin' quiet-like, Marshal."

Calem shook his head. "No need to, son. Young Dean's leaving."

"The hell you say!" Gregg Dean's shocked face stared at Calem.

"The hell I say. I've put up with all I

intend to, Gregg. Next time it won't be the pokey for a night. You get the hell out of town, and stay out until you're sober. I'll close up the next joint that sells you a drink. You hear that, Cody?"

Clark moved up, slowly. His face was red, flushed. He nodded. "You heard him, Gregg. Go home."

"Why, you yellow punk!" Gregg Dean stared around. He saw men look away from him, disgust on their faces. He spun back to Ware. "You—you damn killer! You've got this town buffaloed." He spun about, crashed through the crowd, and was gone.

"And that, is very much *that*!" Doc Wynn grimaced. "Let's go to the Opry House."

THEY left the *New Frontier*, crossed the street, Dorry Dean was standing on the new cement sidewalk before the red brick structure. He nodded as they came up.

"Heard the ruckus. Wondered if you'd make it, Calem." He grinned. "Go on in, Doc. It's on me. I want to speak to Calem here, a minute. We'll join you."

Doc Wynn glanced at both of them, then nodded, and went inside. Dorry nodded towards the far side of the building. "Over here, Calem. Only take a minute." Calem followed him. Dorry's yellow eyes were smoky, unreadable. His face was jovial, the perpetual smile in place, but somehow unreal. "Taleen told me," he said, simply. "I wanted you to know my side of it. I didn't know before, Calem."

"That's all right," Ware answered. Why couldn't he hate this man before him? He felt nothing, no resentment, nothing. "It's been over between us for ten years."

"You're sure of that, Calem?"

He wasn't sure. It was a lie. But he couldn't say that. It wasn't Dorry's fault; it wasn't anyone's fault, unless it was his.

Dorry took his silence for a reply. "I'm glad of that, Calem," he said, quickly. "I didn't know how you'd feel—"

Nervousness marked Dorry's manner.

"She'd like to see you after the show, Calem," he went on. "You know how to get backstage. She wants to see you alone. After—after, if you want to see me, I'll be in my office."

Calem nodded. They went inside. The

opera house was jammed full. There were women, and children. It was a mark of the attainment of Medicine Bend. A four man orchestra was finishing a sprightly tune as they came in, entered a box to the right of the stage.

The backdrop was of lustrous white material, and against it the dark wood of a long piano stood out. A man in a dark dress suit was seated there, hands out before him. He nodded to the orchestra, and the music swelled. From the upper reaches of the balcony a white light burned down, caught by burnished reflectors, and magnified—and into that crescent of light stepped Taleen. Calem felt his breath drawn in. He had never seen her before, not like this, dagger-slim, vibrant, poised, striding gracefully across the stage, to bend gently to the tumultuous applause that rang out.

It wasn't a great voice, and yet it held that crude audience, held them and charmed them. It filled the opera house very well, and the upper reaches were beautiful. The thin white column of her throat was beautiful, and she sang as if every word had a special meaning for her.

Calem stood up. He felt cold. Doc Wynn was staring at him. He seemed half-blind as he stumbled out of the box. He had to go to her, and yet he would rather have faced a dozen men with drawn guns.

At the foot of the stairs he turned to go backstage, then paused. A man was running heavily across the carpeted foyer towards him. The final burst of applause was dying away in the audience beyond. The house lights were dimming, preparatory to the final acts. Then Dorry Dean came up, breathing hard, his fat face mottled with red.

"You better get across to the *New Frontier* in a hell of a hurry, Calem!" he called. "Dooley Brion's gone nuts. I heard he's killed Cody Clark, and that he's wrecking the whole damn place!"

VI

THE saloon was a shambles. The berserk giant had done a thorough job. Men crowded against the walls, lined the stairway.

Three men lay on the floor; two of them

groaning, squirming. The third lay very still, and Calem was shocked to recognize the battered face of Cody Clark. Dooley Brion had really worked him over. His face was a raw mass of bloody meat; but he was still alive, for Calem saw the rise and fall of his gayly flowered waistcoat.

Dooley Brion stood in front of the bar, a heavy chair in his hands, over his head, raised to be thrown against an unbroken panel of mirror behind the bar. He turned slowly as Calem came in. In the bright light of the lamps, his face was demoniac. The terrible swipe of the cougar's claws had done more than transform him into a monster in appearance; it had warped his mind as much. Insanity was marked in the crazy glare of his eyes, in the spasmodic twitching of his bloody-frothed lips. He saw Calem clearly, and a roar tore from his throat. The chair flew from his hands. He lowered his head.

"Stop it, Dooley!" Calem yelled. "I'll kill you sure!"

"Kill an' be damned to ye, ye murderin' scum!" Dooley screamed. He stopped, however, and stood there swaying, his eyes narrowing. He had worked off the first insane rage, and what held him now was more terrible. His great belly sagged, and his shoulders worked, up and down. His hands opened and closed, slowly. He wore no gun, his shirt was ripped half from his body, and it was clear the struggle had cost him some injuries. A cut was open on his hairy chest. Both hands were bloody.

"This is all fer ye, Calem Ware!" he said. He mouthed the words, and they were garbled, all but incoherent. "I warned ye—now ye'll pay fer it!" He took a step forward.

"That's far enough, Dooley!" Calem's gun was centered on the broad chest.

"I tol' ye afore ye couldn't drop me afore I could my hands on ye, Calem Ware. Now we'll see!"

His head came down, and his legs bent, driving him forward in a rush. Calem cocked the gun with his thumb—but did not fire. For the first time in his life his killing instinct failed him. There was no time to reason why, but he knew he could not kill this man as he had killed so many others. He pivoted to avoid the charge, and brought

his gun crashing down on the thick-curved mass of black hair. He felt the impact up his arm, saw the hair part, and blood spurt from the lacerated scalp. Dooley sagged, started down, then came up with devastating suddenness.

There was no time for a second blow with the gun; Dooley's fist exploded in Calem's face, sent him reeling back. His gun fell from his hand. He felt a wave of blackness welling into the room, and his hand went to his second gun—but Dooley was faster. His boot came up into Calem's groin, spilled him backward. His gun spun away. Calem was down, and heard the murderous thunder of Dooley Brion's iron-studded boots as he ran for him. He rolled desperately, avoided the deadly kick that would have splattered his brains on the wall of the *New Frontier*. Dooley's mad charge crashed him against the wall, and he staggered as he came off it, staggered and went to one knee. His head was bowed, and blood dripped into the ruin of his face.

Calem was on his feet. His guns were lost; his eyes swept the floors, but there was no time to find them. Dooley was coming for him, his great hands outstretched, curling into knotted fists as hard as old hickory.

"Now!" Dooley gasped out. "Now we'll fight my way, ye murderin' scum! No guns! no knives! Jist God-made fists. Prove ye're a man, Calem Ware. Stand up to me!"

Calem stepped in, brought his fists up through the awkward stance of the other. It was like slamming them against the solid trunk of an oak; but it stopped Dooley's advance, and his head jarred under the smashing impact of the blows, but his rage-crazed eyes did not fog over. Only a grin twisted his thick lips. Calem tried to step back, to block the blows he sensed were coming; numbing shocks ran up his forearms, and Dooley's fists crashed through his guard, smashed into his ribs.

Dooley's first blow stopped his forward movement, blasted the breath out of his lungs; the second spun him around, the third drove him back, falling face forward. His feet went out, and the grimy sawdust of the floor ground into his face. The wave of blackness was suddenly deluged with blood-red, and his lungs ached and burned.

Thunder; the pounding roar of it close,

nearing him. He rolled with all the desperation of a man facing certain death. His arms came up, and he caught the flying hobnailed boot, jerked it up. Dooley's kick, coupled with Calem's defensive movement, jerked his feet out from under him, and he went over backward. His head struck first, and the floor bounced to the crash of it. For long seconds, the two men lay with arm's reach of each other, Calem laboring for breath, Dooley with his eyes rolled up into his head, his mouth open, tongue lolling out.

Breath surged back into Calem's lungs, and the burn of it cleared his head. Panting, choking, he clambered to his feet to see Dooley Brion sitting up. The giant's face was drained of redness, his eyes narrowed, the fire gone from them. Laughter welled deep in his cavernous chest.

"By God!" he panted. "By God, this was worth comin' fer!"

Calem stepped in as Dooley came up to hands and knees. He drove his knee forward brutally, into the scarred face. Dooley's head snapped back. Blood gushed from his smashed nose; but his long arms reached out, jerked Calem back to the floor. For one instant Dooley's arms closed about Calem's middle—and it was the torturing binding of a metal band, clamping down. Then he smashed his elbows back, back into the battered face of the giant, and broke free. Dooley came up, warily now, arms swinging at his sides.

Calem shook his head, and paced back. Dooley's feet drove suddenly against the floor, and in a bull-like charge, he came at Calem. The marshal danced back, felt the bar strike his back, slid along it. Dooley came in, arms swinging. Calem avoided some of the blows, blocked others, and struck twice, heavily to Dooley's face. The blows were hard-driven, backed by the shoulders and weight of Ware, but they might as well not have landed for all the good they did. Calem ducked, bobbed and weaved, and got away. Dooley had stopped grinning. A gap in his hideous face marked where a tooth had once been.

"Stand up to me, damn you!" he cursed.

"Come and get me, Dooley!" Calem yelled back. The taunt drove the giant for-

ward in a charge that almost turned the trick. His shoulder caught Calem in the chest, and he flew back, almost going down. Dooley came at him again, and Calem bent, drove in his fist at the gigantic sagging belly. It was like striking an adobe wall; shock ran up his arm. The enormous belly was girded by layers of thick, rubbery muscles with little give to them. Again Calem bent under Dooley's flailing fists, drove his fist in; the shock was less, and Dooley grunted, and his body bent to the force of the blow. Instantly Calem drove both fists into his face.

"You wanted to fight, damn you, Dooley!" he raged. "Now come and get it!"

Dooley's cursing reply was unintelligible. But he came at a lumbering run. His eyes were frantic; his strength was failing him, and he could not breathe. His belly seemed smashed against his backbone, and rivers of fire raged through his battered face. He tried to avoid the terrible left hand that sank wrist-deep into his bruised belly, but could not. His breath came out in a swoosh, and Calem struck again and again, driving the giant through the doors and into the street.

Then men were about him, staring at him, unbelievably, and staring down at Doley Brion as if they could not believe what they saw.

TALEEN WARE left the stage almost blindly, finding it necessary to put a hand out to steady herself; and the emotion in her breast was stronger, more poignant than she had ever believed herself capable of. The initial hurt of leaving Calem, ten years ago, had been a shock from which she had never recovered; regrets, and vain wishfulness filled her from time to time, but as the years slipped past, and her career mounted, she found it easier to forget—to remember just the fine things they had shared—until the day she had met Calem in Medicine Bend. She shook her head, slowly.

There came a tapping at the dressing room door, and she stiffened. Her pulse beat crazily in her throat. *Calem! Calem! I love you still!* Almost, almost she betrayed herself, then caught the side of the chaise longue, and gripped it with all her strength. When she moved to the door, she was

outwardly calm, her face set, emotionless. But it was not Calem who stood there, but a skinny-shanked boy who grinned at her.

"Hell, ma'am, ye're missin' a great fight! Calem Ware's tanglin' with Dooley Brion who jist wrecked the whole danged she-bang at the *New Frontier*—bare knuckles, an' nothin' barred. There ain't been a fight like this in a 'coon's age!"

She felt her knees sag as her strength left her, and clung to the door to hold herself up. Calem, fighting again, perhaps being hurt—

The boy was gone, and the backstage crew, the performers, were hurrying out into the alleyway, pressing toward the street beyond. Suddenly she was running; she could not stop it. She was among the others, pressing through them, her heart beating madly.

"Oh, Calem, Calem!" she whispered.

From the upstairs window of his offices, Dorry Dean had a fine view of the street, and of the final stages of the fight. He knelt in the fanlight, face drawn, hungry, his pudgy hands gripping his short-barrelled gun. Twice he brought it up, centered it on Calem Ware's broad back, only to drop the gun into his lap.

A woman sprang through the crowd, out into the street, to drop beside Calem. It was Taleen, and she was crying as she kissed Calem Ware's bloody, battered face—

For an instant, rage burned inside Dorry Dean, a rage like none he had ever known; in that instant he would have killed Calem Ware in cold blood, but the woman stood between him and the fallen man. And as swiftly as it had come, it was dispelled. He hurried down the stairs. He fought his way through the crowd to her side, and his hand gripped her arm.

"It's all right, Taleen. Calem's won. He'll be all right."

She stared up at him, and tears streaked her face. He had never seen her cry before, and but seldom did she laugh. He had sensed a frigidity within her, and had welcomed it as a counterpart of his own hard core. Now that illusion was dispelled; Taleen was all woman, all beautiful woman, and insanely, crazily, he wanted her all the more because of it.

"Oh, Dorry, Dorry, he's hurt—"

"Nonsense. Nothing but a bullet between the eyes will ever kill Calem Ware. You'd better get back. I'll see that he's taken care of. Here's Doc Wynn now."

Taleen bent; her lips touched Calem's closed eyes, her hands touched his face, gently. Then she nodded, stood up. Dorry watched her go, then bent, brought Calem up to a sitting position. Doc Wynn knelt beside him.

"Man, oh man! Did ye ever see sich a scrap, Dorry? I'm askin' ye, man, did ye ever see sich a whale of a scrap? Big Dooley'll never be the same. Ah, Calem me lad! There ye are, lad. Easy does it!"

Calem's eyes opened. They cleared almost instantly. He stared about, saw the prostrate Dooley Brion—and suddenly grinned.

"I didn't think it could be done!" he whispered, hoarsely.

A man came out of the saloon, packing Calem's guns. He handed them to him, cautiously. "Nice job, Marshal!"

"Thanks." Calem got to his feet. "Better see to Dooley, Doc. I've got to take him in. Think he can be moved?"

Doc Wynn shook his head, and knelt beside the prostrate Dooley. For a moment Calem stared about him, and Dorry caught the gesture; like the marshal was looking for something—or someone.

"Funny thing, Dorry," he said. "I thought, for a minute there, that Taleen was here—"

"No," Dorry lied, quickly. "I hope to God she didn't see it, Calem, for your sake. You know how she feels about your fighting—"

Dooley Brion was sitting up, shaking his head. His face was a dust and blood mask. Calem came up. "See if he can walk. Here, two of you men, take hold of him."

They half-carried Dooley toward the jail, Doc Wynn bustling along beside them, Calem Ware stalking stiffly behind. Dorry watched them go, then turned back to the Opera House.

He was staring down at the street through the fan-shaped windows when Cody Clark came out of the *New Frontier*. There was a bandage about the gambler's head, and his stride was none too steady. He paused for a moment, and Dorry felt his dark eyes probing up at the windows of the opera house.

Then Cody crossed the street, and a few moments later his knock sounded on the office door.

"Come in, Cody," Dorry called. The gambler came in, closed the door behind him. There were massive bruises on his face, and his dark skin seemed sallow in the lamplight. He dropped into a chair before the broad desk, stretched his feet out. His face was sullen.

"Go ahead, damn you, say it!"

"I will, Cody, I will!" Dorry answered sharply. "You're a damn idiotic fool—and close to being a dead one to boot. No need of my saying any more. If I'd known the crazy play you were going to make—"

"You wouldn't have done a damned thing!" Cody cut it. "I'm sick of your belly-wash, Dorry. Talk, talk—I don't see you trying anything in the open. I thought that Dooley'd try something better than a damned fool trick like that. It's a wonder the marshal didn't cold-cock him right off the bat."

"And you didn't think he'd go for you first, did you, Cody? That's your biggest mistake. But it isn't irrevocable."

Cody Clark sat up. "The hell you say! What you got in mind?"

"I told you this morning. I just got word. Harley Baskam's in town. He rode in on the four-forty from K. C. I sent for him. He'll be here in a few minutes. I want you to stay."

A smile bent Cody's bruised mouth. "I wouldn't miss it!"

"Harley Baskam," Dorry repeated, and licked his lips. His face was frowning. He swung his swivel chair about, to stare down into the street once more. "Did you ever get scared, Cody? Scared of the thing you were doing?" He grew aware of the gambler's stare, then laughed. Theatrical laughter, strangely unconvincing. "Pay off's coming, Cody—for Medicine Bend, and you and me—and the last pay off for Calem Ware. I wonder if he can sense that, sense that time's running out for him?"

Silence fell between them. Minutes passed. Then Clark stiffened, pointed down. "Look, there's Calem—back on the street."

The tall, slender figure of the marshal was walking stiffly down the street on the

opposite side from them. The lighted saloon fronts, the flaming tar-barrels, made the street almost as light as day. Calem strode on, completing his rounds, as if nothing had happened. And men nodded to him, stepped to one side and stared after him as he passed.

"A living legend, Cody," Dorry said, softly. "Can any man really kill a legend?"

"To hell with that. A slug in his head will drop him as quick as any other man, and Harley Baskam's done it before now to better men than Calem Ware."

"I wonder," Dorry replied, slowly.

Calem was just opposite them. A man stepped out of the *New Frontier*. He was short, slim of build, wearing a dark broad-cloth suit, and a black bowler hat. But his chest bulked suspiciously thick, and it was any man's guess he carried twin revolvers slung from his shoulders. A short, thick black beard hit his mouth and chin. His teeth flashed in a smile as he saw Calem Ware, and he spoke. They couldn't hear the words, but they could see Calem's reaction.

"Look at that!" Cody hissed, for Calem's back had gone rigid, and his stride faltered, broke. Then the bearded man in the bowler hat, still grinning, stepped in front of him, almost contemptuously, and crossed the street toward the opera house.

"That's Harley Baskam," Dorry said, softly, but Cody Clark wasn't listening.

He was perched on the edge of his chair, his face twisted with hatred. He was staring at the tall figure of the marshal as he resumed his steady walk down the street. "Dorry!" Cody whispered. "Did you see Calem's face—did you see his face?" His voice was gloating. He laughed, harshly. "There goes your legend—there goes your 'fighting marshal'—and he's scared—so scared his legs are shaking! One man faces him on the street, and he's afraid of him. It's written all over him. I never thought I'd live to see a thing like this! It makes everything worthwhile, Dorry—everything!"

A step sounded outside the door; a hand rapped softly. Dorry called out, "Come in!" The door opened, and a man stepped inside. It was Harley Baskam of San Antonio, and he was laughing softly, as if at a joke only he could understand.

6—TWO WESTERN BOOKS—Spring

VII

WHEN Calem awoke Friday morning, the soreness of his body had reached its peak. For a moment he closed his eyes, stretched cautiously, to ease the stiffness. Sleep tugged at him, then a thought brought him upright in the bed, only to groan aloud at the pain of his right hand. It was swollen nearly double its normal size; Doc Wynn was sure there were no bones broken, but just the same it would be weeks before he could use the hand in the accustomed manner. He stood up. He doused his head in cold water, dried himself with a towel.

His eyes caught the folded note on the dresser, and his frown returned. He had received it the night before at his office. It was from Taleen. She wanted to see him this morning, suggested they drive out of the town a ways.

After breakfast he wheeled a light buggy out of the livery stable and down Texas Street. He drove slowly, aware of people looking at him. He saw Taleen, standing in front of her hotel; she was looking up the street toward him, and she smiled as he pulled up. He climbed down. They didn't speak as he helped her into the buggy, then climbed in himself. He urged the horse on, out of town, and the silence lasted for some ten minutes.

He pulled up at the top of the rise, most of the valley visible before them, stretching out eastward into the Great Plains. Behind them the mountains shot up to an alarming height, blue-black against the cobalt of the sky.

Taleen stared off into the blue distance for a long moment, then dropped her head. "I'm sorry it has to end this way, Calem," she said. "But when it really ended ten years ago, didn't it?"

"I guess it did. For you, anyway."

"For me." She was looking at him. Her face was pale. Her eyes were hazel, almost brown they were so dark. For the first time he realized her ash-blond hair was streaked with silver. It was becoming, with the firm fullness of her face to set it off.

"I never really expected to find you again, so it won't hurt so much this time," he said. "Sometimes a man builds dreams in his head when he knows they'll never come

true. You've always been a part of my dreams, Taleen. I guess you always will be a part of them."

"There are other women, Calem."

"Not for me."

"You don't—you can't mean that. There are women who can understand you, accept you for what you are. I couldn't do that ten years ago—and I can't do it now. Every time you walked the street with a silver badge on your vest, I died a little. I let you go each morning, not ever sure, not even once, I'd ever see you alive again. That killed something inside me, Calem. I couldn't stand it again. I saw you in the streets, fighting, the other night—I saw your face—bloody, beaten—" Her hands came, made a little gesture, as if she wanted to touch the bruises on his face, then dropped once more to her lap.

"You *were* there!" Calem frowned, suddenly. "I thought I felt you near, holding me. But when I could sit up you were gone—"

She shook her head, slowly, her hands clenched. "Calem, you can't understand how it has been. I've read of you—of terrible things you've done—every paper I've seen, I've expected to read about you dying, out here, somewhere—"

"No!" The word was harsh. "It's changing, Taleen. Can't you see that? It will be different—"

"Perhaps, Calem, but too late for us." She was staring away from him, toward the harsh, cubic outlines of the town. The shrill whistle of the freight train, pulling out, sounded clearly. "It isn't fair, either to you or me, to go on like this." She put her hand up to her throat, freed something there. Then she put her hand out to him. He saw the thin gold band, and his back stiffened.

"You've decided then?"

"I've decided, Calem. I'm returning to Chicago. I'll get a divorce there, quietly. I wanted to see you today to tell you good bye, Calem!"

He nodded. He took the ring blindly, thrust it into his vest-pocket. "I guess that does it, then. What about Dorry?"

"I don't know, yet, Calem. I'm not sure. If I married Dorry, I would live out here, close to you. I couldn't help seeing you,

hearing about you—"

Calem took a deep breath, picked up the reins. They drove back in the same silence that had held them on the way from town. He stopped at the hotel, got down. For a moment, as he held her arms as she climbed down, she was close to him, and he caught the fragrance of her perfume. It would haunt him. Then she turned, slowly. She was smiling, holding out her hand.

"Good bye, Calem!" she whispered.

He lifted his hat, watched her walk into the hotel. Then he climbed back into the buggy, drove it up the street. He left it at the livery stable. He felt sick; a queer blindness seemed to assail him. He walked swiftly, anxious to be alone, to close his eyes, to fight back the loneliness and sense of loss that struck at him. He walked the length of Texas Street, turned blindly into the alleyway that led to the rear of the City Hall and his office.

He didn't notice when Juan Tobrez stepped from a darkened doorway behind him, the ugly glint of naked steel in his clenched fist. . . .

CODY CLARK was a man of some sensibility, and very little fear, yet he viewed the summons from Asaph Dean with some trepidation. He held the note in his hand, and slowly crumpled it, his face frowningly intent. There had been no indication of what Dean had in mind, just the blunt message, *I want to see you*. Cody tossed the note onto his desk, and stood up.

The only thing that troubled him was the knowledge that a woman like Cora Dean sometimes played the fool in more ways than one. If she had told Asaph of her affair with Clark, taunted him with it—Cody's frown deepened. He thrust his hand inside his perfect-fitting coat, felt the cold hardness of the butt of the small revolver he carried. Then he smiled. Asaph Dean's widow would be worth millions—now there was a thought to mull over. He crossed to the door.

Asaph Dean's mansion reposed atop a knoll some three miles west of town, a curious mixture of ornate and simple architecture. A colored servant took his horse at the broad front stoop, and Cody went up

the steps quickly. The door opened before he knocked. Asaph Dean was frowning at him. "Morning, Cody," he grunted. "I see you got here early."

The bigger man led the way down a gloomy hall, through polished doors into a study. Dean waved him to a chair, pulled up a second.

"Two things I want to talk to you about, Cody," Dean said, slowly lighting a cigar. "I heard from North American yesterday. They're coming into Medicine Bend. They've leased land for a smelter, and construction will begin early this fall. The man they got that land from is you."

Cody blinked. Then nodded. "That's right. I didn't think it would be any secret to you."

"Ahuh. Well, that doesn't matter. I wanted the smelter on my own terms. But you jumped the gun. I've never held that against a man, Cody. It's your game, but you won't find it as simple as you thought. I won't be squeezed out; I'll fight back. But you expected that; no doubt have prepared for it. I just wanted you to know."

Cody smiled, slowly. "I guess we know where we stand." He stood up.

"Sit down, Cody. I'm not through yet." Asaph Dean's face was suddenly harsh as he leaned forward in his chair. "Clark, I'm not going to mince words with you. I've fought for every dime I own, and I know how to take care of myself against men like you. Gregg came home drunk last night; the boy's no good, wild. He talked about you and Cora."

It came suddenly. Clark's legs bent, and he dropped back into his chair. He forced a laugh to his lips, regretted it when he caught the hollow sound of it. Tiny beads of sweat made a film over his face.

"That's crazy, Dean," he said.

"That was my own reaction at first, Cody." His mouth tightened. "But I know Cora, too. It may be true, and it may not. I'm not concerning myself with what may have passed between the two of you. But I'm troubling myself to give you a warning." He paused, blew smoke out, masking his face, but his eyes shone through. "Cody, I'm too old to call a man out, but I would if I have to. If you force me to do that, I'm going to take certain precautionary

measures. First, if you kill me, Cora will not get a dime of my money; second, before I leave this house, I'm going to make it known that ten thousand dollars in gold will be paid, no questions asked, to the man who kills you, whether I'm alive or dead. You understand what that means, Cody? I think you do. There are men who'd slit your throat for a hundredth of that sum." Asaph Dean stood up. "That's all. Now get out!"

Cody walked out. His face was blank, the livid marks of Dooley's fists standing out. Then slowly anger came, and his face reddened. He climbed back on his horse, and his spurs dug in viciously. Damn all women! He might have expected something like this to happen, and the hell of it was, Asaph Dean didn't bluff. If he made an offer like that—Cody felt a cold finger probe his back muscles. One thing was certain—Dean had to die, and awfully damned fast!

DOC WYNN was worried; he had waited for Calem Ware in his office for over an hour, but the marshal had not shown up. Doc Wynn left the office, stood outside for a moment, looking up and down, then tensed. He saw Calem turn into the alleyway—and he saw the dark shadow that slid out behind him.

"Look out, Calem!"

Calem lunged to one side; he caught a muffled curse in Spanish, then a man's arm shot out beside him, and steel grated on the red brick of the City Hall. Tiny sparks flew in the shadows, then Calem's left arm chopped down, and the barrel of his Smith and Wesson struck the assailant's arm. The knife dropped to the ground, the Mexican screeched, then sprang backward, fleeing for the mouth of the alley. Calem brought the gun up, but before he could fire, the fleeing man had rounded the corner of the alley into Texas Street.

Doc Wynn was staring at him. Calem spun around, and his long legs carried him at a run towards the sun-lightened street beyond. He came out in time to see the Mexican, a hundred yards away, racing towards the *New Frontier*. Calem brought the gun up, centered it on the running man's back, then shook his head, and lowered the muzzle a trifle. He had to take him alive, make

him talk! The thought was urgent. He sighted carefully—

And at that moment Cody Clark rode into the scene. He saw Calem—he saw the running figure of Juan Tobrez—he cursed, and his hand came out with his tiny revolver. It spoke three times; Juan's stride broke, and he fell, slid heavily into the dust. Cody reined in, smiling.

Calem came up, slowly. He still held his long-barreled gun.

"That one didn't get away, Calem," Cody said, quickly. "The louse hurt you? I saw the whole thing."

Calem shook his head. Doc Wynn came out of the alley, blinking and mopping his face with a kerchief. The marshal passed Cody, went to the fallen Mexican. Blood seeped into the dust of the street beneath him. Then Calem caught the faint pulse at the throat. Doc Wynn looked sharply at him. Calem shook his head the merest trifle. Then he stood up.

"You shot straight, Cody," he said. "He's dead."

"Good riddance," Cody grunted. "Guess I did the right thing, huh, Marshal?"

For a moment Calem's eyes narrowed, then nodded. "From your point of view, Cody, I guess you did."

"Meaning?" Cody straightened.

"Anything you like, Cody." Calem shrugged. "He's dead. I didn't want it that way. He might have talked, and I think we both might have been interested in what he had to say. I'm not going to hold you, Cody. Thanks for the help."

"Sure. Any time." Cody rode on. But his face was blank, his eyes thoughtful.

Doc Wynn was kneeling beside the fallen man. "Help me get him to your office, Calem."

Between the two of them, they got him down the alley. Men crowded in behind them, but Calem stopped. "Go on about your business," he ordered. "You've seen dead men before."

Inside, Doc Wynn peeled off his coat, rolled up his sleeves. "Get me some water, Calem. As much as you can get, better if its hot. Then I'll need some clean rags."

Calem hesitated. "Doc, is there a chance he'll live long enough to talk?"

Doc Wynn shook his head. "I don't know.

There's always a chance. Now, damn it, hurry up with that water."

CODY left his horse in front of the *New Frontier* and hurried across the street. There was no matinee on Friday, so the Opera House was closed. One of the small front doors was unlocked, and he pushed inside. He was breathing hard, and sweating freely. He cursed softly in the darkness of the building's interior, groped his way to the stairs, went up them slowly. At Dorry's office door he hesitated, then a voice called out.

"Come on in, Cody." It was Dorry. The gambler pushed the door open, walked in. Dorry's enormous sausage-shaped figure was a black outline against the brightness of the fan-shaped windows. To one side, a chair tilted back against a wall, his bowler hat over his eyes, sat Harley Baskam.

"Damn it, Dorry, the whole thing's exploding in our faces!"

Dorry's theatrical smile seemed wedged into place. Harley Baskam pushed his hat back from his eyes, and they glistened wetly.

"What's that?" he demanded. "What goes here, Dean?"

Dorry shook his shoulders in a shrug. "Cody's getting cold feet, I suspect."

"Cold feet, hell! I just killed Juan. He tried to sink a knife into Calem Ware's back but that damned medico interfered. I had to kill Juan to keep him from shooting off his mouth. But Calem's wise; I caught that the way he spoke."

"What kind of a stupid game is this?" Baskam let his chair down softly. "I thought you had all this pegged down."

"We have, Harley," Dorry put in, quickly. "You're excited, Cody. You think too much—and give the other fellow credit for guessing too much. Of course Calem's got a hunch about you. We expected that."

"'We' did, did we?" Cody snarled. "Well, maybe you expected that your hard-rock brother had stuck his long nose into things, too? You know where I been? Up to Asaph's house, and what he said wasn't easy to take. He savvies the raw-hiding we're giving him, and he as much as told me he's going to step on us."

Dorry stiffened momentarily, then as swiftly relaxed. "'Us?' He knows about me, Cody?"

Cody Clark stalked stiffly from one side to the other, then back. "How the hell do I know? But it's a cinch he knows damned well I'm not alone in this."

"That's true, Cody." Dorry closed his eyes, swung his chair about to face the window. He opened his eyes, stared out for a moment. When he swung back around, his face had changed, grown ugly. "I had a hunch about you. When Gregg got in trouble—old Hiram Hays blowing off about you and Cora—It makes sense, Cody. I didn't think you'd be such a fool!"

"I won't take that from you!" The gambler strained back.

"Won't you, Cody?" Dean was smiling, but his tawny eyes were yellow beads. "I think you will. You've been playing around with Cora. I didn't think you'd be crazy enough to try anything like that. But it's all right, Cody. It's all right. It isn't 'us' that Asaph warned. It's you, and you alone. I can guess what he said to you to make you run around in a fright wig. But get this straight, damn you! That's your affair—your lookout. It doesn't mean a damn thing to me."

They faced each other across the broad desk, Cody panting, his chest heaving as he fought for control. Then suddenly his right hand made a gesture toward his coat.

"Hold it, Cody!" Baskam was standing up. He held a long-barreled Colt in his hand. Cody froze; his face drained of color; his shoulders sagged.

Dorry sighed, heavily. His right hand lifted from his desk. He was holding a small double-barreled derringer. He thrust it back into the drawer of his desk.

"Thanks, Harley. You saved his life. It's best that way, of course."

"You're damned right it is!" the Texan snarled. "You act like a couple of coyotes sniffin' after some female dog. It don't make sense. You cut me into this game an' I mean to play it out!" He came across the room, and his right hand slipped the gun back under his coat, then lunged towards Cody's face. The blow rang out. "One more stupid play like that, Clark, an' I'll kill you." He laughed, softly. "The more I see of this setup, the better I like it. But I can't say the same thing about you two. I wonder if you've got sense enough to take what's being held out to you on a silver platter?"

"I think that's enough, Harley," Dorry cut in.

"Is it? I don't think so! I didn't come a-beggin'. You sent for me. For three days I've listened to you brag, an' thinkin' about the damned fool way you been playin' this game. You, Cody, goin' off half-cocked. First you hire a flash-in-the-pan like Dingo to drop a man like Calem Ware. There's a laugh for you! An' then this stupid greaser—killin' him was the only thing you could do, Cody, because if Calem had got his hands on him alive, he'd have made him spill his guts. An' wouldn't that be pretty? Calem Ware ain't no city policeman with a night stick; he's a frontier marshal, an' he's seen this kind of shandy pulled before. He'll let his gun do his talkin'. To hell with the law book rules. You'd last about as long as a snowflake in a boiler room." He stopped. His face was a mask of corruptness, steel-taut. "But that ain't the way it's goin' to be! I'm takin' over this town. My way. We'll drop Ware dead in Texas Street, an' then we'll settle down to the biggest pot of gravy any three men ever got to lick!"

"That's big talk, Harley." Dorry was smiling.

"An' I mean to back it up!" Baskam's back stiffened. "Startin' along about now!"

VIII

CODY CLARK was very, very drunk. He stood on the boardwalk in front of the *New Frontier* saloon, and the noise of the town flowed about him. He was grinning crookedly as he used a piece of red chalk on the blackboard.

"Who's betting?" he yelled. "I'm layin' it two to one Calem Ware gets his! Two to one that Harley Baskam downs our tin-badge totin' marshal!"

"You're drunk, damn you, Cody!" Cody straightened to peer down at the bewhiskered face of Doc Wynn. The tiny medico grunted again. "Isn't there enough trouble in this town without you makin' more?"

"To hell with you, you prantin' saw-bones!" Cody yelled. Men were gathered there, crowding the street, pressing into the saloon. The tar-barrels were flaming high, and the drummer in his gaudy uniform coat was banging crazily on his drum.

"Y'know why Baskam's here. Y'think it's a secret? Hah! He's come to pay his last respects to Calem Ware, that's why he's come!"

Doc Wynn stepped back as Cody leaned towards him belligerently, then a man moved past him. He was small, slim. His dark hair curled under the rim of his broad-rimmed hat.

"Shut up, Clark!" he hissed. "You talk too damned much."

Cody straightened as if the smaller man had slapped him across the face. "Aw, hell, I was just funnin'—"

"Then do it later." Harley Baskam turned slowly, surveying the mob. His face was taut, with lines of strain grooving his cheeks. His right hand moved nervously, smacking into his open felt hand. Men stepped around him, never brushed against him.

Doc Wynn backed up, but Baskam's voice stopped him. "I reckon you're a friend of Calem's," he said. The drawl of Texas was in his voice, slurring his r's. "So am I, mister, an' I got some business with him that's been put off long enough. If you see him, tell him I'm waiting for him."

The drum stopped when Baskam started to speak, and silence crept over the gathered men. Baskam's softly spoken words rang out clearly. Doc Wynn took a step backwards, then another. Then a hand caught him, held him.

"Never mind, Doc, I heard him." Calem stepped past Doc Wynn. His tall, slender figure was bent slightly forward, his damaged right hand hanging freely at his side. "Howdy, Harley!"

The gunfighter stiffened. Something akin to an electric shock seemed to ripple through his slight figure, and as suddenly he relaxed. He laughed.

"Hello, Calem. I see you remembered me."

"I remember you, Harley."

"Like you remember Ben Wryson, maybe?"

"Like that." Calem stopped within ten feet of the Texan. "Harley, there's a law in Medicine Bend we don't always enforce. It's about packin' guns on the street. It's left up to the marshal of this town when to enforce it. The time's now. I'm taking your guns."

Men moved back; it was like the silent

scythe of death had brushed them.

"No, Calem," Harley said, gently. "No man takes my guns."

"Then use them!" The challenge came, flat and hard. Calem tipped to one side, the right, and his left hand closed about the handle of his gun. But Baskam's movement was the slip of oiled springs. He bent forward, then back, and his gun was in his hand. The long barrel glinted in the light, and his single shot thundered before Calem's gun cleared its holster.

Calem stiffened. His hat was gone, torn from his head. Blood gushed over his thin, hawklike face, and he wavered, half-bent, then fell heavily. An audible hissing sigh escaped the lips of the gathered mob. Then Cody Clark's crazy laughter rang out, and Baskam stepped forward, his gun ready for the "make-sure" shot.

Doc Wynn sprang forward. His hawklike hands came up with Calem's gun. It was leveled. "Don't do it, Baskam!" the little man yelled. "You've done enough. He's dead!"

The gunfighter stopped in his tracks, his face working. His gun was lowered too far to bring it up before the nervous finger of Doc Wynn pulled the trigger. The chance was too long. Baskam stepped back.

"Okay, mister," he said, gently. "Have it your way. I've settled the score I had with Ware. But stay out of my way, I'm warning you."

Clark's laughter welled forth again. "The great 'Fighting Marshal' of Medicine Bend. The great Calem Ware!" He spat viciously. "All right men, the drinks are on the house. The town's wide open. It's been blowed wide open!"

Men flowed inside the saloon. The drummer boomed forth thunder. Yells and wild laughter rang out. A gun slammed lead into the sky, crazily. A horseman rode past, firing his gun. "Calem's dead! Calem Ware's dead!" His shouts echoed and rang out.

Then Doc Wynn was left along with the body of Calem. Tony Cabrillo, the barber, stepped up nervously. He bent forward.

"Doc, you-a mean what you-a say about shootin' this-a killer?"

Wynn's head came up. His eyes were wet. "You're damn tootin', Tony!" He swallowed with an effort. "Dammit, I must be

gettin' a cold. Help me get him off the street, Tony."

Tony bent to take Calem's feet, then sprang back with a startled cry. "But-a—Doc—he's a-no'—"

"I know it, Tony, damn you!" Doc Wynn growled. "That's why I meant what I told Baskam. Now let's get him out of here before somebody else discovers he's not dead!"

DOC WYNN summed the situation up quite well some years later. He said, "I never saw a town go to hell faster."

It was a situation, after all, that had been played out many times before in the West. Dodge City, Hays City, Amarillo, Central City, had all gone through the same epic transformation, but two things made the treeing of Medicine Bend notable. It was accomplished in perhaps the shortest period of time, and it was done by Harley Baskam.

What Baskam had first approached as a routine shooting assignment, had swiftly blossomed to startling proportions. He had a good thing in Medicine Bend, and Baskam was the man to take full advantage of it.

Of course there were certain problems to be faced, and Harley Baskam faced them in typical fashion, his booted left foot on the brass rail of the *New Frontier* saloon, his left hand pouring whiskey from a waiting bottle, and his right hand always within an inch of his black-handled Colt revolver.

Baskam nodded with some little satisfaction. The town was waiting for him to make his play, to see which way the wind would blow. Would another man step out for Calem Ware, or would Harley Baskam proceed to take over with a strong hand? Baskam enjoyed the sense of suspense as much as anyone, and was in no hurry. The evening was still young.

He poured a second glass of whiskey and looked around for Cody Clark. He spotted him at the far end of the room. The gambler was drunk; his eyes were glazed. Baskam walked towards him.

"Here's to the man who downed Calem Ware!" Clark shouted, drunkenly. Baskam knocked the glass from his hand.

"Get up, Cody. We got business."

Redness suffused Clark's face, slowly. "Who the hell y' talkin' to?"

"You." Baskam caught the front of the gambler's coat, surged back. Cody came up. Baskam slapped him hard across the mouth. "Sober up, damn you! We got things to do."

A crazy glare burned away the drink-glaze from Cody Clark's eyes, then as suddenly died away. He nodded. "You're right, damn you."

As he turned, stalked stiff-legged across the room, Baskam noted that men pulled away before him, gave him clear passage, and he felt a tingling along his spine. He felt good. He felt awful damned good!

Dorry was waiting for them in his office. He was standing in front of the window, staring down at the street. His smile was real, triumphant.

"You did it, Harley! By heck, you did it!"

"Yeah, but we're wastin' time. You know what's to be done. Let's get started. Cody's drunker'n a coot, but he's comin' if I have to drag him."

"Sure, sure." Dorry laughed. "This is it! This makes it good for the pot."

"But I'm in," Harley said, flatly. "You're not payin' me off an' forgettin' the whole thing. I'm takin' over." His eyes narrowed. "There'll be a three-way split. That understood?"

"Jus' a minnit—" Cody rubbed at his eyes.

"Shut up, Cody." Dorry moved around his desk. "One thing, Baskam. You won't last long alone. You savvy that. You need me as much as I need you. With that understood—we'll all of us live high on the hog. There's enough for a dozen men to grow fat on."

Baskam nodded. "Then that's settled. Now let's get goin'. They's a one o'clock curfew clamped on this town, an' we're goin' to rip it loose. But we got a few calls to make first. Who's number one on the list?"

Dorry laughed, deep in his throat. "That's the talk I like to hear, Baskam. The first man is Abe Deland. He owns the *Prairie Rose*. He's strictly law-and-order. Running his place that way will hurt our business."

"Then let's see he don't run it that way. You got a list?"

"I got a list."

"Let's get out of here."

THE town was coming to full life when they gained the street. The word had gone out, and men were crowding in, from the ranges, from the mines, and they intermingled freely.

The appearance of the three men acted as a signal, and silence fell, almost complete. Only from the far ends of Texas Street was there sound, and slowly it diminished. The men of the town fell in behind the three, at some distance. Faces were hard to read, but uncertainty, and a thin edge of expectancy, was marked upon them. For Harley Baskam, it was an old thrill, but one which never failed to exhilarate him. His step lengthened, and his right hand loosened his gun in the low-slung holster.

For Dorry, it was his first open break with respectability, and he found himself enjoying it. An appearance, in support of Harley Baskam, was necessary to his scheme. There would be a period of uncontrolled wildness, and before a pattern could be set, he would step in. Baskam would be named Town Marshal, and the treeing of Medicine Bend would be complete. Tonight, tomorrow, and tomorrow night; then Sunday a special meeting of the town council to be called, and the town would be in his hand. Dorry's grin widened.

To Cody Clark as he trudged along unsteadily beside the two stronger men, the situation was rapidly becoming more than he had bargained for. He was a gambler, but never a real one. He had the capacity for devising such a scheme, the wit to recognize the possibilities inherent in it, but he lacked the driving force to sustain him in carrying it out. He knew that now, where he had only sensed it before. He was afraid of Harley Baskam, and yes, afraid even of Dorry Dean. The fat man had changed the moment Calem Ware hit the dust of Texas Street. The frigidity inside him had oozed forth, making him a man without nerves. Cody Clark shuddered, and drew his coat tighter about him.

Abe Deland was a mild-faced little man with balding head, and bulging eyes. But his nerve was unquestioned, and when the three men stepped through the swinging doors of the *Prairie Rose*, Abe was not surprised. His face did not change, and he

bent to wipe a bar rag over the polished mahogany of the bar.

"Howdy, Dorry." He glanced uncertainly at Baskam and Clark.

Dorry smiled. "It's customary to set them up, isn't it, Abe, when there's been a big killing?"

"Maybe it is, but there'll be no drinkin' to the death of Calem Ware in my joint."

"I'm sorry you feel that way, Abe." Dorry's smile thinned. "But maybe it will make it easier for you to decide to sell out to me. I'm giving you ten thousand dollars for the *Prairie Rose*, payable in sixty days. Here's a deed of trust."

"What?" Abe's eyes bugged out more than ever. His face went red. "Are you plumb crazy, Dorry? What you doin' here, anyways? You're on the wrong side of the fence, ain't you?"

"My business, Abe. And I'm not crazy. It's a good business deal. You're through in Medicine Bend."

Abe swallowed, then suddenly sank down, his hands darting below the bar level. Shots thundered, and black-powder smoke spun in eddies across the bar. Abe Deland's bulging eyes seemed to sink back into his head, and slowly he fell forward across the bar, to slide to one side, and drop out of sight. Harley Baskam held his gun high in his hand, drove a shot into the ceiling.

"Listen to me, men!" Dorry shouted. "You all just heard Abe sell me the *Prairie Rose*. It's a good saloon, and I'm keeping it that way. For the rest of the night, the drinks are on the house! All you want. Come and lap it up!"

"Yaa-hoo-ooo!" From somewhere in the mob of men the shout rolled out. "That's for me! To hell with law an' order. Free drinkin's for mine!"

There was a sudden surge toward the bar, and Dorry backed away, followed by Baskam and Clark. The gunfighter was smiling. "Number one," he said. "Let's get movin'!"

Like a flame, spreading through tinder pine, the word went up and down the street. "The town's busted wide open! Harley Baskam's takin' over!" Men closed in behind the three, and they were talking now, building up something wild, something crazy

inside them. It was mob action, repeated over and over again, and Dorry fed it. He stood in front of flaming tar barrels, his round face alight with sweat, and his voice rang through the buildings.

"This town's been tame long enough!" he yelled. "You're men, not a pack of lobo wolves to be herded by a ranny like Calem Ware! It's your town. Take it over!"

A swelling, growing, roaring volume of sound. Gunshots, ragged, tearing at the silence of the night, shattering it. Stores were smashed into. Breaking glass added to the crescendo of sound. Drunken riders raced up and down the streets, scattering the gathering mobs. A drunken miner careened a mammoth freighter's wagon down the street. It overturned in front of the hotel, and someone set it afire.

The three men moved down Texas Street. They paused from time to time, and the word had gone ahead of them. There was no resistance, for the mob backing them up was becoming unruly. They reached the end of the street, and had started back the other side when the uproar died away, and three men walked the streets toward them.

"It's the mayor!" someone shouted, and Dorry glanced quickly at Baskam. The gun-fighter grinned back.

"Now we cinch it," he said. "You do the talkin', Dorry. You're good at it."

Men were siding them, Dorry saw. He'd have his pick of a hundred, all willing to fight for a chance to share the spoils that were coming. He walked boldly out into the street. The two parties met, stopped within a dozen feet. Men backed the mayor; Dorry recognized Willets, the grocer, and Farston, the printer. Others stood behind them.

"My God, Dean, what are you trying to do?" Mayor Kent's face was wet with sweat. "Help us stop this mob before it gets out of hand completely."

A wild yell peeled out, and a six-gun was emptied into plate glass windows down the street. "Too late for that, Kent," Dorry barked. "I've said before what would happen if you kept the lid clamped on this town. Now it's happened, and there isn't a man alive who can stop it. Now get out of our way. I've got business to attend to."

"Business!" It was Willets. "What're you

tryin' to do, Dean? You've taken over a dozen places in the last hour."

"Listen to me, men!" Dorry's voice rose suddenly. "This is your mayor—Mayor Kent. He's trying to stop your fun. But I'm going to tell you why! There's a smelter coming to Medicine Bend, and it's going to be the biggest boom town the west ever saw! But it's got to be run wide open. That's what I'm promising you. A fair deal for every man, and a chance to do just as he damn pleases, with nobody telling him what to do, and nobody dropping him dead in the street if he don't!"

A cry rang out, swelling, growing in volume. Mayor Kent reached inside his coat. Baskam sprang forward. His gun thundered. Kent dropped. Willets tried to jump forward, and fell as Baskam's gun roared again. Then Farston, the printer, turned to run. Baskam's third shot dropped him dead in the street.

"There's your law!" Baskam yelled. "The town's busted—tear it apart!"

Men swirled, then moved, scattered. Shots rang out. Free liquor ran freely. It was a night such as Medicine Bend had never before known. And Baskam, reloading his gun, spat to one side.

"That does it, Dorry. The town's ours."

IX

THE first shock had worn away, and still Taleen could not cry. She lay still in bed, her hands pressed tightly over her ears, but it did no good. She could still hear the tumultuous uproar of the town. And the sound of it was hideous.

She sat up, shivering, as there came a soft, repeated knocking at her door. For a moment she sat upright, trembling, frightened. But there was no sound in the corridors of the hotel. The second show at the Opera House had been cancelled, and she had returned early. Of Dorry she had seen nothing, but she had heard brutal, ugly talk in the hotel dining room. It was another facet of her fear, her mounting dread of this town.

The knocking came again, almost guarded, then a voice, pitched low. "Mrs. Ware! Mrs. Ware!" She opened the door. Doc Wynn hopped into the room. "Excuse

me, ma'am! I know it's late—but I reckon I had to come." He shook his head, and a serious expression replaced his smile. "Mrs. Ware, I reckon you've heard about Calem bein' shot. Calem wanted you to know he ain't hurt bad."

For an instant the room rocked unsteadily about her. She felt she must have fallen asleep, be dreaming all this. Doctor Wynn, seeing her paleness, stepped close, held out an arm to steady her.

"Here, now! I reckon it's a shock, but Calem wasn't badly hurt. Just a slug along the top o' his head. He'll carry a permanent part in his hair, and maybe lost a sliver of bone along with a lot o' blood, but he'll live. In fact he's sittin' up now, an' by tomorrow he'll be walking the streets of Medicine Bend again."

"No! He mustn't!" she gasped the words out. "Hasn't he done enough? Doesn't he know he'll be no match for a professional killer like Harley Baskam?"

Doc Wynn pulled back. His stare was quizzical. "Reckon Calem never thought of it like that, ma'am. Must say I'm sorry to hear it from you. I'm beginnin' to understand some things that was confusin' me."

She held still. "Maybe you're thinking I'm a coward—and perhaps I am. But it's more than that. Calem's no boy, no wild gunman out to make a reputation for himself. He's a grown man, almost middle-aged. I thought he was dead, and I could stand that. But to know that he's alive, persisting in this madness of being Marshal of a wild frontier town—I can't stand that."

Doc Wynn's frown grew deeper. For a long moment he stared at her, trying to understand her, the meaning behind her words. Then he nodded. "Everybody gets a different slant on things, Mrs. Ware. I reckon that's your privilege. It ain't up to me to put you straight."

She moved back, turned away from him. "What is there to get straight? My husband is no better than a hired killer, a man who makes his living with a gun. I could understand it if he were a man like Harley Baskam, without a soul, cold, merciless, kill-crazy. But he isn't. At least the Calem Ware I knew wasn't."

"And isn't now!" Doc Wynn flashed. "By God, you're askin' for a talkin' to, an'

I'm just tired enough, just mad enough, to give it to you." He stepped closer, and she turned to face him. He seemed to expand in that moment, to become larger, stronger. His face was unsmiling, and the bird-like look was gone.

"First off, I can tell right now you're not the sort of woman for Calem Ware. You're not strong enough—an' maybe you're not good enough! You hear me? I've known Calem for five years, an' for five years I've known that something was bothering him, eating on him like an acid. Now I know what it was—you! Killing something inside him, making him weak when he needed to be stronger than ever before in his life. You called him a hired killer—and you're right. He's killed men—eight or ten, or maybe more. He's shot 'em down, an' me, and thousands of other folks owe their chance to live to his doing just that. He's hell with a gun, but he's never pulled it on a man who didn't deserve to die."

He paused, out of breath, his eyes glaring at her, hating her. "You know why I came? I came because Calem didn't want to hurt you any more than you'd been hurt. He'd kill me with his bare hands for saying the things I've said to you, but I'm saying them just the same. Medicine Bend has busted loose. You're going to see some things in the next twenty-four hours like you never dreamed possible. You want to know why? Because there isn't a man like Calem Ware to walk the streets. Look around you in the morning. Take a good look—because that's the way things would always be out here if it wasn't for the badge-toting marshals. Look around you, I say—an' be proud, because it's you an' people like you who stand back an' let others bull-doze 'em around." He stopped, breathing hard. "I've had my say, an' I'll get out. Good-bye, Mrs. Ware. Losing you again is going to hurt Calem, but no more than he's been hurt already. An' it's a cinch he's better off without a woman like you!"

He slammed the door behind him, and Taleen was alone. She fought down a crazy desire to call him back, to cry out, to deny the things he had said, but she could not. They were true. It rang through her, weakened her. Everything he had said was true, and she could no longer deny it.

A BUCKBOARD was pulling up in front of the hotel, out of the path of some wild, racing freighter wagons. From a dining room window Taleen saw a man and a woman, and several frightened children. A man climbed down, hurriedly, lifted the woman from the buckboard. They started into the shelter of the hotel. The freighter's wagons had made a crazy, tipping turn at the end of the street, were coming back. And suddenly a scream froze on Taleen's lips. A boy was running out into the street. She saw him, and her chair crashed as she lunged to her feet. Another woman screamed.

The racing wagons came on. The boy saw them, threw his arms up and screamed, but his voice was lost in the thunder of hoofs. Taleen saw the man spring out into the street. The shoulder of one of the horses hit him, sent him flying backward. She saw the boy, standing there, screaming, frightened—then the teams struck him, and he fell. The heavy wheels—

A man went crazy, opened fire on the receding wagons with his gun. A cowboy across the street whirled, his gun came up, and the man fell. The woman ran down the wooden steps, into the churning dust of the streets, fell across the tiny, huddled form. Dust closed in about her, sheltering her, hiding her grief.

"Murdering, crazy coyotes!" a man near her yelled the words, bitterly. "If Calem Ware were alive—"

"No one man could stop them now!" another returned. "There'll have to be a vigilante committee, an' damned soon!"

Other voices, other cries, but no one moved. They stood there, talking, and Taleen wanted to shout at them, to curse them. The futile, frightened fools! They outnumbered the lawless element; the town was theirs if they'd just take it in hand. But without someone to lead them, to go ahead of them, they would not act.

She was on her feet, moving. She crossed the dining room, gained the front door of the hotel. A man grabbed her arm.

"Don't be crazy, lady!" he yelled. "You don't want to go out there—"

"Let me go!" she beat at him, broke free, then held hesitant. "Doctor Wynn—where does he live—the hospital?"

The man stood there, gaping at her a moment before he gathered his senses. "He's got a place out of town a couple of miles—but hell, lady, you cain't go out there—them lunatics'll do yuh harm shore!"

"I've got to go!"

The man stirred, moved after her. "Hell, if yuh gotta go, I guess somebody's got to go with yuh. I got me a rig out back. I figgered on gittin' to hell out o' town any-ways. I jist came in to git a load of the excitement, an' I reckon I've got me a bellyful!"

They made their way past the gathering crowd of people trying to get into the hotel. His rig was a buckboard, with a team of heavy horses. He lifted her up, climbed in after her. He wasted no time, but drove out of town, whipping the horses up to a run. Once a cowboy raced his horse alongside them. His face was flushed, his eyes wild. He bent down toward Taleen.

"How's about a kiss, beautiful, jest fer luck?" he demanded. But he leaned too far out, fell to the street with a crash. They were past the town, then, and moving fast. The man slowed after a few minutes, turned the team into a side road. A square building loomed ahead. It was not complete, the naked skeleton of framework showed where a wing was being built.

"Here's the horspital, lady!" the man yelled, and pulled up. Taleen didn't wait for his help, but sprang down and ran towards the building. It would eventually be a hospital, she saw, but there was little to it as yet. The smell of new-sawn lumber, of fresh paint, struck her. Then the door opened, and Doctor Amos Wynn stood there blinking at her. She moved past him.

"I've got to see Calem!" she said.

He hesitated. "I don't reckon he's in no shape to see you, ma'am!" he returned.

"You're wrong!" she flashed. "Where is he?"

"Back here!" Doc Wynn moved past her, down a long hall. She saw rooms off to either side. She heard a man groan, a child crying. Doc Wynn was looking at her. "These are the lucky ones," he said, bitterly. "They're alive. Nine men died last night in the streets of Medicine Bend. There's a little boy in there with a bullet in his chest—"

He stopped, shrugged. "I've done what

I could. In another year, this town might have amounted to something. I'd hoped—" He broke off. "Calem's in there."

She opened the door and went in. She saw Calem, sitting by a window, a bandage about his head. He was dressed, and behind him, over the high back of the chair hung his gun belt. He started to his feet, but she motioned him back.

"Calem—I had to come to you. I had to come and tell you how wrong I'd been. Doctor Wynn came to me last night—he spoke rudely, harshly, but nothing I thought I hadn't known before. But I didn't know, hadn't seen, what I've seen today. The town—"

Calem came close. "It's no place for a woman like you," he said. "I know that, now. You'll go back east, forget this place."

"No!" she stood there, and her eyes opened, stared at him. "It's too late for us, Calem. There could never be anything between us. But I want you to know I've seen—what you've seen many times before now. I saw a little child killed by drunken, racing teamsters. They ran him down—"

Calem nodded. "I know."

She faced him. "Stop them, Calem," she said, harshly. "You've got to stop them." She moved, caught up his heavy gun belt, held it out.

He nodded, slowly. "I'll be going soon." He took the gun belt, held it at his side. "You're upset, overcome by what has happened. It's that way when a town is treed, Taleen. That's what a marshal's for; to keep it from happening. I failed in Medicine Bend, but I'm going to do what I can to rectify it."

There were words that Taleen could not say, could not force past her lips. She wanted to tell Calem how she felt, what she had learned in the night of terror, the awful thing that had happened in the street of Medicine Bend. And more than that, she wanted to tell him that she loved him, had always loved him. But the words would not come at once, and then it was too late.

Doc Wynn stepped into the room. "Calem, it's Juan Tobrez. He's dying. He knows he hasn't got long, and he wants to talk. I think you'd better listen."

"All right, Doc." Calem frowned, then strapped his heavy guns about his waist. His

hands made small gestures, and the guns slid up and down in the leather. He faced her, and his colorless gray eyes were bright.

"Thanks, Taleen. Your coming to me, now—I can't tell you what it means to me. I know we're through. Perhaps I'll never see you again. So this is good-bye."

Still she could not speak, could only stand there and watch him stride from the room. Then he was gone, and her legs collapsed beneath her, and she sank slowly to her knees.

"Good-bye, Calem, good-bye!" she whispered. Then, softly, "I'll always love you."

X

IT WAS eight-thirty when Calem Ware stepped into the far end of wild Texas Street. He was smiling as he started the long walk down the street.

A man was picking up a heavy box to toss on the bonfire at the end of the street, when Calem appeared. The man saw him, grinned; then the grin froze, and his face went wild. "It's Calem Ware!" his voice was a scream, and he stood there, the box in his hands, over his head.

"It's me," Calem agreed. "Put that box down. Get that fire out. Then get off the street. I'm closing the town."

The man stood there, unbelieving, then Calem stepped close, still smiling. He said nothing, made no move, but the man dropped the box, staggered back as if struck.

"Yessir! Yessiree!" he yelled. "I'm doin' it."

Other men stirred, uncertainly. Calem turned, slowly, facing them one by one. "You men heard me. I'm closing this town. Get off the street. Now."

A miner stepped forward belligerently. "Who the hell says so?"

Calem wasted no motion. He leaped forward, and his left hand came out with his gun. He laid it hard alongside the man's jaw, and he went down. The gun came up, level, spurted fire, and a man in the act of reaching for his gun screamed, grabbed his shoulder, and dropped in his tracks.

"Get off the street!" The order was flat-toned, the words hissing, and men moved. Back, anyway to get out of the line of fire. Calem turned his back on them, walked on.

He came abreast the fire-gutted ruin of a store. A man stood there, watching him. His name was Anderson, and he had backed law and order in the city council. He came off the boardwalk, face grim.

"You're alive, Calem! By God, that's the best news I've ever heard. No need to tell you I'm backing your play. And there's a hundred more just as willin'."

Calem nodded, brusquely. "You better start getting them together. I said the streets were to be cleared, and I meant it. I'm closing the whole town."

Anderson nodded. "That's the talk I been wantin' to hear. I'll be behind you."

Calem strode on. Behind him, the street was clearing. Men kicked the bonfire out, threw dirt over the embers. They lined the walks, pressed close to the buildings, but none followed, and none walked the street. A sudden tense silence fell in behind him as he marched on.

He came to the first saloon, and halted. Wild uproar shook the building, then he stepped inside. For a minute he wasn't seen. Then men backed hurriedly out of his way, and he moved toward the bar.

"I'm closing the town!" he said, flatly. "If this place isn't cleared and these lights out in five minutes, I'll come back through these doors shooting."

He backed out, and slowly sound eddied behind him. He stalked on down the street, and now he wasn't alone. He saw Anderson, grim, silent, and other men of set faces, all heavily armed, walking behind him. He paused at a corner, looked back. The street was empty of men. Lights were going out, the street darkening. He nodded, slowly. Ahead of him was Cody Clark's *New Frontier* saloon—and Harley Baskam . . .

FOR Cody, the night had been a long and profitable one. Beside him stood Harley Baskam, a broad grin on his saturnine face, his right hand hooked over his cartridge belt, close to the handle of his Colt.

"Just the beginning," the gunfighter said. "You'll see it like this every night in every joint in town." He waved his left hand expressively. "First time I ever enjoyed bein' in a mob. Maybe it's because a part of what they spend is goin' to me, huh?"

Cody nodded, but he didn't approve of

Baskam cutting himself in. It was one thing to hire a gunman to do a dirty job; it was another thing to have him take over, run things entirely his own way.

Something was wrong. At first Cody couldn't place it. He stared down the bar, at the clustered group of men filling the saloon. A girl stood on the stage, singing off-key; the tinny piano banged away at a melody, and it was almost lost in the uproar of men's voices. A steady stream forged up the stairs, toward the gambling tables. He nodded with satisfaction, then his eyes shifted. Miners, riders, herders, railroad men; strangers in town, familiar faces, blended into a sweaty-faced mass. Nothing wrong, no undertone of violence, of trouble, and still something disturbed Cody. Down the bar, a half-dozen places away, stood young Gregg Dean, half-drunk. He hadn't shown up in town until word of Calem Ware's death had reached him. The little sneaking coward!

No, it wasn't in the *New Frontier*. It was outside. *Outside*—

He listened, heard nothing. And suddenly a coldness seized his lower belly. Nothing! A growing, stifling silence. No gunshots, no yells, no galloping hoofs. Silence, thick, settling down, closing in.

"Baskam!" he hissed. "Something's wrong."

The Texan turned slowly, his grin still on his mouth. "You gone loco? Everything's fine and dandy. Take a look."

"Not here, damn you!" Cody's voice tipped upward, went blurry. "Outside—listen—there isn't a sound!"

"So what?"

"I don't know. But listen—" Footsteps pounded, even above the noise of the saloon. The swinging doors parted, and a man came in. His voice rang out, sharply, shrilly.

"It's Calem Ware!" he yelled. "He's alive! Killed three men already! Cleanin' out the whole damned town!"

The noise stopped. It stopped instantly, dying into nothingness, fringed by the tinny whang of the piano as the player's hands froze above the keyboard. The painted girl on the stage put a hand up to her mouth.

"He's backed by a hundred men—an' they ain't funnin'!"

The man backed out, fast. The swinging

doors came back, swung idly, then slowed to a stop, closed.

"Did you hear him?" Cody stepped back. "Did you hear that, damn you, Baskam? You missed him! You missed Calem Ware. Now he's comin' to give you a second try at him. Did you ever hear of a man who faced Calem Ware's guns twice and lived?" A cackling laughter bubbled from his lips.

"That crazy damned doctor!" Baskam's grin was gone. His face was twisted into a harsh mask of hate and fury. "I should have known! I should have known!"

In the silence of the room, no one moved. Then a step sounded on the boardwalk outside. It was clear, regular. A steady thump-thump of hard heels against dry wood.

Cody Clark jumped back from the bar. "To hell with this!" he yelled, and fled into the crowd. Harley Baskam stood still, but slowly men pressed back, out of line between him and the swinging doors. Only young Gregg Dean stood there, defiant.

The footsteps were louder, clearer. An audible intake of breath sounded as many men sucked air into their lungs at the same time. Then the swinging doors parted, and Calem Ware stepped into the saloon. His hands were lifted a trifle, the finger tips pointing in towards his chest. He saw Gregg Dean, and beyond him, Harley Baskam, stepping free of the bar, where his right hand would have free play.

"You—Gregg—I told you never to let me catch you drinking in town again."

"Maybe you did." Gregg licked his lips. His hands were trembling visibly. "What are you going to do about it, you lousy son of a—"

Calem moved forward. It was a single long stride; his left hand went in, and out. He saw Gregg start back. Saw Baskam's right hand flash down, blurring. Then Calem's gun cracked over Gregg Dean's skull, the boy slipped down—and with a continuation of the same movement, the Smith and Wesson came up and fired. The shot beat Baskam's by a tenth of a second. The .44 calibre slug tore him apart. It struck in the center of his thin chest, and his whole body gave to the force of the shot. His feet slipped. His mask of a face seemed to break, to crumple inward. He staggered, and his shot struck the swinging doors behind

Calem, burst them apart. They swung slowly back, and Harley drew himself together, tried to focus his crossing eyes. Calem shot again. Harley Baskam went back against the bar. A thick mass of blood filled his mouth, spurted out. His gun dropped. He fell on top of it, his blood staining the sawdust on the floor.

Calem Ware turned, slowly, and his gun seemed to center on every man in the room as it went past. His face was calm, his eyes gray smoke.

"Get out of town, every man of you!" he said. "Stay off the street. Medicine Bend is closed. It's going to take a week to bury the dead men now—I don't want to make it worse."

GREGG DEAN was sitting up. Blood was pouring down his face from a scalp wound. Calem picked up the whiskey bottle that had stood before him, dumped it over his head. Then he turned, stalked out through the swinging doors.

He looked up at the opera house. He saw the darkened windows, thought of Dorry Dean up there, watching him, perhaps holding a gun on him. Then he started across the street, went inside.

Dorry was sitting at his desk, both hands on top of it when Calem entered without knocking. He was smiling.

"Hello, Calem. I see you won."

"I won, Dorry. That means you lose."

The fat man shrugged. "Lose what? What are you talking about, Calem? I've done nothing."

"You've done too much—or not enough, depending on the way you look at it, Dorry." Calem sighed. "Juan Tobrez lived long enough to tell the whole story. He's made a point of listening to everything you and Cody had to say. The whole deal. It was a crazy thing for you to do, Dorry. I can't understand it. I've always liked you, respected you. And even crazier than anything else, I still do. But it's got to end here and now."

Dorry was still smiling. "You're the crazy one, Calem. You can't prove a thing against me. Maybe I sided with Harley Baskam—but it would take some proving. You could never convict me on a charge like that."

"That's right, Dorry. I can't convict you, but I can kill you."

Dorry tried to laugh, but it failed him, only a croaking sound came from his throat. His pudgy right fist held a gun.

"You've got it backwards, Calem," he whispered. "You're not going to kill me. I'm going—"

Calem catapulted forward, into the room, his left hand twisting free. Dorry's shots ripped into the silence, thudded into the wall. Then Calem fired, once, twice, three times at the hulking body.

Dorry Dean jerked to the impact, and stepped back, as if walking. But he didn't stop.

His back hit the fan-shaped window—then slowly his weight fell against it—and it gave. With a rendering crash the whole window went out, and Dorrance Dean with it. Calem heard him strike the cement walk below, the only cement sidewalk in the town.

He gained the street once more, did not look down at Dean where he lay. He strode down the center of the empty street. Men looked at him, watched him, but none spoke.

He turned the corner of the new courthouse, down the alleyway. The lamp over the marshal's office was unlighted, but he didn't care. For a few brief hours the law had left Medicine Bend; but it had come back.

Calem's head ached, and his body seemed to be on fire. He wanted to be alone, to rest, not to think, not to worry, nothing but to rest.

He closed the office door behind him. The darkness was calm, peaceful. He groaned, unbuckled his guns, tossed them on his desk. He started for the stairs, then paused.

There was a sound in the blackness behind him. A hissing sound, the sucking in of a man's breath. Calem stiffened. Then a hard coldness prodded his back.

"I've got you, damn it! I've got you!"

It was Gregg Dean, and he had a gun in Calem Ware's back.

This is the way it ends, Calem thought. This is the way it always ends for men like me. A crazy, cowardly kid, and a shot in the back. You gamble you can outlive the worst of a town, and you lose because you can't think of everything. That's the way it always is. It ends here and now.

CODY CLARK'S hands were trembling so badly he couldn't open the safe. He was kneeling before the black iron box in his office, and he cursed savagely, then forced his hands to slow, deliberate action. The lock clicked, and he swung the heavy door open. He scooped up the money box, papers, carried them to the desk. Without sorting through them, he dropped them into a black valise. Then, suddenly, he stiffened, and his hand slipped inside coat, came out with his double-barreled derringer.

The door to his office swung open, and Cody cursed. "My God, I almost shot you!"

Cora Dean closed the door behind her. Her face was strained, looked old. "Cody, what's happened? I don't understand—"

"Nothing for you to understand," he snarled. "I'm clearing out—for good."

"Cody!" She stood there, staring at him.

"The game's washed up, over, finished—I'm lucky I'm alive, and I'm going to keep it that way." He snapped the valise closed. His face was ugly, brutal. "I'm clearing out—and I'm going alone. That's the way it is—that's the way it's always been, only you've been too damned dumb to know it."

"You don't mean that." Her body was trembling. "I heard—I heard that Calem Ware wasn't dead—that he'd killed men—I was afraid—"

"Afraid it was me? No, he missed me, and that makes it tough on you." Cody held still. "Use your head. You're no kid. You've got nothing to lose. It's over, done with. I thought, for awhile—never mind what I thought!"

Cody picked up the valise, stepped around the desk, toward the door. He turned slowly to face her.

"This is good-bye," he said. "I'm glad it's over, damned glad. You're no-good, Cora, but Asaph Dean doesn't know that. Go back to him. Keep on fooling him. It's the only chance you've got."

But she wasn't looking at him, wasn't listening to him. Her eyes were fixed on the door behind him, and there was fear, horror in them. Cody turned slowly, then stopped. Asaph Dean stood in the doorway, a gun in his hand.

Cody tried to look away, to move, anything, but could not. He wanted to yell, to reach for his derringer; but he was afraid.

So afraid his mind froze, and his body seemed almost liquid, incapable of coherent movement.

For a moment Dean stood there, then he moved aside. "I was going to kill you, Clark," he said. "That's what I came for. But I've changed my mind. Go on, get out of here. You'll run, but not far. Your kind always gets caught up with. You'll be dead in a month. But it won't be on my conscience. Get out!"

Cody plunged past him, out the door. Asaph Dean put his gun away. Cora stared at him.

"Come here, Cora," he said. His voice was harsh. She didn't move, so he came towards her, took her arm. There was a mirror on the wall, and he made her stand before it.

"Take a good look—look at yourself!" he demanded. "You're growing old, Cora. Can't you understand that?"

She stared at her reflection in the mirror. The lines, the darkness about her eyes, the gray in her dark hair. A shudder wracked her, and she threw her hands up before her face. She was crying.

He stood a moment, watching her, then his hand came out, pulled her hands from her face. "We're both too old for such damn foolishness, Cora. Let's go home."

She stared at him. Then slowly she nodded. "All right, Asaph," she said. "All right."

In the darkness of the Marshal's Office, Calem Ware took a deep breath. The gun was unsteady, pressing deeply into his back. He could hear the rasp of Gregg's lungs, sucking in air. Then another sound, faint, close. Calem went down in a lunge—and a gun blasted redness into the black of the room. The stench of black powder smoke; Gregg Dean choked, seemed to strangle. Then a body hit the floor, threshed about a second, then stilled.

The sound came again. A footstep, light, quick. A match flared, and Charley Drew grinned at Calem. He held a short-barreled pocket Colt in his hand. He stepped to the lamp, lighted it, then stared down quizzically at the fallen Gregg.

"Not bad for being in darkness," he said. The two bullets had struck high in the

chest. Gregg was dead. "Funny thing, I had a hunch I'd be able to square things off with you before I pulled out of this town."

Calem got to his feet. His whole body was trembling. Charley grinned, tucked his gun inside his coat. "I got the repeater last night. I was figuring on pulling my freight tonight. I had a hunch Doc Wynn was pulling a shandy when he got you out from under Baskam's gun. Nice going, Calem." He paused, then shook his head. "But it's just as well I got out now. Asaph Dean ain't going to realize what a good turn I did him by getting rid of Gregg before he caused some real trouble, and I've got no use for a rope necktie."

Calem nodded, slowly. "It's all wound up. All except Cody Clark. He got away."

"Ahuh." Charley Drew's eyes narrowed. "I always had a hankering to sit in a game with that tinhorn. He walked to the door. He stopped there. "Funny thing, but I had a hunch you was going to win this game, Calem. Cody told you the odds were getting short. But it's a queer thing about a gambler's odds—they change sudden-like. Right now I'd say it's something like a thousand to one that you'd live to be ninety. Good-bye, Calem, I reckon we're square."

"We're square, Charley," Calem said. He took the other man's hand, and the grip was hard, sure. Then the gambler slid outside, and the door closed behind him.

Calem stared down at Gregg Dean, and frowned. A hand pounded on the door, and he opened it. Anderson stood there, blinking in the lamplight.

"Heard shootin', Marshal, an' thought I'd better come by." He saw Gregg's body, and whistled. "Reckon that does it up brown for shore."

Calem nodded, slowly. "You're right, it does." He hesitated. "A policeman with a nightstick can run Medicine Bend from here on in—and I think you better plan on hiring one tomorrow. I'm through." He reached inside his coat, unpinned the cheap silver-plated badge. He tossed it on the desk beside his guns. "I'll never wear it again. You can count on that. Right now, I'm going upstairs, lock myself in a cell, and sleep for a hundred years."

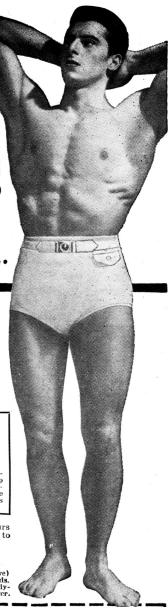
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