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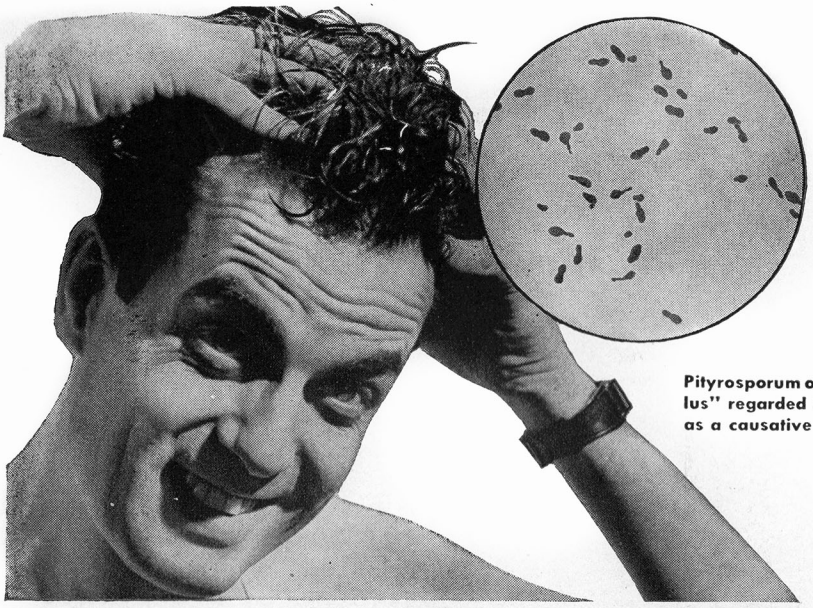
by LES SAVAGE Jr.



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ACTION STORIES

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GUN-SAINT OF THE DEVIL'S NIGHT-RIDERS . . . Les Savage, Jr. 2

A complete novel of mystery range

It was everywhere . . . like a shroud, growing, billowing around them like unbridled storm clouds. Fear. Terror. The Riders of the Night. Soon they would come, sweeping across the range, burning, looting—seeking the lives of young Hayward and the girl.

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GUN-SAINT OF THE DEVIL'S NIGHT-RIDERS

By Les Savage, Jr.

It was everywhere . . . like a shroud, growing, billowing around them like unbridled storm clouds. Fear. Terror. The Riders of the Night. Soon they would come, sweeping across the range, burning, looting—seeking the lives of young Hayward and the girl—and the ruin of the Rancho Mateo.

HE WAS a slim young squirt of a man with more weakness than aristocracy in his delicate acquiline nose and more temper than fire in his smoldering black eyes. His hair was the same color as his eyes, done up in an archaic queue behind the haughty rise of his neck. The square cut of his fancy charro jacket failed to hide shoulders too narrow for his height, and his black silk trousers were slit up the side as far as the knee to show snowy white pantaloons beneath.

"What is your name, *señor,* what is your name?" he kept snapping, and his voice was as thin and arrogant as the blue-veined hand that kept jerking at Johnny Hayward.

Hayward shoved the man away roughly and sat up on the bed, swinging his legs to the floor. The movement sent pain throbbing through his blond head. The hands he put up to feel the bandage there bore the sinewy character of an older man; there was something older about his eyes, too, their strange pale blue almost hidden by the weather wrinkles forming his lids. He was big for his seventeen years, the bony breadth of his shoulders catching at a homespun shirt, blue jeans belted around a narrow waist. The man caught at his arm again, almost shouting at him.

"Tell me, what is your name?"

"Silence, Ortiz," said someone else, and it held more of the soft beauty Hayward had become used to in these Californicos. "Perhaps he does not speak Spanish. Zacatas here found you just south of the Hastings Cutoff."

There was something troubled about the girl's beauty. Her big black eyes held a dark, haunted depth beneath their liquid surface, and there was a question to the way her rich lower lip dropped faintly away from a shadowed line of small white teeth. Her hair was so black it looked blue beneath the lacy white mantilla, and her flesh had a velvety texture above the low-cut bosom of her wine gown.

Johnny licked dry lips. "The others?"

Compassion made her voice husky. "There were no others, *señor.*"

Johnny stared at her a moment, then dropped his face into his hands. His whole family had been in that wagon train crawling through the Sierras. Their faces swam dimly before him in the dull waves of grief. He knew anger at himself for not being able to feel it more poignantly.

"Night," he said brokenly, speaking almost to himself. "We didn't even have time to corral. Bullet clip me?"

"That's what the wound looked like," said the girl. "Zacatas said the box of a burned wagon had turned over on you. The only thing that saved you, undoubtedly. Whatever we can do—" her hand was soft and warm on his shoulder—"you are at Rancho Mateo, in the Laguna Valley, about thirty miles west of the Sacramento River. I am Carlotta Mateo. This is my brother, Ortiz Mateo—"

Ortiz grabbed Johnny's collar, twisting it till he had leverage to force Johnny around, peering closely at him. "Is he one of them?"

"Of course he is not one of them, Ortiz."

It was a harsh, grating voice, like the scrape of mesquite against saddle leather. It came from the third one in the room. He was a short man, standing farther back in the dim, flickering light of

"Zacatas!" Hayward screamed, drowning his own cry as he fired.

the tall yellow candles, maybe five foot six in his shiny black, mitaja leggins that went all the way up his tree trunk thighs instead of ending at the knee in the usual way. The patent beginnings of a paunch in his thick, square waist was belied by its granitic refusal to be indented by the pressure of the two enormous Warner Navy revolvers he had thrust naked through his broad black belt, their walnut butts turned inward for a cross-arm draw. The huge Mexican cartwheel spurs on his wooden-heeled boots clattered across the hard-packed earth of the floor as he moved toward Hayward, slapping calloused palms against his belt in a nervous, volatile gesture.

"One of who?" said Johnny. "Indians?"

The girl's bosom rose with her quick breath. "The Indians didn't—"

"Carlotta!" Ortiz' sharp voice cut his sister off. A glance passed between him and the other man. Johnny tried to pull away from that grip on his collar, but Ortiz yanked him back. He bent toward Johnny, thin nostrils fluttering, voice hissing out on a hot breath against Johnny's cheek. "You are one of them. They have *Americanos* with them. Tell me. You *are* one—"

"Patron," said the other man, "how could he be one of them? He was with the wagon train. Let me take him out to the peon's quarters. When I go down to Yerba Buena next time, I will inquire. Perhaps he has relatives there. Or maybe we can send a letter to someone he has in *los Estados Unidos,* ah?"

"No!" Ortiz was shaking Johnny now, voice rising. "Tell me. They're all around us now. Anyone might belong to them. You're one! Tell me!"

"Ortiz, he's only a boy—"

IT was Hayward who stopped it, cutting off the girl's voice. The anger had flamed up through his grief, and his long fingers met his thumb around Ortiz' thin wrist, and his collar made a ripping sound as he tore the young man's hand away. His body had not moved perceptibly, yet he thrust Ortiz from him with such force that the young Don staggered back when Hayward released him, crashing into the big oak table. The hammered silver candelabra toppled over and hot tallow dripped across Ortiz' sleeve as he caught desperately at the table to keep himself from falling.

"Barrachon," he shouted, pulling the fringed satin cloth off as he lurched toward Hayward. Then, with the candelabra clattering to the floor and the green satin swirling about his feet and his hand upraised with his quirt, Ortiz Mateo stopped. Hayward was standing by the bed. His legs were slightly bowed, spread apart, and his shoulders were thrust forward a little so that his hands hung free from his body. Most of the blue had left his eyes, and they had taken on a color akin to the hammered silver of the candelabra on the floor.

"Yeah?" he said. His voice was flat. "Come ahead."

Ortiz Mateo stood rigidly for another moment, his mouth open a little. Then he drew his breath in with a spasmodic gasp. Before he could move, or shout again, the girl was between them, catching at his quirt.

"Don't be a child, Ortiz. He's only a boy."

"I'll beat him," screamed Ortiz, struggling with her. "I'll show him who's *patron* on Rancho Mateo. American or not, he's still a peon."

It seemed to Hayward that Ortiz could have gotten by the girl if he'd wanted to badly enough. Then Hayward felt the rough callouses of a hot, heavy hand through the homespun of his shirt at the elbow, and Zacatas was pulling him toward the door.

"You should not have made that mistake, *señor.* On a rancho here, the *patron* is God. Pronto, now—"

"Señor Hayward!" Ortiz Mateo's scream turned Johnny an instant, just before Zacatas had pulled him through the door. The young man was still struggling with his sister, his thin, pallid face contorted above the white pattern of her mantilla, *"Señor* Hayward, you will regret that. I won't have to kill you for it. I won't have to sully my hands on your putrid flesh. You'll be dead before Zacatas can ever find out whether you have relatives in Yerba Buena or not. You're on Rancho Mateo now, and you'll never get off alive. It doesn't matter whether you're one of them or not. If you aren't, they'll get you, and if you are, we'll get you. You'll never leave Rancho Mateo alive!"

HIS name was *El Sombrio,* which meant The Sad One. His paunch was a magnificent edifice erected to the delights of tortillas and pulque. His face was a crumbling facade seamed by weather and grooved by experience and wrinkled by time. He sat on the floor with his back to the wall at one end of the long hood covering the hearth of the fireplace playing on a flute he claimed to have gotten from a flagelante in New Mexico.

"The crops will surely be bad this year," he said mournfully, ceasing his dirge momentarily. "I saw a black crow over my left shoulder last Sunday."

"Shut your mouth," said Zacatas.

He sat across a plank table from Hayward, Zacatas, stuffing a fork full of tortillas into his mouth. His whole face worked, masticating the food, and a sullen speculation was in his black eyes. He wiped the back of his hand across his mouth, watching Hayward above its edge. He reached for the clay jug of wine without looking at it, upended it above his cup. Then he beat the empty bottle on the bare table, shouting.

"Campeche, more pulque, this cup is empty!"

The man's eyes on him like that made Hayward nervous, and he toyed with his fork. "What did Mateo mean, was I one of them? He kept talking about 'them.' Who?"

Zacatas shoved a clay bowl toward him. "Here— you will find this good to finish on. It is a bread pudding with layers of apples and butter and sugar and cheese browned on top and dusted with cinnamon and served with hot wine sauce. Campeche makes it every Saturday."

"You will just eat too much and make yourself sick," said El Sombrio.

"Are you afraid of them, too?" said Hayward.

Zacatas stiffened. "Afraid of who?"

"You won't tell me who," said Hayward. "Is that why you won't tell me? Ortiz was afraid of them."

"I'm afraid of nobody, no man, no beast, no—" Zacatas stopped abruptly, realizing he had half-risen. He crouched that way a moment, his hairy hands flat on the table. He had already begun to laugh before he sat back down; still laughing, he bent toward Hayward, studying the boy's face.

Hayward and Carlotta

"You did well to see that in Ortiz. Most *hombres* would have only seen it as anger."

"Who are they?"

"Hermanos del Noche."

It was El Sombrio, and the sepulchral tone of his voice turned Hayward that way. "Brothers of the Night?" he asked.

Zacatas glanced toward Sombrio, frowning, then turned back to Hayward, waving a deprecating hand. *"Bandidos—"*

"No ordinary *bandidos—"*

"Shut your mouth!" Zacatas had risen again, in that violent way, turned toward The Sad One.

El Sombrio blew a minor, off-key scale, took the flute from his lips. "I was just telling him."

"I told him," said Zacatas hotly. "Just *bandidos."*

"The moon comes up red tonight," said Sombrio, staring out the door. "That means our heifers will all die at calving this year. Bad times."

"Ah, *caramba,"* growled Zacatas, sitting down again. Sombrio's wife padded in on bare feet with the clay jug of wine. She was thin and haggard in a soiled camisa of white cotton. Her fugitive eyes settled on Hayward momentarily. He straightened on the bench. But she had already turned away, and he couldn't be sure if it had been fear in her eyes. Zacatas poured two cups full of the pulque, downed his in one gulp, poured himself another. The flickering fire cast Sombrio's shadow huge and grotesque across the whitewashed wall, the giant redwood beams stretching ominously across the ceiling. Hayward realized

Zacatas was watching him once again.

"You saw who attacked your wagon train."

It was a statement more than a question, and Hayward sipped his drink. A hard boyhood in Texas and the terrible exigencies of that overland trip in the wagon train had given him traits of manhood most boys would not have obtained till much later in life, and reticence was one. Finally he shrugged faintly.

"I got hit right off. Sleeping in the wagon box. Heard the shooting and jumped up onto the front seat with my gun. Must have clipped me almost as soon as I poked my head out."

Zacatas downed his next cup the same way, in one gulp. He poured himself another. "Then you didn't see."

"Who else could it have been but Indians?" said Hayward.

His slitted eyes met Zacatas, and they had taken on that glinting, metallic light, and the question lay heavy between them for that moment. Sombrio blew another discordant scale.

"Hermanos del Noche?" said Hayward.

THE flesh of Zacatas' cheeks was thick and brown, the discernible pores giving it a rough, greasy texture, yet it was not coarse enough to hide the barely perceptible tightening of muscle around his heavy, sensuous lips. His small black eyes were faintly bloodshot, and the pouched look of his eyelids only lent to the carnality of his whole face. He took another drink, still watching Hayward, then motioned with the cup toward the youth.

"You will be here a couple of weeks before anybody rides to Yerba Buena. Ortiz Mateo is the *patron* here, and his word is law. Next to him comes the amanzador. That's me. What you did to Ortiz this evening precludes your making any demands on him as a guest. That's not the way it used to be in the old days, under Don Fernando, the old man. But things have changed. If Ortiz sees you again he might shoot you. It would be smarter for you just to stay down here."

"Where you run things," said Hayward.

Zacatas watched him a minute, then nodded. "I think you understand. I am just the amanzador here. I have no right to make you a guest."

"And that leaves you only one alternative," said Hayward, shoving back his bench. "I appreciate your picking me out of the massacre that way and bringing me here, but I didn't sign on your crew."

"What?"

"I mean," said Hayward, rising, "that if you're thinking of the same alternative I am, you better think again, because I'm not taking orders from you any more than I am from Ortiz."

"Oh, Santa Maria," said Sombrio, and made a miserable failure of his first attempt to rise.

Zacatas wiped his hand across his mouth that way, and shoved back his own bench. "I'm amanzador."

"You told me that once."

Zacatas rose with a swift jerk and got around the end of the table so fast Hayward did not have time to set himself, thrusting out one hairy hand to grasp the youth by his shirt front and shove him stumbling back against the wall so hard it shook the building and knocked a shower of dried yeso flakes onto their shoulders. For that instant, Zacatas held him there, his black head not far above Johnny Hayward's chin, his sensuous lips pulled back off primitive white teeth. Hayward had sensed the potent, driving force of the man, but had guessed at nothing like this.

The utter, bestial strength in the man's grip held him against the wall as if a herd of buffalo had him pinned there, and Zacatas shoved his sweating face up into Hayward's till the youth could smell all the fetid odors of wine and chile and onions on the man's breath.

"You're too smart for a *muchacho,"* snarled Zacatas. "Maybe you're not as much of a kid as Carlotta thought, or as you look, but you're still a kid, and you're too smart. As long as you're staying here you're taking orders from me. There isn't nobody on Rancha Mateo that don't take orders from me, except the *patrons,* see, there isn't nobody in Laguna Valley."

"I'm not," grunted Hayward, and was over his surprise at the short man's awful strength enough now to make his heave a good one, twisting aside as he caught Zacatas' wrist in both big fists. The vague, frustrated grief and the pain of his wound had dulled him to this point, but now, somehow, the frustration of not be-

ing able to feel more grief erupted in a roaring anger, and he found himself yelling some incoherent curse as Zacatas spun around, and he followed the man, punching hard for his exposed ribs. Zacatas grunted sickly with the blow and slammed against the table. Sombrio had managed to gain his feet by now, and avoided the tilting table as he rumbled for the door to the kitchen, shouting a string of Spanish.

All the violent ebullience of Zacatas exploded in his short, squat figure, as he jumped away from the table, knocking it on over as he did so, and charged into Hayward, bellowing in rage.

"Barrachon," he roared, and took Hayward's fist in his face in order to grab the boy's arm and come in close. Hayward slugged him in the belly, and it was like hitting an oak tree. He stumbled backward before Zacatas' wild charge. The man slugged him across the face with an elbow and kneed him in the groin. Hayward's head snapped back and then he bent over with the knifing pain through his belly. He clawed wildly for Zacatas' face, caught a thumb in the man's mouth, forced Zacatas' head backward. Zacatas tried to give him another knee. Hayward twisted to one side, blocking it with his hip. Then he lashed out backward with his heavy, home-made shoe, catching Zacatas in his own knee with the heel. Zacatas cried out harshly with the pain, and it robbed him of the strength to block Hayward's shove. The youth's weight carried the squat Californio back against a leg of the overturned table. The leg snapped beneath their combined weight and they went down onto the planks, rolling across the bottom of the table, kicking and slugging.

HAYWARD got on top and straddled Zacatas, pulling him up and knocking him clear across the room. Zacatas crashed against the adobe hood over the hearth, ashes rising in a thick, choking cloud about him. Hayward threw himself at the man, smashing him back up against the wall. Again they grappled, Hayward succeeding in getting a leverage on Zacatas' arm that bent the man back over the hood, smashing him in the face with his free fist. Zacatas caught the fist the second time, spitting blood and teeth into Hayward's face.

"Diablo," he gasped, jerking Hayward to one side. They were locked that way, Hayward still levering Zacatas' arm between them, Zacatas trying to force the boy away with his hold on Hayward's other arm, in order to break Hayward's leverage. It was then Zacatas' maturity told. With all his strength, Hayward lacked the final, refined puissance five more years would have given him. He gasped with the awful effort he thrust into bowing Zacatas backward over the hood. For a moment it seemed as if the amanzador was giving. Then his short, thick body stiffened. His sinews cracked and popped as he straightened the arm of the hand which held Hayward's wrist, twisting Hayward back and away. Sweating, gasping, gritting their teeth, they strained there. Slowly, inexorably, Hayward felt himself forced away. He didn't think he had ever felt such awesome power. Realizing he had to shift his position or lose his advantage entirely, he tried to slip one leg backward. It threw him off-balance just an instant. Zacatas' feet shuffled. Hayward never saw the fist which caught him in the face.

He went backward onto the overturned table with a crash, sight spinning in a vortex of pain. He didn't see Zacatas come down on him. He felt the hot, sweaty weight of the man's body. Another blow knocked his head against the thick planks. Then those hands were in his blond hair. His head banged into the table again, again. All the sand went out of him and he lay limp beneath the spraddled Californio. Finally Zacatas got up, panting, wiping

his bloody nose on the back of his shirt sleeve.

From somewhere far away, Hayward heard his voice.

"You going to get up?"

Hayward felt a dull impulse move his body faintly. That was all.

"I didn't think so," said Zacatas, snuffling at the blood leaking from his nose. "Like I said, I'm amanzador here. There isn't nobody on Rancho Mateo that don't take orders from me!"

II

DON FERNANDO MATEO had come north with Captain Gasper Portalo and Father Janipero Serra in 1769, and had been among the first Spaniards to see the bay of San Francisco, taking out his land grants, given by the King, in Laguna Valley, and bringing north a herd of blackhorn Spanish cattle the very next year. He had built his house of buttressed adobe at the east end of the valley, where the sprawling tile-roofed buildings would be warmed early by the morning sun in the winter, yet escape the heat of the lower lands during the summer, and where, from its slotlike, double-hung windows, or its shady verandah, Don Fernando could see his holdings, stretching away beneath him, the stout cottonwood corrals forming their dim pattern to the left of the house, and beyond them the cluster of hovels for the peons who tilled his fields and worked his cattle. Standing in the doorway of one of those adobe hovels, now, in this spring of 1842, with the dawn mists carrying their pungent, wet odor of wheatgrass up to him, Johnny Hayward could look out over the dim blue undulations of Laguna Valley beneath him and realize how little it had changed since Don Fernando had first come. It brought home to him how alien he was here, and how dependent on the Mateos. Without a horse, not speaking the language, without even a gun of his own—what could he do but stay here at their whim? He rubbed his cheek, wincing at the pain. He didn't think he'd had a beating to compare with that in his life before. And there had been more than a few.

El Sombrio came out, licking grape jelly off his lips. "It looks like a hot summer. All our horses will get heated up running the cattle and die."

"You're the most cheerful cuss I ever saw," said Hayward.

A man was riding from the big house higher on the hill, the tapaderos on his stirrups so long they kept kicking up puffs of dust. He forked a finely-chiselled black stallion that had a gait like a dance, swinging the rider from side to side in the saddle. He was a hawk-faced young man with a lean, supple line to his body, wearing a fancy charro vest and a pair of tight, fringeless leggins they called chivarras.

"This will be Pio Tico, our *jinete,*" said Sombrio.

"Jinete?"

"Yes," said El Sombrio. "A *jinete.* A man who rides the green horses till they no longer wish to buck. Pio Tico is a rough-string rider. He will break his neck one of these days."

Pio Tico had reached them now, halting his fiddle-footing black. He leaned slightly from the saddle to look at Hayward, and the utter lack of humor in his dark, intense face struck Hayward. He straightened in the saddle, turning away carelessly as he spoke, the way he might dismiss a peon. Hayward looked to Sombrio for a translation.

"He says they're going out after mustangs today and Zacatas ordered a horse saddled for you. It's waiting down in the lower corral. I'm sorry to see it. You were a nice *muchacho.*"

It was a nondescript paint they gave him. The saddle was a high-cantled centerfire rig and he felt awkward in it at first. Zacatas came down from the big house with Ortiz Mateo. The *patron* of Rancho Mateo gave Hayward a single white-lipped glance, then put the spurs to his tall, flaxen-maned chestnut, and jumped her into a vicious gallop. Zacatas sidled his heavy-hocked dun into the paint, peering at Hayward's face. Then he threw back his head and laughed hoarsely.

"You're all right, *muchacho.* Not a man in Laguna could have sat a horse the day after a fight with me, and here you are, sitting on top like you never knew what it was to be hit by Zacatas." He clapped his hand on Hayward's shoulder, and the sincerity in his voice, and the heavy warmth

of the calloused palm through his shirt, made an indefinable feeling of friendliness surge up in Hayward despite himself. He realized, perhaps, it was a reaction from his utter loneliness, yet, somehow, more than that. "Carlotta has persuaded Ortiz their traditional hospitality extends to one insult," Zacatas went on, grinning. "He has promised not to kill you till the next time."

There were three other vaqueros beside the jinete, Pio Tico, and the cavalcade crossed the bottomlands of Laguna Valley riding through wild oats so tall Hayward could not see over them, flushing small bunches of antelope here and there. The bellow of wild blackhorns came through the waving oats once, before noon. Then they crossed the low hills through scrubby manzanita and greening chaparall. Hayward was used to the easy rocking motion of the centerfire rig by now, though the high cantle still bothered him, and he took a horseman's delight in the marvelous response even this old pinto cull gave to his slightest pressure on the bit. They dismounted a few minutes for a lunch of jerky and cold coffee carried in gum-pitched morrals slung from the saddle horn. Then they rode again, crossing the Sacramento River in late afternoon. The Sierras were within sight now, rising blue and misty beyond orchards of peach and apple. Born and bred to the saddle, these leathery vaqueros of Mateo's showed none of the exhaustion Hayward felt when they made night camp. Again it was jerked meat and coffee, heated this time over an open fire. They sat around smoking and talking in soft, Spanish voices after the meal, and Hayward went to sleep with that music in his ears.

HE rose before dawn so stiff Zacatas had to help him into the saddle, and they were off again. Gingko trees, and marestail, and carpets of gilias and mariposas appeared abruptly out of the morning mists, swirling in milky serpents about the horse's feet. They topped a ridge lined with lodgepoles and dropped into a broad valley shaped like an arrowhead, its pointed end running into sierras that rose five thousand feet above the floor.

"Good bunch of mustangs in here," Zacatas told him. "We ran this valley four-five years ago. Should have a new herd now. First we jump a couple of bunches to see which way they run. Always have a favorite getaway, see." He pointed to a spur ridge leading down into the valley from this higher, main ridge. "That was the one they took last time. They love an open ridge like that. Or a stand of cedars, maybe, ah?"

Mateo sent two of the vaqueros out to spot the horses, and the rest of them dismounted and eased their girths. By noon one of the men was back with news that a big herd was grazing in the bottoms of the creek.

"Cedars is right," Zacatas told Hayward. "Pablo says they ran north into a stand of incense cedars when he and Garcia jumped them. We'll build a trap in them trees."

They crossed the creek into the cedars, unslinging axes to get logs for the stockade. It was sweating, exhausting work, with Ortiz riding haughtily about on his chestnut directing them, and by nightfall they had the trap built, the corral itself set stockade style with a ripgut fence and reinforced brush, the wings extending a hundred yards down toward the creek. Leaving Pablo and Garcia at the trap, the rest of them lined down the slope, camping far to the south of where the horses had grazed in order not to leave scent or be seen. Hayward had the early morning hours, and he was rubbing his eyes sleepily when he spotted the first ghostly shapes drifting into the open down there, hock deep in milky ground fog swirling up to dissipate in the first heat of a rising sun. He felt an undeniable excitation as he silently woke Zacatas and the others. While they waited on this side, Pio Tico crossed the water. They could see his shadowy rise through the conifers on the opposite slope. Then he turned into an open patch and stood there a while. The first mustang to sight him raised its head; there was a general stir among the other wild ones, and they began to drift into the river, and across it. Pio crossed after them at an easy walk, pressing in a little closer. The mustangs began to bunch, and the first one broke into a trot.

The rising sun laid its first heat on Hayward's face. He licked dry lips, holding tight to his horse's noseband so it couldn't

whinny. Pio broke into a trot. The mustangs began to canter, taking a more definite direction now.

"Compadres," said Ortiz softly, and Hayward swung aboard amidst the creak of saddle leather, and the ground trembled as the herd finally broke completely in a wild dash up the slope toward those cedars, and Ortiz shouted, "Compadres!"

They had planted spooks along the path to the trap in case the horses tried to veer out of their usual breakaway. As Hayward appeared on their left flank, the leaders veered to the right, away from him. But a pair of chivarras Zacatas had tied onto a manzanita there spooked them, and they swerved back, whinnying wildly, eyes flashing, manes ruffling. Hayward's pinto could not keep up with Ortiz Mateo's chestnut, or with the herd, for that matter, and as he dropped back on the flank of the running animals, the leaders tried to cut away ahead of him. Mateo ran his chestnut into the open, head-on at the leaders, yelling and popping his quirt against his leggins, turning them back. He was running neck and neck with the first horse, with the right wing of the trap in sight. The crack of the quirt had a sound like a gunshot, and Hayward thought the noise was that. Then he saw that Ortiz' hand was up in the air, and it could not have been him hitting his leggins. At that same instant, Ortiz's horse stumbled and went to its knees, throwing him over its head. He rolled through the rank wheatgrass, and came to a stop, lying there, apparently stunned. From behind Hayward came Zacatas' shout.

"Swerve them, Hayward, swerve them. He'll be trampled."

THE leaders of the herd had been running single file, and had passed Ortiz to the right, but farther back, beside Hayward, the file became a big bunch, and Hayward saw that in another moment the left flank of that spreading bunch would be crosing the ground where Ortiz lay. With a wild shout, Hayward necked his pinto over. He had not realized how abruptly the paint would respond to such a vicious jerk on that bit, and was almost thrown as it cut sharply into the running horses. Hayward's leg mashed into the lathered flank of a dun, most of its winter coat still on, rubbing it off in hairy clumps as his knee bumped constantly into the hot animal. He kept neck-reining his pinto hard to the right, forcing the dun over into a piebald, closing them up as they charged into the cedars. There mght have been twenty yards left between him and where Ortiz was stirring feebly on the ground, and he felt the herd giving before his constant fight, and knew he would have them over far enough to miss Ortiz in another moment, when he heard the shot from somewhere above, and felt the paint stumble. There was a cedar looming up ahead and if he had jumped free that way he would have gone head first into it. There was only one other way left.

With a grunt, he kicked free of the stirrups and threw himself from the falling paint, landing belly down across the dun's hairy back. The horse screamed in wild panic, and he caught the mane in his face, jerking a leg over till he was astride. Then he could see Ortiz directly ahead of him.

He lifted his foot to kick the piebald on his right in the face, wrapping his arms around the dun's neck and jerking all his weight over on its right side at the same time. The piebald neighed in pain, jerking away from that flailing boot. The dun stumbled, forced to turn part way to the right to keep from being pulled off its feet by the sudden shift of Hayward's weight there. He didn't see Ortiz as he went by, for he was on the off-side. But one wild glance backward gave him the sight of Ortiz still crouched there, staring after Hayward in a dazed way, the path the dun had cut through the wheatgrass coming within a foot of Ortiz's right hand, where it supported him on the ground

The dun was too frantic now to do anything but run straight ahead in a wild charge along with the rest of the herd, and bumping and ramming into the piebald and the other horses on his right. Hayward was carried into the wings of the trap. He stifled the instinctive impulse to throw himself on the ground, knowing the chances of being trampled in that ever narrowing enclosure. Behind him he could hear the vaqueros yelling and screaming, really going wild on the tail of the herd now that it was inside the wings to make sure nothing turned it in the last instant.

Still grasping the dun's mane in both

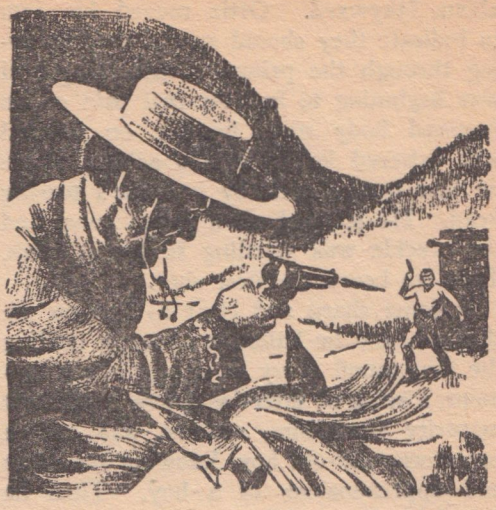
hands, Hayward was carried through the narrow gate into the stout cedarpost corral, smashing wildly into the tight press of horses already there. The bunch inside were milling in a circle, whinnying and rearing and tossing their heads, and once Hayward went down here he would be through. Caught here, now, with the strange creature still clinging to its back, the dun went crazy. It tried one abortive buck, but the tight-pressed herd all about it prevented anything like that; then it reared up over a black, kicking and pawing with its front feet and tossing its foam-flecked head. Hayward slid down its back, his grip on the mane the only thing which prevented him sliding clear off. He could feel the quiver and surge of all the wild muscle beneath him. The dun began thrashing back and forth wildly, slamming into the horses on either side. Hayward's legs were mashed and numb. Then he saw his last, desperate chance, and took it.

The circling bunch had carried him the closest to the outside he would ever get. He released his hold on the mane, pulling his legs from the press of hot, sweaty hides, and leaped across the black next to him. One foot struck the broad back of a mare, and gave him foothold to throw himself in a second spasmodic jump, his hands clawing at the top of the ripgut fence. He pulled himself over the stockade and fell to the ground outside. In another instant, hands were pulling him upward, and he heard Zacatas' harsh voice. *"Valgame Dios,* that was a ride I never forget. Where did you learn to fork a *caballo* like that, *Juanito?* You'd make a first-class jinete. Hell no, an amanzador. I been waiting for a *muchacho* like you to come along. I never seen anybody do it like that. I never see a man take a wild one naked like that without even a reata, not even an Indio. You all right, *Juanito,* you all right, you crazy *muchacho?"*

"Sure," he mumbled. "All right . . ."

He rose to see that Pablo and Garcia had shut the gate on the herd. Ortiz was coming toward Hayward and Zacatas in a stumbling walk, shaking his head.

"Are you just going to stand there gabbling," he said shrilly. "Get me a horse. We're going after them. Get me a *caballo—"*



IT finally came out that Pablo and Garcia should guard the corral while Hayward and Ortiz used their horses. As they worked up the slope out of the cedars, Zacatas pulled one of his Warner Navies from his belt, offering it to Hayward. It was a big, heavy, side-action gun with two triggers, yet it had a good hang. Ahead of them, just before they pulled from the trees, Pio Tico swung off his black, kicking at sign in the earth. With Zacatas, Hayward turned in the saddle to look back downward.

"They sure had a good range from here," muttered Zacatas. "They could see the whole slope below the corral clear down to the creek. Maybe they was aiming to hit the *patron* with that first shot, but when they hit his horse and saw how he'd be trampled by the herd, it was just as good. Then when you started swerving the herd, they didn't take a chance of missing by trying for you. They shot your pinto. If you hadn't been so quick, the herd would have trampled the *patron* anyway, ah? *Sacramento!"* As they passed the spot where the rifleman had stood, Zacatas twisted in a frettish way, his face black, muttering, "Ah, the fools!"

Hayward looked at him, not understanding. "What?"

"Alla, alla," called Pio Tico, and they followed his pointing finger to movement up near timberline. They dismounted and hitched their horses, working up through yellow pine that rapidly gave way to Jeffrey and red firs. The pungent scent of decayed wood common in a fir forest rose

about Hayward. Ortiz moved his arm to indicate they should spread out. Moving through the primal silence, Hayward was beginning to feel the real pain of his battered body now, limping on bruised and battered legs, his ribs aching where he had been struck by a horse's tossing head. He stepped on a fallen cone, and the crackle was startling in the stillness. Then he heard the first shot.

It came sharp and clear to him on the thin air, and he halted a moment, holding the two-pound Navy in sight. For a moment, a sense of utter loneliness wiped that maturity from him, and he was only a seventeen-year-old boy, knowing the fears and apprehensions of a boy. Then he licked his lips and began to move upward again, almost angrily. He reached timberline and searched the talus above him, hesitant about exposing himself; there was no movement and he guessed the man had topped the ridge. He went to his belly and squirmed out of the timber in a fissure. A cold breeze swept this height, but Hayward was sweating profusely by the time he reached the ridge. Lying there, he looked down into the timber on the opposite slope, searching for some movement. He sensed it, behind him, more than saw it. Still on his belly against the hard rock, he turned around. The man was still on the slope Hayward had come up. Evidently he had staked his horse there at timberline and dropped down to do his shooting from the cedars on foot, fearful a whinny from the animal would give him away. Lying there, screened from below by a granitic uplift, what Hayward saw stopped his breath in him.

Zacatas had already seen the horse, and was moving in toward it. The other man had been working toward it through the hemlock, but had stopped when he saw Zacatas. He was already lifting his rifle when Hayward first sighted him. As in a trance, in that last instant, Hayward saw the sunlight run a silver sliver along the metal barrel. It was not even a hundred yards, and Zacatas was totally unaware, and there would be no missing.

"Zacatas," screamed Hayward, leaping up and throwing himself down the slope, "Zacatas," and his shoes struck loose talus and he slid into an avalanche of his own making straight toward the man at timberline, "Zacatas," and his bellowing Navy drowned his own screams as he fired. The man had whirled with the rifle, and the gun jerked upward, exploding toward the sky as Hayward's slug struck him. Hayward slid into him before the man could fall.

They rolled on down the slope, crackling through cones and mashing soft snowplant beneath them. The man was a sweaty, stinking peon in greasy chivarras and a flapping blanket worn poncho style over his filthy torso. Hayward's slug must have taken him in the shoulder, for his poncho was soaked with blood there.

"Bribon," he gasped, clawing with dirty, broken nails at Hayward's face, *"bribon!"*

Hayward slugged at him with the gun, stopped their rolling as he came up, straddled the man. He jerked the Warner up to slug the stunned peon once more. The crash of someone running down through the timber above came to him while he still held the gun up, and then the shots. The peon jerked beneath Hayward, emitting a sick little gasp each time a bullet struck. Once. Twice. Three times.

Zacatas tried to stop himself, catching at Hayward to keep from falling, and stood there swaying, breathing heavily, his smoking Warner in his hand. Hayward got up, looking stupidly from the dead man to Zacatas.

"You didn't need to do that," he said. "You could see I had him. You didn't need to kill him."

Zacatas turned toward Hayward, his face twisted with some idefinable emotion, and his voice came out harsh, cracked: "Didn't I?"

Then Mateo and Pio Tico came puffing up from below. Mateo's face turned pale as he saw the peon; he turned the man over with his foot, staring at him.

"Is he one of them?" Mateo almost whispered.

"Yes," said Zacatas, with a weary sigh. "I suppose he is."

Hayward frowned at Zacatas. *"Hermanos del Noche?"*

III

HOLLYHOCKS filled the warm spring night with their scent in front of the verandah at Rancho Mateo, and the soft

yellow rectangle of light from the open doorway silhouetted the wide adobe arches supporting the tiled roof. Somewhere down among the huddle of peons' huts, El Sombrio was playing on his flute. A horse nickered softly from the adobe-walled corrals.

It was several days after they had brought the herd of wild horses back to the rancho, and Hayward stood now in the fragrance of the apricot orchard on one flank of the house, having walked up from the corrals. He heard a sharp, high voice from inside the house; then Carlotta Mateo formed her silhouette in the doorway momentarily, a white lace mantilla falling from a high comb in her hair about her shoulders. Her cream colored skirts of ruffled satin made a soft rustle across the verandah. Hayward drew back into the trees as she stepped off the flagstones.

"You do not need to hide, *señor,*" she said. "I saw you coming up from the corrals."

He stood there without speaking, his breath coming faster as she moved toward him. She stopped before him, looking up, and the light caught for a moment across the liquid flash of her big eyes. Her perfume enveloped him, faintly, filling him with a heady excitation.

"Fighting with your brother again?" he said.

"There was a time when Rancho Mateo could boast strong men in its house. Today there's only a hotheaded young fool without the courage to frighten a mouse." She shrugged irritably, then raised her face to him again. "Why did you come?"

"Maybe I wanted to see you," he said.

He saw her mouth open, as if she did not understand, at first, and then her laugh came, light and tinkling. "You're only a boy."

The taunt made him rash. "Zacatas said you were only nineteen."

She laughed again, but there was a different note to it now, more coquetry than amusement, more invitation than rebuke. She reached up a scarlet-tipped finger, running it cross his chest; it caused him to stiffen, sucking in a breath.

"You *are* big, aren't you?" she murmured. "And strong. Zacatas was telling us the thrilling things you did. That's the kind of men we need at Rancho Mateo. Not whining women like Ortiz. I wish I had seen it. Maybe Zacatas is right. You are more of a man than most boys at seventeen."

"Two years isn't much difference, Carlotta. You don't know how I've wanted to see you like this. Watching you ride down to the corrals, catching only glimpses of you at a distance. You don't know how I've wanted to—" he stopped abruptly. He had bent forward in a youthful eagerness, reaching out to touch her, his face flushed. But something in her eyes had caught him up. She was looking up at him in a waiting, breathless way, her lower lip dropped slightly, and he could see the effort she had been making to keep from smiling. He felt with a sharp stab his utter, callow youth, realizing what she had been doing. He dropped his arms, straightening up, the word coming out without much volition, more a remnant of what he was saying than anything else, a rather hopeless remnant. "Carlotta . . ."

"Don't be a *pendejo!*" There was some small contempt in her voice, and she turned from him, pulling her mantilla about her shoulders. "You're only a child. And even if you weren't— I've got suitors from here to Yerba Buena, a dozen, a hundred, rich, and sophisticated and important—why should I want a towheaded peon my brother picked up out of a wagon train?"

"Yeah," he said, toeing the ground. "I guess so."

THE reticence had returned to him, bringing back the maturity he had lost in his eagerness, and the new, heavy tone to his voice caused her to turn. He was still looking at the ground, and it gave him the appearance of some indifference. Perhaps that was what intrigued her, drawing speculation to her eyes.

"You're so strange," she said. "One minute you seem only a boy. The next—" she hesitated, then laughed ruefully.

He raised his head, drawing in a breath. "That man who tried to kill your brother up in the Sierras. Brothers of the Night?"

The abruptness of it drew her up, and her face paled. She put her hand up to her mouth. For an instant, all the haughtiness and the aristocracy was gone, and it made him realize that nineteen was not so old, either.

"Who are they?" he said. *"Hermanos del Noche.* What does it mean? Zacatas tried to tell me they were a bunch of bandits. I get the idea that isn't the whole thing. Your brother seems scared stiff of them. What's going on around here, Carlotta? I felt it the first night I came."

"Bandidos?" she said, and threw back her head slightly to laugh, and it held a hint of hysteria. "That's funny."

"Then they aren't?"

"Of course not." There was heating anger in her voice. "Revolutionists would be better. Murderers. Ever since Mexico overthrew Spanish rule it's been going on. In Mexico proper most of the rich landowners who had held power under the Spanish government, were overthrown, their lands confiscated. It didn't touch us so deeply up here, it didn't change our life much. You see we still live the same way we have for fifty years. Some of the alcaldes up here, the mayors with Spanish affiliation were withdrawn, true enough, and there was a big upset in the army, but as far as the *hacendados* went, it stayed the same. At least on the surface. But ever since the Revolution, this movement has been growing. Among the peons in the towns mostly. Yerba Buena, Monterey, Los Angeles. I suppose *Hermanos del Noche* have some connection with the original *revolucionarios* Iturbide organized in '22 down in Mexico, I don't know. Probably many of the *Hermanos* were in the revolution. Now they've drifted up here."

"But why should you fear them so?"

She raised her head defiantly. "We don't fear them!"

"I've seen it."

"Ortiz is a weak fool. I told you," she flamed.

"Not only Ortiz," he said.

"We don't fear them!"

"Even yourself. I saw it. Why, Carlotta?"

Her anger drew it from her. "I told you why. They resent the *hacendados* here. The revolution didn't touch Alta California like it did Mexico. We haven't changed enough to suit them. They're all around us. Especially these last years. My father was killed by them. It's spreading. No telling where they might be, or who. Our next door neighbor. One of our jinetes. Everywhere you turn it's all you hear. *Hermanos del Noche.* Murder. Burning. Pillage. Never in the towns. Only on the ranchos. Only the landowners. If we don't stamp them out soon they'll be an army, they'll have enough strength to strike in force. You know what happened in Mexico. Father was there; he told me. We wouldn't have a chance. And they're all around us—"

It was her brother coming out onto the verandah that stopped her. He swayed a little, catching at one of the arches, peering into the apricot grove.

"Carlotta?"

"I'm coming in."

"Who's that with you?" Ortiz came on out, and the way he walked, Hayward could tell he had been drinking. He stopped in the trees behind Carlotta, blinking at Hayward. "You!"

The girl moved in front of Hayward with an instinctive, defensive gesture. "Ortiz, please, he was just—"

"He was just coming up to see you," snarled Ortiz, and shoved her aside. "You insolent dog. You know where you belong. You thought you'd come up and make love to my sister? A puling baby like you? That would almost make me laugh if it wasn't such an insult. By what right? By what right do you even raise your eyes to her? No more than one of my peons. I told you what would happen the next time."

"Ortiz, please, remember he saved your life—"

"I told you what would happen the next time." Ortiz' eyes were slits in his white face, and his voice had raised till it was almost a shriek, and he lifted his right hand, and Hayward saw what he held in it. Then it was the voice, coming from just outside the trees, stopping Mateo who had a long Spanish duelling pistol, pointed at Hayward.

"Patron," said Zacatas, "if you harm one yellow hair of that boy's head, I'll kill you!"

IV

RUSSET dust hung heavy above the cedarpost collars and the shouts of the vaqueros echoed flatly on the thick heat of the spring afternoon. It was the day after Hayward had met Carlotta up in the apricot grove, and the youth leaned on the second

As the buckskin veered, Hayward found himself wondering what it would feel like to be dragged to death.

rung of the corral, peering beneath the top one to watch the men work the horses. Zacatas was out in the middle of the corral performing things with a sixty foot reata of plaited rawhide that Hayward would never have believed possible. He had seen enough roping in Texas, but never anything like this. Pio Tico had just sunned his moccasins off a wild bucker, and the animal was romping across the corral away from where the jinete had fallen. Zacatas turned completely around till his back was toward the horse, and had his loop built by that time, and flirted the rope over his shoulder without much apparent concern. The long rawhide leaped toward the running bronc in a figure-eight loop, the upper half snaking around his neck, the lower half catching both his forefeet. Zacatas was still faced away from the animal when it went down. He slacked up on his rope as a pair of vaqueros ran to the kicking horse with short tie-ropes they called peales, and when they had the animal hog-tied, Zacatas sent another flirt down his slack reata that lifted both loops of the figure eight off the horse. Coiling his rope, he walked over toward Hayward.

"I bet you never see anything like that in Texas, ah?" grinned the amanzador, striking his chest. "I am the best roper in Alta California. No, in the world. In

all the world there is no roper like me, ah?" He stepped through the bars, nodding at the horse they were allowing to rise now. "That one was what we call a *mangana de cabra.* Few can do it facing the animal. Nobody but me can do it backward. I am the best in the world."

And the funny part about that, thought Hayward, he probably was. "You sort of put your neck out for me last night," said the youth.

"You saved my life up there in the Sierras, didn't you? Anway, Ortiz was too drunk last night to remember this morning." He finished coiling the reata, turning to Hayward. "Besides, I couldn't let him kill such good material. I been waiting a long time for a *muchacho* like you, Juanito. I thought Pio Tico had the makings of a good amanzador, and I sort of had him under my wing, but that ride you took up in the Sierras tops anything Tico ever did. It's one thing to stick a bucker when you've got a saddle under you; it's another to stay on a bare animal without even so much as a rope around his nose. Most every amanzador has a protégé or two. How you like to learn about horses the right way?"

Hayward looked at him a moment, realizing the honor of this. *"Bueno,"* he said finally. *"Mucho bueno."*

Zacatas threw back his head to emit that roaring laugh. "Already he's learning the language."

"It's more than just being a ramrod—" Hayward made a vague gesture with his hand, trying to express it— "I mean the way they look at you here, at an amanzador—"

"Oh, *si, si,* an amanzador is not a foreman the way you know one in *Los Estados Unidos,"* said Zacatas. "Much more than just rodding a bunch of *loco* vaqueros and seeing the wrangler turns out his *caballado* every morning. Thirty, under ordinary circumstances, isn't considered old, but in this business, it is. After a man spends ten-fifteen years as a jinete, working the rough string, his sinews and bones and muscles just won't take the beating a jinete has to go through every day. So, if he's had enough experience, and if he has the innate talent necessary, he becomes an amanzador, gentling the already broken horses, training them, polishing them off. In California that's a very different process than you're used to in Texas. We don't just take out a green horse and ram a snaffle bit in his mouth and start running cattle with him. It takes two-three years to turn out a good horse here, but when we pronounce him finished, you know you got a real horse. It takes an infinite amount of patience and experience and *sabe.* Not every jinete makes an amanzador. And a good amanzador, even in this country of amanzadors, is exceedingly rare." He struck his chest. "And I am the best amanzador in Alta California."

He turned to call Pio Tico over, then looked back to Hayward. "I guess you'd call jinetetiando bronc-busting, and you got to be tops in that before I'll let you polish off any broke horses. I've already asked Pio to pick out a green *caballo* for you from that bunch we trapped last week. I got to go up to the house about some missing cattle. I want to see you jinetetiando when I get back."

HAYWARD had not lived near enough to the Texas border to have a fluent command of Spanish, and Pio Tico's English was bad, and added to this, Hayward sensed a strange, sullen resentment in the lean young jinete, all of this lending to as little talk lost between them as possible. Without speaking, Pio indicated the horse they had chosen for Hayward, a buckskin they called a bayo coyote. It stood only about fifteen hands high, and because of this, an inexperienced hand might have catalogued it as a small horse, underestimating its weight by several hundred pounds. But it must have had Quarter blood in it, because the hocks were broad and massive and prodigiously muscled, and despite its lack of height, it must have packed a good twelve hundred pounds. Pablo was one of the vaqueros who had gone into the Sierras with them, a bow-legged, pot-bellied little man with sleepy eyes and bucolic lips, and he looked at Tico as they neared.

"This one?" he said.

The jinete looked at Pablo. *"Si.* This one."

Hayward glanced at Pablo, then Tico. "What does he mean, 'this one'?"

"Nothing," Tico said impatiently. "Nothing."

"Nothing?" Hayward looked from Pablo to Tico, trying to see what had passed between them. Then he tugged at the hair rope which apparently sufficed for the reins. He had never seen such a headstall before. "What kind of rig is this? You haven't even got a bit in his mouth."

Pablo bent forward dully. "What?"

"A bit, a bit," said Hayward, pointing at the horse's mouth.

"Oh, *el pedazo,*" nodded Pablo, then shrugged. "It is not necessary, *señor.*"

Pablo pulled on the hair rope and Hayward was surprised to see how quickly the horse responded. He had some dim memory of his father telling him how the Californio's never put a bit in their horses' mouth the first three years, yet he still felt little trust of the jaquima. He worked the rope again several times, noting its apparent efficiency; then he glanced at Tico once more, running his hand over the quivering, twitching musculature of the hindquarters. They held the horse with a blind over its eyes, and there was a collected, waiting potency to the animal that challenged Hayward. Finally he stepped back and let his belt out a notch so he would not pinch a gut if he got twisted wrong. He slipped a foot in the stirrup, grasping the high pommel to swing his other leg about a foot off the ground experimentally. The horse stiffened, but apparently it was saving all its jumping for after he was on. The next time he swung his foot off it was for good.

He hit leather grabbing for the reins, feeling the horse bunch itself beneath him. Pablo waited for his nod, then tore the blind loose and jumped back. From the corner of his eye, Hayward caught sight of Zacatas coming down from the main house in a hard run, and in that last instant before the bayo coyote boiled over, heard the amanzador's shout.

"*Hola,* Pio, not that one, not that *caballo,* he'll wipe the *muchacho* off."

Then twelve hundred pounds of buckskin fury was erupting between Hayward's legs. He bogged his head and started bucking straight away. After Zacatas' shout, Hayward had been looking for some tricky work, but the animal just high-poled in long jumps, heading for the other side of the corral. The reddish dust boiled up in clouds about Hayward, through which he caught an instant's glimpse of Zacatas crouching through the fence to one side, and Pio standing on the inside, and a pair of vaqueros running away from the animal's route toward the corner pole. It was almost too easy. Hayward had ridden enough buckers to take the jar without too much effort, his upper body bowed over legs clamping in at the knees as the horse banged down with all four feet. Sucking in a breath as the buckskin drove up, Hayward set himself for the turn at the fence. It did not come when he expected it, and he was slightly off-balance as the horse went into its next cloud hunt, and while it was still in midair, he sensed what it meant to do. He threw himself violently to the inside as the horse swapped ends in midair, and it was the only thing which saved him. As it came down, the buckskin's flank struck the solid cedar rails of the corral, shaking the whole structure. If he had not been prepared, Hayward would have been slammed against the fence. As it was, with his weight toward the inside, he had swung his outside leg with the foot still in the stirrup clear over the slick roping horn of the saddle. If the horse had bucked again with him in that position, he would have gone off, but as soon as the horse had thrown himself against the fence that way, Hayward knew it wasn't bucking he had to worry about.

WHILE his leg was still thrown up in the air, Hayward put his left rein viciously against the side of the animal's thick, arched neck. The buckskin jerked momentarily away from the fence, but it bogged its head again and turned back, throwing itself into the cedar rails in a wild effort to wipe Hayward off. Again Hayward lurched to the inside, yanking his foot free of the stirrup this time in order to get his leg out of the way; his hip struck a post, numbing him, and he necked the horse again, in a desperation.

"He ain't broke to the bit yet," Hayward heard Zacatas shout. "He ain't trained to neck. Give it to him straight, Juanito, he'll wipe you off if you don't get him away from that fence."

Panting, Hayward hit the inside rein, pulling it away from the right side of the neck and then yanking back with a grunt.

He was now riding with his left foot out of the stirrup and his knee hooked up under the bronc roll in order to free that leg for getting it out of the way of the fence, and he almost lost the buckskin as his violent pull on the right rein caused the animal to whirl inward.

The buckskin tried to fight the jaquima back toward the fence, but now that Hayward had switched his reining, the horse could not help but respond somewhat. The youth fought it out into the open, where the buckskin began bucking again. Zacatas was running toward him from the other side, waving his arms.

"Sun your botas," he shouted, "take a fall. He ain't no *caballo* to break in the corral. He'll wipe you off the fence sure. Pio couldn't break him. He's killed a man that way already and broken another one up. Take a dive."

Hayward could see Pio Tico beyond Zacatas, standing outside the fence, and it filled him with a flaming anger, as he realized what the jinete had done this for. This one? Sure, thought Hayward savagely, this one. Pio couldn't break him? Hayward grew taut as the buckskin threw itself at the fence. If a man waited to see which way it spun against the fence so he'd know which leg to yank free, he might be too late. Hayward pulled his right rein out with a savage curse, yanking his left leg up at the same time. The buckskin whirled to the right, slaming its left flank against the corral. Again Hayward pulled on that inside right rein, the whole weight of his body thrown inward against it. With a wild, choked scream, the bayo coyote spun that way, the bosal so tight around its nose the flesh stood out white.

"Get off, Juanito, get off while you got the chance. He's going at the fence again—"

Pio couldn't break him? "I got him, Zacatas, I got him!"

Shouting it, Hayward sawed at the reins again. The horse was dripping dirty white foam from its nose and shoulders now, and Hayward's left leg was sopping with lather from working up and down on the buckskin's wet shoulder every time he lifted his leg to keep from having it smashed. There was a desperation to the way the animal started bucking now. It tried to catch Hayward off guard, its eye rolling white back toward him as it pulled a double shuffle and then crawfished. But Hayward had caught that glass eye, and his sense of balance lashed his supple torso toward the horse's rump as soon as he felt that backward buck begin. Failing to pull him into the fence that way, the coyote let out a crazed whinny and began to buck straight away across the corral. It had been a long ride and Hayward was feeling every jarring impact now, his breath erupting in a pained gust every time they hit, his knees trembling every time they relaxed an instant from their grip. His head began to roar, and he almost missed when the buckskin began to pioneer in the middle of the corral.

The beast bucked in circles and then figure eights, his feet never striking the ground in a straight line, and even with the violent agonized effort to staying on, Hayward felt a growing wonder at the incredible balance of the animal. It was always perfectly collected, in its wildest attempts to unseat him, shifting leads with amazing instinct, never unsupported in a spin or landing. He had been so intent on riding through the pioneering that he missed the buckskin's last, devilish windmill, and for that instant, his weight was off-center. It was what the beast had been waiting for. Sensing Hayward's loss, the buckskin threw itself at the fence. Hayward could not shift his own balance soon enough to determine which side the horse would hit on by reining, and thus could not lift his leg out at the same time he jerked on the reins. He had just snapped back into balance, his feet still in stirrups, when the buckskin slammed into the fence.

HAYWARD could have saved himself by throwing free, but the determination was too strong in him for that. He shouted with the agony of his leg smashing into the cedarpost, the horse's whole sweaty weight grinding it on in. Then, with his shout of pain still ringing in his ears, he pulled savagely on the inside rein. The buckskin spun away from the fence. It tried to turn back in, but Hayward kept jerking savagely on that rein. He had no feeling in his left leg now, below the knee, and could only grip consciously with his thigh. Forcing the buckskin into the

center of the corral again, he relaxed his upper body for its straightaway once more.

The horse hunted the clouds savagely, coming down in a pile-driver. Everything was spinning and roaring around Hayward now. He heard his own coughing exhalation every time the horse struck in one of those pile-drivers, all four legs stiff as pokers when it hit, jarring Hayward from toe to head. It seemed an eternity before the realization seeped through Hayward that the buckskin had not tried to head for the fence again, and the awful savage desperation to its pile-drivers gave Hayward a surge of hope. He clung grimly to the eruption of buckskin savagery, not daring to relax for one moment, his whole being inundated with the crashing shock of stiff-legged landings and the quiver and jerk of hot, lathered musculature and the choking acridity of the rising dust and the spinning sky and whirling corral-pattern.

Finally he came out of that mad nightmare to realize the horse had come down in its last pile-driver, and crow-hopped a couple of times toward one side of the corral, and then stopped, to stand there heaving and blowing, muddy lather dripping off its wet, gleaming hide, muscles quivering and twitching like dying snakes beneath the skin. Hayward slid off, hanging onto the horn with his face turned in toward the horn, and retched. He was bleeding from the nose, and he wiped that off with a dirty, sweating hand as he finally straightened. Zacatas and the others had reached him by then.

"Pio couldn't break him?" said Hayward.

"Madre de Dios," laughed Zacatas, beating Hayward on the back, *"Sacramento!* That was like the old days. I haven't seen a jinetiando like that since Iturbide had Oro Peso for a horse breaker. I thought you'd be killed sure. What a jinete you'll make. I thought he'd break you to pieces on that fence. What an amanzador. I thought—" He cut off abruptly, whirling on Pio Tico. His sensuous face contorted, diffused blood sweeping up to turn it dark, and without warning, he swung his arm around in a backhand blow that caught the young jinete full in the face, knocking him head over heels across the corral. Pio Tico rolled to a stop and lay inert there, the dust settling about him. "That's for giving the *muchacho* a killer to ride," he said, and then his arm lifted again, and before he realized Zacatas' intent, Hayward's vision exploded in stunning pain, and he felt himself falling backward beneath that backhand blow, and his body struck with a thud. "And that's for letting Pio pull such a trick on you," he heard Zacatas snarl, through a wave of pain. "What do you thing I am, your mother or something, that I should follow you around and tell you everything to do?"

V

THE first hint of summer came to Rancho Mateo with a sultry wave of heat, shimmering haze lying across the valley till late forenoon of the second day after Hayward broke the buckskin. He had spent most of his time recuperating in El Sombrio's hovel, where he had been given a pallet by the fire to sleep on. Sombrio's wife, Campeche, was squatting over the metate, grinding corn for tortillas. To make the dough which they called masa as white as the driven snow, Campeche picked the black base from each grain of corn with her teeth. Then the soft white masa, without salt, leavening or grease, was patted into thin tortillas and cast upon the comal over the open fire to bake.

"I stuffed the tamales with chicharonnes for you today," Campeche told El Sombrio when he came for the noonday meal.

"Cracklings?" said the Sad One. "That won't make the day any happier. The grapes will surely sour before they ripen this year, and leave us without wine for the next."

Used to Sombrio's gloomy prognostications by now, Hayward lounged against the open door. "Sad One," he said, squinting thoughtfully at the sun, "why should Pio Tico dislike me?"

"You mean trying to kill you on that bayo coyote the other day?" Sombrio took a succulent bite of tamale, dribbling rich juice unconcernedly down his chin. "We have had that buckskin here before. He got away from us a year ago, after killing one of our best jinetes and crippling another vaquero. When Tico saw him in the bunch you got last week, he knew what we had."

"But why?"

"Before you came," said Sombrio, "Zacatas was training Pio Tico to be an amanzador. You can understand Tico's jealously. It would behoove you to watch him, Juanito."

Hayward pursed his lips. "I will, Sombrio. I will."

Following the siesta after lunch, Zacatas appeared at the door, belching casually from the usual excess of frijoles.

"You feel good enough to go back with the horses?" Zacatas asked him. "You're going to be an amanzador, we got no time to waste." They went down and turned the bayo coyote out into the lower corral. Zacatas drew Hayward over to the fence to talk, watching the action of the animal as it trotted around the enclosure, keeping a safe distance from them. "I knew if anybody could ever break that cimarron, they'd have a real horse," the amanzador told Hayward. "You must have felt how collected he was when you rode him. Never lost his balance, never a wrong lead. Gentle him and train and polish him right and he'll make the best cutting horse Rancho Mateo ever had. You took the bucking out of him the other day and he's broke now, and that makes him ready to be turned over to the amanzador. Instead of taking him myself, I'm going to let you have him. I'll show you how to put him through every stage of training. He's marvelous material. How he turns out depends on what kind of an amanzador you make. Let's begin, ah?"

Zacatas got a reata off the top rail and forefooted the buckskin. Then, while Hayward tied a bandana over the horse's eyes and saddled him up, Zacatas got the jaquima de domar.

"This is the starting hackamore," he told Hayward. "It's what you had on him the other day. I know you're used to riding a bitted horse when you're busting it. A Californio would rather die than do that. You're just a liable to tear the poor *potro's* mouth to pieces, and if he had the makings of a good cow horse, you've ruined him right there. A colt's mouth and bars ain't mature enough when he's this age. You ever see a jaquima de domar before like this? This horsehair rope we use for the reins is called the mecate. The bozal is the noseband. It takes place of the bit. You see how the mecate is attached to the bosal. You don't have to pull hard on the mecate to cut off his wind. That's the control. We'll just do a bit of starting any stopping this afternoon, ah?"

"You going to leave this lead rope on?" said Hayward.

"That is the fiador," said Zacatas. "You'll see how it works."

The buckskin hunched itself as Hayward got on, and he was set for anything that might come. Zacatas removed the blind and stepped back, the fiador coiled in his hand; the buckskin stood there a moment, quivering. Finally Zacatas nodded, and Hayward touched the buckskin with his heels. The bayo coyote started, but did not move forward.

"Now you see the fiador," said Zacatas. "Touch him again."

AGAIN Hayward heeled the animal; this time Zacatas gave a small tug on the fiador, still attached to the bosal. The horse responded to the pull, walking forward. After a half dozen repetitions of this, the horse was responding to Hayward's heels, and Zacatas did not need to pull from the front with the lead rope. After Hayward had walked the horse around the corral once on that last start, Zacatas called to stop him. The youth gave a slight pull on the mecate and was surprised at the quick response, the horse's head snapping up as it came to a startled halt.

"Too heavy on the reins," shouted Zacatas. "Keep pulling him that way and you'll have a head tosser. *Valgame Dios!* I never saw such a terrible reinsman. You got muttonchops for hands? Slack up, you. You ain't fit to rein a blind mule."

Hayward flushed under the rebuke; he had always been considered a light-handed rider. He slacked up, put his heels into the animal again. They spent the rest of the afternon that way, and Hayward soon realized what an exacting teacher he had; his slightest mistake elicited a storm of rebuke, and several times he was sure Zacatas would pull him off the horse

"No, no, get that mecate away from his neck. You ain't doing any turning today. *Barba del diablo,* do I have to get up there and show you. No necking him. You're giving him more bad habits in one day than Pio could think up in a lifetime. Oh,

Madre de Dios, why did I ever pick such a stupid barrachon as you. Sombrio himself could do better than this. Oh, *caramba . . .*"

It was how the summer passed away. An hour every morning and an hour every evening Hayward worked the buckskin, learning why the fiador was so long, and how to make the falsarienda by taking wraps on the jaquims, learning a myriad of facts and tricks about this strange method of training a horse. And gradually, as both he and the horse developed, Hayward came to realize what a master Zacatas was, and why an amanzador was given such infinite respect on the ranchos. Now there were no more apricots on the trees up by the main house, and the cornfields were nothing but rows of brown shucks in the sun, and the spring calves were weaning and growing into gawky long-legged atrocities that shied and bawled in the dry grass of the creekbottoms. Ortiz and Carlotta spent the heat of the summer in Monterey, and did not return till late September. Though Hayward had no relatives in the States, there had been several men in Yerba Buena his father knew, and Zacatas had ridden twice to the city inquiring for them. Hayward found himself almost glad at the amanzador's failure to find these men; the youth was beginning to feel as if he belonger to this land, now, and would have hated to leave it. A pair of chivarras had replaced the jeans, and he wore one of Sombrio's old charro jackets over a white cotton shirt Campeche had made for him, and with a tattered sombrero hiding his long blond hair, he might have passed for one of the vaqueros to the casual glance. He was working the buckskin in the corral the afternoon of Carlotta's return, and did not notice she had gotten a ride in Sombrio's creaking two-wheeled carretta till it had pulled up outside the fence.

She jumped out of the hay-filled back, dressed in a simple camisa and short skirt, and Hayward pulled the buckskin up, feeling a strange breathlessness as he saw her stoop through the bars.

"It's been so long since I've seen you," she said.

Memory of that night in the apricot grove filled him with that reticence. "Did you want to?"

"Want to what?"

"See me."

She laughed. "Of course. Why do you think I came down here?" She tossed her head in a quick, feminine way that caught at him, and shaded her eyes against the sun to look up at his figure across the corral. *"Santa Maria,* I think you're even getting bigger. I'll bet you couldn't get into the shirt you came here with now. You must be eating like a pig."

"I'm not fat."

She giggled, pleased that it taunted him, then sobered. "You're heavier, anyway. You'll be a man soon."

"I'm eighteen now."

"Are you? And the quebrantado? He's growing up, too. Zacatas said you named him Cimarron. Outlaw, hm? That's *bueno.* Let's see."

Hayward could not help the pride he felt at the horse's instant response to the slightest shift of his reins. But before he had reached her, Zacatas was stooping through the corral fence, coming up behind her with a grin.

"He's getting a beautiful *caballo* there, no, Carlotta? Where is our *patron?"*

Carlotta tilted her dark head northward. "Monterey made Ortiz restless. He left on a hunting trip with Pablo as soon as we arrived today."

A strange look took the grin off Zacatas' face. "Not the Sierras."

Carlotta turned toward him, her eyes darkening. *"Si,* why not. Zacatas, what is the matter?"

"Get off the horse," Zacatas shouted at Hayward, shoving the girl aside. *"Pronto,* you burro. Mine isn't saddled."

HAYWARD'S reactions were too slow to suit Zacatas; the amanzador grabbed him and pulled him off the buckskin, jumping onto the animal without bothering to find the stirrups, booting it into a gallop toward the gate. Carlotta ran after him, choking in the dust.

"Zacatas, what are you doing, what is it?" she cried. He had to stop the horse to lean out and drop the bar, and she reached him and pulled at his charro coat. "Zacatas, will you tell me what it is?" The twisted look he sent down at her stiffened the girl. Hayward was running toward them by then, and he saw the horror come into Carlotta's face. Her voice was hollow.

"Zacatas, not that, you don't mean that, you can't . . ."

"Maybe I can stop him in time," said Zacatas. "He hasn't got a very big start on me."

He dropped the bar and crossed it and broke into a hard gallop down into the valley. The girl stared after him, her eyes wide and filled with a growing fear, and Hayward was close enough to make out the soundless words her lips formed.

"Hermanos del Noche."

The dust filled Johnny Hayward's mouth with a bitter acrid taste as he trotted the mare he had been using for cow work up to the verandah of the main house, leading the skittish little pinto he had cut out for Carlotta. She was already clattering across the flagstones, having changed her skirt for buckskin leggins, carrying one of Ortiz' percussion Colts in her hand. Sombrio and Campeche and several other servants had gathered, and the Sad One wrung his hands in front of Carlotta.

"Please, *señorita,* you cannot do this. Whatever is happening, Zacatas will take care of. Your good father would be horrified to see you dressed this way, and with a gun. *Madre de Dios,* what is *el mundo* coming to when our young girls put on pants and go out shooting up the country like some crazy young hidalgo. You will come to no good end, *señorita.* Reconsider, I implore you—"

"He's my brother, isn't he?" she flamed, shoving past him and ripping open a flap of the alforjas on her saddle, shoving the Colt into the saddlebags. Hayward thought he had never seen her looking so beautiful as she mounted with a lithe swing to her hips, her face flushed beneath the defiant toss of her blue-black hair, her eyes flashing like a ringy mare's. She had put on a pair of hand-tooled boots and the spur-chains tinkled as she swung her cartwheels to rake the pinto. The little horse almost jumped from beneath her, and Hayward put his own mare into a gallop, Sombrio running down the road after them, still wringing his hands and calling.

They took the north road out of the valley, neither saying much. He could remember how they had ridden through oats so tall it topped a horsebacker that spring; now the fields were nothing but a desolate stubble. It filled him with a strange foreboding.

They topped the highest of the rolling hills surrounding Laguna Valley and dropped down the other side, out of the oppressive heat of the lowlands now, with a slight breeze ruffling Carlotta's long hair and flapping Hayward's sombrero. They had pushed their horses from Rancho Mateo in hopes of catching Zacatas, but on the high ground they could still not sight him, and Carlotta dropped her horse into a trot. Hayward had rarely seen a woman who could sit a trot that way for very long, but the girl kept her horse at the pace all through the afternoon with as little sign of tiring as a hand hardened to sixteen hours a day in the saddle would have shown. When Hayward had not been working the horses, he had been running cattle with the other vaqueros, but as inured as he was to the saddle, he was beginning to feel the strain when they reached the Sacramento River. Here they halted at a small cluster of adobe jacales just off the road, forlorn, degraded little shacks of white mud walls and brush roofs, a sagging cottonwood corral holding a bunch of ratty burros. Squalling children scattered the clucking, scratching chickens, running from the front door of a house, and after them came a shambling brute of a man, his unkempt mane of black hair shot with iron grey, falling about his massive shoulders. His small glittering eyes held a sullen antipathy as he stopped before the horses.

"Oso," said the girl, "my brother came by here sometime today or yesterday on his way to the Sierras. Zacatas was following him. How far behind them are we?"

Several other peons had gathered about them, dirty, ugly looking men in flapping white pantaloons. One of them held a big machete.

"I owe no allegiance to your *patron,*" said Bear sullenly.

"I didn't ask you that," said Carlotta, and then the trying ride and her fear and her rising anger must have gotten the better of her, because she stiffened in the saddle, lashing out at him hotly. "Will you give me a straight answer, you bribon. How long ago did my brother pass through here and which way was he headed?"

Oso grabbed her bridle. "Don't call

me names, *señorita.* You got no rights over me. You ain't my *patron.* I'm a free man."

HAYWARD realized then why these men had seemed different; it was the first time he had come into contact with peons not attached to a large *estancia.* El Sombrio and the others at Rancho Mateo were undoubtedly as poor as these villagers, yet they possessed a dignity, lacking here, an indefinable superiority. Hayward had never heard El Sombrio or Pablo declare their freedom, though they were as free as this man, legally. Oso's monotonous repetition struck Hayward as defensive.

"Let go my bridle, you *maldito,*" shouted Carlotta.

"You ain't my *patron,*" snarled Oso, yanking down on the bridle. Hayward tried to boot his horse so it would force the man to release his hold and run between him and Carlotta's animal, but Carlotta bent down before the mare jumped, whacking at Oso with her quirt. The peon with the machete shouted something and leaped at the girl. She was bent forward on the off-side of her horse and she couldn't see the man and Hayward saw where that bright blade would cleave her and knew what he had to do. With a grunt he left his horse, his belly scraping the rump of her horse as he threw himself across behind her. He hit the man with all his weight while that big knife was coming down. Hayward wedged his right shoulder in the peon's left armpit, partly aborting the man's attempt to strike him with the machete. Then he drew back his fist, still sprawled on top of the man, and brought it down on the man's face with all his strength.

When Hayward regained his feet, Carlotta was no longer on her horse. The two animals were leaping and rearing and whinnying in the bunch of peons, and Hayward caught sight of a little hand-tooled boot on the ground, amidst the shifting legs of the men, its heel pointed toward him. With a cracked yell he threw himself at them.

Oso was the only Californio in the group who matched Hayward's size. Hayward towered above the first man he caught. He grasped the man by his long hair in one great sunburned fist, swinging his whole body with the arc of his arm. The man flew through the air, landing with a thud ten feet behind Hayward, and already Hayward was tearing at the others. Three more men were coming from the jacales, and Hayward grabbed one of the men already here by the crotch and the arm, lifting him bodily into the air and heaving him into the other three. They went down in a shouting, scrambling heap. There was one peon left beside Oso now, and Hayward whirled to put a bony set of knuckles into his face as he leaped. The man stopped like a poled ox, hung there a moment, fell backward into Oso. Oso caught him, dropped him aside, and came for Hayward.

Before he met the man, Hayward could see what had happened to Carlotta. They must have pulled her off her horse into their midst, for she was crouching behind Oso where he had whirled to meet Hayward's rush, her hair down over her eyes, shirt ripped.

The two men met with a fleshy thud, Hayward slugging at Oso's thick middle, feeling the sloppy resilience of flesh give beneath his blow. Oso's gasp was hot in Hayward's face, then the man's thick arms were about him, the great, smooth biceps bunching against Hayward's ribs like contracting snakes.

"Now you will see, *señor,* why they call me Bear," said Oso.

Hayward sucked in a breath with the sharp pain of compressed ribs. He heard his tendons begin to snap and pop. Bright red spots exploded before his eyes. Oso's sweating, greasy face blurred in front of Hayward. Hayward writhed desperately in the man's grip, his great shoulders turning this way and that against the inexorable contraction of those massive arms. He sucked in another agonized breath, then relaxed abruptly, forcing his air out. It gave his body a certain shrinkage, enough to cause a slack in Oso's grip for that instant. Before Oso could catch up the slack, Hayward let one foot snake around behind the man, and jerked his body backward at the same time. Falling, he heard the boom of a gun somewhere behind him. Then he struck the earth, with the Bear's immense body coming down on top of him.

It stunned Hayward, but he had heard Oso's sick grunt. Falling back, he had let his free knee double up, and Oso's groin

had struck it with his whole weight. While the man sprawled across him, incapacitated, Hayward struggled dazedly from beneath. Oso made a feeble effort to roll over, clawing at Hayward's wooden-heeled boots. Hayward kicked him in the head, whirling to meet the shift of movement behind him, thinking it was the others. It wasn't.

CARLOTTA stood there, the smoking Colt in her hand. A man sat over by a jacal holding a bloody shoulder; the others were spread about her and Hayward in various attitudes of suspended motion. The man who had wielded the machete was just getting to his hands and knees, shaking his head. His face was covered with blood where Hayward had slugged him. It was while they stood there that the nicker of a horse came from behind the adobes. Carlotta whirled that way, started running for the houses. A woman in a flapping skirt scuttled out of her way, hugging a *niña* to her bosom. As Carlotta disappeared behind the hovel, the men started moving again. Hayward leaped to where the machete lay, scooping it up.

"Come on," he said in Spanish, "if you want to."

The man on his hands and knees had started to rise, and he settled back, staring at Hayward. One of the men Hayward had thrown was still flat on his back. The other four didn't do whatever they had meant to. Before Hayward could move toward the jacales, a chestnut trotted from between two of them, followed by Carlotta.

"I thought it sounded like his horse," she called. "I've heard that nicker so many times. It was tethered in back there. Hayward, Ortiz is here somewhere!"

"Where?" Hayward turned toward the men, asking it again, of them. "Where?" They stood there stupidly, shaking their heads, glancing from him to the girl. Hayward jumped to where Oso was rising, grabbing him by the shirtfront and swinging the machete up. "Bear, where is he? You've got him here? Where is Ortiz Mateo. I'll chop you in two, I swear—"

But the Bear only stared up at him in sullen rage, his face still twisted with the pain that knee in the groin must have caused him. Hayward's lips writhed back off his teeth, and for a moment he had the savage impulse to carry out his threat; then, with a disgusted snarl, he let go the man's shirt, shoving him away so hard Oso fell back to the ground. Carlotta was trying to force it out of the other men with the gun, but they would not answer. She whirled toward the jacales, and again the woman with the baby scuttled out of the way. Carlotta disappeared into the hovel, reappeared almost immediately. They were but one-room structures, and it only took her a moment to search the half-dozen of them. She was just coming out of the last one when Hayward saw the hay in the hair of one man, and it struck him. The thought sent him between the first two houses, still clutching the big knife. There was a haystack adjacent to the corral. He jumped the battered tongue of an old two-wheeled carretta and then stopped abruptly. Without getting near the stack, he circled it till he found a spot where the hay covering the ground about the main pile had been disturbed. He approached the stack from this direction. Carlotta's boots made their clatter behind him by this time, and he heard her jump the cart-tongue. He was already tearing at the hay when she reached him, and his first few handfuls exposed a boot of fine black leather. Carlotta gave a sick little gasp. Hayward reached on in, grasped the leg, pulled. Ortiz Mateo had been shot in the middle of his chest, and he was dead.

With the man lying in the open, Hayward turned to catch the girl as she burst out crying, burying her face against his chest. It was then the first peon appeared between the two jacales, and he had gotten a gun from somewhere.

"Carlotta," shouted Hayward, and his arms were still about her when he threw himself aside. The bullet went into the haystack where they had been standing. Hayward had torn the Colt from Carlotta's hand, and he fired over her body. It was an old Paterson .36, and it leaped in his hand with an incredible detonation that stunned his fingers. He saw the man stumble between the houses, and trip over the cart tongue, and fall that way, with his head on this side. Someone else began shooting from beyond the corral, and realizing the route to their horses was cut off, Hayward pulled the girl to her feet, guiding her toward the river where it

made a lazy turn behind the village.

"Got any more loads for this Colt?" panted Hayward, kicking his way through a scattering bunch of cackling hens.

"No," Carlotta told him, stumbling ahead. "I had some shot and balls in the alforjas. That's all."

THEY flushed a jackrabbit, breaking through the undergrowth above the cutbank, and it went bounding away in fright. Mesquite grew thick among the great cottonwoods and Hayward checked his gun as he crashed a way through it. It was a five shot percussion; the girl had used one, and he one. He glanced back at the running bunch of men spreading out as they came from the village. There were six or seven, Oso towering above the others. He grasped the girl's shoulder and pulled her faster through the broad, swart oaks growing in the loamy ground nearer the river. The water was broad here, and there would be no fording it. There would be no point running on down the bank; the men could follow as fast as they went, and close in as soon as the girl tired.

"Can you swim?" he panted at her, and when she nodded, "Keep under water as much as possible. Their bullets won't go very deep into it, and that will save you. I'll hold them here till you're across."

"No, Hayward, I can't leave you—"

"Do as I say!"

She cringed back from the savage tone of his voice. He knew an impulse to reach out and touch her, sorry for his brutality. Yet he realized it was probably the only thing which would make her go, so he hissed at her again. "Do you hear, me, damn you, do as I say?"

With a faint moan she slipped into the water. Once her head turned, and her eyes were big and dark on him; then she struck out. Hayward dropped down the loamy cutbank, his legs sinking into the water to the knees. The damp, foul odor of the black earth filled his nostrils, and the sting of chiggers from the grass began to penetrate his sweaty shirt. He slid farther down till only his head was above the bank. There was a crashing, and the man who had possessed the machete erupted from the mesquite into the open. The blood was dry and caked on his face, turning it to a ghastly mask. He stopped, and Hayward knew he must have seen Carlotta in the water. He shouted, and raised his gun. Hayward shot him in the chest.

Crouching there with the ivory grips of the Paterson sticky in his perspiring palm, Hayward waited a long moment before more crashing came from the trees. The man he had shot lay on his back beneath the cottonwoods, not seeing the sky his wide eyes were turned to, mouth open slackly. Whoever it was coming after that one must have seen him sprawled there before they broke into the open. The clatter through the mesquite stopped abruptly. Then there was more, farther away, and the subdued sound of voices. Hayward glanced behind him, saw that Carlotta was halfway across the river; she was swimming sluggishly, not trying to go under any more, carried far below him by the current, and it struck Hayward like a blow.

"Can you make it?" he shouted.

"Current," she gasped, and he could hardly hear. "Current. Tired, Hayward, I'm tired."

He rose up and fired the two remaining bullets into the trees and flung the gun after them, and whirled and dived into the water. Once in, he tore his boots off and struck out toward the girl with all the power in his broad shoulders.

He was almost to her when they began firing at him from the bank; he sucked in a great breath and dived under with the deadly patter of balls about him. Opening his eyes under the turgid water, he could barely make out the girl ahead, and he did not come up till he had reached her. He caught her about the waist, gulping in another breath; she saw what he intended, and took her breath, and they went under together. When they finally had to surface again, the firing had ceased. Looking back, Hayward could make out but one man on the shore, reloading his gun.

"Other must have gone for horses," gasped Carlotta. "A ford about a mile south."

"Turn on your back and take it easy, and I'll tow you," he said. "Why should they do that?"

Gratefully she turned over. "Didn't want us to get away, after seeing Ortiz."

"Obviously," he said. "But I meant

your brother." Her head turned toward him, blue black hair streaming out over the surface of the water, and he could see how dark her eyes were. He didn't say it very loud. *"Hermanos del Noche?"*

"I never thought—Oso," she said. "He never gave any sign before. Sullen enough whenever we saw him. But nothing to indicate this."

She turned toward him again, a plea in her voice. "Johnny, do you think . . . they are?"

"That didn't look like any accident to me. The body was hidden. Would that mean the village is headquarters?"

"Not necessarily," she said. "Nobody knows where they gather. Nobody knows who leads them. Nobody knows anything about them till we come up against it suddenly, like this, and then it's too late. Hayward, we're drifting toward the ford."

"Fight the current too much and we'll never make it," he said.

HE was tiring himself now, but the far bank was nearing, somber oaks forming their gnarled pattern against the blue velvet of the hills to the westward. His arm felt like lead and the muscles of his legs responded sluggishly when he finally felt the sandy bottom beneath him. The girl stumbled in ahead of him, throwing herself onto the bank. He could see the gentle pulse of her shoulders and wondered whether she was sobbing from utter exhaustion or for her brother. He was barely out of the water when the sound came from across the river. The current had carried them far south of the village, and he realized how near they were to the ford when the horsemen appeared on the opposite bank, but a few hundred yards below. He caught Carlotta under the armpits.

"We've got to go," he said. "They're almost on us."

"I can't. Hayward, I can't move—"

It was the crash of chaparral from this side cutting her off; she turned her head up listlessly, and Hayward saw it about the same time. He was so surprised he let the girl sag back into the sand.

"Zacatas!"

"Si, si," said the amanzador, swinging off Hayward's lathered buckskin. "Now help me put the *señorita* aboard. *Pronto* you burro, *pronto,* I never saw anything as slow as you."

"No!" Carlotta was struggling feebly in Zacatas' grimy hands. "You think I'd leave you here? If you stay, I stay!"

"Señorita, they kill you if you stay."

"I don't care. I'm not going, Zacatas. I'm no coward—"

"Carlotta!" Perhaps it was the name which drew her head up, eyes staring wide at him. It was not considered proper for a peon to address his *patron* by the proper name. Hayward had never heard Zacatas use it before. There was a strange, twisted look to the amanzador's face, and his eyes held Carlotta's gaze locked. For a moment, something tacit seemed to lay between them, so akin to the physical that Hayward had an impulse to reach out with his hand and touch it for recognition. He got a maddening hint of it, and thought he understood, and then it was lost, in Zacatas' hoarse, trembling voice. "You are going, do you understand? I am staying."

Carlotta stared up at Zacatas as if hypnotized, her eyes dark with wonderment, her voice barely audible. "Zacatas, what is it?"

"Don't you know . . . what it is?" said Zacatas, in a husky whisper.

For that moment, their awareness of Hayward had ceased. He could sense that, and he had a feeling of not belonging here, somehow, as if it were something belonging only to them, and he had profaned it by seeing. The wonderment faded from Carlotta's eyes, replaced by a strange pain.

"Oh . . . Zacatas," she moaned.

Zacatas thrust her away from him abruptly, his voice savage. "All right, Juanito."

"Zacatas, you aren't going to stay here."

"Somebody has to hold them off," spat the amanzador. "You'll never get away unless I do. The bayo's tired and those barrachones have fresh mounts."

"Let me stay behind. You take the girl."

"No, do you hear me? *Pronto,* they are almost across."

"I can't leave you, Zacatas—"

It was all Hayward got out. He staggered backward, all his senses blotted out in the pain of the blow Zacatas had given him; he had the dim feel of falling and striking his back against something. Then

he could see again, with the pain of the blow still rocking through his head. He was sitting with his back against a tree where Zacatas had knocked him, and the amanzador was bending over him, face contorted.

"Now," snarled Zacatas, "are you going to take her or do I have to beat you to a pulp? Somebody has to get that girl away. She can't do it alone. Either you or me. I'm amanzador here and I'm giving the orders. I thought I showed you that once. Now you get on that horse before I fix you so you'll never be able to get on one again!"

Hayward must have weighed thirty pounds more than the amanzador, yet with one hand Zacatas jerked the youth completely to his feet and shoved him toward the buckskin. Carlotto took her foot from the left stirrup so Hayward could mount. He swung heavily up behind the high cantle, still dizzy from the blow; he put his hands around the girl's waist, turning to the other man.

"Zacatas—"

"Vamos!" shouted Zacatas, and whacked the buckskin on its rump with the flat of his palm. The startled horse leaped ahead, crashing through the brush growing beneath the oaks, and Hayward had to throw against the girl to keep from tumbling off backward. The last sight he had the Zacatas, the stubby, bow-legged man was running down the bank toward the ford, where the first peon was climbing his horse out onto dry land.

Carlotta was slumped over the saddle, still too exhausted for any effort, and with his arms about her waist, Hayward took the reins from her slack hands, driving the buckskin up onto the road from the bottomlands. For ten minutes he kept the horse in a hard run down the road, then slackened up, unable to punish the gallant animal any more. Zacatas must have ridden it hard enough before, because the horse was blowing and dripping lather, its gait sloppy and uneven as it slowed to a trot. Hayward felt the girl stiffening against him, and her head raised slightly.

"I didn't hear any shooting."

"We're too far away," he told her.

"But—before that. Since Zacatas first showed. They weren't shooting."

"What do you mean?" he said.

VI

THE fire snapped softly in the *estufa* of El Sombrio's hovel, and outside a mockingbird was singing softly from a maple tree. Hayward sat slumped at the plank table, toying with his fork, staring blankly across the room. Campeche came in from the kitchen, frowned when she saw him. She moved to the table in her bare feet, shoving at his plate.

"You haven't eaten anything. I made that carne adobada especial for you. I been pickling it in brine all week. I fried those chiles and spices in the pork till the juices dripped out. Try it, Juanito."

"I'm not hungry," said Hayward dully.

"Leave the boy alone, woman," growled Sombrio, from where he sat at his inevitable spot by the fire. "Can't you see he grieves for our amanzador."

His wife leaned on the table. "You didn't find anything when you went back?"

"Nothing," Hayward's voice was hollow. "As soon as I got Carlotta here, I rounded up every vaquero on the place. The village was deserted when we got there. Even Ortiz' body was gone." He slammed his fork down, lashing out bitterly. "I shouldn't have left him there, I shouldn't have—"

"Muchachito, muchachito—" the woman moved around the table, running her hand across his hair, in a soothing way—"somebody had to get our señorita out of it. If they were *Hermanos del Noche* and they killed our young *patron,* they would have done the same to Carlotta. She couldn't have escaped alone. You said yourself you had to hold her on the horse. And Zacatas wanted it that way. No other way, for him. He was that kind. Maybe he was big drunkard and braggart and brutal. We won't remember him for that. We'll remember him for this. Isn't that better?"

Hayward shrugged her hand off, rising from the table and moving restlessly toward the door. He stood there against the suporte, staring out at the night, his face set in bitter lines. Sombrio grunted himself to his feet and waddled to the door behind Hayward.

"I wish that mockingbird would quit sing-

ing," he said darkly. "It makes me think of a Penitente dirge."

Hayward did not answer. He had raised his head slightly. It seemed to come from the valley road. El Sombrio moved closer, cocking his gnarled head. It was clearly recognizable now, the sound of a hard-ridden horse drumming through the night. In a moment they could see the rider, pounding up the slope. It raised a vague excitation through Hayward and he moved out beneath the maple tree.

"He's here," shouted the man, before he had reached them. "I was nighthawking the cattle down by the creek and he came. They're bringing him up. He's here."

"Who?" shouted Hayward, and already he was running forward, because he knew.

"Zacatas," shouted Pio Tico, wheeling his black excitedly and turning it back the way he had come. "Zacatas."

Hayward could see a whole bunch of riders now, coming up through the scattered hovels, led by a broad, heavy figure on a bareback mule. The younger vaqueros were cavorting on the outside of the cavalcade, whooping and yelling and roping at each other wildly. The women were running from the houses and the little children were scampering precariously among the horses. The man on the mule had a curly-headed *niñito* in one arm, and over all the other sounds, Hayward could hear his roaring laugh. Now the cacaphony had resolved itself into intelligible sound that held the unmistakable beat of a song. The man on the mule must have started it, for Hayward could see him waving his free arm and swaying from side to side, his mouth forming the words.

"Ojos triguenos, color de cafe,
Dame un beso de buena fe.
Ojos azules, color de ciel
Dame un beso, un beso de miel."

"Dios," said El Sombrio, trying to keep up with Hayward, "like the return of a conqueror."

"It's his song," shouted Hayward, carried away by the full realization that the amanzador had really come back. "Zacatas' favorite song. He's back, Sombrio, he's back . . ."

"Deep brown eyes of coffee hue,
Give me a kiss, loving and true—"

"How did you do it," screamed Hayward, fighting through the crowd and leaping up to grab Zacatas' hand. "We thought you were finished. We went back and thought you were dead. How did you do it?"

"NEVER mind, *muchacho,"* laughed Zacatas. "I got back, didn't I? That's all that matters. All I want now is a big eat and a big drink and a big sleep."

The crowd gathered closer as he pulled up in front of Sombrio's hovel, sliding off the mule. His face was covered with mud and his hair was filled with hay and his charro jacket was torn and ripped, and weariness drew its lines deep through the thick brown flesh of his face. He tossed the laughing *niñito* casually to one of the women, and she caught the child in her arms, face flushed happily.

Campeche was already running frantically about the hovel, carrying ollas of grape wine and mezcal from the kitchen, stirring the fire under the pan of carne adobaba, setting the table.

"Now you eat the abodaba, *que?"* she told Hayward, and it was the first time he had ever seen her laugh.

"Sure he will," rumbled Zacatas, throwing one arm heavily about Hayward's shoulder, the other over Sombrio's fat back, shoving through the door with them, the other vaqueros following. "He'll eat abodaba and drink pulque like a man tonight. All of us eat and drink! You didn't think I was dead did you, really? *Valgame Dios,* what great confidence you must have in my manhood. Don't you know *nada* can kill me? I'm Zacatas, ain't I? The best amanzador in California. The best roper in the world. Come on, *compadres,* come on!"

Sombrio squatted in the corner and began to play on his flute and Pio Tico brought his guitar in, and as many as could crowd onto the benches sat about the table, Hayward having the honored place on Zacatas' right. Pablo's daughter, Nita, threw her arms about Zacatas from behind, kissing him on the top of the head and pulling the hay playfully from his hair; he pulled her down across his shoulder and got one arm about her beneath the armpits, and everyone laughed while he kissed her. Hayward tried to reconcile this with what he had seen between Car-

lotta and Zacatas back at the river, and couldn't.

Between kisses, Zacatas gulped at a long-necked jar of mezcal, shouting at Hayward. "Go on, go on, eat, drink, you're a man now, ain't you? I hope so."

Yet Hayward sensed something beneath Zacatas' violent good humor, and couldn't help asking, "How did you get away?"

Zacatas couldn't seem to help that one sharp glance he let pass to Hayward; then he reached for a tortilla. "No, no," cried Pablo's daughter, pushing his hand away. "Let me." She rolled the tortilla skillfully and scooped up some beans, turning to stuff it in his mouth.

"How do you think I got away?" roared Zacatas, his mouth full of the tortilla. He waved one hand, pointing his finger like a gun. "I got my *pistolas,* ain't I? Who can shoot them like me? Nobody. *Hola!* Bang, bang, down they go. *Hola!* bang, bang. Nothing to it."

"*Si,* Zacatas, tell us how you did it," giggled Nita, giving him a sloppy kiss, and Pio Tico began pounding on the table, face flushed with wine and excitement.

"But there wasn't any firing after we left," said Hayward.

Zacatas was tilting the bottle of pulque to his lips, and his black eyes swung to Hayward over its top. He took a long pull, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down in his thick brown throat, then slammed the botle down, shoving Nita away irritably as she tried to kiss him again.

"Take it easy, *muchachita,* give a *hombre* a chance to eat, ah?"

"We didn't hear any firing," repeated Hayward.

"You were too far away."

"But those men were right on you and if—"

"*Ca-ramba,*" erupted Zacatas. "What does it matter? I got away, didn't I? I slept in a haystack and had to steal a mule to come home, but I got away. Isn't that enough? Aren't you glad I'm back? Maybe you'd rather I was dead—"

"No, Zacatas, no," shouted Pio. "*Madre de Dios,* Hayward, let him alone, will you? Maybe he went out and tied all their horses' tails together and they drowned. Who cares."

"Sure, that's what I did," said Zacatas drunkenly. "I tied all their horses' tails together and they drowned."

He threw back his massive head to roar with laughter, and the other joined in. Then his laugh cut off abruptly, and he shoved Nita roughly away, leaning forward to grab violently for the bottle of mezcal.

"I'm going to get drunk," he said.

"But Zacatas," Campeche told him, "you haven't eaten enough—"

"I'm going to get drunk!"

For a while Hayward sat at the table, amazed at Zacatas' enormous capacity for liquor; the man emptied jug after jug of pulque and mezcal, still roaring and singing and making love to Nita when the others were all slopped around in a drunken stupor; Pio Tico fallen back on the floor from where he sat, mouth open wide, snoring raucously; Pablo leaned forward with his head in his arms on the table top. Hayward wanted to get drunk, too, wanted to feel nothing but the first wild joy he had known at the amanzador's return, but he could not. There was something else in him. Finally he rose from the table.

"Where you going, Juanito?" hiccoughed Zacatas.

"Out a little, I guess," Hayward said vaguely, wandering restlessly to the door. He stood there a moment, staring moodily into the night. From behind came a burst of Zacatas' song, and Nita's bibulous laughter. Hayward went on outside. It wasn't Zacatas' violent display of carnality. Hayward had been with him long enough to be used to that facet of Zacatas by now. It was something else. It troubled Hayward.

THE youth rose early the next morning to work his buckskin, but no one else appeared at the corrals before noon. He was resting the animal near the fence when Zacatas came in his catty, bow-legged walk from Sombrio's house, running his tongue around thick lips with a grimace.

"*Sacramento,* why does a man do such things? My mouth tastes like I been eating old saddle leather." He spat, grinning at Hayward, slapping him on the back. "You got *un caballa bravo* there *muchachito.* That bayo coyote's got more bottom than a frying pan. He could go all day and all night on a dead run. I think it's time to put him in dos reindos, ah?"

From the saddle-room behind one of the

bunkshacks he got a lighter mecate than the buckskin had been working in, and along with these lighter hackmore reins, a spade bit.

"This is the Santa Barbara spade bit, and there ain't nothing to compare with it for controlling a horse. The stage of training we're starting now is called dos reindos, or two reins. We leave the jaquima on when we put the bit in his mouth. That way you have two sets of reins. The mecate attached to the bosal, and the rawhide bridle reins attached to the bit. The horse has been used to reacting to the bosal now a long time; with the jaquima you've taught him turning and stopping and everything else he needs. Now we'll have to work him till he's responding to the bit instead of the bosal. Say you want to neck rein him to the right. You start by using the mecate same as before, laying it against the left side of his neck. Then you begin laying the bridle reins against his neck, too, putting a little more pressure on each time till he's turning right in reaction to the pressure of the bit in his mouth rather than the pressure of the bosal on his wind. When he's learned to rein with the bridle reins, you can take the jaquima and mecate off, leaving only the bit. *Comprende?*"

"Yeah," said Hayward. "This bit, though. These shanks are almost eight inches long. The spade part goes into his mouth? That must be four inches. Isn't it a little cruel on him to put that much iron in his mouth?"

"If the horse had been broke with the bit at the start, yes," said Zacatas. "His mouth would not be so tender, and you would have to pull harder to get any response, and would probably cut it up. That's the very reason we work the horse so long in the hackamore. You've got him reining perfectly without touching his mouth. He's got a roof and bars like velvet. It will react to the slightest touch. We'll just lay the bit in his mouth for the first few days without any bridle chains or reins at first, so he'll get used to chewing on iron, *si?* Hold the headstall up to his brow so you can pull his head down a bit. *Si,* that's it. Now, between his bridle teeth. Ah, *bueno.*"

Hayward finished the summer out riding Cimarron with the light hackamore they called a bozallilo, and that spade bit loose in his mouth. The fall roundup was nigh by the time the horse had become used to the bit enough so they could actually put it into dos reindos, attaching bridle chains and rawhide reins to the bit. Then began the most delicate part of the training, changing the horse's responses over from the mecate and hackamore and bosal to the bridle reins and bit. Hayward soon came to appreciate the arduous preliminary training which had left Cimarron's mouth in such perfect condition, yet had taugh him all the necessary reactions to reining. The animal's response to the bit was incredible, the slightest pressure drawing instantaneous reaction.

"That's it, that's it. *Caramba,* what an amanzador you'll make. I never saw a man and a horse work so *perfectamente* together. And I thought Pio had talent, *Sacramento.* Look at that buckskin. He loves you, Hayward. I love you. I love the whole world." Zacatas blew a kiss at the clouds. "Ah, *Santa Maria,* what a beautiful *dia.*"

IT was an exacting, trying process, though, even for one so fascinated by all its ramifications as Hayward. There was no crowding the animal. The instant it got to fretting or showing signs of wrong reaction, the lesson was over for the day. The third day Hayward had been necking it to the left with both mecate and bridle reins, and the horse had shown momentary confusion, leading off to turn right, then shifting leads to veer the other way.

"That's all, that's all," bellowed Zacatas, running toward them. *"Acabar.* Finish I never thought I'd see the *dia* you'd mix him up like that. We're through. Don't you know the difference between right and left? Put him away. What do you use for brains, tortillas? I thought you were a horseman. You put the reins toward his left and lean toward the right. No wonder he don't know what you want."

"But I didn't lean—"

"Are you telling me what you did? I saw. Get off. You'll be lucky if I ever let you get on again. Ruin the best *caballo* this hacienda ever head, I swear. What a foul excuse for an amanzador you are."

Hayward lost all sense of time in the endless days of dusty corrals and bawling

cattle and sleepy peons and whooping vaqueros, in the saddle sometimes twelve to fourteen hours a day, rising an hour earlier than the others to work his horse, spending the rest of the day with the roundup crews. The heat of September passed, and the first rains of September caught him by surprise on the range without so much as a charro jacket. By October the calves were branded and a herd gathered on the holding ground north of the house ready to be driven to Yerba Buena for shipment to Mexico and the States, and Cimarron was worked into dos reindos enough so Hayward could use him a little in the cattle riding. The tension caused by *Hermanos del Noche* that summer had subsided with a cessation of their activties, but their threat was always in the background. During the week, Hayward was to busy to catch more than a glimpse of Carlotta now and then, and most of the Sundays she spent at other estancias dancing and partying. But she accompanied them to the Coast with the cattle in a four-wheeled carroza drawn by two spans of Mateo blacks, and after the cattle were disposed of Carlotta and the roundup crews were invited to spend several days at the hacienda of one Don Alvarez Barcello, who estancia was situated just north of town.

The house was a massive, two-story structure, its roof of hand-riven shingles shaded by a eucalyptus grove, a cantilevered balcony on the second story overhanging the three foot thick mud walls of the first floor. While the vaqueros of the cow-crew were not allowed in the main house with the gente razon, Zacatas' station of amanzador was held in such high esteem that he was accepted on the social level of the landowners. He had bought a new charro suit in Yerba Buena, the coat intricately wrought with gold trimming, the trousers, exchanged for his usual greasy chivarras, split up to the knee to show immaculate white pantaloons beneath, in the manner of the hidalgos. Yet no matter how many fancy clothes he put on, his short, broad, bow-legged body moving in that quick, jerky way reminded Hayward of a ringy scrub-bull shoved in a pen of purebred heifers.

The tables were groaning with food, and silent, brown-skinned criadas in white cotton camisas moved through the laughing chattering people, refilling cups with grape wine.

No sooner had *café* been served than the native tipica orchestra Barcello had gotten from Yerba Buena struck up a slow contradanza, and the young ricos began leading their *amoratas* onto the floor of the huge redwood-beamed living room. Hayward moved through the crowd, his corn yellow hair gleaming in the light from overhead candelabras of cut-glass, hunting for Carlotta. When he caught sight of her, he stopped a moment. He did not think he had ever seen her so beautiful. She wore a white mantilla over a high comb set with huge cabochon emeralds, and the neck of her blue gown was cut low enough to reveal the top of an onyx crucifix riding the white swell of her bosom, the ruffled edge of her flaring skirt brushing the tips of red satin slippers. She was dancing with a black-haired young *rico* in a high lace collar and cuffs, his lean smooth hand dark against the supple curve of her back, but her eyes caught Hayward's over the young man's shoulders, sparkling and bright, and there was an invitation in her smile. The next dance was a quick, pulsing jarabe, the backbeat of the guitars becoming his own pulsebeat as he bowed, asking her for the honor, and swung her away from the discomfited *rico*. After the jarabe, a zorrita, and after the zorrita, a fandango, and a cuna dance, and another jarabe, and he had them all with her, and his head was spinning with her black eyes flashing up at him and her red lips laughing and her body moving and spinning in his arms.

"BECAUSE you're an *Americano* and not actually one of the peons you work with, they accorded you the same honor they did Zacatas," she smiled; "and that's funny, because you're no longer an *Americano*. You've become more a Californio than *Señor* Barcello. Where did you learn to dance like this?"

"They have bailles down where we live, too," he grinned. "You ought to spend an evening in Sombrio's shack some night."

"With Nita and Consuelo," she pouted.

"I never heard of them," he said. "You're the only woman in the world. This is the only night in the world."

"Then let's go out and see it," she said. "If you steal another *danza* with me you'll have every young *rico* in the house at your throat with his stilleto."

It was an enchanted night. The moon filtered down through the eucalpytas trees, casting a gentle shadow pattern across the white walls and flatstones of the veranda. Out beyond the grove came the faint sounds of the vaqueros, eating and dancing and celebrating among themselves. Carlotta leaned against one of the heavy, hand-hewn suportes, throwing her head back to look up at the night. Moonlight drew the soft curve of her cheek, and the milky line of her throat. Suddenly Hayward felt as if he could not breathe.

"Why do you look at me so strangely?" she murmured. "What are you thinking?"

"Does it matter what a child thinks?"

"A child?"

"You called me that once," he said.

"Did I?" She started to laugh softly, but he could contain himself no longer, and his kiss stopped it. She was stiff against him for a moment, her hands pushing at his chest. Then she relaxed, and her hands were at the back of his neck. Finally he released her, raising his head. She drew a ragged breath, looking up at him, unsmiling. "Juanito," she said, "you are no child."

VII

A TROVADORE was singing a cuando over by the huge estufa, flames crackling and blazing beneath an adobe hood above the fireplace that ran the length of the room, and the couples had gathered around the table for cafe made the Mexican way. Carlotta had made Hayward come in after the kiss, something puzzled in the glances she let slide up to him, or something fearful. It gave him a sense of power, somehow, that he had never felt before, with her. He was leaving her to get them coffee when Zacatas' voice rose from the crowd about the trovadore.

"Ride? You should see me ride, *señoritas.* I have ridden from here to San Diego in one *dia* and one *noche.* I killed ten horses to do it. And the minute I was in San Diego, I went to a big baille thrown by the alcalde there and danced all night and then rode back to Rancho Mateo the next day without any sleep and got there in time for Sunday morning mass, killing ten more horses to do it. And drink. *Valgame Dios,* there is no man north of Mexico City who can consume so much mezcal in so little time, and the man in Mexico City who could do that is dead because he tried to belch and drink at the same time one day and choked to death on the bubbles. . . ."

Carlotta caught at Hayward's arm. "Can't you get him out? He's drunk, himself, now, and when he gets that way he embarrasses me and everybody else. He'll begin to tell those stories of his and they aren't the kind of stories a gentleman tells at a party like this. Barcello only let him in as a courtesy, and I always try to get him out again before he goes too far."

"Why me?" said Hayward.

"You're his best friend."

Hayward frowned.

"His best friend?"

"Of course," she said. "Didn't you know, by now? Everybody else does. Why do you think he spends so much time with you and that horse? Why do you think he's teaching you everything he ever knew? He wouldn't do that for anybody else. Not Pio or Sombrio or anybody. More than just a friend, Johnny. Don't you know that? A *compadre.* You know enough about us now to realize what that means. A *compadre?* A man would ride with his *amigo,* or camp with him, or laugh at his jokes. But *compadre.* A man would give his best saddle to his *compadre,* or his best horse, or his life. You must know."

"I didn't," he said, and something warm was spreading through him; "until now."

"He'll go with you," she said. "Take him down to the vaqueros where he'll be more comfortable."

He started to move through the crowd, but Don Barcello had already preceded him. The old man had long white hair done in a queue and a white goatee, his lean spare body moving with a graceful austerity bred in these aristocrats. He had Zacatas' arm, gently propelling him through the bench of laughing *señoritas* and young men.

"I understand you are even a better roper than you are a rider, Zacatas," he was saying confidentially. "I have a va-

quero here I would like to match against you with the *lazo.*"

Hayward knew an admiration for the tact of that, but Zacatas was too drunk to see anything beneath the surface, and he threw back his head with a roaring laugh. "Show this *muchachito* to me. He thinks he can sling the reata? *Sacramento.* I learn all I know from Oro Peso, and he was the best roper in the world, and now he is dead, and I am the best roper in the world. Come on, Juanito. You want to see some roping? Let's leave these gabbling women and go down where the real men drink!"

Hayward felt a moment of shame that he should be identified with this drunken, boorish bull of a man. Then he flushed, feeling a bitter recrimination flame in him. A man would give his best saddle to his *compadre,* or his best horse, or his life? He took Zacatas' arm, and they walked out.

The whoops and laughter of the vaqueros reached them as they moved through the moonlit eucalyptas grove. Down past the corrals a dozen fires were winking in the velvet night, and the intermittent drum of running horses shook the ground. Hayward could see half a dozen riders racing back and forth, lazos swinging. Pio Tico raked his cartwheels along his black's flank, building a loop in his reata as he raced toward another vaquero on a gray gelding. As they passed each other, some fifty yards apart, going at top speed in opposite directions, they made their throws.

Pio tried to duck forward on his horse without affecting the line of his rope, but he could not hold his arm straight enough to keep from jerking the rope too soon, and though the other vaquero's loop spun over Pio's head, Pio's loop fell short, and they clattered on by each other, wheeling and drawing in their reatas.

"Are they *loco?*" said Hayward.

"You never saw a *duello con reatas,*" said Don Barcello. "That is California, *señor.* They would rather have it out with ropes here than guns. Many's a time I've seen a young hothead dragged to death by some rival for his *amorata's* affection. The same way below the horder. The vaqueros there are as deadly with the *lazo* as we Californios. Some say even more deadly than the gun. Once I came across the body of a Texas Ranger. He had been dragged to death with his gun yet gripped in his hand, and the *lazo* which had done it was still around his throat, imbedded so deeply the vaquero could not get it off. *Hola,* now—"

PIO and the other vaquero were riding toward each other again at breakneck speed. The other boy made a feint to throw, which caused Pio to toss his line prematurely, not ducking this time so his arm would not jerk the reata and cause it to fall short. The other man avoided the loop with an easy swaying motion, making his real throw at the same time, and it caught Pio upright. A great shout went up from the others about the fire as Pio tumbled from his saddle. The rider let go his *lazo* as soon as he had pulled Pio free, so as not to drag the Mateo jinete. Pio took the fall with the skill of a man who had no fear of it, rolling and coming to his feet.

"That is my *muchachito,*" grinned Barcello, nodding at the man cavorting his horse around Pio. "Indita, they call him."

"I'll show you some real roping," shouted Zacatas, running toward one of the horses standing near the fire with the reins on the pommel. *"Hola, compadres,* here comes Zacatas, *hola, hola. . . ."*

His boots pounded the ground in that hard jerky run of his, carrying him with incredible speed for such short bow legs toward the horse. He leaped into the air while he was yet one pace from the animal, his left foot striking the left stirrup in a flying mount. That was dangerous to do with these California horses, for they were trained to whirl inward the moment a man lifted his leg to the stirrup, inward being away from the left. Not many men could have made the mount without being thrown. But as the animal jerked to Zacatas' boot and made its whirl, he threw his torso forward with perfect, instinctive timing, and his right leg swung over the rump, the knee slapping against the horse's whirling shoulder, his hands already ripping the reins off the pommel.

"Vamanos, Indita," shouted Zacatas, his huge cartwheel spurs gouging the mount into a headlong run toward the Barcello vaquero. Indita snaked it in, whirling his

mount to face Zacatas, then kicking it into a gallop. They raced toward each other, the ground shaking, the dust boiling up around them, shouts from the other vaqueros filling the air. Indita was whirling his rope about his head, eyes on Zacatas. Zacatas hadn't even begun to build his loop. He sat glued to the saddle of the pounding horse, holding the coiled reata in one hand. At the last moment he made what looked like an abortive effort to throw out a loop. With a triumphant shout, Indita cast his big loop straight at Zacatas. It was then it happened, and Hayward could hardly believe his own eyes. He had never seen a horse whirl so fast; he would not have believed it possible. It was not even Zacatas' own mount. Yet, with Zacatas' own guttural shout telling how hard his jerk had been on the reins, that animal, going full speed ahead, spun completely around on one hind hoof, until it was faced the same way as Indita's running mount. The motion caused Indita's loop to spin futilely by the front of Zacatas' face, not a foot away. Before Indita's rope had fallen across the neck of Zacatas' horse, the amanzador made his throw. It was so slight a flirt of the hand that Hayward barely caught it.

The loop spun flatly above Indita and seemed to hover above him an instant, no bigger than the brim of his sombrero; then it was taut around his shoulders, and he was pulled over the back of his horse with a resounding thump.

"Magnifico," gasped Don Barcello. "Incredible."

"Eso es nada," said Zacatas, dropping the rope contemptuously from his hand to allow Indita to rise, trotting his horse over to Don Barcello. "You want to see some real roping?"

"Now comes his famous bet," grumbled Pio Tico, from behind Hayward. "All the time he makes this bet."

"I bet you a talega full of gold pesos that I can, blindfolded, and with one end of the rope tied around my own neck and not to be pulled on by hand, riding a bareback stallion of your own choosing, forefoot each of ten of your best mares in a pen and break their necks."

It took a moment for that to sink in. *"Sagrado nombre,"* breathed Barcello, finally. "You must be *loco*. No man could do that. No *devil* could do that."

"I am neither man nor devil," said the amanzador, striking his chest. "I am Zacatas, and there is only one like me in the whole universe."

"WHERE would an amanzador like you get a thousand talegas of Spanish gold?" said Barcello suspiciously.

"He couldn't pay you if he loses anyway," growled Indita, beating the dust off him. "With the rope tied around his neck, that neck will be his payment to you if he makes one little mistake."

"Es verdad," laughed Barcello. "That's the truth."

"You think I'm joking—"

"No, no—" Barcello's veined hands raised placatingly—"I believe you would do it, Zacatas. In fact, even knowing I would never get a thousand pesos if I did win, I will still make you the bet. It would be worth a thousand pesos to see this thing."

"Don't be a *pendejo,"* Hayward told the amanzador. "You can't possibly do—"

"Shut up!" Zacatas shouted, whirling on him. "What kind of a *compadre* are you? Have you no more confidence in me than that? Turn those mares into the pen, Barcello, and round up the stallion. You're going to see a performance tonight you'll never forget!"

The throng about the huge cedarpost corral was oddly subdued, shifting back and forth nervously, muttering among themselves. The *ricos* in the main house had heard about it, and had come down to see. Carlotta pushed her way through the people to where Hayward stood, a cabriole of blue velvet thrown over her bare shoulders and reaching below her waist.

"Hayward," she pleaded, "you've got to stop him. He'll kill himself. Nobody's ever taken him up on that bet before. It's how Oro Peso was killed down in Mexico. He went around making the same bet and when somebody took him up on it, he got pulled off the stallion and his neck was snapped by the jerk. Oh, please, Hayward . . ."

He looked into her eyes. "You care for him that much?"

She drew herself up. "He's my amanza-

dor. He's been with our family all my life."

"That's all?"

"What do you mean?" she said.

He shrugged. "Nothing. Never mind. I can't stop him, Carlotta. He got too much tequilla under his belt and he's determined to go through with this. Barcello tried to stop him. He thought Zacatas was joking at first, or he wouldn't even have let it go that far. Now it's too late. Barcello tried refusing Zacatas a horse and Zacatas has gone out to rope the stallion himself."

Just then a shrill whinny rose above the other noises, and Zacatas pranced an enormous white stallion into the pen. It was already covered with a nervous lather, eyes rolling white in its noble head, ears twitching to every sound. Zacatas controlled it with no more than a mecate tied about its lower jaw, his reata already tied around his neck, the other end coiled in one hand.

"Help me up on the bars," pleaded Carlotta, and Hayward put his hands on her warm, pliant waist, lifting her to the top rail. She leaned toward Zacatas, holding out her hand. "Please, Zacatas, for my sake, don't do it."

He trotted the fretting stallion up to her, grinning eyes a little bleary with drink. "*Señorita,* do not worry about me. If you give me but one kiss, I could do it with a thousand mares."

It was the deepest insult for a peon to presume that way, even a peon of Zacatas' standing, and knowing those nearby had heard, Carlotta flushed angrily. "You *are* drunk. Zacatas, I order you—"

"Then give me your mantilla to blindfold myself," laughed Zacatas, ripping the lacy cloth from her comb and wheeling the stallion to prance it across the corral to where Barcello stood. "I give you the honor, *señor.* Tie it in many folds so I cannot peer through the lace."

"Zacatas, I—"

"*Señor,* on your honor as a *caballero.* You made me a bet. Will you back out?"

Reluctantly, Don Barcello tied the bandage over Zacatas' eyes. Then the drop bar was pulled off its sockets, and Pio Tico and Indita ran the ten mares they had cut from a manada into the pen, lifting the bar back into place. The mere presence of the mares sent the stallion into a frenzy of excitement which made him practically unmanageable, pawing ground and wheeling and rearing and whinnying shrilly, froth dripping from his muzzle. Carlotta had dropped back to the ground, and Hayward could feel her shrink against him as Zacatas raked the stallion into a run. Squealing, the mares bunched up, heading for the fence and then running along the rails of the big pen, the stallion in hot pursuit. Hayward could see Zacatas' head turning from side to side as he listened to the hoofbeats ahead of him. The stallion was closing onto the last mare when the bunch approached the corner.

"Andale!" yelled Zacatas, and made his toss.

THE loop snaked about the forefeet of the last mare, and as he felt it go taut, he let go completely with his hands, pulling his thick neck down into his shoulders to set it and jerking back with his torso at the last moment. The mare turned a flip, her shoulder hitting the rump of the running animal in front, and as she struck, Zacatas shoved the mecate hard against the stallion's neck, veering it sharply outward to pull the rope taut with a jerk again, his neck once more sinking into his shoulders. That second jerk did it, catching the falling mare just as her shoulder slid off the next horse's rump and struck the ground, the whole weight of her body twisting up onto her neck. Hayward could hear the bones snap from here. Then, with the crunching sound not yet dead, Zacatas had raked the stallion back toward the fallen mare to give his rope slack, and pull the loop free from around the mare's forefeet.

"Viva, Zacatas, *viva, viva,"* shouted the vaqueros, and a woman laughed nervously from the crowd.

"Oh, Zacatas," moaned Carlotta.

"Hola, hola," bellowed the amanzador, spurring the wild stallion around the pen and back onto the rear of the bunch. The mares broke along the length of the fence again. Going entirely by sound once more, Zacatas rode up on them, his head lifted, his hand holding the rope poised. *"Ahora,"* he roared, "now," and tossed. His rope caught the last mare's hind feet instead of her forefeet, and as a sighing sound went

up from the crowd, Zacatas must have sensed something wrong, for he spurred the stallion brutally, and its crazed leap into a headlong gallop gave him slack enough in the rope to send a flirt down its length that carried the loop off the mare's hind feet almost as soon as it had caught them. The mare stumbled against the fence, broke away toward the others, whinnying. By that time Zacatas had his rope coiled, and he threw again. This time it was the forefeet, and he dropped her, breaking her neck as before. The end of the rope about Zacatas' neck was not a slip-noose, but Hayward could see the rawhide dig into the thick brown flesh as Zacatas jerked backward, till the skin showed a white ridge above and below the *lazo*.

"How is that for the *lazo,* Barcello?" laughed the amanzador, coiling his rope for the third try, sweat streaming from his face. Carlotta was trembling against Hayward, and his arm was tight about her shoulders, eyes fixed in fascinated horror on the bizarre, moonlit sight of that crazy drunken horsebacker galloping a bareback stallion around blindfolded with a rope tied to his neck.

Zacatas worked in behind the mares again, sending them into a squealing dash for the far side of the pen, fighting the stallion with his left hand, cursing it obscenely every time it whinnyed or tried to battle his mecate, head twitching from side to side as wild and feral as the twitch of the stallion's head. He closed the gap between himself and another mare, made his throw. He forefooted the animal and veered the stallion away, letting go the lazo with his right hand and grabbing the mecate with both hands, jerking on the mecate at the last moment to turn the stallion just right for throwing the mare as the rope snapped taut, sinking his neck into his shoulders.

But the stallion turned the wrong way, back after the mares, neck arched to fight the mecate about its jaw. For just that instant Hayward's horrified eyes were fixed on Zacatas' rigid figure there, stiffened backward for the jerk of the falling mare, both hands fighting madly to rear the stallion the opposite way, the reata stretching taut from the man's neck to the mare's feet. Then the full weight of the mare struck, and Zacatas was faced the wrong way to take the shock. He made a small, choked sound, as he was snapped off the stallion.

"Oh, Hayward, Hayward," screamed Carlotta, and her cabriole was torn from her back as she stooped through the bars. He followed her through, catching her as she would have run out to where Zacatas was rolling across the ground. Hayward thrust her backward just as a pair of crazed mares thundered by, trampling across her comb that had dropped from her hair. With her thrown back against the fence, Hayward himself plunged toward Zacatas, dodging another racing mare.

The horse Zacatas had thrown had already scrambled to its feet and was breaking into a stumbling gallop, the reata still caught around one forefoot. Hayward saw the slack rope stretch out as the horse pulled it away, and knew he could never reach it in time. If Zacatas' neck were not already broken, his head would surely be pulled from his body now. Another mare crashed into Hayward from behind, sending him spinning, and he threw himself bodily toward the rope where it lay tautening across the ground, in a last desperate effort to try and get it before the horse had stretched it full.

BUT even as he threw himself, he saw Zacatas had risen to his hands and knees. The amanzador must have heard the hiss of the rope and known what was happening, for giving his head one dazed shake, he jumped to his feet, sinking his neck down that way and throwing himself backward. His body was at a three-quarter angle when the rope tautened fully; it would have fallen completely back if that rope had not caught him. The impetus of him jerking back that way, and the weight of his body, combined to upset the mare again with a snap that threw her against the ground with an earthquake shudder.

"How's that, Barcello?" laughed Zacatas, running forward to slacken the rope so he could get the loop off her foot. "You got a roper can do that? Even Oro Peso can't do that. Did you think I was finished? Not with a neck like that. I could throw a bull ten times as heavy as the mare. Bring me the stallion, Pio. I'm not through yet. Not with a neck like that!"

Dazedly Hayward picked himself up, seeing Pio Tico run out to corner the stallion and lead him over to the sweating, grinning Zacatas. The amanzador jumped aboard, and the jinete fled the corral, and it had started again. Stumbling back to the fence, Hayward watched the crazy performance out. His own clothes were drenched with sweat now, the front of him covered with dust. Carlotta clung to the bars, eyes wide and horrified on each succeeding mare Zacatas threw. He took three casts to nail the seventh horse, and Hayward knew he was tiring.

"Three more, *compadre,*" he kept muttering to himself, and then, "two more, *compadre,* two more."

On the last one the stallion was fighting the mecate so savagely Hayward did not see how Zacatas could ever control it in the delicate maneuver. Racing after the tenth mare, head held high, the fixed grin on his face giving him the appearance of some woods satyr chasing a naiad, he closed up on the last mare.

"Hola," he shouted, *"ahora,"* and the rope spun, and caught, and tautened, and the ground shook beneath Hayward's feet as the last mare broke her neck. Coiling in the rope, Zacatas spurred the stallion to the gate, ripping off his blindfold. They were all running over to him now, Tio catching him as he slipped off the lathered, quivering animal, pounding him on the back, Hayward catching his hand, Carlotta sobbing in utter relief. Zacatas was covered with sweat and dust and blood, his barrel chest heaving, the little muscles about his mouth twitching as he forced his mouth into that reckless grin.

Barcello had sent one of his criados to the house for the talega of pesos, and the man came back bowed beneath the sixty-pound rawhide bag of gold, and the Don presented it to Zacatas gravely.

"Gladly I pay my bet to you, Zacatas," he told the amanzador. "Such a sight is worth a hundred talegas of pesos. I have traveled in many countries and seen many things and many incredible feats of horsemanship, but never have I seen such a feat as we witnessed tonight. California will be talking about it a hundred years from now. You will be immortal."

"I am immortal!" Zacatas shouted, throwing back his head for that roaring laugh, swinging the heavy bag from the criado with one hand and setting it at his feet. Hayward had never seen Sombrio ride before, and it surprised him to see the old man trot a lathered horse into the camp farther off, dismounting stiffly. Momentarily, Zacatas' glance dropped on him, and Sombrio nodded. Then, grinning still, Zacatas turned back to the crowd of admiring vaqueros. *"Valgame Dios,* these quinta marks burn holes in my chivarras. A man needs to celebrate after such a ride. What say you to Yerba Bueno, *señores,* and a little mezcal and a few *señoritas* and a big game of *chusa?"* Hayward was still looking at Sombrio, but he spoke to Zacatas. "Is that all you want there?"

VIII

THE first men known to have visited the site of the town were Tamal Indians from across the bay who braved treacherous tides in frail canoes to obtain salt in the marshes there. For years the Spanish had sought to find a harbor here to serve as a stop on the long sea route from Mexico to the Philippines, and it was finally discovered, not from the sea, but from the land, by Portola and Mateo in 1769. In 1776 settlement was begun, the Mission of San Francisco de Asis laid out by Father Junipero Serra, but for seventy years the new colony of Yerba Buena, named good herb for a grass that grew thickly across the sand dunes, was no more than an isolated outpost of mud huts and soldiers. Riding down the moonlit road after Mission Dolores which Father Serra had built, Zacatas told Hayward this.

It had been two hours of steady going from Barcello's hacienda and they had ridden side by side all the way, with the other vaqueros behind. Though the bayo coyote was now completely under Hayward's control, reacting instantly to his slightest command, it still possessed all the fire and spirit which had made it an outlaw at the beginning. It had a high, collected action that made its hoofs clop in a sharp clear beat along the hard road, its neck arched, its tongue playing constantly with the cricket the Californios put on their spade bits. Glancing over at

Zacatas' solid, square seat in the saddle, Hayward thought he had never felt so fine. He had allowed all other considerations to be swept from his mind, leaving only the keen pleasure of riding down the yellow road on a good horse beside the man who was his *compadre*. He didn't care what they were going to town for; he didn't care that Pio Tico rode behind in a sullen jealousy at Zacatas picking Hayward to ride beside him; all he cared was that he could join in with the free, roaring laugh of his *amigo* who was the best rider and the best roper and the best amanzador in the world. They passed into the first sprawl of mud buildings, and Zacatas reined up before the store of Jacob Primer Leese, one of the first Americans to enter San Francisco. Zacatas swaggered into the one-story frame building, his sweating face gleaming brown in the flickering light of two oil lamps, a grey-black stubble spreading over his heavy chin.

"*Señor* Leese," he bellowed, pounding the plank counter till it rattled against the barrels it was set upon. "Give us service. I want a revolver. I want the best six-shooter you have in the store."

Leese came forward from the back room, grumbling irritably in his heavy russet beard, a napkin stuck in the rumpled collar of a checkered shirt. There were half a dozen holstered revolvers hung behind the counter; he tipped up the price tags of several with his finger, then grunted, slipped one off the hook.

"Whitney," he said. "Navy. .36 caliber. Weight two pounds nine ounces. Fifty dollars."

"Fifty dollars!"

"Take it or leave it."

"Is it the best you got?"

"The best."

"We'll take it," shouted Zacatas, striking the counter. He scooped it off the counter, tossing the belt behind Hayward and buckling it around his waist. "There, you are a real vaquero. You got a horse, you got a gun. All you got left is to get drunk."

For a moment, appreciating the significance of this, Hayward could not speak. "*Gracias, compadre,*" was all he could say, finally. "*Gracias.*"

Turning to go out after the amanzador had paid Leese, Hayward met Pio Tico's eyes momentarily. They were smoldering blackly.

After the store, they went to the *Plaza Espana y Mexicana* and hitched their mounts before a low-roofed, mud-walled building with a sign on its uninspired façade advertising it as *El Cantina del Vaquero*. Hayward grimaced at the mingled odors assailing him as he moved behind Zacatas into the fetid, smoky room; someone was strumming at a guitar at the back, and a crowd of stinking men shifted constantly back and forth from the long unpainted bar at one side of the large room to the monte tables on the other.

"*Hola,* Zacatas," shouted someone, from across the room, and as the amanzador turned to wave, a girl in a short spangled dress surged through the crowd, throwing herself on Zacatas with shrill cries.

"Teresa," laughed Zacatas, throwing his arm about the woman and swinging her up off her feet. "Bring Benita over for my *compadre* here. We are going to have a *noche* Yerba Buena will not forget soon."

ANOTHER cheap-looking woman pushed through the crowd when Teresa called, swinging into Hayward. Benita was pallid and tired looking in a soiled camisa pleated about the neck and thrust sloppily into a short wool skirt; she had none of the plump, wholesome beauty Hayward was used to in the peon girls back at Rancho Mateo, and her fixed smile depressed him somehow. When they found an empty table, he managed to get in close enough beside Zacatas so there was no room on his lap for Benita, and Pio Tio, seeing this, took a chance to grasp her wrist, swinging her across to him, glaring defiantly at Hayward. Hayward grinned blandly at him and took a drink of the fiery mezcal they made from the maguey. It had none of the grape wine's soothing sweetness, and looking across at Zacatas, he was filled with a sudden, urgent desire to get drunk. The amanzador ate and drank and made love with equal lack of restraint, consuming an incredible amount of the potent liquor before it took effect, the clay bottles scattered all about his chair, the corn

shuck husks of the tamales piling up in greasy triumph. He began singing some obscene Mexican song and pounding in time on the table with an empty bottle, and finally, stuffing a last, whole taco into his mouth, he heaved Teresa off his lap.

"Let's do a *danza, muchachita.* I've been doing a fandango with a bunch of *ricos* and it was like trying to get on a horse with a pair of wooden chivarras. You never saw such a stiff-necked bunch in all your *dias.* They don't know how to enjoy themselves. We know how to enjoy ourselves, ah? Come on, Hayward, I'll show you how to really swing a jarabe. I saw you trying it with Carlotta. You looked like a three-day colt trying to walk along the top rail of a corral."

Fuddled by the mescal, Hayward started to rise; he felt a hard, sinewy hand grasp his forearm, pulling him back down, and blinked across at Pio Tico, surprised to see that Benita was gone from the man's lap. The first few months, Pio had not spoken much to Hayward, because he did not know English, and Hayward's smattering of Spanish left much to be desired. But now Hayward spoke their language fluently, and Pio shot it at him in a sullen, slurred stream.

"You stay here. We need another for monte."

Pablo and Sombrio were at the table, the only other vaqueros of the Mateo crew. The young roper Indita, and three other Barcello vaquero had also come. Indita got a pack of horsehide cards from the waistband of his chivarras, shuffling them with slim brown hands. The suits were clubs, swords, suns and cups, each suit numbering ten cards from ace to seven and then knave, a horse standing in place of a queen, and a king. Monte or chusa was the usual game in the bunkshacks and Hayward had become proficient at it, but his mind was not on the game. He kept looking through the crowd for Zacatas. Once he saw the amanzador whirling Teresa in the jarabe across the room. Then the crowd surged between them and Hayward. All the vaqueros about the card table were drunk and quarrelsome now, eyeing each other furtively.

The deal passed to Hayward and he shuffled automatically, putting the deck onto the table for Pio Tico to cut. He thought Pio took more time than necessary. Hayward picked up the pack, slipping two cards from the bottom and two from the top, laying all four face up on the table; the four were seven and queen of clubs, two of suns, four of cups. Pio Tico shoved a handful of silver pesos across the queen; the others placed various bets on the remaining three cards of the layouts. Then Hayward turned the pack face up, exposing the gate card. It was a king of clubs, matching none of the four cards on the table, and that meant the bank won. As he reached out to rake in the pesos, Pio grasped his wrist.

"Let's see the gate card."

Hayward tried to jerk free. "What the hell—"

"Let's see that gate card!" shouted Tico, grabbing for the pack and scattering half a dozen cards across the table as he pulled it free of Hayward's fingers. He ran his finger down the king of clubs; then, without a word, he passed the gate card to Indita. The Barcello vaquero ran his finger down the edge of the king as Tico had.

"Que esta?" said Pablo stupidly. "What is it?"

"Fingernail cuts," said Indita, and it struck Hayward how Pio had fumbled that cut, and why, now.

"He marked it," snarled Pio, shoving his chair back to rise. "The *Americano* marked it. Thirty pesos in the spot and he marked a gate card that couldn't possibly match the layouts. You going to let him do it? You going to let the *Americano* do it?"

AMERICANO. There it was again. Several of them were on their feet, shouting drunkenly, and Pablo had grabbed Hayward. *Americano.* It was a symbol. A symbol of the hard Yankee trappers who had come across the Sierras to sweep through the soft sleepy villages of California taking the liquor and money and women and whatever else they chose, or of the calloused seamen who landed on the *Embarcadero* for a fortnight with the pent-up lusts and hungers of two years on tarred decks to satisfy. These were the only

Americanos they knew here, and the word held a hated significance. And Hayward saw what Tico was doing. He took a last wild glance into the crowd for Zacatas.

"You going to let him do that? You going to let the *Americano* do that? *Hola,* Pablo, don't let him get away—"

That was what did it. In a burst of anger, Hayward had torn Pablo's heavy hand off his shoulder. Then all he could see was the violent shifting of their bodies and their sweating faces swimming through the smoke at him and he knew the only thing left. He bent and caught the table, and all the weight of his heavy shouldered torso was in the heave. It went over in a melee of fluttering cards and clattering chairs and shouting men.

"Americano," shouted Tico, jumping back from the table and then hurling himself at Hayward, pulling the pistola from his belt. "Get the *Americano.*"

It was like a tocsin. Hayward could hear the shifting surge of the crowd behind him, the drunken shouts, the curses. He threw himself at Tico and they met with a fleshy thud, his right hand catching the jinete's wrist before Tico had the pistol fully out. Spinning around with the man, Hayward yanked the arm upward, pulling the gun free, then slammed Tico's wrist across the edge of the upturned table. The gun went off and Tico yelled with the pain and dropped it. Hayward let go the wrist to smash a fist into Tico's narrow, sweating, contorted face. He felt a savage satisfaction at the thud of flesh and bone beneath his knuckles, and caught Tico to keep him from falling back over the table, and hit him again.

Then Indita hit him from behind with a chair, and Hayward went down, clawing at Tico. Tico fell across his shoulders, his dead weight keeping Hayward from rising again, and then Indita had come on in smashing him again with what was left of the wrecked chair. Stunned, Hayward pawed groggily for the man's knees; he felt one beneath his clawing fingers and got a grip and pulled, and Indita fell over backward. But the rest of them were on him, Pablo kicking him in the face, the Barcello vaqueros bearing him down with their weight. He had a great, frustrated feeling of suffocation, choking on the fetid breath of stinking chivarras and sweating cotton shirts and black hair thick with rancid grease that he took in. His head jerked to the blows and all his violent young strength was not enough to drive up beneath all that rolling jerking shifting weight.

"Get off him, you *bribons,* that's my *compadre.* I'll kill you for this! I'll take each one of you in my bare hands and break you apart bone by bone. *Valgame Dios.* Get off him. *Barbe del Diablo.* That's my *compadre. Sagrado nombre.* I'll kill you!"

It came from somewhere above Hayward, through all the other shouts and yells, like the wild roar of an unpenned cimarron bull. Pablo's body was abruptly jerked off Hayward, and he heard Pablo's cracked shout of agony, and then another heavy weight disappeared from over his shoulders. He caught the upturned table to pull himself erect, and almost rammed his face into Zacatas' sweating brown visage. The amanzador had jumped over the table to land spread-legged there, and he still had one of the Barcello vaqueros gripped by the neck in both hands.

"Zacatas," strangled the man, clawing at him.

"Si, Zacatas," bellowed the amanzador, and swung around in a half-circle with his arms held out full length and then let the man go. The vaquero stumbled backward into the crowd of fighting figures, and went onto his back as a shift left a hole in the job. The whole saloon was filled with fighting men now, most of them too drunk to know what they were fighting about.

"That woman," panted Zacatas. "Teresa. They put her on me for this. I wouldn't have gone off if I'd known. Tico wanted you like this. Damn him for a*demonio,* I'll kill him, where is he, I'll kill him." He jumped over to where Tico lay, inert, grabbing him by the collar and lifting him up. Then he dropped him again, disgusted. "I guess he's already dead." A man reeled into Zacatas, knocked out of the crowd, and spinning around, slugged wildly at the amanzador. Zacatas blocked the blow, caught his arm. "You want to fight?" He brought his fist down against the man's neck in a sledgehammer blow. "I'll fight. I'll fight you all. Come on, Hayward. That is what I promised you. A night such as Yerba Buena will never forget. Come on,

compadre. You and me. We can lick the whole mob. Did you hear that, you gobbling *mujers?* The whole crowd. Hayward and me. Me and *mi compadre.* Come on Hayward!"

HAYWARD was just drunk enough to feel the great surging exaltation of it. He followed Zacatas into the crowd, matching the amanzador's roaring laugh, shouting his vile Spanish curses, slugging and kicking and butting. It was like riding down the road again. The two of them. *Compadres.* A great blond youth with shoulders like a bull and hands as big as alforjas and a short, squatty breadth of a man with legs like horse collars and a jerky, catty drive to his walk that nothing could stop. A vaquero pulled his gun and threw down on Hayward.

"Barrachon," roared Zacatas, and kicked the man's gun from his hand with one foot, and dropped that to slug the man in the stomach, and the man doubled over his fist. While Zacatas was caught that way another vaquero leaped on his back, a knife flashing above his head.

"Bribon," screamed Hayward, and caught the man's knifearm, tearing him off Zacatas onto his back on the floor, and jumped with both feet on his face.

He did not know how long it lasted. He lost all sense of time, or space. There was the pain of blows in his stomach and on his ribs and in his face. The flashing heat of a knife ripping him from shoulder to wrist. The mushy resilience of flesh and bone beneath his fists, and teeth coming out all over his knuckles, and someone else's blood spurting in his eyes and blinding him. Zacatas shouting and a Barcello vaquero shouting and a lot of other men shouting. The shrill squeal of a girl. The sound of breaking chairs and smashed tables and men in pain. And above it all was the wild exalted untrammeled excitement of battle beside Zacatas. Then, abruptly, it was through.

The two of them stood swaying in the center of a shambles. The man who had jumped Zacatas with the knife lay on his back, pawing at his messy face, making unintelligible sounds of pain. Pio Tico was huddled against the wall, retching. Indita lay on his belly with the pieces of the chair he had used to hit Hayward scattered all about him. A Barcello vaquero squirmed feebly beneath the overturned monte table.

"Madre, madre," panted Zacatas, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "I ain't had a *battala* like that since Oro Peso and I told the manager of the Collegio Cantina in Mexico City we thought his pulque nothing but colored water."

Sombrio peeked from beneath one of the few tables remaining erect, looking all about him before he crawled out and hoisted himself on his feet. *"Que barbaridad,"* he marvelled, gazing at the wreckage. "I think they are all dead."

What men were left on their feet had all the fight knocked out of them, and had clustered into the back wall, or at the far end of the bar or near enough the front door to provide a handy exit if necessary, muttering and shifting nervously. Zacatas kicked side a smashed chair in order to reach the bar, pounding on the chipped pine. Finally he bent over the top, and laughed.

"I guess we'll have to serve our own drinks," he said, vaulting the bar and shoving aside the bartender with his foot. Hayward's shirt had been ripped off and he was trying vainly to pull its pieces back on him; finally he cursed, tearing it completely off. Zacatas filled two cups with tequilla. They raised them to each other across the bar, laughing. Hayward could not remember when he had felt so good.

"To friendship," Zacatas said.

"To friendship," Hayward said. He had not yet touched his lips to the cup when the man came in through the door. His great head seemed set directly on his massive shoulders, which had such a deep slope that they precluded any neck. He stopped just inside, glancing indifferently around at the carnage. Then he lifted his head, and his glittering little eyes met Hayward.

"No, *compadre,*" said Zacatas, grabbing Hayward's arm.

"But that's Oso," said Hayward, trying to jerk his elbow away from Zacatas' painful grip so he could get his Whitney out.

"Si," said Zacatas. "That's Oso." He turned to the man. *"Es bien,* Bear, Juanito here is our *amigo."*

The Bear came on forward in a flat-footed, shuffling way, his arms swinging a little. The beginnings of a realization stirred

in Hayward then, and he released his half-drawn Navy. Zacatas took the tequilla bottle and his own cup and another empty one.

"Let's take our drinks to a table," he said.

HAYWARD let Oso go first, followed, with that realization growing in him, not yet full or coherent, but growing. Maybe he had known it really for a long time, subconsciously. Their chairs scraped mournfully in the silent room. Teresa had appeared from a doorway at the rear, standing there a moment, disappearing again. Then men at the rear wall began moving toward the door. Someone lifted the bartender up, slapping at his face. Hayward looked from Oso to Zacatas.

"So the time has come," he said.

Zacatas was looking intently at him. "You know?"

"No," said Hayward, twirling his glass, staring at it blankly. "That is . . . not exactly. Or maybe I do. *Hermanos del Noche?*"

Zacatas took a slow breath. "I am a peon, Juanito."

Hayward nodded, still twirling his glass. "Nobody knew who their leader was. I guess that's right. I guess it would take a strong man."

"I tried to get them to bide their time until they were strong enough to do it all in one blow," said Zacatas. "But they kept getting into small troubles. Like some trigger-happy *pendejo* killing old man Mateo, or some hotheaded *miñito* running off a bunch of cattle to show how brave he is."

"And Ortiz?"

"Same thing. I knew he would run into something like it if he went into the Sierras without me. The *Hermanos* are all through there. Passing through the village on the Sacramento, Ortiz got high-handed with Oso. The Bear couldn't take it. He killed Ortiz. I found out and was going back to head you and Carlotta off. You got by me somehow. That's why I didn't find you till you'd started swimming the river."

"We left the main road about a mile before the village to water our horses and followed the river on up to the houses," said Hayward. He was trying to stir some emotion in him, now. It seemed wrong that he should sit here so calmly, discussing it. Yet, nothing would come. He could feel no anger at Zacatas; he had no reason for that. And Ortiz' death had meant little to him, with that antipathy between them.

"That's how I missed you," said Zacatas. He took his drink in one gulp, set the cup down.

He watched Hayward a moment. Finally he spoke again. "As you say, the time has come. Sombrio brought word to me at Barcello's that Oso would meet me here tonight. We are now strong enough, Juanito. We have the numbers, the arms, the horses. We will break the rule of the *hacendado* forever in this land. What Iturbide did for Mexico we will do for Alta California. No longer will the *hacendados* enslave the peons. The peons are supposed to be free, but they are more slaves under this system of landholding than your Negroes in the states. The land and wealth will be divided equally—"

"You're preaching organized banditry, nothing more," said Hayward, finding that emotion in him now. "There will always be the rich and the poor. If you do succeed with this *loco* plan, things won't be divided any more equally than they are now. Men like you will get the lion's share. The very strength that made you their leader will give you power to get the biggest cut. You won't be satisfied with the same thing Pablo gets, or Sombrio. All they want is a house and a mule and an acre of frijoles. That's all they could handle. You wouldn't be satisfied with that—"

"No!" Zacatas slammed his clay cup onto the table so hard it shattered. "It will be divided equally. What do you think I've fought for so long? Why do you think I've stayed at Rancho Mateo and put my face under their boots and bowed and scraped like a good peon so long? I don't have to do it any longer, Hayward, I don't have to hide or pretend or bide my time any longer. We have the strength now. We have what we waited for." He stopped, flushed, breathing heavily, his mouth twisting as he fought to control his ebullience.

"And Carlotta?" said Hayward.

"She will not be hurt," said Zacatas.

"You aren't going to make an exception," said Hayward. "How could you leave her there and wipe out all the others. Your *Hermanos* wouldn't take that. Having one *hacendado* left, in the middle of all

the rest, to mock them, just because they used to be your *patrons.*"

"I didn't say anything about her lands," said Zacatas.

Hayward saw the expression in his face, and remembered that moment when Zacatas had faced Carlotta back on the Sacramento, and understanding blossomed in him. "You?" he said almost inaudibly.

"What else?" flamed Zacatas. "I'm not much past forty. I'm more of a man than any ten of those simpering *ricos* who wanted her. Do you think it could be any other way, living there and working there, seeing her every day, watching her grow, seeing the bud flower into something like that. Every other man in the valley. Why not me? I'm just as good as any. I'm better. They'll find that out. Do you think I'm incapable? Just because I'm older. How do you think it was, just being a peon, just the amanzador. Saddle up my *caballo,* Zacatas. *Si, señorita.* Get me my quirt, Zacatas. *Si, señorita.* How do you think it was? Waiting. All the time waiting. And now the time has come, Juanito."

"But—" Hayward waved his hand in the vague direction of Teresa—"this one, Pablo's daughter, the others—"

Zacatas threw back his head, his laugh shaking the ceiling. "*Valgame Dios,* you are a child. Do you think they meant anything? A man has to have something. He can't wait a lifetime like that making love to his horse.

"And Carlotta won't be any different."

"NO!" Zacatas slammed the table that way again. Once more he sat there, his coarse, brown flesh darkened with diffused blood, the pores pocking his cheeks, greasy with sweat. Finally he leaned forward, his lips moving over his teeth in a hissing intensity. "Don't you understand, Juanito? I told you. Carlotta will be different. She *is* different. Those other *muchachas—*" He stopped abruptly, looking at Hayward. Then he shrugged. "You don't understand. I guess we are different, that way. You love a girl, you wouldn't look at another one, ah? No difference between the flesh and the spirit of you. All one. *Bien.* That is all right. For you. Not for me. As long as Carlotta sits up there in heaven out of my reach, there would be Teresas and Nitas, because I am that kind of man. But when Carlotta falls off her cloud—" he grinned, pursing his lips to blow a kiss at the ceiling— "*Santa Maria.* She will be my life. She will be my heart. My soul, Juanito, my soul." Again he stopped, studying Hayward. "As you say, the time has come, *compadre.* For all that. I want you to ride with me."

Hayward did not answer for a long time. "That's why you bought me the gun."

Zacatas shrugged his broad shoulders. "I bought it for either way. If you ride with me, you'll need one."

"And if I don't?"

Zacatas' eyes slitted slightly, staring at Hayward. "We will have to meet again, somewhere, and I would not want to have any advantage."

It was silent after that, except for Oso's breathing. The men were gathered at the bar now, glancing uncomfortably this way. Pio Tico had gone out the front door, leaving it open, and they could hear him retching in the street. Dully, Hayward guessed he must have hit the boy pretty hard. Then, with the decision in him, he shoved back his chair, stood up, his bare torso gleaming in the weird light, the heavy, quilted musculature of his shoulders rolling down into the pectorals crossing his chest like thick slabs beneath a skin so thin it had a bluish, translucent cast.

"You know I can't ride with you," he said.

Zacatas shoved his own chair back, looking up at the youth. "I had considered that possibility. But I thought . . . our friendship . . ."

"It isn't a just cause you're fighting for," said Hayward. "You're free, legally. You can come and go as you please. You have as much right to the land as the *hacendados.* If they're a carry-over from the old system, and the balance of power is such that the peons are treated unjustly, you can't help matters by starting another revolution. Under any code, you'll be bandits. But I guess it wouldn't make any difference, even if your cause was just."

Zacatas was squinting his eyes. "Carlotta?"

"Yes," said Hayward, looking away. "I can't see you do this to her."

Zacatas nodded heavily, rising. *"Si.* I guess I knew. *Pues,* I had hoped—" he trailed off, shrugging. He jerked his head at Oso, and the Bear rose with a grunt, shambling toward the door. Zacatas started to follow, then stopped with his head down, and turned around. His eyes met Hayward's and he held his hand out, a strange, half-smile crossing his lips. "Your horse. He is about ready to take off the bozallilo and put him into the bit for good. You know enough about it now to train him for cutting cattle. Whatever else you need, Pablo will tell you." His laugh came out on a breath, small, wistful, somehow. "You know, I wish I could have stayed to see you finish him. He'll make a good *caballo."*

Then Zacatas turned and walked out. Standing there, Hayward heard the squeak of saddle leather. The horses raised hollow echoes going out through the plaza. Then the sounds died. Hayward closed his eyes.

"Zacatas," he murmured. "Zacatas."

IX

EL freno del paiz, now. As soon as they returned to Rancho Mateo from Yerba Buena, Hayward took off the light hackamore they called a bozallilo, leaving only the bridle reins and Santa Barbara spade bit for the final stages of his horse's training. By some tacit agreement never fully explained by any of them, he gradually took over duties of the amanzador; perhaps it was due to his former association with Zacatas, or to the abilities they were coming to recognize in him. Either way, most of the peons accorded him the respect due a ramrod, and came to him for advice and orders on every subject, and Carlotta asked him up to the house every week-end to go over the accounts with her and report on the activity. The whole countryside was under the black pall of *Hermanos del Noche,* however, and whenever Hayward was away from Carlotta, he held a cold lump of fear inside him. He tried to stay nearby as much as possible, even having her ride the cattle with him some of the time, but with his new responsibility, it was necessary that he be away more than he liked. More than half the peons had ridden with Zacatas, which doubled the work the remainder had, and due to this, the fall roundup and branding dragged out through September, the men struggling through viscid mud, brought by the rains, to herd the animals from the outlying pastures. Hayward was doing the cutting work on a big bunch of blackhorns they were branding in the lower valley that day in early December; he had just finished cutting out a long yearling and throwing it near the branding fires, and as he was getting his rope free, he saw the horseman coming down from the corrals. It was Pio Tico huddled down in a heavy serape he had unwrapped for winter. Hayward trotted out to meet him.

"You left Pablo with Carlotta?" he said.

"Si, si," said the jinete irritably. "You think I'm stupid? Always there is somebody with her. Although what good that will do I don't know. When the *Hermanos* strike, one man will not do much good against them."

"You know how hard I've tried to get her to go to Monterey," said Hayward. "She claims she feels safer here. I can't understand that."

"Can't you?" said Pio.

"What do you mean?"

"Nada," shrugged Tico, leaning forward to lift Hayward's bridle reins with his index finger. "What you got here?"

"Twelve link Nevada."

"Isn't that a little long?"

"Keeps the reins from getting wet when you give him a drink with the bit in," said Hayward.

"And is just about heavy enough to keep your spade tapping his roof with the weight of that curb chain," Tico told him. "What kind of response does that leave you for cutting?"

"He can cut anything that black can," said Hayward.

"I'll take you up on that."

Hayward nodded at a big brindle steer and a sabina milling close together in the bunch of cattle. "Which one you want?"

"The brindle," said Tico, taking his reata off the horn and wheeling his black.

Hayward touched the right side of his buckskin's neck, and the animal whirled and was heading toward the sabina steer,

a big red and white speckled beast. One of the prime qualifications for a cutting horse was its ability to change direction instantly, and this necessitated a high degree of balance or collection and the capacity to change leads even while in midair.

Usually a colt had this naturally before he was broken, but once a man was put on his back, he was all out of balance and had to be taught over again. Hayward had noticed, however, the perfect collection of Cimarron in the corral during that first ride when he was taking the bucking out of him. If a horse did not have this capacity naturally, he could be taught it, but would never make a top cutting horse.

Now, Hayward could feel all of Cimarron's taut, intelligent collection beneath him, the neck arched slightly, the head held high, the action of the trot high and clean.

Both men went into their steers about the same time. The sabinas broke and tried to turn the other way. Hayward had been working the buckskin at cutting long enough so the horse knew what was expected of him, and without any signals from the youth, it changed leads from right to left without losing its speed an instant and whirled left toward the head of the sabinas.

The steer was a wily animal, and Hayward was watching the sly way its eyes shone in its swinging head. Seeing the buckskin making for its inner side, the steer apparently started to wheel away from the main bunch and make for open country.

This caused Cimarron to change leads again in order to get behind the steer and direct its run toward the branding fires. As soon as the horse had shifted to turn, the steer wheeled back toward the herd.

Hayward had been waiting for this; he touched Cimarron on the neck with his reins, and the horse responded instantly. It had been in midair, changing leads to run in the direction it appeared the steer was going to take.

Before its forefeet had touched, it changed leads back again, and had support on the correct side to wheel back toward the herd once more, cutting in between the sabinas and the others.

THWARTED, the steer wheeled again, and really cut for open country. But Cimarron had anticipated that, and needed no signal from Hayward to change leads once more and wheel after the sabinas. The horse's hard gallop brought it up on the sabinas' rump. The steer was running at a direction which would take it past the branding fires. Cimarron worked in on its flank, forcing it gradually toward the fire, Hayward let it run straight till they were within ten feet of the fires, and when he saw its nervous sign at veering away, threw his rope.

Cimarron was stopping the instant that rawhide snaked out, ramming stiff legs at the ground as the rope snapped taut and the sabinas went down. The vaqueros at the branding fires ran out with peales to hog-tie the steer and throw Hayward's rope off. He was coiling it in when Tico hazed the brindle steer past him and made his throw. After the men had dabbed their peales on that animal, and Tico had coiled in his rope, he turned his black toward Hayward.

"I never saw a horse change leads so fast," he said sullenly.

It was then the man appeared on the crest of the hill, galloping down into the valley from the north, and though he had been waiting for it, and expecting it any day now, any hour, Hayward was swept with a foreboding chill. The most likely direction for the *Hermanos* to come from was the north, and though they would undoubtedly not enter Laguna Valley from that obvious direction, they would use the main road from the Sacramento south for some distance before leaving it and turning into the hills. As short of men as he was, Hayward had planted one peon what he hoped was far enough north along the road so the man would be able to see the *Hermanos* before they left it.

"Get your horses," Hayward was already shouting to the men at the fires. "Never mind dousing the fire. "We can't do anything to keep them from scattering this bunch of cattle."

Then the horseman was coming down the road and cutting off into this pasture at a hard run, hauling his lathered horse up on its hocks in front of Hayward. His face was covered with blood and his eyes did not focus as he spoke.

"They're coming," he said, and slid off his horse."

Hayward swung down, catching the man beneath his armpits and trying to lift him. He stopped a moment, staring at his face. Then he let him down gently and turned back to mount the buckskin. Without a word he wheeled Cimarron and broke into a gallop toward the house, the two men from the fires following with Tico. Hayward had reached the corrals before he saw it in the huddle of peons' quarters. There was some violent movement in the doorway of Sombrio's house, and muffled sound. Then Campeche staggered into the open as if she had been catapulted.

"Juanito," she screamed. "Watch out. They are here. In the village—"

The shot made a flat sound on the sullen air. Campeche held up one hand, her mouth still open; then she fell forward on her face. Sombrio ran from the door of his house, dropping to his knees beside his wife. Then he stood up again, glancing toward another doorway, his face twisted.

"You shouldn't have done that," Hayward heard him say.

Realizing what it meant, Hayward turned his buckskin into the furrows of a corn field, meaning to skirt the village and gain the main house that way. But as the first furrows sent up their reddish-brown dust from beneath his horse's feet, flame stabbed from the trench between the furrows farther on. One of the vaqueros behind Hayward shouted, and made a dull thud falling. If there were only one or two men in the field, Hayward would have taken the chance on riding over them, but there was no telling how many had been planted there, and he turned his horse back onto the road, knowing he would be blocked whichever way he tried to get to the main house, and wanting the way he took to be the fastest. He could never run the horse as hard through that billowing cornfield as he could up the road. Sombrio was still standing above his wife in the road, and he shouted at Hayward. "Don't do it, Juanito, don't try to come through. I don't want to shoot you. There are others. I don't want to shoot you!"

"I'm coming, Sad One," yelled Hayward. "Don't try to stop me. Please."

SOMBRIO started to run back toward his own hovel. Another man Hayward could not see opened fire from the doorway of another hovel. He caught sight of four horses hitched to the cottonwood rack at the far end of the road running through here. That many, then? Sombrio stepped halfway between the body of his wife and the door of his house, as if changing his mind, and turned back.

"No, Juanito, no, please."

He had a gun out. It was a new Colt.

The thunder of the buckskin's hoofs almost drowned the roar of the Colt. Something made a soft plucking sound above Hayward's head, and the big sombrero was swept off. With a sobbing sound he himself heard, he pulled his Whitney out, sweeping it to arm's length. Sombrio made a dark shadow over the sights, lifting that Colt again. The Whitney bucked high in Hayward's hand. When he dropped it to where the sights would cover Sombrio again, the Sad One was no longer there. He lay on the ground between his wife and his shack.

Bullets whining around him from the other snipers, Hayward drove his buckskin past Sombrio. He fired twice at the nearest doorway from which the shots were coming, and saw the swift, furtive movement from within, and the shots stopped coming. Behind him, Hayward heard Pio Tico shooting. When their horses had passed that doorway, the man from there ran out and began firing again. It was a *loco* ride full of yelling men and pounding guns and thundering horses. Hayward emptied his gun at the next doorway and then bent forward across his horse. He heard another yell from behind him, and then only Pio Tico and himself were left. That was the way they came out, and it was only the drumming speed of their ride which saved them. They raced past the four horses at the rack, three men visible in the cluster of houses behind them now, running into the open and up the road after them, firing a last futile volley. They were spurring their horses up past the corrals now, toward the tile-roofed house sprawled across the higher slopes. Hayward could hear shots from the house, and see the dozen horses milling around the front door.

"It looks like they got Pablo and Carlotta trapped inside," said Tico. "I'll keep them busy at the front and you see if you can't cut around through that apricot orchard and get in behind."

Hayward cast a last glance at the man. Tico had been Zacatas' boy when Hayward had first come here, and Hayward still did not trust him, somehow.

He did not think about the odds as he turned his horse into the orchard. Carlotta was the only thought in his mind now, driving him. Already Tico had begun firing from up front. The men saw the direction Hayward was taking into the trees and several of them mounted and headed toward him, but Tico had gotten off his horse and was shooting across its back. One of the riders pitched to the ground, and the others veered away. It gave Hayward that chance to reach the back of the house. He swung off his animal through one of the open, double-hung windows, into what had been Don Fernando's bedroom.

The chamber was empty, and Hayward crossed the rich brussels carpets Don Fernando had shipped in from Mexico City, the fifty-candle candil hung from the vigas above rattling faintly to his hard-heeled run. The huge wooden-pegged door was locked, and he shot the handle of beaten silver away before it would open. Hayward stepped into a long hallway, and from the other end Hayward could hear Zacatas' voice.

"Pablo, open that door. We've got torches and we can smoke you out just as well as not. You won't be hurt if you open up now, but if we have to smoke you out I'll shoot you myself just as soon as you show."

Pablo's voice came, more muffled. "You won't get me alive, Zacatas. You'll have to come over my dead body to get the *señorita*."

"All right, Oso," Hayward heard Zacatas shout. "Light that tapalo."

ALL the while, Hayward had been running down the hall, and the pungent smell of burning wool came to him as he reached the end. He saw it all in that instant. There were five or six men in the living room, standing before the heavy oaken door of Carlotta's bedroom, the only room in the house which did not open off onto the verandah or the placita at the rear, having but one door. Oso was bent toward a savanilla on the wall, holding a pitched torch to the homespun tapestry, smoke sweeping black against the white-washed wall. Zacatas whirled, cross-arming those two Warner navies from his belt with a swift, snapping draw, and then they were facing each other. All of Hayward's volition was suspended within him. It seemed as if the passage of time had stopped abruptly, leaving him in a sucking, suffocating void. It was in reality only an instant, yet it seemed an eternity that he stared at Zacatas, unable to pull the trigger on his gun, though it was pointed at the man's chest. A kaleidoscope of memory swept him like the stab of a poignant knife. The russet dust of a thousand days in the corral with Zacatas' sweating face swimming before him and Zacatas' booming laugh in his ears.

And then, through that memory, came Zacatas' voice. "What's the matter, Juanito, can't you do it?"

Hayward stared at Zacatas' leering face, and his own lips formed a guttural word. "Zacatas—"

For a moment, a vagrant, spasmodic pain took the leer off Zacatas' face. Then his eyes were squinting with the crash of his left-hand Warner. It was like the blow of a sledgehammer striking Hayward's shoulder. It knocked him back so hard, and spun him around so far, that he was facing the wall when he struck it. He dropped his gun and slid down to the floor with his face and belly still against the wall, scraping yeso off with his nose clear to the bottom. Twisted there with his legs crumpled beneath him and his head partly toward the room, he could see Zacatas take a step toward him, one of the Warners smoking in his hand, lifting the other. Hayward knew Zacatas was going to shoot again, but the pain in his shoulder was paralyzing. The roar of the gun shook the room.

Hayward felt no shock. Then he realized Zacatas had not fired. The amanzador was whirling toward the front door. One of the *Hermanos* who had been outside reeled in and fell on his face. Pio Tico jumped in afterward, his shirt torn and

bloody. A tall dish-cupboard they called a trastero was standing next to the savanilla Oso had put the torch to, and was beginning to blaze, and the tapestry had burned up to the roof, and the redwood beams were beginning to snap and crackle sullenly, small splinters on their hand-hewn surface bursting into minute flares. The room was swept with smoke, and Zacatas was not the first man Tico saw as he reeled into the room. The jinete took his first shot at Oso. Bear screamed and fell back into the flames, dropping his torch. Then Pio Tico leaped over the man who had fallen on his face, taking a breath that drew in smoke, too, and set him to coughing. Bent forward that way, coughing, he saw Zacatas. Zacatas was already firing.

His first shot drew a grunt from Tico. Still bent over, Tico tried to twist around so his gun would be in line. Zacatas fired again with his other gun. It drove Tico backward and he tripped across the man in the doorway and fell. Zacatas was coughing now in the smoke, and the other men were plunging out the door. Zacatas jumped to the closed door, beating at it.

"Do you hear that, Pablo, do you smell the smoke? You'll be burnt to a crisp if you don't get that girl out now. If you wait any longer you'll never be able to get through the front room alive. I'm not fooling. Can't you see that smoke?"

Lying there in a dim haze of pain, making feeble, futile efforts to move, Hayward heard muffled sounds from inside Carlotta's bedroom; then the door opened, and Carlotta was framed there, her eyes big and dark in a pale face. Zacatas grabbed her, beating at the flames threatening to catch her full skirt. Zacatas had put away one gun so he could grasp the girl's arm with one hand. Arm held across her face, stumbling through the smoke-filled room, Carlotta passed Hayward going toward the door without seeing him.

X

HAYWARD'S first sensation was one of convulsed suffocation. Then he opened his eyes, each wracking cough causing him a spasm of agony in his wounded shoulder, and stared up at Pio Tico's face.

"You?" said Hayward vaguely.

"*Si.*" Tico was crouched above Hayward, hugging both arms about his bloody shirt, his face contorted with pain. "I dragged you out after they left, Juanito. I guess I had it wrong from the first. Zacatas was teaching me how to be amanzador till you showed up. I was jealous. I didn't believe you could ever make the amanzador I could. You have. You're better than I'll ever be. I saw it when you beat me cutting that steer today. I gave myself excuses then. I don't now. You're the amanzador, that's all. I couldn't go after the *señorita* now, with this in me. I saw where Zacatas' *bala* struck you. I dragged you out. I got your horse here. I thought maybe you could, Juanito . . ."

Hayward could. The pain was still beating at him in waves, but he was no longer helpless. With Tico's help, he mounted the buckskin. Once he was on. Tico sat down on the ground, hugging his belly that way. Hayward realized it wouldn't be long for him, and wanted to say something, and didn't know what.

Tico looked up again. "They took the east road out of the valley. *Vaya con Dios . . . compadre.*"

The trail of *Hermanos del Noche* was easily followed; they had run off all the Mateo cattle in sight, driving them steadily northward. If Hayward had been in condition to ride hard he could have caught up with them before noon, but if he had lifted the buckskin above a walk he would have fallen off. The peach and apple orchards beyond the valley were as barren as the apricot trees back at Rancho Mateo now. The few villages he passed through were empty for him, peons peering furtively out of their hovels, either sympathizing with the *Hermanos* or fearful of giving aid to him. He finally found a lonely woodcutter south of the Sacramento who gave him something to eat, just before nightfall. His left arm hung useless at his side now, the shirt stiff with dried blood, and the knifing agony had settled down to a dull throbbing pain. He rode on through the night, dozing in the saddle half the time, the buckskin following the road when he did not guide it. Trying to ford the Sacramento, he fell into the water and had to hang onto

the buckskin's tail till they reached the shallows on the other side, and after that, he tied himself to the rig with one end of his reata. Dawn was turning the black silhouette of the Sierras to a hazy pink when the bawl of cattle snapped Hayward out of a semi-stupor.

They had camped in the broad flat of the valley below, the big herd of blackhorns shifting through their own haze of dust, half a dozen fires winking in the shadowed end of the vale where the dawn light had not yet touched. He had not believed Zacatas when the amanzador had told him Carlotta was different than the rest, Nita and Teresa and so many others Hayward had seen the man make love to; yet now, Hayword hoped Zacatas had been telling the truth. Hayward had lived and worked with Zacatas long enough to know how it would be if Zacatas' love for Carlotta was something more than physical. He would keep her apart, like he had kept the finest, most spirited horses apart from the rest back at Rancho Mateo.

USING the dry winter brush as cover, Hayward moved down the slope, searching for a campfire apart. Already the main herd had begun to move, and the fires were winking out. Shouts of the vaqueros came up to him, and he could see them riding through the dust below in small groups, no particular order to their march, a dozen or more apparently driving the cattle, riding a sloppy point and drag. Then there was only one fire left, the tail of the herd already having moved far away from it, and Hayward could see the horse standing beside the blaze. It was the flaxen-maned chestnut which had belonged to Ortiz Mateo, and Hayward knew no other man but Zacatas would ride it. He had been right then. She was different.

The other *Hermanos* were far ahead, with the herd, as Hayward saw the figure stand over the fire and scatter it with a kick. Hayward was drawing nearer, and he had his gun out this time, and now none of those poignant memories rose to block him.

Zacatas half-lifted Carlotta from where she had been sitting on the ground before the fire, and Hayward could see how her hands were bound, and the weary bow to her body. With her standing up by the horse, Zacatas stepped aboard in his quick, catty way, and sitting in the saddle, bent down to slip an arm around her waist and swing her up. It was then the trees petered out and Hayward walked his buckskin into the open. Still bent toward Carlotta, Zacatas saw him.

"Juanito!"

Without speaking, Hayward let the Whitney drop a fraction till he could see the man's thick torso over its sights. He squeezed the trigger. The hammer made a hollow, metallic click against the percussion cap.

Then he remembered falling into the river. Wet powder? He had dropped the useless gun from his hand almost before the realization went through him, and was grabbing for the only thing left. At the same time, Carlotta tore free of the amanzador so violently that she stumbled backward through the fire and fell. Zacatas had straightened in the saddle, pawing to get one of his guns free. Then he saw Hayward had dropped his gun, and understood what Hayward was reaching for, and stopped his Warner almost out of the belt.

"Go ahead," said Hayward, his voice shaking feverishly from all the pain and weariness. "Go ahead, if you're afraid to do it with a rope. I'll get you anyway."

"Afraid?"

Hayward could see how that goaded Zacatas, and knew his only chance was to play on the man's inordinate vanity. "What else? You said you didn't want any advantage when we met again. That's why you bought me the gun?"

"Afraid?" roared Zacatas again. "Me?" He shoved the Warner back into his belt viciously and reached for his own reata. "Me? The best roper in the world? I'll show you, Juanito. *Duello?* I'll show you. *Vamanos!*"

He jabbed his chestnut with the gut-hooks and the beast leaped forward with a shrill whinny. At the same time, Hayward touched his buckskin in the flank, and the first step the bayo coyote took was a jump into a full gallop. They were closer together than men would ordinarily have started for something like this, and the chestnut seemed to come at Hayward

in one surge that left no space for conscious thought.

Zacatas was approaching Hayward ten feet to one side, and just before they passed, the amanzador's arm jerked. Hayward was watching for the man to pull the same trick he had on Indita, and was expecting that first move to be a feint on Zacatas' part, and did not make his own cast. He did not actually see the rope come toward him till the loop made its hissing circle above his head. It was only Cimarron's incredible response to his instinctive jerk on the reins that saved Hayward; his automatic duck to one side would not have done any good, as the loop was big enough to compensate for that, but the duck itself threw his weight so far out the reins touched Cimarrron's neck on the right side. Hayward was almost thrown off as the buckskin made a quarter turn to the left in full gallop. He was so occupied with regaining his seat on the horse that he did not realize he was out from under Zacatas' loop till a few seconds later. Then he wheeled Cimarron, his own rope still coiled, to see Zacatas flirting in his reata.

"Valgame Dios," bellowed Zacatas, "you got a cutting horse there."

His roar sounded forced somehow. Without answering, Hayward touched the buckskin's flank and headed in a dead run back toward Zacatas.

"HOLA, Juanito," shouted the amanzador, and spurred his chestnut, loop spinning above his sombrero. This time Hayward did not wait for Zacatas to throw. The ground shook beneath the two horses racing madly toward each other. When two more lengths would have brought them opposite, Hayward let his reins touch Cimarron's neck. Without a perceptible diminution of speed, the buckskin veered into a quarter turn that took it across in front of Zacatas' chestnut, and Hayward made his toss at the amanzador directly over the chestnut's head. He had time to see the surprise on Zacatas' face. Then Zacatas had tossed his loop up into the air at that last instant to foul Hayward's rope, the only way he could have kept from being noosed.

With the chestnut thundering past his rump, Hayward wheeled his buckskin and pulled his rope in. The utter deadliness of this was beginning to penetrate him now. This time Zacatas did not shout as he came at Hayward; perhaps the grimness of it had begun to impress him also.

Memory of the trick Zacatas had pulled on Indita back at Barcello's rancho was still somewehere within Hayward, waiting. He knew it would come some time, and he knew the chance it would give him. This third run, Zacatas was the one who cut across in front. The possibilities of escaping that approach were limited. A good roper could foul the oncoming rope the way Zacatas had; the instinctive reaction would be to neck the horse aside. Hayward stopped.

Perhaps Zacatas had never seen a horse stop so short. Again Hayward saw that surprise on his face. One moment the buckskin was racing head on into that thrown loop. The next he was squatted like a jackrabbit with his forelegs out in front of him, and Hayward had not even pulled hard enough on the reins to raise the buckskin's head. Zacatas' loop spun on by and dropped behind, and Hayward was already making his cast. With Hayward throwing from a still horse that way, and Zacatas racing by so close, it was next to impossible for the amanzador to veer sharply enough to keep from getting noosed. He was running right into the loop, and for one wild, leaping moment, Hayward thought this was it. Ducking would not have saved Zacatas.

Hayward had seen Indians do it. One moment Zacatas was sitting on the horse. The next moment he wasn't. The loop fell across the back of the riderless horse, caught momentarily on the horn, then slipped off its rump. Then Zacatas appeared in the saddle again. He had jumped completely off, striking the ground and bouncing back up, the rope hitting while he was off on the far side that way. As soon as he was in the saddle he wheeled the madly running beast toward his own rope where it lay on the ground.

Hayward was no longer trembling now. He was shaking. The pain in his shoulder was so much he could hardly will numb fingers to grip the reins. The manzanita above spun in his vision. The ground seemed to be rising up to meet him, then descending again.

He flirted in his rope with difficulty.

This time he waited for Zacatas' maneuver. The amanzador apparently meant to pass him straight away. When they were almost opposite, Zacatas jerked his whirling loop. Hayward snapped up his own loop to throw. With it still spinning in front of him, he realized Zacatas' rope was not coming. The rest of it moved automatically without conscious volition from him, because he had seen it happen before, and had seen what could be done against it if a man knew it was coming. He let his buckskin race madly on past Zacatas one more instant.

THEN, when he knew Zacatas would have wheeled the chestnut, and have made that cast at Hayward's retreating back, Hayward put his reins against Cimarron's neck with more force than he ever had before. He felt the movement of the horse's shoulders beneath him, changing leads as it spun in full gallop on its hind foot. Zacatas' rope made a hissing sound past Hayward's ear, one part of the loop striking his knee as it fell. Then he was turned clear around and racing at full tilt back at the amanzador, with Zacatas' rope still in the air. In wheeling Zacatas had come to a full stop for his throw, and in that last instant, he tried to spur the chestnut. But it had not responded before Hayward's loop settled over the amanzador. Then Hayward was racing by Zacatas, the rope snapping taut. The chestnut bolting one way and the rope pulling the other yanked Zacatas off so hard Hayward could hear the man's air expelled from him in a loud grunt. Then there was the sound of his body striking the ground. Hayward tried to keep his horse in its gallop and drag Zacatas, but something within him rebelled, and he hauled up, jumping off the horse before it had stopped and keeping the rope taut on Zacatas so he could not rise.

But he was not trying to rise. As Hayward walked down the rope, keeping it taut, Carlotta stumbled over from where she had been standing helplessly by the fire. She caught at Hayward first, crying and laughing in awful relief, her face streaked with tears. Then they were both crouched over Zacatas. Without touching him, Hayward could see what happened.

"Broke his neck," he mumbled. "The fall." Then he was pulling at Carlotta. "We've got to get out of here. They're coming."

Either someone had seen what was going on, from farther down in the valley, or they were coming back to see what had detained Zacatas. Hayward helped Carlotta on the chestnut, then got Cimarron.

"They won't believe someone actually beat him at it," said Carlotta as they rode. "It's over, Juanito. *Hermanos del Noche.* Zacatas was the only thing that held them together. Without him they would never have gotten this far. He was the one who organized them, the one who held them in check long enough so that they could gain the strength they have. With him gone they'll be nothing. They'll scatter again and we'll be able to stamp the little bands out, if we even have to do that. You see, they aren't even coming after us now. They don't know what to do. They're finished."

His grin cracked the blood and dust on his face. "And we're just started." The grin faded, and he moved closer to her. "Why did you insist on staying at the rancho when Monterey would have been so much safer?"

"I told you. I felt safer at home."

"Why?"

"Don't you know?"

"I didn't," he said. "Pio Tico said something."

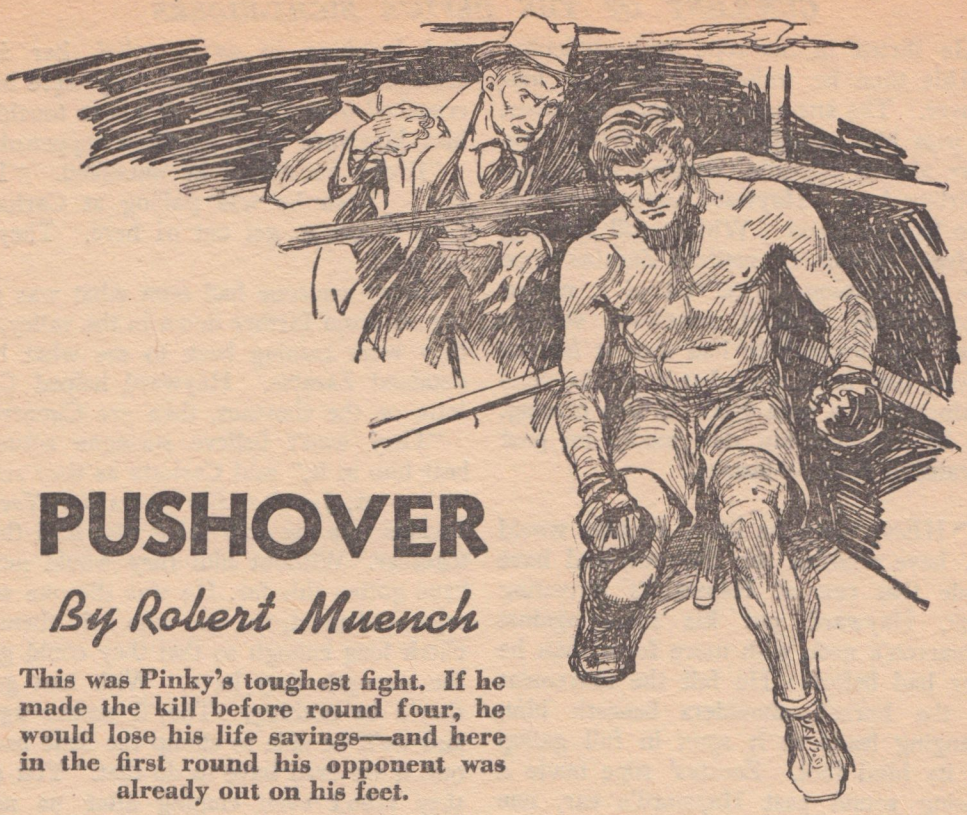
"What?"

He was looking into her eyes. "Me."

She took a breath. "He was right."

He slipped his good arm around her waist. The first time he had tried, there in the garden, she had resisted. The second time, down at Barcello's she had merely accepted. This time she reciprocated.

Finally she took her lips away and looked up at him. "Keep that up," she smiled, "and you'll be more than my amanzador, at Rancho Mateo."



PUSHOVER

By Robert Muench

This was Pinky's toughest fight. If he made the kill before round four, he would lose his life savings—and here in the first round his opponent was already out on his feet.

A HEAVY odor of sweat and liniment surrounded Pinky's nude body. He lay grunting on his dressing room cot while Alf massaged his corded muscles. New to the fight game, Pinky had never lost a bout and he was proud of the power in those muscles. The dressing room door opened, and Pinky peered over a beefy shoulder to see his manager, Max, standing in the doorway talking to a young fellow.

"Wait till after the fight for your interview. Pinky's getting dressed. I'll letcha be the first to see him after he wins this one. And don't smoke around his room, either. Liable to spoil his tone." He entered the dressing room, closing the door behind him. "That was the press, Pinky. Pretty good following for a small time fight like this. How do ya feel?"

Pinky's face was the color of corned beef. He pushed it into a grin. "I'm in the pink, Maxie, in the pink."

"That's great, Pinky. I like to hear 'em talk that way. I placed your dough like you said. One grand on a knockout in the fourth. I even put in two hundred of my own. That's how much confidence I have in ya. Pinky," he mussed Pinky's sweat saturated hair, "you'd better be hot tonight."

"What odds on calling my shots like that?"

"Five to two, no less."

"Hey, that's pretty high, isn't it? When they're only giving seven to four to win."

"Well, you're still an unknown; you're green."

"Green, nothin'! I'm not as green as that pushover tonight, what's his name, Haffer."

"Sure, Haffer is a pushover, a punk. But maybe it's a good thing you didn't promise anything before the fourth."

"A grand is a lot to stick on a knockout in the fourth," Alf left off massaging to comment.

Pinky snickered boastfully. "You heard what Max said. This Haffer kid is a pushover. I can knock him down any round I feel like."

Pinky lunged across the ring toward Haffer as the bell clanged. Haffer began to slug gamely, but after sparring for a few minutes, Pinky knew for sure that Haffer was no competition for the purse. Pinky was sorry that he had made his bet on the fourth round when it would be so

much simpler to kayo Haffer in the first and not make a pretense of fighting for three rounds. If he made the kill before the fourth round, his thousand dollars of savings would be gone. That was the bet.

RELUCTANTLY, Pinky waltzed around the ring with his unworthy adversary. Haffer was putting his borrowed time to good use, throwing heavy punches at Pinky's scarlet face. Pinky indulgently brushed aside these futile assaults, his only anxiety being that the kid would hurt himself. Haffer made a swing and Pinky stepped lackadaisically out of the way. The kid was wide open for something in the head that would put him to sleep for a week, but Pinky only bounced a weak jab off the kid's defense. The referee didn't like that; he smelled a rodent. So did the crowd, showering Pinky with long, derisive boos.

A change of tactics was in order. Pinky quickly assumed the corny role of a stout hearted athlete fighting a losing game, hanging on the ropes by the end of the third, gloriously winning in the fourth by a miraculous burst of energy. Pinky thought that the crowd ought to love such a martyr act. He crouched around the bewildered Haffer as if hunting for an opening, left his chest unprotected, spun around to take the sting out of Haffer's punch, and kept spinning as if hit by a cannon shell. Haffer was amazed by these antics. The crowd booed.

Pinky continued his farce, though, and when the bell rang, he stumbled to his corner. Plunking himself heavily on the stool, he set Alf to work massaging his arms and abdomen.

"What are you trying to pull?" screamed Max. "Did you hear that crowd boo?"

"What else could I do, Max? I couldn't keep dodging without the ref getting wise. It's hard to keep pulling punches for three rounds. When I all of a sudden come through in the fourth, the crowd will eat it up."

"If they don't lynch you first," muttered Max. "Jeez, as an actor you certainly stink! Can't you at least tap the dope a few times? Look at him over there, as cocky as though he knew the score."

The bell rang and Alf scrambled out of the ropes. "I'll toss him a few this time, Max, but everything goes if I kayo him too soon."

The two dashed at each other. Haffer was exuberant, believing himself to be winning over a more experienced fighter; Pinky's heart was sick with the tyro's disgust that he had to submit to the maulings of this ignorant opponent. He allowed himself to be pushed about the ring wincing at each volley of boos that the audience fired.

Haffer had one thing besides spunk, a terrific drive behind his punches. Pinky knew that if he ever got in the way of one of those punches he was likely to be maimed. He thought it might be a good thing to take the power out of those swings and appease the crowd as well. He waited for an obvious opening, and when the next one came he threw an arm like a steel beam into the kid's stomach.

The effect was greater than he had expected. Haffer turned green like a young cauliflower and sagged downward. Pinky gave him a lifting shove that carried him to the ropes. A cold sweat began trickling down Pinky's red forehead. "Oh please, kid, stay awake," he pleaded as Haffer slid down the ropes. The kid turned a little and tried to hold onto the ropes. When he lost his hold, Pinky rushed against him and tried to pin him up by the force of his own body. The referee motioned him away, and when Haffer went down for the count, Pinky made a further play for time by refusing to move to a neutral corner. By the time the referee had begun to count, the bell rang. Haffer was still on his knees.

THOROUGHLY shaken, Pinky slunk back to his corner, expecting a tongue-lashing from Max. Max was too upset by this turn of events to blast Pinky. He just sat by the ringside watching Haffer's trainers rubbing the kid's stomach. For long, anxious seconds Pinky waited for the kid's manager to throw in the towel. Smelling salts seemed to be bringing the kid around. The time was short, but the kid was game. When the bell rang, he was on his feet, lurching out of his corner.

"For crissake nurse him," Pinky heard Max holler after him. Pinky pulled every punch during the third round. Every now and then when he thought the kid was going to fall down, he rushed into a clinch

and held him up. "Please, Haffer," he would coo, "try to stand up. Please don't fall down. You can't fall down on me. Oh damn you, stand up and fight."

They waltzed around through the longest round that Pinky had ever fought. By the time the bell clanged, Pinky could feel that the kid was actually coming around.

Speculatively, Pinky and Max watched Haffer's trainers building him up for the onslaughts of the next round. "That Haffer's got guts," remarked Pinky. "I almost hate to put the slug on him."

"You'd better not mess up this round."

"How can I, Max? All I have to do is hold him still and hit him."

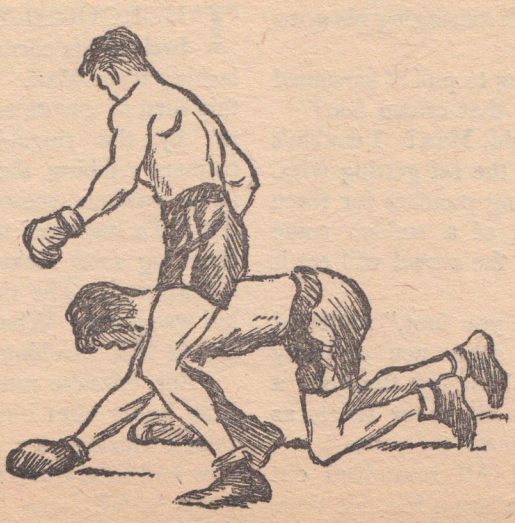
The bell announced the fourth round, and Pinky skipped forth to make his bet pay the five to two. He noted that Haffer had recovered sufficiently to box defensively, though in a crabbed fashion. Pinky began nudging him into a favorable position. He wanted to knock him out cleanly, without letting him suffer more than necessary. "Just hold still a minute," he coaxed, "one little minute, and it will all be over."

Haffer's groggy head jerked violently away. Pinky crowded him back against the ropes where he hung dazed a moment before trying to push out of position. Backing him into the ropes again, Pinky sighted Haffer for the knockout. "Just hold still one eensy second, kid," he wheedled half aloud as he calculated the most favorable part of Haffer's anatomy to pulverize, "one little ole second and this ole fight will be over for you."

He pivoted a little, then lunged with all his weight at the cleft of Haffer's chin. The punch would no doubt have knocked Haffer unconscious for the rest of the evening, but halfway in his swing, Pinky felt a white hot pain streaming through his own chin. He couldn't understand it. Could he have bumped into some overhead obstruction? He must have, because he found that his lunge had stopped completely. He was standing perfectly motionless. In front of his face he dimly saw Haffer's arm moving slowly away. So that's what happened! Pinky suddenly remembered that there had been dynamite behind the kid's wild swings. The nerve of that guy, Pinky thought, trying to get my prize money. And my bet! I'll show him.

He tried to raise his arms to avenge this outrage on his person and his money. Somehow his arms failed to respond; they hung from his shoulders like two logs. Pinky couldn't quite understand what was happening when he sagged helplessly to the canvas.

The referee spent ten seconds shouting at Pinky. He then raised Haffer's glove, thus stopping the kid's swaying. The crowd voiced its mixed opinions. Off in his corner, Max was a despairing stream of profanity. But none of these things disturbed Pinky. *His sleep was deep and peaceful.*



MIXED CARGO

By Frank R. Pierce

An ancient windjammer, fleeing through black night and raging storm. A strange, frightened cargo. A woman's voice raised in hopeless prayer for safety. A hint of death approaching—slow death, at the torture-skilled hands of shadow stalkers—A futile, frantic battle for existence.

WITH pardonable pride in craftsmanship the Gurkha displayed the head that he had brought aboard in the creaking wicker basket. It was the usual neat job of decapitation—a clean cut and no ragged edges—but it was the wrong head. Fong Kea, one of the more ghoulish of the creatures spawned by the worst blood of the Far East, had made a clean getaway and was doubtless dickering with the Japs at this very moment. If they'd pay his price, he would show them the exact spot where the American square-rigger had hidden from them since Pearl Harbor.

He would describe the estuary penetrating the dense vegetation on a remote section

The Madam knelt between Matsuri and the Old One.

The sadness of the Gurkha was evident, for he had brought the wrong head.

of the China coast. He would tell them that she was the *Gloria* whose hull was built of iron, not steel; and whose lofty spars had been sent down to aid in concealment from Jap reconnaissance planes; and whose decks were covered with growing bamboo plants.

If he contacted Lieutenant Matsuri of the Japanese Navy, Fong Kea would hit the jackpot because in the pre-Pearl Harbor days when Matsuri was on the West Coast buying clipper ships, loading them with scrapiron and sending them to Japan, he had lost a lot of "face" because my grandfather, Captain Abner Bodfish, had refused to sell him the *Gloria.* And he had lost another hunk of face when he hired Grandfather to sail the *Star of Windermere,* overloaded with scrap, to Japan. She was "lost" off the Aleutian Islands in 1940, the only ship Grandfather ever failed to bring into port.

Grandfather's only comment on his return was, "Those Japs are monkey men, and they look like monkeys aloft, but they know nothing about windships."

One night, passing Grandfather's room, I heard my eldest brother, Ron, ask, "Grandfather, as one shipmaster to another, what happened to the *Windermere?*" And Grandfather answered, "Paid off the crew before we made port." There was a significance to his emphasis on *paid off* that harkened back a century or more.

Some of the less generous in Grandfather's era termed him a hard case, but he was soft enough over windships. He wasn't foolish enough to buck progress. Crack liners, even planes, were right with him, but he insisted there was nothing as beautiful as a ship under sail, and he was willing to go to extremes to keep a few of them on the sea—not only as museum pieces, but as a cold blooded business.

As long as I can remember, the *Gloria* gave our family a good living and there was enough left to help the in-laws over the hard places. Even Grandmother loved the *Gloria,* though she had reason to believe the ship was named for a girl who had played house with Grandfather when he was a man of eighteen. Grandmother invariably spoke of the girl as "that combustible little baggage steeped in sin."

Liking the sea skipped Father, but Ron and I loved it. It was no coincidence that the *Gloria* was ready for a short voyage each summer at vacation time. Longer voyages were in order whenever Grandfather could dig up an ailing school teacher to go along.

At twenty-three Ron held master's papers in sail and I had qualified as first mate at twenty-one. As master, Ron sailed the *Gloria* to Alaska that summer. Grandfather went along as passenger, and when we got back to Seattle his sister Prudence was home—home with a story of Japs murdering her missionary husband in China, and of a bayonet jab in the thigh when she tried to protect the young girls.

That was the year that Grandfather refused to sell the *Gloria* to Matsuri, but to everyone's amazement agreed to skipper the *Windermere,* manned by a Jap crew, to Japan.

HE learned a lot on the voyage, I'm sure, and read handwriting on the wall that should have been visible to more of us. Bottoms were at a premium, and he said, "I'm sailing the *Gloria* to Dutch East Indies and way ports for raw rubber, spices, quinine, camphor gum and other things a Jap blockade might keep out of this country. Ron you're first mate. Eddie, you're second mate, if you want to go." I'd have shipped as seaman to sail.

Then he crossed the room to Grandmother. "We're getting along, Hetty." He stood there, a barrel-chested man with snow white hair, his heavy arm resting lightly across Grandmother's frail shoulder. "So perhaps I shouldn't go. Now we've had our fusses, but when outsiders barge in we pull together. Outsiders are ready to barge in —Japs. It looks as if I'll have to go. I'll miss you."

"Oh go on with you," Grandmother said, immensely pleased, "I'll keep things going."

A week before sailing day Grandfather was taken sick. The doctor told him it was going to be a long haul, and Grandfather called in Ron and me. "You're taking the *Gloria,* Ron," he said. He reminded him of sharp practices those in foreign ports often use on very young masters. He didn't, however, remind him that the family fortune was invested in the *Gloria* and her cargo. "Now," he said in conclusion, spreading out a chart, "If you're here when the Japs declare war." He marked the chart. "Set a course for there!" He marked the chart again.

Grandfather charted every possible escape route before he was done with it, and when Ron and I boarded the *Gloria,* he said, "Eddie, the Captain thinks there's going to be war, sure as hell."

And there was! It caught us, homeward bound, December 8th, and we changed course for the spot Grandfather had charted on the China coast. He had suggested that we stay there until the American navy *cleaned out the Japs.* "In a few months," Grandfather had predicted. "And if they chase you into the open, Ron, use your wits. Matsuri is a member of the Imperial family and it's "face" with him. Nothing less than bringing the *Gloria* into a Jap port will satisfy him. It'll be your wits against his, Ron." He chuckled. "Watch everything. You may get a chance to pay off the prize crew." And we knew that he was thinking of the *Windermere.*

Ron told the Gurhka to take the head away, then we went below. "Eddie," he said, "my hunch is, Fong Kea got through to the Japs. We know that our submarines have raised so much hell with Jap shipping that thousands of slave laborers are building railroads and highways to tap the raw materials vital to Japan's very life. But we don't know how soon a patrol working from the nearest railroad, or guided by Fong Kea, will penetrate our

hideout. We know our planes plaster the China coast with bombs and machine guns. But how near is our fleet? How much protection could it afford to give a windjammer? We're a single white chip in a blue chip, sky-limit game. If we run the gauntlet, can we reach a protective screen before the Japs pick us off? I've got to make a decision, Eddie, and I want to air all angles. There'll be no second-guessing on this deal."

Several hundred Chinese knew of the hideout. Most would die rather than betray us, but there was always the chance than an educated coolie-disguised renegade of the Fong Kea type would sell us out.

The third mate interrupted our discussion. "Captain, the Gurkha is taking his failure to heart. He's ashamed, sir, because he sliced off a murderin' Chinee's head, instead of Fong Kea, the boss man's."

"Try your hand at smoothing his feelings, Eddie," Ron said.

I talked to the Gurkha, but he only looked sad and kept on whetting his blade. He was whetting it when I heard Ron exclaim, "Geez H! What's this?"

An improvised bamboo raft, poled by a huge, sloppy blonde, was coming alongside the gangway. She made fast, stooped to pick up a bundle, and her heavy breasts fell from her soiled blouse, and a half dozen ropes of real pearls lay in the deep, white valley.

"The wages of sin are pearls," Ron said. "A Hong Kong madam, harder than the hubs of hell. Grandfather pointed her out to me ten years ago. The years haven't been kind." Ron's face hardened. "Nor can I be kind if she's planning to make her last stand on the *Gloria*."

THE Madam picked up the bundle easily enough and mounted the gangway with aggressive steps. You could see her jungle-smeared calves shake like jelly with each step. She shook the bundle, and the wrappings fell away. An aged Chinese, with pencil-line moustache and whiskers, lay on quilted silk. His hips were little more than hollow shell, his face, parchment drawn tightly over bones, but profound wisdom lay in the depths of his tired eyes.

"To me, he's my husband," the Madam said, "the one human being in all the world who was ever kind. To this region, he is the Old One, worth a hundred thousand yen delivered *alive* to the Japs for torture." She nodded toward the land. "That's the frying pan out there. The *Gloria* is the fire. We're jumping into it, Mister Bodfish." She took off a rope of pearls. "Passage money, Mister."

Ron shook his head. The Gurkha, and others, had told us about the Old One, directing genius of Chinese guerrillas. The Japs were closing in fast, or else he was too sick to again slip through their lines and carry on. Ron said, "Madam Old One, the *Gloria* isn't licensed to carry passengers, but we'll find room for you as crew members."

Relief and gratitude softened her face. "Thanks, Mister—come sailing day, and you'll have the godamnedest crew."

"Yes?" Ron was puzzled.

"Yes, Mister," she replied. "You don't think it is *all* Yankee luck that's kept out the Japs? For certain whites, each slugging it out with the monkey men in his or her own way, the *Gloria* has been an anchor to windward. Each white has had Chinese following so loyal that when spies were moved to report the *Gloria* there was immediate . . . shall we say *safeguarding?* Sometimes a head was neatly removed. Again a silken cord left the head intact, but the body just as dead."

The Madam named the village where Fong Kea would meet Matsuri. I didn't see the Gurkha leave the *Gloria*. His departures were like vapor drifting through the lowlands. His attacks were as silent.

Before sundown, we were sending topmasts and spars aloft, and our ancient shellbacks—the last links between sail and steam—were settling down for a night's work. Ron and I were up there with them It was an all hands job.

If you know your business, you can always keep a crew busy. Ron had learned his business from a past master. The *Gloria's* bottom had been scraped frequently, then painted. She had once played the *Constitution's* role in a motion picture and Grandfather had maintained her frigate-like appearance, painting squares on her hull to suggest gun ports.

Of course the small deck boiler to supply power for cargo gear, and the radio wind charger, and antenna were not in char-

acter, but you hardly noticed these details.

The crew had kept the rigging tarred, seams calked and mildew out of the sails. Now the bamboo thickets growing in deck boxes were going over the side; and the trailing jungle vines concealing her masts were coming down. The Madam's predictions were coming true, too. The man the shellbacks promptly named the Missionary came out of the jungle, followed by his gaunt wife who was momentarily expecting her fourth child. The other three, each carrying a pack on bony shoulders, trailed their elders.

"War leaves debris in its wake," Ron said, "but where the Japs are concerned, the debris swirls ahead of the advance guard and eddies in the read guard's wake." The woman stopped, looked aloft, then began sobbing without restraint.

From the first, we had flown an American flag. It was so tiny Jap planes would never spot it, but it was there. And it stood for as much as a flag a thousand times larger.

Ron drew a long breath. "To her it's sanctuary and protection," he said; "she's never weighed the odds against sailing through the Jap sphere to the American. The Madam's viewpoint is realistic. Better help her aboard, Eddie."

She was caked with muck, and her hands and face were badly scratched. Where her dress pulled tightly across her abdomen, I could see the throb of life beneath. Ron turned his head and swore softly; then he bowed it because the Missionary was on his knees praying. I noticed the soles of the kneeling children's bare feet were thick, like a native's. The girl, if she survived the days ahead, would always have large feet with widely spread toes. I liked the prayer. It expressed appreciation for God's mercy and guidance of the past, and asked no help for the future.

"Move your gear into the master's cabin," Ron said to me, "and give them your room."

The Madam nudged Ron. "You'd better give the Three Graces a hand, Mister." She was staring intently at a jungle path and there were mixed emotions on her face. "When I first saw them, young teachers from Stateside, they were beautiful, with fresh young faces. Something in their hearts—something I never had—filled them with the urge to do good. That was before . . . the Japs caught them. The blond one, claimed by a high Jap officer, put up a terrible fight—killed him with his own hari kari blade. She's been a little mad ever since, and tense as a fiddle string. She has lovely breasts—with an ink cross on the left one, so that she'll know exactly where to drive the hari kari knife if the Japs ever again corner her. The two dark girls? If they could reach America, the things that have happened might seem like a nightmare in time. They'd like to wake up from the nightmare in America."

I'VE seen Ron in many a tight spot, but this was the first time that I ever saw cold sweat on his face. "Let's go down, Eddie," he said. "They need a hand."

The blonde walked straight to Ron and I could see mad glitter in her eyes. I thought of blue ice. Each breath was short and rapid and she spoke so swiftly the words seemed to run together. "Put your arms around me. Hold me tight! Tighter! Tighter!" Her command was savage and she pounded her right fist on Ron's arm. "I want to feel safe! I want to cry—cry my heart out and feel better. But I can't cry! I can't feel safe, not even in a big American's arms. And I thought I'd feel safe. I was sure! Sure! Sure!"

She was going to pieces and Ron said sharply, "Easy, girl! Easy. I won't let anyone take you . . . ever!"

"Margie's always like that," a companion said. "I'm Ann Oliver. This is my sister, Donna."

"We'll do our best for you," Ron promised, his arm around Margie, his fingers striving to steady her with their strong grip. "With luck, we'll sail in twenty-four hours."

"The others should be here," Ann said, "and the Japs won't be far behind them."

"The others? How many?" Ron asked.

"Perhaps dozens," Ann replied. "It has been everyone for himself. It was plain horse sense to keep our parties small. A large party leaves a broad trail. We've backtracked; waded in streams and done everything to confuse the Japs. There's an American aviator coming on a litter. He's lost a leg below the knee. Another operations is needed, I'm told, though it may be rumor. There are a couple of engineers

who have been aiding the Chinese; several whites with military background; a priest and . . ."

"And a doctor and nurse, I hope," Ron said.

"I don't know," Ann replied, "but I do know there's a big price on the head of most of them. They've been responsible one way or another, for much of the Chinese resistance in this province."

We helped them up the gangway; moved the mates into the master's cabin; stoked up the hot water system and told them to soak in the tub and forget their troubles. We promised plenty of food.

When we had time to catch our breaths, Ron said, "Grandfather was a great hand to take on plenty of stores, for which we can thank him. Otherwise we'd have used the last long ago."

"But it was your idea that we use fish, rice and local fruits and vegetables to conserve our tinned stuff," I reminded him. "Being short-handed helped, too. Where're you heading for when the China coast is hull down?"

"Straight to sea," he answered, "and when there is plenty of American battle force astern, I'll head for Saipan, Honolulu or possibly Puget Sound."

Puget Sound started me to thinking about the folks again. I wondered how Grandfather had made out. Had we left him behind with his last illness, or had his stout old constitution pulled him through again? Often he had said, "I had guns aboard my ship in the Spanish-American war, and again in World War I. If we get into this one, I hope some blasted swab don't start saying, 'Sorry, Captain Bodfish, but a man of your advanced years . . .' Because if that happens, I'll work him over with my fists and prove how wrong he is."

If alive, Grandfather would be telling the family, "The boys are safe. They're obeying my orders. When it's safe, the *Gloria* will be making a run for it. And if the Japs catch 'em . . ." Then he would chuckle away to himself, which would aggravate Grandmother and she would give him a good dressing down. But his chuckle would convince the family that he had provided for that contingency, too.

We had used our radio receiver sparingly, realizing that our stock of replacements and tubes wouldn't last indefinitely, but we knew of the war's progress; of island hopping; D Day; the German situation; and B-29s smashing Japan.

The aviator and several others came aboard during the night. Ron, as ship's doctor, examined his leg, and reported it in bad shape. Amputation had been crude, and the job would have to be done over again. His faith in Ron getting him safely through to an American surgeon was a touching thing.

At noon the next day, we began removing the last of the camouflage. The litter of bamboo and other vegetation was deep around the ship. He had a regulation flag up, and its fluttering in a stiff breeze was heartening. You might think that departure was a momentous occasion. It should have been, but our passengers were sleeping, except Margie. She would fall asleep, awaken with a violent start an hour or two later, then was wide awake for hours thereafter.

She stood at the rail, eyes on the jungle trails, waiting for screaming Japs and rattling machine guns, while we put two power boats over the side, and began towing the *Gloria* to give her steerage way. The outgoing tide carried us along smartly.

RON was in command, but I had the wheel because he felt that I could respond faster to an emergency order than some of the shellbacks. When the estuary widened beyond machine gun range, Margie came over to my side. Ron had given her a sailor's peacoat, and she had her clenched fists shoved hard into the pockets. Her flannel shirt was open at the throat, and when she leaned down to look at the compass I caught a momentary glimpse of the inked cross on her left breast—and the jeweled hilt of the hari kari blade which she carried in a sort of shoulder holster.

It was night when we cleared the headland and took the power boats aboard. The shellbacks were aloft making sail. We'd left one at the wheel, and Ron and I went up with them. We could hear the wind singing through the rigging and feel life surge through the ship. It was as if the *Gloria* had been given a blood transfusion after lying at death's door for years.

Ron planned to drive her from the first and as the wind grew in strength, I knew that he was risking losing sticks in an

effort to get well as sea before daylight. Sometimes he was formal in our deck relations, and I was "Mister Bodfish." Again, I was "Eddie." When the weight of command was heavy on him, he was formal, and around midnight he said, "Better get below, Mr. Bodfish, and grab forty winks." I answered smartly and when I started below I saw Margie leave the rail, where she had stood for hours, and join Ron. She trembled as if from the cold, and leaned against him.

If doubt if she regarded him other than a solid rock that gave her a sense of security.

Ron awakened me at dawn. Coffee was ready, and we mugged up. "Margie has me worried," he said, "I talked to her, held her close, but she was afraid—constantly poised for fight or flight. The slightest sound makes her jump. She's all highly tempered springs and a borderline mental case. Something might snap, and she'd go over the side or use that hari kari blade. She practices the movement like the old Western gunmen worked on their draw. And her hand moves faster than my eye can follow."

We finished our coffee and stepped outside, and Ron exclaimed, "Where in the hell did you come from?"

The Gurkha stood there, grave, apologetic explaining that he had come aboard shortly before we sailed and that he hadn't wanted to bother the captain with trivial matters because so much of importance had occupied his mind. He picked up his wicker basket, removed the cover and presented a head for inspection. "Fong Kea!" Ron exclaimed. "You're a thorough man with no end of patience. I am happy to call you friend, but what in the hell am I going to do with you?"

The Gurkha had that figured out. Wasn't there a British dominion called Canada adoining the United States? Good, then a Canadian regiment might find use for a healthy Gurkha in perfect working order. Or perhaps the Marines need a Gurkha in connection with future operations? "It's in the laps of the gods," Ron said; "find yourself a place to sleep, and we'll give you plenty of curried rice and herring."

The Missionary met us in the cabin. His face was a yard long. "My wife's *time* has come, Captain," he said. "I'm sorry to bother you when you have so many responsibilities, but it is God's Will."

"Can't you handle it?" Ron asked. He was as nervous as an incipient young father. "Mister Bodfish will start knocking on doors. There must be a midwife or a midhusband in this gang." I routed out the Madam first.

"Hell, no!" she exclaimed sleepily. "In my time the doctors brought 'em in little black bags. I understand the deal has been modernized and streamlined in recent years."

"No dice," I reported to Ron. "It's up to you."

"Break out that medical book. It's What A Shipmaster Should Know or something," he said. "Wait! I've an idea. The watch is changing. There's fathers among the shellbacks."

I lined them up. "Fathers step one pace forward," I said. They looked startled, and seven obeyed. "We're needing what the captain calls a midhusband. Any of you men been around when your wife was sponsoring a launching?"

Boiled down they had either been at sea, or had walked the floor like any landlubber. I reported to Ron and found him deep in a medical volume. "Well, as the nurses say, 'I'd better scrub up!' Keep the ship on her present course, Mr. Bodfish, and don't call me unless you sight plane, ship or submarine."

An hour later the Madam came on deck. "I've some soft things to wrap the kid in," she said. "Those folks came aboard with the duds they wore and nothing extra as far as I could see."

"Take 'em below," I told her.

I called Margie, standing at the rail. "Report to the captain. You might be needed."

RON opened a ventilator. He needed fresh air even if Mrs. Missionary didn't. I could hear him say, "Drink this! It's brandy."

"But why?" she protested.

"I don't know," Ron answered helplessly, "but it seems like a good idea." She drank it and choked some, then moaned. I caught a glimpse of Ron's head and shoulders. He had the medical book in his hands and was reading the same page over and over again. There would be no time

for a refresher course when things began happening.

The Madam's voice rasped, "Hang onto me, Mrs. Missionary, if it'll help." Then to Ron, "Can't you give her a stiff whiff of ether? Put her out! No goddam sense in a woman suffering like this. I'll bet it's worse'n a man getting kicked in the groin."

"It says in the book, right here, that if a woman is completely out that she can't *help,*" Ron answered inadequately. He showed the Madame the paragraph. She sniffed in resignation.

The Gurkha came running and pointed at a speck on the horizon. I took a long look through the binoculars, then motioned Ron on deck. "Plane!" I said, and handed him the glasses.

"Jap," he said tersely. He called to Margie through the ventilator, then closed it. He passed the word forward, and the watch went below. "Mister Bodfish take the other wheel." This was partly protected from heavy seas, bu housing of oak planks. What the wheelman now needed was a concrete pill box.

Margie asked, "What is it, Captain?"

"When the baby comes it'll be your job to take care of it until the mother's able to take over," Ron said. "Regardless of what happens, the baby is your responsibility! Understand?"

The hatch would be a tight squeeze for the girls. It had been designed for men to hide in, and they were built along different lines.

"Yes . . . sir," she answered. I think she heard the plane's motor then, because the terror in her eyes strengthened and she began talking hysterically.

"Goddam it!" Ron shouted. "Think of someone besides yourself for a change!" It was cruel business, and it hurt me inside. It hurt Ron, too. If Margie hadn't been made of special stuff, she'd have been a raving maniac long since.

"Yes sir," she answered, startled.

"I'll take that hari kari blade," Ron said. "You won't be needing it." There was none of this, I'm-the-captain-obey-my-orders business now. Rather he was using logic.

"And if I need it will you give it to me—*in plenty of time?*" she asked.

"Yes," he agreed. "Now go below. And don't worry about the Japs," he added in a gentler tone.

Ron took a final look around and returned to his patient. I watched the plane circle the ship. She was wary, as if expecting AA fire, then she closed in and I could see the rising sun on her wings. She could have riddled us with machine gun bullets and set the sails afire. If ever there was a sitting duck, it was the *Gloria.* But the plane was content to circle and study the ship. I could see the pilots in the greenhouse, and the gunners. The guns moved back and forth, as if the men behind them were itching to cut loose. Suddenly she turned and headed in a general westerly direction at cruising speed.

I opened the ventilator—and heard a baby's first gasp, then a lusty howl. Ron came on deck, limp as a rag, and grumbled, "Laugh, you damned fool. If you make any cracks about a midhusband I'll keelhaul you."

"Boy or girl? Wait! Don't answer! It's a girl and they've named her *Gloria,*" I said.

"Naw! It's a boy. Ronald Bodfish . . . what the hell's that missionary's last name?"

"Ronald Bodfish Missionary," I suggested. "Was Margie any help?"

"Too nervous," Ron replied, "but I'm hopeful. We may bring her out of it. The trouble is, we're in for Jap action. I wish I knew our fleet's position—I'd break radio silence and ask for help. But if help didn't come soon, a Jap submarine might throw a torpedo into us."

I nodded. The Jap submarines were closer than our surface craft. But what about American submarines? Still, they couldn't waste time protecting us. "Jap psychology being what it is, Ron," I said, "why not let 'em make the next move?"

He left it that way and we maintained a course that would put a maximum number of miles astern. The male passengers came on deck and asked for work. They were in no shape for hard work, and Ron let them do a little polishing. Sailors brought Lieutenant Manning, the aviator, up where he could get fresh air and sunshine. Ron had dressed his leg, but it looked bad.

We saw almost nothing of the women that day, nor the next, but the morning of the third day the Madam led a procession to the poop deck where Ron was checking our position. "I cut up some of my old things," she said, "and the girls made a homeward bound pennant. They have them in the navy, you know. When the ship is home the pennant is cut up and divided among the crew. I thought . . ." She hesitated, blushing at the sentiment breaking her hard crust, "that it might help—might show faith in the *Gloria,* the Bodfish brothers and those old shellbacks making up the crew."

"That's swell, Mrs. Old One," Ron answered. "It'll buck up the old morale." She was always touched when Ron called her Mrs. Old One. "How's your husband? I haven't had time to see him."

"He's alive," she said seriously. "You take old ashes deep enough and you find a spark. His spark of life is like that. He's got to live, Mister, he's got to live. When it's all over, China is going to need his wisdom. Funny, a wise guy would marry an old battleaxe like me."

"Maybe the wise guy alone sensed the pearl within the hard outer shell. The Old One, I believe, is an authority on pearls?"

"Shut up, Mister, before I start blubbering," she rasped in her whiskey voice. "Bend the pennant to a line, and run her up."

People who had been through less, would have cheered, but the *Gloria's* passengers, and crew, just watched the pennant stiffen in the breeze. Then some of them swallowed hard.

That evening, Ron said, "Eddie, I want

you to watch Margie with that baby. You'd think it was her own. I think caring for it is going to turn the trick. But . . . she has a long way to go, Eddie."

MARGIE was holding the baby close to her and there was a gentleness on her face that I had never seen before. "More and more, Eddie," she whispered, "I feel that he is mine. Such a pititful, blue little thing, to fill one with hope and courage. Do you suppose that the Missionary would give him to me? They have three."

Hell, I thought, *things are getting worse, not better. When they try to take the baby from her, there'll be no reasoning with her.* When she leaned forward and her shirt fell away, I managed to peek, without getting caught. She had washed off the ink cross on her left breast.

I looked in on Manning and caught him off guard. His face was twisted with pain. "Catching hell, fella?" I asked.

"A little. But I'm alive, and we're headed for America," he answered. "I'll manage."

"When it can be arranged," I told him, "we'll radio for a PBY to fly you to a hospital."

"That'll be something," he said, "a flying boat taking a man off a windjammer. What do you suppose Decatur or Paul Jones would say to that? Sometimes I think of the damnedest things—things like wondering if George Washington would be scared, if Alley Oop's time machine plunked him down in Times Square when traffic was at peak. Or would he take it in his usual calm, dignified stride?

"I'll bet you that George would take a second look at the girls' short dresses. They claim he had an eye for a neat gam—on those rare occasions when a man saw one." He laughed, which was the main idea, but the next moment he was sober, and telling me that he had heard the Jap plane's motors, which was something we were trying to keep from him.

I turned in an hour later, and shortly before it was my watch on deck, the Gurkha was shaking me. A Jap submarine was following us, and Ron wanted me to radio the *Gloria's* position. I felt a curious sense of relief—proof enough that subconsciously I had been feeling the strain of uncertainty. The showdown had come. Either we'd get help in time, or we wouldn't. By daylight we'd know where we stood. Ron and I had gone over the message that we'd transmit and I'd practiced getting it off fast by voice and telegraph.

And I sent it fast! At different frequencies. With luck the world—and Grandfather—would know that the *Gloria's* hull hadn't been melted and turned into Jap munitions. It would know that she had been hiding all these years and was making her break. It would know her exact position.

I heard Ron bellow a warning, then wreckage crashed on the poop deck, and paint scale fell like snowflakes on the transmitter, the table and deck. I heard Margie scream, "My baby!" Then the Madam's whiskey voice, "Hang onto yourself kid. It's only the radio antenna coming down. Didn't think the Japs could shoot that good." Ron's voice bellowed, "On deck, Mr. Bodfish!"

The watch below came tumbling out of the foc'sl as I reported. I saw a flash a half mile distant, then a shell screamed across our bow. The Madam came on deck. She was chewing on a cigar. "Calms my nerves," she explained. "My husband doesn't like it, but he'll excuse it this time. Any orders, Mister?"

"Yes," Ron answered. "They're going to board us. As a matter of *face,* I think, they'll try to take the *Gloria* to the nearest Jap port. She'll make a swell barge for work between Japan and the China Coast. God knows they need bottoms. Bringing her in will give Matsuri's face a *lift.* But a Jap's a Jap, so you women go below. Mister Bodfish, show them that compartment."

Margie came on deck and said, "Captain, I'll take that hari kari blade. It was a promise, you know."

"Very well," he answer, giving it to her, "but keep your shirt on. We may get out of this yet. And don't forget that you've a baby on your hands."

I THOUGHT I saw her flush under his steady gaze. She followed me to the mate's quarters. "Below this deck," I explained, "there's a compartment. We built it with the idea of concealing four or five men who might get the jump on the

Jap officers who came aboard with a prize crew. It's stocked with tinned grub and beakers of water. Drag blankets and donkey's breakfasts below when you go . . ."

"Donkey's breakfast?" Ann asked.

"Yes," the Madam answered, 'thin straw mattresses—each holding about enough to feed a donkey."

I pulled out two locker drawers and raised a small hatch cover. A single small bulb supplied from the radio storage batteries lighted the place. The girls went below with misgivings, but the Madam shook her head. "I'm safe enough, even from the Japs," she said. "I couldn't squeeze through that hatchway—not with my stern. Besides, Mrs. Missionary isn't in shape to take care of the baby and Margie can take him with her."

When I reported to Ron, the *Gloria* had almost stopped, and her sails were flapping in the breeze like a Monday morning washing.

"I've sent all the men, including the Missionary, forward," Ron said. "They're getting into shellback clothes. Manning, of course, is in his bink, with his uniform hanging where it can be seen. He rates prisoner of war treatment, such as it is."

"What about the Gurkha?"

"He's with the sailors," Ron answered. "His knife is cached somewhere. I gave him orders to exercise restraint in all things. I think that he'll obey them, but temptation will be great at times. Well, here they come, and I'm worried over the girls. Donna has a tendency to claustrophobia. I hope it isn't too much for her down there. It's too bad the Madam couldn't squeeze through. She exerts a calming influence—understands girls," he added dryly.

"You can't anticipate everything," I answered. "The hatch was designed for men, and she's built along other lines."

Sailors had lowered a gangway on the lee side, and a boat, loaded with armed Jap sailors, was coming in. Matsuri, jeweled Samuri sword in hand, leaped to the gangway and hurried up. Jap sailors, carrying light machine guns, followed. The sailors obviously were looking for an excuse to cut loose.

"Commander Matsuri taking possession of your ship as a prize of war," he said crisply, "Haul down your flag, Captain Bodfish."

"You haul it down," Ron answered. "You're in possession."

"Haul down your damned flag, or . . ."

"Commander," Ron said in a low tone, "your breed should know something of Americans by now, but I'm afraid that you're among the backward boys when it comes to learning. One of Japan's greatest men was raised in America and graduated from the University of Oregon, but he never learned that underneath we weren't soft. And your own American high school and college training seems to have missed it. You'll save yourself a lot of *face* by not sticking your neck out. In other words, your men are watching you, don't start anything you can't finish. You started at Pearl Harbor. Remember? I'm not hauling the flag down."

There were several seconds' silence and I expected that sword to swing and Ron's head to thud to the deck. God, it was still and tense. There was only the soft song of the wind in the rigging and the slapping of the sea against the hull.

Then Matsuri barked a command in Japanese and a sailor hauled down the flag, wadded it up, and sent up the rising sun flag. It was the hardest thing I ever had to take.

"What's that other thing up there?" Matsuri asked.

"Homeward bound pennant," Ron answered.

"Haul it down," Matsuri ordered. He was determined to make Ron haul something down. "Homeward bound," he repeated. "I like that. The *Gloria* is homeward bound to Japan. A delayed arrival." His face grew rather ruthless and incidents of the past, his failure to buy the *Gloria,* and the failure of the *Star of Windermere* to arrive, haunted him. "The homeward bound pennant stays up there. But I'm sorry, so terribly sorry, that the *old* Captain Bodfish isn't in command."

I thought, *Grandfather's unexpected illness was the luckiest thing that ever happened to him.*

Another boatload of Japs came aboard under a petty officer. They lined up at attention.

"Captain Bodfish," Matsuri said, "you will muster your passengers and crew on

The sails billowed aft. The ship rolled heavily. This was the pay-off.

deck. Should anyone *forget* to report, he will be bayoneted and thrown overboard."

"A Lieutenant Manning is confined to his bunk from wounds, Commander," Ron said. "There's an old Chinese on the verge of death. And a missionary's wife who has just given birth to a child. She is in her bunk."

"Captain Bodfish, understand me. When I say *all* there are no exceptions."

Ron turned to me. "Mr. Bodfish, muster the passengers! Mr. Keys," he said to the third mate, "muster the crew!"

A JAP with a bayonet close to my spine followed me into the cabin. I passed the word and the Madam said, "I've dressed Mrs. Missionary. Her children have stopped crying. You'll have to carry the baby, Mister, because I'm carrying my husband."

"I'll manage," Lieutenant Manning said. He was sitting on the edge of the bunk, dressed in his tattered and stained uniform. "The yellow vultures wouldn't check on the bed cases and I knew it, so I got ready."

The baby was asleep. It had lost weight and looked blue and scrawny. We made a sorry procession as we came from the cabin, with Manning hopping and holding onto things; Mrs. Missionary following him, with the children hanging onto each other. I wodered if one of them might unintentionally mention the girls, though days in the jungle with Japs near, had trained them in the virtue of silence. It was one more worry. The Madam, carrying the Old One, came last.

Matsuri could hardly conceal his eagerness, as he threw aside the blankets and gazed intently at the aged Chinese's face. He exclaimed in Japanese, then with a tenderness that hinted at dire future things said, "Take care of him, madam. Interesting, Captain Bodfish, that we who have waited too long for the *Gloria* and the Old One, should kill two birds with one stone. Interesting, but logical."

Jap sailors went down the line, searching us for weapons. Sailors' knives went over the side, and the search went on to its conclusion. The Gurkha was passed by as a common sailor, but I was interested in his study of Matsuri. He never looked him in the eyes. Rather his gaze was fixed on his neck—an enduring gaze, reminding me of a row of dots the comic artists employ to indicate visual direction.

"Commander," Ron suggested, "why not let the sick and wounded return to their bunks? They're helpless. Lieutenant Manning has fallen twice."

"I'm giving orders, Captain Bodfish," Matsuri coldly reminded him.

"Then you had better get the ship headed into the wind before something carries away." Ron's suggestion was what the surgeons term an exploratory incision. He was determining Matsuri's windship knowledge right then and there. The shade of worry that passed over the Jap's face was heartening.

Manning fell to the deck with the next lurch, and Ron helped him to his feet. "I know, fella," he whispered, "the falls aren't doing your stump any good, but don't be discouraged."

"Not while they're around," Manning answered. "Have we a long shot chance—an American plane maybe, or a submarine?"

"Yes, we've a long shot chance," Ron whispered.

"Long shots come home sometimes," Manning answered. "And the homeward bound pennant still flies."

Matsuri shot orders at his men and they scattered and searched the ship, returning with various items that might be used as weapons. I was glad the Gurkha's knife was not included. He had shifted his gaze to another Jap officer now, and I thought, *X marks the spot.* "Et tu Komuri," I whispered in my best latin. Komuri, a lieutenant, was a tough looking customer. He had a dirty way of trying to arouse resentment so that he could slap someone down.

He gave Manning a bump that sent him sprawling, and Ron cut loose with a punch that made Komuri's knees buckle. Matsuri's voice quieted his men in the nick of time. Komuri stood, his funny, muscular legs balancing his body against the ship's roll, his eyes flashing hate as he obeyed.

"Easy does it, Ron," I said out of the corner of my mouth. "We can't afford to lose you."

"Neither can Matsuri," he answered.

I understood how he felt. Other Ameri-

cans our age had been slugging it out with the Japs for several years. Our emotions were dammed up, and a little thing could touch off a blast.

"Commander," Ron said evenly, "it's time we had an undersanding. Now shall I talk in a loud tone of voice and let your men get the drift of the deal, or shall we go into a huddle—*huddle* a word you should have picked up when you played high school football?"

This was a matching of wits, and a clashing of wills that I could have enjoyed more if so much hadn't been at stake—the Missionary family, Manning, the Old One, bound for torture sure as hell, and the girls down below. In his way, Matsuri had pride, and the Jap version of what we call breeding. He was educated, and an officer. He was no coward. Against him was Ron. Well . . . Ron is . . . Ron.

The family fortune was tied up in the *Gloria,* but neither of us thought of that angle. The family fortune was of little importance, all things considered.

Ron's invitation was a command in a way, but it left an opening that saved Matsuri's face. He stepped away from the others and motioned Ron to join him. When Komuri lined up, too, I backed Ron.

"Here's the deal, Commander," Ron said, "and let's not try kidding each other." He glanced to starboard. The submarine was moving away at cruising speed. "You failed to get the *Gloria* either on sale in America, or as a prize when you started the war. You were long in locating her hideout. Then it cost you plenty of money and Fong Kea his head."

"Fong Kea's head?" he queried in surprise.

"Yeah. A detail, but interesting," Ron said. "Now you're gambling on taking the *Gloria* to a Japanese port without her being bombed on the voyage. Right?"

Matsuri nodded. He wasn't liking Ron's verbal slugging at all. "Okay," Ron continued, "Making port saves your face. It doesn't matter if our Superfortresses blast her afterwards. You're in the clear. The Matsuri escutcheon is again clean."

"I don't care for the things behind your words," Matsuri said. His words were like ice. "The Matsuri escutcheon is clean in all eyes. For a thousand years . . ." He broke off abruptly.

"I've a hunch," Ron continued, "that an American submarine may show up . . ."

"Your radio message never got through," Matsuri said. "There was no answer . . ."

"BUT our planes get around," Ron observed. "Any way, I'm gambling on getting out of this mess. You Japanese don't know a damned thing about squareriggers. You proved that when you hired my grandfather to sail the *Star of Windermere* to Japan. And he was given plenty of proof during the voyage. You need the *Gloria's* master, mates and crew to sail your prize. This calls for a deal."

"You forget, sir, you are a prisoner of war," Matsuri said.

"Not at all, but I can still read the hand I've been dealt," Ron said. "It isn't a full house, but I like my openers. Okay?"

"Yes?" It was a query.

"Either you sail the *Gloria* with your own men, and without advice from her crew, or we'll sail her under certain conditions.

"My conditions are these. Passengers will double up, leaving master's quarters to you, Commander," Ron said. "My mates and I will crowd into the third mate's quarters. Remaining space to be occupied by the woman and children, the Chinese and his wife, and Lieutenant Manning. We are short handed. There may be times when some of your men should go aloft. My men will show them how to take in sail."

"Yes?"

"We'll stand our watches, and handle our ship as though she were under the American flag," Ron concluded.

Agreement came hard. Matsuri was outwardly thoughtful, but inwardly he must have squirmed, because he realized Ron had called the turn. There are probably Japs with squarerigger experience, but they were not among Matsuri's crew. "Very well, Captain Bodfish," he answered, but he couldn't resist adding. "Only one can possibly win. Me. My men have placed bombs aboard the ship. When we are sure that we cannot take her to port, she'll be blasted apart. *Banzai Nippon!*"

That last came out with a crash, that must have surprised even Matsuri. It revealed the stress of his fury and emotion, and gave us a good idea of the self-control

he had exercised while his prisoner laid down the law. His men took up the cheer, and it was something to make the cold chills run up and down your spine. It made you think of burning, raping and killing just to see the blood flow. The Missionary's children began whimpering. Ron quieted them.

We put in a half hour rearranging quarters. Matsuri and Komuri took a Jap ensign along and made themselves at home in the master's quarters. The ensign, a communications officer, sealed our radio, and set up a small, powerful little job of Jap design.

Our shellbacks repaired the damaged antenna masts; Japs telegraphed a brief report. "That was code, of course," Ron said when we were alone, "I've an idea it was to report the *Gloria's* position. See if you can dope it out from day to day."

"The Marines couldn't have handled the situation any better than you did," I told him.

"I went too far, Eddie," he said seriously. "But shoving Manning around was more than I could take. Komuri isn't forgiving, nor forgetting. He's out to get me. Like Matsuri he's an Imperial family shirttail relation."

Matsuri broke it up with orders. The watch below was to be locked in the foc'sl. The deck watch was to remain in sight of the poop deck, except when aloft in line of duty. Master and mates were to be on deck except when actually sleeping. All other whites were to remain in quarters.

The shellbacks did a neat job of covering up the male passengers' inexperience. A quick word here and hand there aided them in getting by. They assigned deck jobs to them when there was work aloft.

Matsuri spent a lot of time over the charts. First he drew lines from the various islands we had taken to key spots in Japan. As bombers don't waste fuel he was logically assuming that these were the courses that they would take on their strikes. The course he worked out for the *Gloria* would keep her below the horizon at all times.

THERE are ways of slowing a ship down. An experienced man would have detected it instantly, but Matsuri never caught on. If the sails were full, that satisfied him. The seventh morning Ron said, "There's a squall in the making—maybe a mild blow—but we'd better reef sails, Commander. It might be a good idea to send your men aloft with mine. It's time they learned what it's all about if there're to be worth a damn in bad weather."

I could see that Matsuri was pleased; that he felt Ron was a fool who was playing into his hands by teaching his men the tricks of business aloft.

He divided them into watches, and up they went, including Komuri and the communications officer. When I found that Komuri was assigned to me, I went straight to the main top gallant yard. Ron was having his fun, quietly making the ship roll. One moment we'd be looking down into the boiling sea, the next, the hard deck would be beneath us.

Komuri looked down and saw Ron grinning. "He is making the ship do this," he said savagely. It was the most English that he had spoken at any time. There are times that you can fairly feel hate, like heat radiating from a hot stove. This was one of them. Komuri's eyes narrowed to slits, and he said something in Japanese that seemed adequate to him.

"Here's the way you do this," I said, "feet on the footropes, legs against the yard arm. Hands taking in sail. This rule is, one hand for yourself, one for the ship. Sometimes you forget about yourself and take chances. It depends on how fast the squall is coming up. And how bad."

The shellback on the yard below looked up. I knew that he was having his troubles. I bellowed down to Ron—knowing that Matsuri would hear it—"These damned Japs are afraid. They hang on with both hands. Where're all the guts Tokyo Rose raves about?"

I wish that I undersood Japanese lingo. I'd have known what it was Matsuri yelled up at his men. We got some help five seconds after he had finished. We took in sail in time and the squall passed.

The next day Matsuri sent his deck watch aloft with the shellbacks even though they weren't needed. A lot of "mental" stalking and murder went on, too. I'd see Komuri, strutting the deck, with his Samuri sword clanking. He would look longingly at Ron's neck, and mentally lop off his head. Sometimes his gaze would

brush along the deck, as if following Ron's rolling head. It gave me the willies. Then I'd see the Gurkha studying Komuri's neck. If Ron had had decapitating designs on the Gurkha, it would have made a beautiful circle.

Often you would see Matsuri with the little Missionary's daughter—Penny. Japs are queer. They'll murder the parents and pet the kids. Then, again, they'll murder the kids, too. Matsuri was turning on the same smiling charm that deceived tens of millions of whites before Pearl Harbor. We learned why one afternoon when he said, "Captain, where are the pretty white ladies that Penny tells me about?"

Ron has a poker face. It never served him better. "Quite a number of people asked passage on the *Gloria,* but I turned them down, fearing that I couldn't get by your planes or submarines. It turned out that way."

"Captain Bodfish, it has been an interesting matching of wits, and clashing of wills. Sometimes you've won. Again, I've won. Of course, in the final analysis I'm the real winner. You've taken a skirmish or two, and so have I, but I've won the battle," he said.

"I doubt if Lloyds would insure the *Gloria's* cargo delivered in a Puget Sound port," Ron said.

"You Americans have a quaint saying, 'Finders keepers!'" I knew Ron sensed what was coming, and was having a damned bad chill. "Suppose, Captain Bodfish, that I explained the finders keepers game to my men, and suggest that if they search diligently that they might find the pretty ladies?" He stopped to light a cigarette. "My men have had little of . . . shall we say, the lighter pleasures of life? The army, of course, captures cities and villages each with its quota of young women. But the Navy?" He shook his head with mock sadness. "It's prizes are manned by males."

"And either way a Jap is a Jap," Ron said.

"Merely a matter of racial viewpoint," Matsuri observed, then the hardness broke through. "Well, Captain Bodfish?"

"As a laboratory experiment," Ron answered, "I'm interested in observing the control of a Japanese officer over his men. The record to date isn't too good." Then Rod, with leaden feet, made his way to the third mate's quarters. He was gone quite a while and when he returned, Margie's eyes were like glass marbles; and Ann and Donna had the resigned attitude you rarely see in an American girl.

Margie fascinated Komuri. He bowed low and sucked in his breath. From some of the sailors there were cries . . . well, feeding time in the lions' cage is something like it. A sailor named Nogi grabbed Donna's arm, and Matsuri slapped him. Nogi let go and bowed at Matsuri who slapped him again. This produced another low bow. I thought, *Sometime we may laugh over this.*

"What about the girls going over the side?" I asked Ron.

"I got their promise to hang onto their nerve," Ron answered. "Margie has that hari kari blade, though. We're nearing Japan in spite of all that I can do, Eddie. Have you figured out the message that the communications officers gets off every night?"

"Yes. A code number that was evidently assigned the *Gloria.* Other numbers giving her position," I answered. "Ron, keep an eye on Komuri. You're his number one hate, and he keeps looking at your neck."

"So you've noticed it, too?"

"Yes, and I've noticed that he watches his men aloft. When he thinks you aren't needed, he'll let you have it, and Matsuri will dismiss the killing with, 'So sorry,' and maybe not that," I told him.

A COUPLE of days later Komuri got the idea that Ron and Margie were sweethearts. Whenever she was about to break, she would stand close to Ron and sometimes pull his arm around her. Komuri misunderstood the situation.

I had the watch that evening, and as usual Matsuri was pacing the deck. Ron and I handled the wheel personally, so that we could work in little slowing-down tricks. Komuri came up about fifteen minutes before Ron relieved me. He smoked a couple of cigarettes, then leaned on the stern rail, watching the *Gloria's* wake. "On your toes, Ron," I whispered when he showed up, "Komuri is setting the stage for something. It could be you. Or it could be Margie. Better have a man take

the wheel so you you'll have your hands and eyes free for self defense."

Then Matsuri came over and checked the course. I turned the wheel slightly to take a cross sea that might have given our shellbacks a drenching. Spray crossed the foc'sl head in a solid sheet, and for a moment there was the roar of breaking water, and the deep notes of a strong wind spilling through taut rigging.

Something rolled into the lee scuppers, rebounded and rolled toward the wheel as the stern settled. Then as the stern lifted it tumbled toward the scuppers again. It looked like a ball and Matsuri turned a flashlight on it. "Geez!" Ron exclaimed. "Komuri's head!"

At all times Matsuri kept a sailor on guard just in case trouble started. The guard carried a machine gun and you could see that he had been told to shoot first and ask questions afterward. Matsuri barked an order to him, then he turned the the flashlight astern. Komuri's headless body was sprawled on deck.

The Jap deck watch came aft and began searching for the killer. Obviously the deck watch was guiltless. To a man they were just below the poop deck, and in plain sight. Ron and I had been within six feet of Matsuri's eyes at all times, which cleared us. The communications officer, responding to Matsuri's call, went forward. The watch below was invariably locked in the foc'sl. The Jap guard reported the door locked and that no one had come out. During the next hour every inch of the deck, the deck houses and lifeboats were thoroughly searched. "What is your theory, Captain Bodfish?" Matsuri demanded sharply.

"I haven't any," Ron answered. "I know this ship. I don't see how a man could possibly have killed Komuri and escaped, unless he jumped overboard. Maybe one of your men who had a grudge did it?"

Ron knew damned well that hadn't happened. We both knew, too, that there is no limit to a Gurkha's resourcefulness and understanding. It left the Japs jittery. We were jittery, too, because the guards' trigger fingers were nervous. All of us wondered what had become of the Sumari sword that Komuri had sharpened for Ron's neck. Only the scabbard had been found on the body.

A day or so later, Ron was in the dumps. "We aren't getting a break on the weather," he said. "At this season of the year we could bet that . . ." He shrugged his shoulders. "It's the white chip in the blue chip game squawking again. The bombers are getting the weather. There's no place that they aren't plastering if it's part of the plan. I shouldn't complain."

And the next day a twin motored Jap plane circled us. There was wing dipping in the air, and Banzais from the *Gloria's* deck. Matsuri's face had been practically saved. That night the barometer dropped!

"It shows," Ron said, "that if you live a clean life, pay your bills, never refuse a drink nor kick a dog, there is a reward. Well, Eddie, this is it. It's the *Star of Windermere* all over again, if I'm half the windship man our Grandfather is."

"I'm glad that you said *is* and not *was*, Ron," I told him. "If we *could* make port, the old gentleman could take the *Gloria* out once more—a lumber cargo to a China Coast base perhaps—then he could say he'd fought in this war, too."

AT daybreak Ron sent me below to call Matsuri. "Commander," I said formally, "we're in for a gale of wind. I'm calling the watch below. We're going to need your men."

As Matsuri came to the poop deck the mizzen skysail carried away with a crack like a cannon. It seemed to writhe as it floated away on the wind. Ron bellowed at the shellbacks, then turned to me. "Bare a hand up there, Mr. Bodfish. If this keeps up we'll loose our sticks. It's going to take every man we've got." The wind began to roar. The *Gloria* would roll to port, then snap back. Continue on to starboard, then with a snap, start back to port again.

Both watches were going aloft, and when Matsuri gave the order, his men followed. Matsuri took over the machine gun and sent the guard up too. A sea piled over the side, and left a surging flood amidships.

Japs and shellbacks were on the foot ropes running under the yards. Their legs were braced against the yards and their hands were taking in canvas. Every sail billowed forward, curving beautifully, and as tight as a drumhead. The *Gloria* was sailing four points off the wind, and

that's mighty close sailing into the wind for a squarerigger.

Every shellback aboard saw the bow veer slightly, then as she rolled and was about to snap back, it happened. The whites dropped to the footropes and hung on. The veering bow completely changed the picture. The wind instead of driving the sails ahead, had gotten in *front* and was pushing in the opposite direction. The air was filled with cannon-like reports as the sails billowed aft. The sails caught the Japs completely off guard. It was like being struck with a mighty fist.

Some fell a hundred and fifty feet into the raging sea; others dropped from the lower yards. Here and there one struck the deck. It seemed to me there was a moment when every Jap aboard, except Matsuri, was in the air.

I saw the Gurkha drop from the mizzen rigging. At first it looked as if he were falling, then I noticed that his leg was twisted around a line. His knife was in his hand as he landed. Matsuri, stunned by what he had witnessed, whirled with the machine gun, a split second too late.

Ron saw it all in a glance, then he was bringing the *Gloria* back on her course, and the shellbacks were struggling stiffly to get their feet on the footropes and their hands to the sails. The *Gloria* was shorthanded again, but the hands were of the right breed.

The third mate joined me. "Some of us are pretty old," he said, "and I figgered we might lose a man or two, but I told 'em it was a trick that the skipper had planned, and that if it didn't work we'd all end up in a Jap prison camp, or worse. If there *is* anything worse." He chuckled. "As long as sailors gather around a bottle, they'll be telling how old Cap'n Bodfish paid off the *Star of Windermere's* Jap crew; and how his grandson done the same thing to the *Gloria's* prize crew." He drew a long breath. "But it's too soon to crow. We're too close to Japan for comfort, and don't forget those bombs they planted aboard."

"Expert bomb men will locate 'em in port . . . I hope," I answered.

We had seventy-two hours of hell at sea, and mental comfort. No Jap plane would be flying in such weather, and the submarines would be below. I sent code messages as the Jap communications officer had done, but fouled them up on the *Gloria's* position. The Jap set was a good one, and we picked up enough to know that the Superfortresses were working on Jap-held mainland areas—flying above the storm.

The *Gloria* moaned and groaned under the strain, and we made good time under little more than bare poles. The Jap flag was a souvenir in the master's cabin, and we had our own flag up.

The cook did his best in the flooded galley, and we ate standing up, or lashed to the rigging. Have you ever heard a gale roar through standing rigging, and the thunder of seas piling over a windjammer? Well, it is America when she was young, reckless and didn't give a damn. It's a thrilling and sobering experience.

At times the black clouds came down to the water. At other times the rain fell in such torrents that it flattened out the sea. Ron sent me below when the storm began easing up. Things in the cabin were a mess—furniture smashed; people seasick; and water from a leaking port sloshing around.

Manning was white with pain. "Tossed out of the bunk," he gasped, "and hurt . . . my bad leg."

"Why didn't you ask for help?"

"Everyone below deck's sick, and those above had more than they could handle," he answered.

I reported to Ron. "And I think the Missionary's baby is dying," I added.

RON'S eyes were like burned holes in a blanket, and his mouth was gray with exhaustion. The weight of command was heavy once more, and it would be heavier when Jap planes got out. "Figure out a message that'll bring a PBY," he said, and send it."

"We can't identify ourselves," I answered, "How about this? 'Destroyer Bodfish. Operational Case.' Then give tomorrow's position?"

"Okay," he answered.

I had the duty next day when that big flying boat came over the horizon. We shot up signals and she circled. I called Ron, and as he took over a vicious swarm of Jap fighters came down to plaster the PBY. They opened up, then it seemed

to rain American planes. Carrier based jobs, hoping no doubt, that the Japs would be suckers enough to jump the PBY.

It was all new stuff to us. Jap planes exploding. Jap planes out of control diving into the sea White water leaping high from the impact, then falling slowly back, like wet white sand filling a grave. You see, we hadn't seen a news reel picture since months before Pearl Harbor.

We put a boat over the side, and the PBY skipper's face was something to see when we handed up the baby. While they were taking Manning aboard, a reporter was getting the *Gloria's* story. He kept saying, "Geez! Geez! In this day and age." As the door was about to close he said, "Tune in tomorrow afternoon, four bells. Nationwide hookup."

"And here's your safest course," the PBY pilot shouted at Ron. He gave it, and we watched them take off, the Madam holding her husband in her arms, and the Missionary, arm around his wife, telling her that the baby was going to be okay.

At four bells the following afternoon, we brought out the radio, and the watch below came aft. The reporter's voice was full of emotion. "It was incredible!" he exclaimed. "Something out of this world! First came the message telling us that the *Destroyer Bodfish* had a hospital case. There's no such destroyer, but some of the oldtimers remembered that the Bodfish is a famous sailing ship family, and that their squarerigger the *Gloria* was supposed to be hiding on the China Coast. On a hunch we took off.

"She came over the rim of the world under full sail. She looked like the *Constitution* with her ports and the proud way she drove through the foam. You wondered if perhaps our Naval heroes of 1812 hadn't returned, manned their old ship, and set forth to fight the Japs.

"The Japs captured her at sea, and put a prize crew aboard. But the Japs didn't keep her. How the *Gloria's* crew got the upper hand, I don't know. There was talk about paying off the Jap crew, and the exchange of significant grins. But . . . the *Gloria* is homeward bound, and she's flying a homeward bound pennant. May the winds of good fortune fill her sails."

I suppose that the Japs heard it all, but they didn't know the *Gloria's* position. There were tense moments when we seemed to be forgotten, then a plane would come over to let us know that even a white chip can be important in a blue chip game.

Three days we kept to the assigned course, wondering why, then at dawn Ron barged into the cabin, yelling hoarsely, "Everybody on deck! Everybody!" Then he choked up and tears filled his eyes.

The watch tumbled out of the foc'sl, and climbed the shrouds. The rest of us lined the rail aft. As far as the eye could see, the water was dotted with ships. A destroyer, slicing the water, passed within a hundred yards, and her crew cheered as it lined the rail.

"Geez!" Ron said. "The *Gloria's* story is known. If Grandfather could only see her now. I'll bet he's heard about it. Grandmother was always bawling him out for keeping the radio on full blast."

Patrol planes soared overhead, then the cruisers passed and finally the battleships. We never left the deck, but stood there eating sandwiches the cook brought from the galley—sandwiches that were made in a hurry.

"Look, Eddie!" Ron yelled. "Aren't those the damnedest things you ever saw? Must be the landing craft we heard about over the radio. Wonder how many aircraft carriers we've got? Look at 'em. That baby is changing her course to look us over. Hell, she's dipping her flag." He almost broke his neck to dip ours.

He came back, and I saw Margie standing close to him. The glass marbles were gone, and the warm blue eyes had returned. Already the things that Donna and Ann had gone through were merging with the blackness of nightmares. They had awakened to sunshine, a fair sea and protection. I guess we all were sort of crying.

Margie didn't need to put her arm around Ron, but she did. Nor did she need the protection of his big arms, but it was there. *Protection?* I thought. *Hell no, possession!* "We're sailing straight through it, Ron," Margie said, "it's America's fist, driving through for the knockout blow."

"Yes," Ron said, "Yes, darling." But he was watching a transport that had evidently gone mad. It wasn't cutting across bows, but it was passing close enough astern to cause other transports to whistle

their consternation. We could see plumes of steam going up from their whistles.

"That skipper's a plain damned fool," Ron growled. "Or his ship is out of control."

THE Gurkha came up. He had explained that he had noticed the Japs were careless in their count and that the time he was supposed to be locked in the foc'sl with the watch below that he had been in a boson's chair, rigged astern, and secured a few feet above the rudder. He had been afraid Komuri was going to lop off Ron's head, basing his emotion on the fact that Komuri acted toward Ron, as he, the Gurkha felt toward Komuri. It was very amusing when he explained in an apologetic tone. Now he wanted Ron to signal a transport to heave to so that he could immediately return to the fighting. He was afraid the war would be over before he could return.

"You don't need to worry about that," Ron told him, "there're several million Jap soldiers on the mainland that have to be made to see the error of their ways. And you can keep both of those Sumari swords—you won them the hard way."

The crazy transport, badly out of position, was now on a definite course. "Damn him!" Ron yelled. "He's coming *too* close. Doesn't he know a sailing ship has the right of way?" He picked up the megaphone and put it to his lips. He was going to use the words Grandfather taught him on the offending skipper.

"Drop the megaphone and grab the glasses, Ron," I yelled, "and take a look."

"Geez!" he shouted. "Grandfather!" Then we climbed into the rigging and hung there, like the pictures that you see of Admiral Farragut.

"Hey, you blasted swabs!" Grandfather yelled. "What the hell kind of sailors are you? Tighten up your riggin'. Want to lose your sticks the next time a hatful of wind comes along? God bless you!" His hat was off, and his gray hair was blowing in the wind. And when he gesticulated, we could see the four gold stripes on his sleeve.

The old boy was skippering a transport in his third war.

The transport was a mile astern before Ron shook off the spell, then he bellowed at the shellbacks. "Damn you, crowd on more sail! Let's make port so we can get into this man's war! Shake a leg, you blasted swabs. Lively now!"

He sounded just like Grandfather at his best.

END OF THE TRAIL

By D. J. French

He rode into town slowly—a tall, hard man, dusty from the trail, wearing twins of death in his holsters. He was looking for a job, he said—a killing job.

RATED as tough as they come, and really tougher than his rating, Drag Harper rode the length of Crystal River's one street. He turned his head neither to the right nor left, but his piercing black eyes took in everything.

Cruel years of riding on lonely trails had shortened Drag Harper's code of living, stripped it of every essential detail, until now it stood stark in its nakedness. Expressed in short words, his code read: "Take your pleasures tough, trust no man, kill or be killed." He lived up to that code religiously.

Living it brought him to Crystal River on a long ride from distant Santa Fe. The dust of the trail still covered his black hair and bristling, shaggy, month-old beard. It settled from his eyelashes as he blinked harder at the big saloon set almost in the center of a vacant block. Around this unusual setting, fire-destroyed ruins of former shacks still marked the passing of more crowded days.

The strangeness of it, laid out like towns back in Iowa and Illinois—with a square at the end of a street, but with a saloon in the place of honor—puzzled Drag Harper. It suggested a story behind this strangeness. He sensed in the blackened ruins surrounding it, something of the cross-purposes which trace their intricate pattern through the history of most towns. It could be part of the warp and woof of the tale which had sent him here to do a job. Slocum, a man he'd never seen, needed that job done so badly he'd sent to far Santa Fe for a doer.

Drag swung his leg over the cantle and slid to the ground near the center of one side of that square. The corner of his mouth drew up when little trickles of dust slid from his wrinkled clothing at this disturbance. He slapped his battered black hat against chap-clad leg, eased the heavy twin guns in their greased holsters on his thighs, and shrugged his satisfaction at the still present evidence of his care through this trip he'd finished.

He sensed the boring eyes watching his every move as he paced directly through the center of a burned shack. New ash rose to mix with that in his hair. The street behind was deserted.

Three men played cards at a table when he shouldered through the bat-wing doors and moved to the bar. Three pairs of eyes raised to him, and he caught the imperceptible nod of one man in the glass of the back bar. One of them rose from the table and came to draw the beer Drag ordered.

"Ride far?" White-apron asked, as he slid the beer toward Drag.

"Far enough to get here," Drag said, and began to think he had been mistaken in riding out of his way to learn personally about a job which would pay a thousand iron men for its doing.

He'd overheard a girl trying to tell a drunken giant of a man in the next booth about that job, which a guy in Crystal River was willing to pay a thousand berries to have done. Now Drag Harper was here to investigate. He wasn't quite sure about the first name — Squint, or Squirt, the unseen bragger had insisted on her repeating — but he was cautious. Probably he would do the job anyway when he found out what it was, but he was here investigating.

The bartender studied him through

The man's guns had barely cleared leather when Drag's peacemaker blasted.

gray, half-closed eyes in a head whose chin came little above the bar behind which he served. What Drag could see of those expressionless eyes looked hard enough to cut glass. They were protected by a heavy brow overhang against injury from an ordinary blow.

"Okay, feller, Squint will see you," the barkeep said when Drag set down his glass. He jerked a thumb toward the still seated pair at the back.

THE tall, striking-looking guy whose job Drag was investigating wouldn't be along for a while. Drag grinned at the thought, and how he had enticed the braggart into a poker game, intending to win his outfit so he could ride over ahead of him. And when the big fellow wouldn't bet his horse, he'd persuaded him to bet the job, and won it away from him.

Drag had stripped the bridle off the horse, too, and hazed him out into the sage when he rode away, leaving the man broke and dead to the world. A day's start would be plenty, he mused. This job didn't look

so good now. The big guy could have it when he sobered up and came along.

He sized the two men up as he strode back toward the card table. This promised his kind of fun—tough. The big man could maybe have this job, if Drag didn't like it, but he'd have fun to pay for his trip.

The slim, hatchet-faced one was a typical gun-slinging Texan who drew gun-wages for part time in preference to a full-time riding job, Drag figured. The fat man was of an entirely different type. Short, with a tremendous belly. His skin showed a jail pallor, or perhaps merely from a life in smoke-shaded rooms. His head grew from his shoulders without benefit of neck. His moon-eyes faded behind a pair of colored spectacles, which accommodatingly raised at a twitch of a flat nose. They were covered completely as Drag approached.

"Well!" Drag said, and waited.

For long moments the unrendered fat studied him through the colored glasses while fingers, whose knuckles were dimples instead of knobs, shuffled and cut the cards endlessly.

"Sally got one of my specifications, but sure as hell overlooked the other. I said you must be good-looking," the bloated corpulence croaked at last, after dropping the cards and stretching his arms to lace pudgy fingers over the protruding paunch. "You look tough."

"There's a way to find out," Drag said, watching Hatchet-face.

"A lady-killer, too?"

"Making an accusation?" Drag demanded. "Why not have your watch-dog say it?"

"You're in a hell of a shape to prove it the way it's got to be proved," Corpulence said. "What do you look like behind that mask?"

"Who wants to know?"

"Squint, if that means anything to you," the fat man said.

"I came here to see a Squint, or a Squirt, about a job. I didn't quite make out which. You don't look so much like Squint as Squirt, if somebody jammed on your belly real hard."

The fat man grinned. "Maybeso. They call me Squint because I can't." He pushed up the colored glasses, to reveal almost lidless eyes. "That satisfy you, mister?"

Drag nodded. "What else?"

"A thousand berries paid if you do the job. No soap if you fail. Is it a deal?"

Drag shook his head. "Not without details."

Hawk-face exploded. "You'd be a fool to ride all the way from Santa Fe without knowing the details. What are you stalling about?"

"Repeat 'em!" Drag's eyes fixed on the gun-man and his voice was hard, still speaking to Squint.

"Lay off, Slim! Perhaps Sally left the details to us, and this hombre was looking for a quiet place to stay. This is it, big feller. Get a shave, a haircut, and bath, with some decent clothes," Squint said placatingly. He pulled out a wallet and peeled off a bill, extended it.

"I spend my own money, not before I earn it. About this job now?" Drag asked.

"I can't tell a masked man. Come back so I can see you presentable enough to face your sweetheart, or ride on."

FATTY began to shuffle the cards again, and dealt Hatchet-face a hand. Both men ignored Drag further. He turned, figuring on getting his fun some other way, but he was tired. Mounting his horse, he rode back to the Blue-Front Livery. The hostler took it sullenly.

"Looks like a horse badly treated, or I'd tell you to ride on," he growled. "He'll be fed and watered early in the morning."

"What in hell's the matter with this place?" Drag demanded.

"Not a thing. We don't cater to your kind," the hostler said, and led the horse into a stall while Drag stared, his curiosity fully aroused.

"I'll find out what's behind this," he mused, and strolled toward a barber shop he'd passed. The barber was taking off his apron when Drag entered.

"Sorry. I'm just going out for the rest of the afternon," he muttered, without turning his head.

"Then tell me, is there another barber in town?"

The tall old man shook his head. "Not so far as I know. You rode the whole length of the street. See any other signs?"

"Then why not give me a shave and haircut before you leave?"

"Got important business, and you went to the saloon when I wasn't busy. Sorry." The barber turned and opened the door, waiting.

Drag preceded him, and turned when he locked the door. "Say, neighbor, tell me what's the matter with this place?"

"We don't like tough-looking strangers." He turned and paced up the street toward the stable, while Drag started for the hotel, puzzled more than ever.

The clerk, a bald-headed man, stooped, with a gray fringe around his tanned dome, came from behind the desk as Drag approached, meeting him at the door.

"How about a room with a soft bed?" Drag asked good-naturedly. "I'm dead tired."

"Sorry. Full up." The clerk made no effort to permit him to enter.

"What the hell's the matter with this place?" Drag demanded, his voice hard. "The barber won't cut hair, hotel clerks won't rent rooms, and the livery stable takes pity on my horse. You've got plenty of rooms by the looks. Where's the crowd to occupy them?"

"We're particular who we have for guests, and the horse looked better than his rider. The livery man is right here. If you insist, he'll get your horse out."

Drag glanced back, to see the livery man and the barber approaching.

He backed a couple of quick steps toward the edge of the walk in order to watch all three. "I want a room, and I'm as tired as my horse. Do I get it, or . . ." His hands slid to his thighs.

"What seems to be the trouble, stranger? Somebody picking on you?" a musical voice asked from the corner around which he had ridden on entering this town, and his swinging glance took in a girl astride a big roan horse.

"This man's demanding a room after I told him we were full up, Miss Molly," the clerk explained. "He rode in about an hour ago and went direct to Slocum's."

"And I was too busy to cut his hair, so when Hammond suggested he might make trouble with Dave here, we came down to hear the argument."

"That's hardly the way to build up hotel patronage. I intended to stay in town but, if you have to turn away customers, I'll give up my room for tonight," she said softly, and dismounted at Drag's side with a smile. "It will be a pleasure to contribute something to the comfort of a man as weary as you look, Mr. . . ."

"Harper is the name, ma'am," he said, grabbing at his sombrero and bowing. His face colored when dust fell from his effort. "But I'm in no position to deprive a lady of her room—in fact, to sleep in a bed. I wanted a shave, haircut, and a bath before changing into other clothes. Thanks just the same. I've slept on the ground for many nights—another won't hurt me."

A faint smile parted the full lips of the woman—for woman she was, with all the freshness of a girl.

"Perhaps we can do even better than that. Harry might reopen his shop, and I'll give you that tonsorial rejuvenation as a favor. I've worked at it, too, and I promise not to cut your throat. Could you be persuaded, Harry?"

"But he went straight to Slocum's when he rode in," the barber protested.

"A natural thing after a long ride," she said. "Why not?"

The barber shook his head. "Okay, feller. Come on! I'll do it, rather than bother Miss Molly."

Drag stared from one to the other in amazement.

"Report to me, if he don't treat you right," Molly said. "I probably won't have gone before you get cleaned up." She followed the clerk inside. Drag trailed after the barber and livery men, who were shaking their heads and muttering to each other.

"I'LL need to get the roll off my saddle," he said to the barber at the door. "I can't put these clothes on again once I'm clean."

"Get busy on him," the livery man growled. "It's a big job. I'll bring his stuff. If your razor slips while I'm gone, it might save us trouble."

"Now just what did he mean by that?" Drag said, and there was something in his voice which made the barber give him another look.

"Just this, feller. That gal runs this town and you know it. It's what you came here for. Three gun-hawks besides Slocum is too many for us to watch. We tried to get you to ride on. Notice my hands?"

He held them out and they shook as with the palsy. "He was telling me if I slipped and cut your throat doin' this job you're forcing on me, we'd be accomplishing what we started out to do. One less gunman. You're next."

Drag grinned. "I might not be a third," he said. "You old birds figure you have to do everything yourselves?"

The barber began stropping his razor without answering. At the fourth stroke he dropped it to the floor, and cursed. "You've made me particular nervous," he said, and pulled another from the leather case on the shelf. "Close, or once over lightly?"

"Use the clippers. Hair first," Drag said, and climbed into the chair after loosening his guns so they would lay in his lap. "Them nervous fingers should make the clippers your dish, and I don't like to be pulled. While you work, tell me what's wrong in this place. I figured on staying here a spell."

"It ain't healthy for the people Slocum sends out for," the barber said, and went to work. "We don't like them that just comes here to rest a spell."

"You old ducks place me all wrong. I came looking for a job, and the trip took so long I got to looking tough. When you get me . . ."

"We got you as far as we're gonna," the barber said. "You're forkin' your hoss Sam has kindly brought to the door, or he'll blast you with the cannon he's got lined up on the back of your head."

"That girl was curious how I was gonna look when you got the job done. So was Slocum. He wouldn't even talk about a job until I got cleaned up. With both of 'em watching, you'd have a hard time explaining a murder here in your shop. And you ain't near so nervous as you was," Drag grinned. "Tell Sam to untie my bedroll and leave it here. I'll need my other shirt after my bath."

Drag's tone held a quiet amusement. This was the fun he enjoyed. And his very audacity won. When he came from a bath, at which he took plenty of time, the barber eyed him warily. Drag tied his tie, combed and brushed his hair with the barber's tools.

"Now I'll see what sort of an impression I can make on Slocum," he grinned. "If he won't hire me, I'll have to sleep in the hay over Sam's stable. My bedroll and stuff won't be in your way?"

"I never saw a gun-hawk spend that much time on his looks," the barber growled. "I don't get it."

"It's because you're old. A little new blood in this place . . ."

Jauntily Drag walked out and back up the street toward the saloon. But he eased the one gun from beneath his coat to a forward position in the waistband of his pants.

"YOU'VE sure got what it takes. Sally's still batting a thousand in picking 'em, besides wanting to get even for running her out," Slocum said when Drag walked in and asked about the job. "Here's the background. A woman runs this place, owns it, in fact—all but this block—inherited it from her Dad. This is about as far from any place as it's possible to get, and these prospect holes make places to work and hide. Occasionally one strikes it rich, and we had a set-up arranged to get the money. It worked fine until we got burned out. It will work again, when we get rid of the woman."

"Want a woman beefed, huh? Two gunnies not enough to do it? I thought Sally said a *job,*" Drag sneered.

"You don't get the picture," Slocum said. "Those old birds—you've only seen a couple of 'em—burned us out. To lay a violent hand on the woman would be suicide for us. We wouldn't last an hour. So we sent for you."

"I don't fight women, or kill them for money," Drag said, anger getting the better of him. "Instead of batting a thousand, Sally popped out." He swung toward the door.

"You still don't see it," Slocum said. "I'm offering a thousand to get rid of her any way you like. If love will do it, so much the better. I've enough confidence to pay you half now."

Drag turned and stared at him. "I'll look it over," he said. "Where do I find this thorn in your side? If I take the job on, you can pay when she's out of your way."

"Fair enough," Slocum grinned. "Ask the old bald-headed clerk down at the hotel to point out Abigail Whitney to you.

Then get busy, but don't come here again or you'll queer the deal. When the job's done, or you need money, mail me a request with your address."

The clerk was sullen when Drag reached the hotel.

The barber and livery men were seated on opposite sides of the lobby.

"I've got the promise of a job on the strength of the transformation you worked," he stated, grinning at the barber. "But Slocum insisted on me having a talk with Abigail Whitney first. Where do I find this Amazon who's put the fear of God into Slocum?"

"You don't find her. If you make the attempt, you won't live to get where she is," the barber said flatly. "Promise of a job by Slocum is a death warrant."

"Don't let these children frighten you," a clear voice said from the shadow of the dark dining room. "They talk ferociously, but they're really gentle. Did you say you wanted to find Abigail Whitney?"

Drag swept off his hat in a deep bow. "I do, ma'am. I want first to thank you for your kindness in getting me a bath, shave and a haircut. Now, if you can tell me where I'll find Miss Whitney, I won't think of depriving you of your room. I've slept in hay lots of times, and glad to get it."

A faint smile touched the woman's lips. "Harry certainly did accomplish wonders with you," she said. "I wouldn't have picked you for a man on the dodge. Did you come here for a purpose, or just happen along?"

"I just happened to overhear a remark which sent me here with a purpose. Since I've found out why I came, I can ride away content once I've explained that purpose to Abigail Whitney."

"Slocum didn't send for you?" she asked, looking him straight in the eyes.

"On the contrary, I won the chance at Slocum's job from a man picked to come here by a woman I never saw. Slocum called her Sally. When I found out what the job was, I decided to tell Abigail Whitney about it, and look for excitement elsewhere."

"Suppose you come in and have supper. I've had them keep it hot for you. Sam fed your horse, Harry did a fine job for his part, and Dave should do no less since you're leaving. You can tell Miss Abigail better on a full stomach."

"Thank you, ma'am," Drag said, and followed her into the dining room where she lighted a lamp. And while he ate as though it had been a long time between meals, she watched him from across the table and made conversation.

"WHY ride so far and not take a job which looked good to you at a distance?" she asked. "I'm really curious. If you'd rather not say . . ."

"There's no secret about it. I just don't fancy making war on women. I'm going to tell this Abigail woman what's in the cards, come back and kill Slocum, and hunt for greener fields."

"I'm afraid you've got another bum hunch. I know Miss Abigail, and she has no money to pay gunmen, if she were so inclined."

"It's you with a bum hunch now," he smiled. "It won't cost the woman a cent, even if she's as tough as Slocum and his gunnies. All men have dreams. The pastures look greener across the hills. When I find that spot I'll settle down, and it will take an army to blast me out."

"Suppose this Miss Abigail proves charming to you and shows you how to make this spot the greener field you've been hunting. Could she do that?"

He shook his head sadly and pushed back his chair. "I'm afraid not, ma'am," he said, staring at her. "Since I've come here I'm afraid no place will live up to that promise of greener fields again. There are none for me anyway. Once I've told Miss Abigal and finished the job I've laid out to do, I'm on my way. In that greener field I'll always see the face of my dream waiting for me. That face will look like you."

The door of the dining room burst open, and Dave sprang in. "There's another long-rider shown up, and he's been in confab with Slocum. Now he's headed this way fast, Sam says. You want they should both have your room?" he asked sarcastically.

"She's not going to be bothered with giving up her room. I'll talk to this gent," Drag said. "Neither one of us will trouble her further."

"Not before I tell you something," the

girl said. "Miss Abigail's father pioneered this Canyon when driven across the Divide by the crowding of the westward march. Always such men as Slocum have made trouble. Here he thought to build and own a town, but a man to whom he trusted the other canyon which forks here double-crossed him. Slocum owns that block in the middle of which he sits. Her guardians, since her father died, burned the shacks with which he surrounded himself and populated with his kind."

"And now Slocum plans to get even? Thanks for giving me the picture. It makes what I've got to do easier," he said over his shoulder. "If I don't come back, tell her . . ."

He strode across the lobby and stepped to the walk, seeing again what it might mean to him if Miss Abigail Whitney had been such a woman as this one who had befriended him. But she wouldn't be waiting for him in any other valley now. He'd admitted to her he was a killer, and did it for fun; had come here to do it for money; dooming himself to see her face in the smoke of lonely campfires forever. There could be no greener fields for him now.

Determined to do his job and ride away, he hastened up the street.

"What's your hurry, brother?" the man from whom he'd won the job in far Santa Fe demanded, stepping from an opening between buildings to confront him. "You stacked the cards on me in Santa Fe when I was drunk, but you ain't going to have the gal. She's mine. Fork your cayuse and beat it fast, or I'll blast you."

"I ain't forking no hoss until I've done a little job I've got to do, including runing Slocum and his gunnies out of this place tonight or planting them here. You drawing cards again?"

"Yeh! Only this time they ain't stacked," the man barked, and slapped at his gun. It barely cleared leather before Drag's slug tore into his chest to whirl and send him crashing to the sidewalk from which his own shot had torn splinters.

Deliberately Drag walked to the body, plucked the gun from relaxing fingers, reloaded the chamber from the fallen man's belt and stuck the weapon into his waistband, before striding toward the saloon.

Again he could feel the ashes of the charred building rise in a cloud to cover his store clothes, but he gave it no heed. He was doomed to lonely campfires where clothes would make no difference.

The three men sitting at the card table, and doubtless expecting a different visitor, looked up in surprise when Drag shouldered through the bat-wings and strode toward them.

It was the old familiar pattern to Drag, except the odds were too heavy. But his hope was gone. He might as well end it here, in the valley of what might have been if he hadn't been a killer. He could take the slim chance in a good cause, and the girl of his dreams would tell Miss Abigail. Then he wouldn't have to think of the greener field behind him from which he was forever barred.

THE two gun-hawks were on their feet before he paused spread-legged before them. The bartender's eyes would still cut glass.

"Where's the man Sally sent?" Slocum demanded. "I heard a shot . . ."

"Two shots," Drag corrected. "His was a fraction slow."

"So-o-o-o?" Slocum's question was almost a purr. "And you've thrown in with Abigail?"

Drag shook his head. "I might have, if I'd seen her, but things happened too fast."

"Meaning you're taking on the job? The offer stands."

Again Drag shook his head no, while his eyes watched the gun-hawks.

"Meaning the old birds raised the ante?" Slocum insisted.

"Meaning they should have finished the job and burned this sinkhole with you in it, when they fired the rest of your shacks. They're too old for this game," Drag grinned.

Hatchet-face moved first, with Agate-eyes a fraction behind. Drag beat Hatchet's draw, and the three reports blurred into one with a dream face in the smoke as Drag sank with the bartender's bullet high in his chest. But he had the satisfaction of seeing the bartender's gun drop from loosening fingers, as he tried to push himself erect for the final shot to clear the slate.

His arms would not answer the demand of his brain. Disappointment rode Drag's

mind at the thought that in this last battle he could not accomplish his end.

Slocum still sat in his chair. "It's too bad, feller. I could have used you, but you played a bum hunch. Sally will find me another man." He slid a big gun from the drink shelf below the table, and it looked like a cannon to Drag still fighting to control his muscles. "I owe the boys something."

But the barber, livery man and hotel clerk, with two more of their age, pouring into the saloon from front and back, distracted Slocum's attention, and Drag dropped as Slocum pulled the trigger. The bullet burned his upper arm. It released the numbness in him, and he managed to lift the gun at last, knowing it was useless.

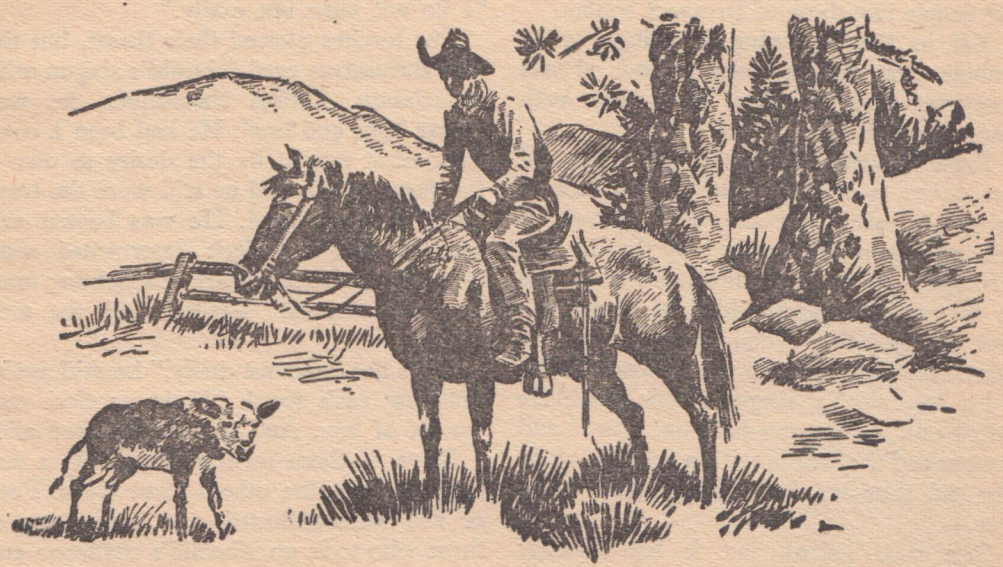
The guns of the old men were yammering at Slocum from both sides, and Drag decided Squirt was as good a name as Squint, the way the blood flowed from his many wounds, then he himself passed out.

Gentle arms were easing him to a bed when he recovered consciousness, hearing, "Be careful of him, boys. That wound in his chest is bad, even if Doc did do his best."

He opened tired eyes to see the girl of his dreams, and whispered, "You promised to tell Abigail."

"You told her," she smiled. "I'm Abigail. Those old men sometimes call me Gail, and sometimes Molly. When you recover, as Doc assures me you will, I'm going to try and make you think this is that green valley you've been looking for. Now go to sleep. You've lost a lot of blood."

Drag Harper's hard lines eased into a smile as he sank to sleep at the end of the trail.



BELLY-GUN BUCKAROO

By Joseph Chadwick

Kincaid wanted the girl. And he wanted peace in the Valley. But he could have neither, for his heart was torn with hate. His homestead had been razed by hombres he once called friends, and his desire for revenge was tolling him to a hot lead show-down.

THE RAILROAD was to have been a boon to mankind, and a spur to the development of the west, now linked by its sinuous web of steel rails. Instead it had become, through the machinations of its owners, a giant octopus, with shiny tentacles reaching out for a strangle-hold on the land. Cattlemen, farmers, miners, merchants; no man could freight a single steer, a bushel of grain, an ounce of ore, or a pound of merchandise, except by the paying of an exorbitant toll.

This toll was paid in money, money earned by the sweat and sometimes by the blood of countless bewildered men. But, too, the railroad was a great landowner, and so could exact yet another tribute from the people, from decent, hard-working people like those of Prospect Valley.

Yet in the beginning of things, when trouble first strikes, men do not always recognize their enemies. So it was with Sam Kincaid.

Rage blinded Kincaid to logic. He did not pause to look beyond the surface of things, to see there the ugly pattern of this grim game. Knowing only that he was wronged against, that his homestead was in danger, he was prodded by impulse—and his impulse, when aroused, was to fight. He came from his rough-board shack, a big man with a sixgun in his hand. He called out, "Hold on—hold on, now!" and punctuated the words with a metallic click. He had thumbed back the sixgun's hammer.

The mob halted, but it had already shoved down his laboriously hand-built picket fence and trampled down his vegetable garden. Nearly forty men were in the rampaging group, and their faces, in the red-yellow glow of the torches some carried, were the familiar faces of Kincaid's neighbors—settlers like himself, farmers. He had needed only a month, the length of his homesteading, to become acquainted with them.

"Kincaid," said a man, "we warned you two days ago to clear out. You didn't heed that warning. Now we've come to burn you out."

There was a red glow in the distance, an eerie coloring against the night sky, and Kincaid knew that another late-comer like himself already had been burned out. He eyed the man who had spoken, a big, bearded farmer in overalls, floppy straw hat and clodhopper shoes. A man named Ed Purcell. Kincaid named him, and said, "I do not burn out easily."

The torches glowed their threat, but the men themselves eyed Kincaid's sixgun with uncertainty. Unlike themselves, he was Texas born and bred. He had been a cowman, until caught by the desire to own a few acres to till, and he still wore the trappings of a cowhand. He was booted and spurred, and his black flatcrowned sombrero was partly the mark of a fighting man. For one moment, Kincaid had the mob cowed.

"I do not burn out easily," he said again, drawling each word. "Fight or clear out, the lot of you. And to hell with you all!"

Some of these men were armed; a few carried rifles, the others stout clubs. Four or five were mounted, and it was one of these who took up Kincaid's challenge and flung it back at him. This man was Rowdy Bowen, a big brute of a man and a hardcase. There was little of the homesteader about Bowen, yet he farmed a small place

For one moment Kincaid had the mob cowed.

by Red Creek and so belonged with this resolute mob. Rowdy Bowen's voice was loud with a booming quality, and he shouted, "Kincaid, we'll fight!"

The hardcase sat his horse off to one side of the crowd, so that Kincaid had to pivot half about to face him. As Kincaid turned, Bowen's weapon—a sixgun—blasted. Kincaid's pistol fired an answering shot, but harmlessly into the ground. For Kincaid was hit. He cried out, an incoherent cry that wasted itself in his throat. He spun half around, drawn over to the left side. He fell to his knees, before the now frightened eyes of the mob, and the gun dropped from his hand. Kincaid remained like that, on his knees, for the space of several heart beats. Then he slumped forward onto his face, his voice crying out again and this time cursing the name of Rowdy Bowen.

ROWDY BOWEN laughed hollowly, while a wild look played across his face. "That does it," he muttered, and jabbed his smoking gun into its holster. "Now we'll fire his shack."

No man in the crowd moved. These men were no longer a mob bent on ruining another man. Some fear lay upon them, now, making of them so many shocked and alarmed individuals. Howdy Bowen growled, "Fools! Give me a torch!" He grabbed a flaming brand from one of the farmers. He rode forward and he heaved the torch through the doorway of Kincaid's homestead house. Dry timbers instantly caught. Flames fed upon the shack as upon tinder.

Rowdy Bowen seemed to relish all this, for his dry chuckle was the only sound other than the crackling of the fire. Then he said, "Let's clear out of here."

He swung his horse around, giving the sprawled Kincaid a contemptuous glance, and rode away into the night. The others followed him, moving silently, with trouble burdening them.

Shock and pain had their way with Sam Kincaid, and for a time longer he lay sprawled there spilling his blood out upon the ground. His mind was oddly numb, yet he did not lose consciousness. He was aware of the blaze, of its high heat and roaring flames, but only dimly did he connect it with himself—as a personal loss. The shock attendant to his gunshot wound was not wholly an unkindly thing.

Kincaid struggled up to hands and knees, fighting against the pain in his left side. Waves of sickness attacked his belly, and he was dizzy and weak. And he thought: *"So this is the way a man feels when gunned down."* His mind cleared then, and filled up with hatred for the mob that had struck against him. At first, it was a wild hatred embracing the whole crowd, but then it crystallized and focused upon one man—upon Rowdy Bowen.

"Bowen, by damn," Kincaid mumbled. "Bowen!"

It was a blasphemy. It was an oath. He, Sam Kincaid, would have his revenge.

Black smoke poured from the burning shack, billowed up into the night sky. The red glow pushed back the darkness, and into it came a farm wagon recklessly driven. A man called out, "Kincaid—Sam Kincaid!"

The wagon halted before Kincaid's place, and its driver, an old man, climbed down from the seat and hurried to Kincaid. Lurching up, gaining his feet, Sam Kincaid recognized the man as Saul Yeager. Like Kincaid, Old Yeager was a latecomer to Prospect Valley. He was bent by his years and a lifetime of toil, and now his seamed face had a beaten look. It was clear to Kincaid that Saul Yeager too had been burned out.

"Neighbor, you bad hurt?"

"Bad enough. My left ribs are smashed."

"I'm heading for town," Old Yeager said. "I'll take you with me, to the medico." He gave Kincaid a hand, helped him to the wagon. "They fired my place, the dirty sons! Burned me out—lock, stock and barrel. My missus collapsed, mighty sick, her heart being none too good. I left her at Bensons' place, they offering to take her in. Me, I'm going for help!"

With the old farmer boosting him, Kincaid climbed to the seat. He said, "Friend, fetch my sorrel horse from the corral. Tie it to the tailgate. Fetch along my saddle. I won't be coming back."

They set out when Old Yeager had brought and secured the now skittish sorrel and placed the saddle in the bed of the wagon. They drove away from the still burning homestead, two men struck down by disaster. Old Yeager kept glancing

back, but Kincaid stared — unseeingly — ahead. His companion had brought him his sixgun, from where it had lain on the ground, and Kincaid rode with it in his hand—and with the resolve to kill in his heart.

The road followed rolling country, and finally the two fires were nothing more than a faraway pink glow in the night. Old Yeager tooled his team of heavy farm horses along, and he talked, not so much to Sam Kincaid, but like a man thinking aloud.

"Why'd they do it?" he muttered. "I asked them why. They just up and said the land didn't belong to me. Hell! I paid for that land, with all the money I had in this world. My life savings. Me, I can't help if another man was dispossessed off it. Forty dollars an acre, I paid. Forty dollars!"

Kincaid's mind roused from dullness. "Who'd you buy from, friend?"

"From the railroad—who else?"

THE railroad! Here the road swung east, running alongside the right-of-way with its steel rails dully gleaming in the night. Far ahead and coming at them, Kincaid saw the lights of a train and heard the hoot of the locomotive whistle. The railroad owned the whole basin of which Prospect Valley was a part; it had come into possession of the land through federal land grants and now, able to convey titles, was selling the farm land to settlers through a land department. In the beginning, when the road was built, Prospect Valley had been called Poverty Valley —because it had been a barren stretch of wasteland. Irrigation had made it fertile and rich.

The westbound train swept by, its funnel-stacked engine puffing out smoke and sparks. The four coaches were lighted and filled with passengers. Yes, thought Kincaid, the railroad had made this a land of promise. Greed had come with the settlers.

The town of New Hope once had been a wild cowtown and called Mustang. Now it was a comfortable farming center, boasting a steepled church and aa handsome brick bank. The town had grown, spread out, and few of its bleak, falsefront buildings remained. It was in the early morning that Sam Kincaid and old Saul Yeager reached New Hope and roused Doc Shale, an old cow country medico, from his bed.

"A gunshot wound?" the elderly doctor said. "Well, well! Seems like old times."

In Doc Shale's house, by yellow lamplight, Sam Kincaid underwent crude but swift surgery. The wound was more painful than serious. "No worse than the kick of a jughead mule," the medico observed. He dosed his patient with brandy and bandaged him tightly so that the cracked ribs would knit. He gave Kincaid a bed, then left the house with Saul Yeager. The two were driving by buggy to see the sick Mrs. Yeager.

Kincaid, made drowsy by the brandy, fell into a heavy sleep. It was full morning when Doc Shale's Indian woman housekeeper woke him.

"Girl want to talk," the housekeeper said to Kincaid.

Kincaid knew of no girl who would want to talk to him, and so he was puzzled. He threw aside his blanket, got gingerly from the bed, and pulled on his clothes. His bloodstained shirt made him frown, but it would have to do for the time. The Indian housekeeper had left a basin of water for him to wash up.

Finally, running his fingers through his tousled hair, Kincaid left the bedroom and went to the girl who was waiting in Doc Shale's parlor. The sight of her, standing by a window through which sunlight filtered, stopped Kincaid in the doorway. He had expected to find some buxom, heavy-featured farm girl. This girl might have stepped from the picture of a calender or from the pages of a mail order house catalog.

Sam Kincaid stared, jolted.

"You wanted to talk to me, Miss?"

"Yes," came the reply. "Yes, I do—very much."

Her voice was slow and pleasant, and her smile for Kincaid seemed to glow with friendly warmth. She was a tall girl in a fashionable gray dress, and her hair in the sunlight was golden. She wore a cameo brooch at her throat, and her face was as perfectly molded as the cameo. This, thought Kincaid, is a town girl—a city girl. He felt big and awkward in

comparison, for here was feminine fragility.

The girl's smile wavered as he continued to stare at her; his hard scrutiny disconcerted her and brought to her cheeks a faint color. She said, with a soft embarrassed laugh, "I'm really not a curiosity, Sam Kincaid." She gestured to a chair. "Do sit down. I know you must be weak from your wound."

Kincaid came forward, but he did not seat himself. It occurred to him that a man did not sit when a woman like this one stood. He said, "You know my name, but I do not know you. What is it you want?"

"My name is Mary Logan," the girl told him. "My father publishes the weekly newspaper here in New Hope, the Prospect Valley Record. I help him. I write some of the copy. The whole town has heard what happened out in the Valley last night, and we want to print the truth of it in Friday's paper. Will you tell me what happened?"

She seated herself now, and Kincaid saw that she had a paper and a pencil. He said, "There is nothing to tell. A mob came to my place and burned me out. I had a gun, but I was shot down. Saul Yeager was also burned out."

"You speak with very few words, Mr. Kincaid."

"Words won't change what has been done."

Mary Logan gave him a sharp look, and she must have seen the dark rocky look on his face. "I see what you mean," she told him. "You intend to fight back. But whom do you intend to fight?"

"The men who burned me out," said Kincaid. "The man who shot me."

"The farmers of Prospect Valley?"

"Who else?"

The girl rose and faced him squarely. Kincaid now saw that she was no fragile fluff of a girl; there was a stern squareness to her chin and smooth jawline, while her eyes flashed with some angry light. She shook head, and said, "Who else? Why, the railroad. Don't you see, Kincaid? The railroad, through its land department, swindled the original settlers of the valley—the hard-working people who starved and sweated and suffered to change the valley into the rich land it now is. The railroad is bringing in new people—men like yourself—and selling them land it takes from the old settlers. It is a deep and ugly game, Kincaid. It is like a chess game. Do you know chess, Kincaid? No? Well, you are but a pawn in the game. There are high stakes. Land, at forty dollars an acre! Think of it! Why, the railroad is making a great fortune out of its swindle!"

Excitement carried her away, but it was an excitement that Kincaid neither understood nor felt. He said, "I know nothing of that. I only know that I have lost my homestead to a mob."

Mary Logan stared at him, then slowly shook her head. "When you came to this room," she told him, "I thought you were an intelligent man—one who would help the *Record* fight the railroad swindle." Disappointment was heavy in her voice. "I see I was wrong. You are just what you clothes suggest—a Texas buckaroo who can only fight with a sixgun, against the thing that seems to be his enemy. Kincaid, I am sorry I wasted my time here."

Her voice rang with contempt, her eyes flashed with it. She turned and walked from the parlor, her skirt snapping angrily about her ankles. The front door slammed after her and Kincaid, looking from the window, saw her retreating figure hurrying along New Hope's main street. It was a figure stiff with anger. Puzzled, Kincaid reflectively rubbed his chin.

II

DOC SHALE'S Indian woman served Kincaid breakfast, and after eating he left the house. He had had five ten-dollar gold pieces in his pocket, and two of them he left behind as the medico's payment. He made for a general merchandise store and there bought and donned a new shirt. He visited the barber shop for a haircut and shave. He inquired at the livery stable, and learned that Old Yeager had left his sorrel there. With so much attended to, Kincaid drifted along New Hope's dusty street. He saw the one-storied frame building that bore the sign: "Prospect Valley Record & Job Printing." It was a building he had only vaguely noticed on other visits to the

town. Now he peered in through the open doorway and through the grimy window, hoping for another glimpse of Mary Logan. He failed to see her. And he wondered why he should desire to see her again. She was not his sort.

He went on to a two-storied brick building that bore a sign reading: "Texas Mid-Pacific Railroad; Land Department." He entered the cool, dim office and found some people—obviously prospective settlers—waiting to see the land agent. Kincaid pushed past the gathering, and when the pale-faced clerk at the rolltop desk said, "You'll have to wait your turn," he replied, "This can't wait."

He walked into the agent's private office.

E. P. Harmon, the agent, was a bald and very fat man with an oily sheen to his heavy face. Ordinarily, he was bland and smiling. But Kincaid's entrance made him look up with a frown, and growl, "What's the idea, friend?"

Kincaid thrust back his sombrero and with the back of his hand wiped away the gathered sweat on his forehead. He was weak, weak enough to be holed up in bed. He was hot and he was cold, with a fever playing through his blood. "Harmon," he said, "you know why I'm here. I was burned out last night—driven off the land I bought from you in good faith. I want to know why. I want to know what you aim to do about it."

E. P. Harmon leaned back in his swivel chair and lighted a cheroot. He still frowned, making a show of worry. "Kincaid, when this office sold you your land, it was done with you. I can't protect your home, defend your land. Take your troubles to the law." He puffed hard on his cheroot. Then: "You were burned out because you were on land dispossessed—by legal means, mind you—from another man. He was given the opportunity to buy, but he didn't have the money. You had, so you got the land. Those other farmers in the Valley turned against you because they fear the same thing will happen to them, and they don't want to lose their farms. It's a bad business, but still it is business. The man who can't pay his way is crowded out."

Kincaid knew he would get no help here. This fat man was so shrewd, so cunning at protecting himself and his office, that there was no besting him. But Kincaid would not admit defeat. He drew his six-gun and he leveled it at E. P. Harmon's round belly. "Harmon, I mentioned 'good faith,' but you didn't play the game that way. When a man loses his all, he doesn't care much what happens. I could gut-shoot you, for a tinhorn swindler, here and now." He thumbed back the pistol's hammer, and he saw Harmon's eyes bulge. "What do you aim to do?"

"I'm helpless, Kincaid," Harmon said heavily. "Helpless."

"You'll go on putting more settlers on dispossessed land," Kincaid said. "They'll be burned out, some of them maybe murdered. Better I stop that, even if I have to kill you."

The fat man's breathing was short and hurried. "Ease up on that gun, Kincaid—for God's sake!" he whined. "I'll help you. I'll do something. I swear it!" He held out trembling hands. "Give me a chance. Len Cordrey is due here tonight, by special coach. He's superintendent of the T&M-P, and he'll make matters right. You wait and see him. He's bringing some law deputies with him, so as to handle those Valley renegades. You talk to him, Kincaid."

"I'll wait that long, no longer," Kincaid said.

He holstered his gun, turned and walked from the office. Reaching the sun-scorched street, a dizzying weakness engulfed him. He needed a drink and a bed.

Half an hour later, in a room in the Liberty House, he stretched out on the bed and let the whiskey he had drunk in the Welcome Saloon put him to sleep. It was a drugged sleep, lasting through the day, but by night he felt better except for the soreness in his left side. He went down to the hotel's dining-room for supper. Among the people at the long table were Mary Logan and a lean, middle-aged man Kincaid judged was her father. Bert Logan, publisher of the *Record*.

Kincaid took a chair opposite the girl. She nodded coldly, and said, "Saul Yeager's wife died this morning, Kincaid. I suppose you'll hold that against the people of the Valley."

"Who else is to blame?" said Kincaid, annoyed by her.

The other men at the table were townsmen, a few of them railroad workers. E. P. Harmon was there, busily stuffing himself with food. Harmon said, from a full mouth, "Miss Logan blames the railroad, Kincaid. The lady's mind works in strange ways. But we must admire her courage, foolish as it is. Few men, no matter how brave, would dare buck the T&M-P." There was a sly hint of a threat in the fat man's tone. "I fear for the lady—" He looked at Bert Logan. *"And* for you to, sir. Your newspaper cannot exist without the backing of the railroad, and failure—"

Sudden fury was in Mary Logan's eyes. She said, "Kincaid, who shot you last night? Who was it behind the gun?"

"A man named Rowdy Bowen."

The girl showed an icy smile. "And Rowdy Bowen, besides pretending to be a farmer," she said, looking at E. P. Harman, "happens to be a friend of yours. Maybe he is in your pay, Mr. Harmon. I hope soon to discover that he is."

The fat man smiled his bland smile and went back to his eating. Bert Logan gave his daughter a worried look, and said, "Mary, you must go easy. This thing can ruin us, just as it did Kincaid, here."

III

THE railroad had a deputy U. S. Marshal's badge pinned to Kincaid's shirt. He was sworn in, and it was all legal and above-board. Len Cordrey was a man who talked fast and well.

Cordrey's private coach was shunted onto a siding at New Hope, an hour after sundown that night. Sam Kincaid was waiting outside the land office, and when E. P. Harmon appeared he fell into step with the fat man.

"We'll talk with this Cordrey, together," he said.

The private coach was a handsome affair of red and gilt paint, and its interior was made up of several compartments. Cordrey was seated in a compartment that was a combination office and parlor. He was a gaunt man, black haired and mustached, and he had the pale unreadable countenance of a faro dealer. His earlier profession had indeed been that of gambler. He waved a hand at E. P. Harmon, saying, "Sit down, Ernst. You and your friend will be served drinks in a minute."

Cordrey was not alone.

Bert Logan, the newspaper publisher, stood before him with hat in hand. Lean and almost frail, Logan, however, was not humble. He said in a reedy, angry voice, "I warn you, Cordrey, I will not be dictated to!"

"I do not dictate," Cordrey said suavely. "I bargain—"

The rest of the talk was lost on Sam Kincaid, for now a colored man in a white jacket had appeared with a tray of drinks. Kincaid accepted a shot of whiskey, then found himself a chair. At a table in a corner of the compartment, a black-clad man with iron gray hair sat playing solitaire. Beneath his open coat, a U. S. Marshal's badge could be seen on his vest. He was deep in his game, puffing on a cheroot.

Bert Logan continued to argue with the poker-faced railroad superintendent for some minutes longer, until Cordrey, wearying of it, rose and said, "I've listened to your warnings, my friend. Now you heed one of mine." He tapped the newspaperman on the chest with a stiff forefinger. "There are such things as libel laws. You continue to publish lies concerning the T&M-P's land department, and I will take you into court. That's all, Logan. Goodbye."

Logan's thin body was shaking with rage, but without another word he jammed his hat upon his head and strode from the coach. And Cordrey, smiling, rubbing hands together, turned to E. P. Harmon. "Your friend?" he queried, meaning Kincaid.

Harmon said, "Sam Kincaid, Cordrey—a settler who was burned out by an armed mob. He feels that we should side him, somehow, so I've brought him to talk it over with you. Kincaid's a good man."

"Ex-cowman?" said Cordrey, to Kincaid.

"All my life, until a month ago."

Cordrey nodded, and he studied Kincaid with shrewd eyes. Finally he turned to the lawman who still was at his card game. "Romain, this man would make you a good deputy."

Romain grunted, "Maybe."

The matter seemed settled. Cordrey said, "Besides regular deputy pay, Kincaid, you'll get a hundred a month from the land office. Your job will be to ride with Chris Romain and serve eviction notices—" a sardonic smile curled the gaunt man's lips "—on the men who burned you out."

E. P. Harmon came along in the morning, transporting his huge bulk by horse and buggy. Chris Romain rode a hired livery horse, and Sam Kincaid was in the saddle of his sorrel gelding. They left New Hope at eight o'clock, and at nine arrived at the farm of a man named Vander. Chris Romain called out, but there was no answer. Vander's house was empty. The farmer was not at his barn nor in his fields. "He must have seen us coming," Romain said, "and pulled out."

Harmon said, from his buggy, "Set his household stuff out, Marshal."

Chris Romain had no heart for the job, Kincaid saw, but he dismounted and went to the house. Kincaid followed, and the two of them worked for nearly two hours setting Vander's poor effects out of the house. They turned his milch cow out of the barn and pulled down the bars of the pig pen. "A dirty business," Romain said to Kincaid.

He took four rifle cartridgs from his pocket and stood them upright on the front stoop of the house, saying, "That will serve as the Law's calling card."

They mounted and rode on, E. P. Harmon leading the way in his wagon, and two hours later, after passing up a dozen farms, arrived at Rock Creek. Rowdy Bowen had a place on the creek; it was a ramshackle board hut, a pole corral for a horse, and a weed-grown potato patch.

"A queer sort of farm," Romain said.

"We evict him?" Kincaid asked.

"I've no papers for Bowen," the marshal said.

And from the buggy, Harmon told them, "Bowen is paying for his land."

THEY rode on, Kincaid full of suspicions about Rowdy Bowen and recalling what the girl, Mary Logan, had said about the hardcase being a friend of E. P. Harmon. If the girl was right, there was something odd in that friendship. Bowen was a leader of the farmers, an instigator of the mob violence, and so should have no love for the head of the railroad's land office. Rowdy Bowen! Kincaid meant to settle matters with the man, court papers or no court papers.

They swung south, and at high noon reached Len Purcell's farm. Purcell was the big, red-bearded man who had been the spokesman for the mob during the raid on Kincaid's place. The farmer was over by his barn, with a dozen men, including Vander and Rowdy Bowen, gathered about him. A dozen rifles leaned against the barnside, within easy reach of the men.

Chris Romain said, "Purcell, I have a court paper to serve on you."

Purcell was a stolid man, slow-spoken. He said, "Marshal, you can serve your eviction notice, but I won't be put out. My neighbors here say the same, siding me." He paused, thinking out each word. "We folks settled here three years ago, on the railroad's say so. We believed the railroad's word, its fancy advertisements. We were to pay no more than five dollars an acre, when the railroad could transfer title. Now that agreement has been broken, not by us folks but by the men who own the railroad—by men like E. P. Harmon and Len Cordrey. The land is being sold from under us, thrown on the open market —at forty dollars an acre. We can't meet such a price, but we won't be dispossessed. We are banding together and we are taking this to a high court."

Romain sighed, and said, "Purcell, I can only do my duty."

Some of the farmers moved back toward the waiting rifles. Kincaid lay a hand on his sixgun, keeping his eyes on Rowdy Bowen's burly figure.

Purcell said, "Marshal, there will be bloodshed here this day."

Chris Romain had his share of courage, but as Kincaid had noticed before he had no heart for this game. The marshal was frowning, weighing the odds, and perhaps the justice of this thing; and finally he looked at E. P. Harmon. The fat man's face was suddenly pale and moist with sweat. Harmon looked at Rowdy Bowen.

"Rowdy, you are a sensible man," he said. "Talk to your friends."

Rowdy Bowen merely grinned and

shrugged his thick shoulders, and a heavy quiet settled down. It was a quiet to break men's nerve, and it was Harmon's nerve that broke. He said, in a hollow voice, "No bloodshed, my friends. I do not want to see good men die."

It was quite clear to Sam Kincaid that Harmon was thinking of his own hide. Half a dozen of the farmers were now holding rifles.

Harmon said, "We will find another way to settle this." He took up his reins, anxious to be off. "Romain, come along. You, too, Kincaid."

The quiet was shattered, the farmers now chuckling over their victory. Rowdy Bowen swagged over to Kincaid, and said, "No grudge for that trouble the other night? It was an accident. My gun went off by mistake. I reckon I was a little drunk."

Kincaid's suspicions of this hardcase increased by the minute. And distrust fired his hatred. Kincaid said, "Mistake, hell! Bowen, a grudge is a grudge and not a thing to be talked away. This is not the time nor the place, but I will meet you one day with a gun in my hand."

Bowen's face turned dark with black rage. "You pick the day, *hombre,*" he muttered. "I'll be ready."

The day following the futile eviction trip, which was Thursday, New Hope had a funeral. Old Saul Yeager buried his wife who had died, perhaps of heartbreak, the night the mob had burned the Yeager homestead. Sam Kincaid attended the funeral, silent and grim-faced, illy controlling the anger that flared in him. For many of the Valley farmers had come to the funeral, their womenwolk bringing flowers for on the grave. *Did they not realize,* thought Kincaid, *that they had hastened the good woman's death?* Their hypocrisy was behind his rage.

Mary Logan, dressed this occasion in black, was there; Kincaid saw tears in her eyes. E. P. Harmon was also present, fat and pompous despite the mournful occasion. Kincaid listened to the words of the parson as the remains were given unto the earth, but his anger let him find no solace or hope in them. He saw old Saul Yeager, bent and broken, a man now alone in the world. It was difficult to look at a weeping man. . . . That was Thursday.

Friday was another day. Marshal Chris Romain left town by train after receiving a telegram, but Len Cordrey's handsome private coach remained on the town's siding. Kincaid spent the day at the land office, using his deputy marshal's badge to protect E. P. Harmon from a crowd of people demanding the land they had come from afar to buy and settle upon. Friday, too, the weekly edition of the *Record* was published. Kincaid did not see a copy of the newspaper. He did not know the story printed by the Logans until trouble broke out right in peaceful New Hope. A maelstrom of trouble that caught up Sam Kincaid.

IV

KINCAID was in the Sun-up Cafe eating a late supper when a tumult and a shouting rose in the quiet night, somewhere out on Main Street. The restaurant's counterman stepped outside to see what was happening, then shouted through the doorway to his customers, "Trouble up at the newspaper office. A crowd of tough hands are bustin' the place up. Old Si Larue, the constable, was manhandled and knocked out. All hell's poppin'!"

Kincaid put down his coffee cup, sudden alarm gripping him. He thought of Mary Logan, that strange and lovely meddler, and of her father, the frail Bert Logan. He knew those two well enough to realize that they would try to stop whatever was happening, and his alarm was for them. Kincaid left his stool, strode from the cafe. A great crowd of excited townspeople were in the street, watching the newspaper building from a cautious distance. Kincaid pushed through the crowd and broke into a run. There were people who knew he now wore a badge, and some of them called out, "Here's the Law, now, a deputy U. S. marshal!"

What those people expected of him, Kincaid did not know. He did not ponder the question. His running gait brought him up to the newspaper office doorway. A burly man—a railroad roustabout—tried to bar his way. The man had a pick-handle for a weapon, swung it up as a club. Kincaid ducked in close, so the blow went over his shoulder. He grabbed up his six-gun, slashed the long barrel down across

the man's head. His victim groaned and slumped to the floor, and Kincaid stepped over him.

The forepart of the office was where the Logans did their business with the public and wrote their copy and firebrand editorials; this front space had been thoroughly sacked, with desks and chairs toppled over and splintered by clubs and axes. Further back stood the type cases where Logan did the composing, and beyond was the flat-bed press for the newspaper. Half a dozen rampaging men were upsetting the type, piling it over the floor, and damaging the press. Newsprint paper was already strewn about, wholly ruined.

Kincaid saw Bert Logan sprawled on the floor beside the small job printing press, and his daughter was kneeling beside him. The girl's face was pale in the dim lamplight, and it was clear that she no longer was worried about the shop. Her fear was for her father. Kincaid felt outraged, for this was as bad as the burning of his homestead. The only difference was in the identity of the mob. He swung his sixgun up, fired a shot ceilingward, and the roar of the gun brought a quick end to the violence.

"Enough of this," said Kincaid, to the men who now faced him. "You've wrecked these people's place, and now—"

The odds were against him, even though he held a gun, for he could not watch six men scatted about the room. One of the crowd—all were railroad workers—flung an ax. Kincaid ducked, but the handle struck his shoulder. He stumbled, but fired as he fell, hitting the ax-thrower in the arm. Then, before he could recover his balance, the others were upon him. Clubs struck Kincaid, exploded pain in him, and he was beaten to the floor. He heard Mary Logan cry out in protest. The blows stopped raining upon him. His attackers broke away, ran from the wrecked shop with wild yells and mocking laughter. Kincaid climbed to his feet, his battered head reeling.

He gulped air into his laboring lungs, filled his nostrils with the print shop smells of ink and benzine. He saw Mary Logan staring at him, heard her affrighted voice say, "Kincaid, you are all right?"

She was no longer the stylish and well-groomed girl who had visited him at Doc Shale's house. Her dress was torn at the shoulder; there was a big smudge of ink on her face, and her blond hair was dishevelled. She looked very much like a small girl wanting badly to cry. Kincaid said, "I am all right. What about your father?"

"Dad is unconscious," the girl said. "He was hit on the head."

Kincaid said, "Go send somebody up the street for Doc Shale," and he went to where Bert Logan lay. He knelt and felt the man's heart, making sure that it really was beating. He heard Doc Shale come in, almost at once. He moved away so that the medico could give the needed treatment. Townspeople were venturing into the front part of the shop. Mary Logan stood leaning against the wall, her pallor increasing. Kincaid picked up one of the overturned chairs and urged her to sit down.

"Tell me what happened," he told her. "Why was this done?"

"WE printed the truth about what is happening in the Valley," Mary said weakly. "We believe Len Cordrey might sue us, claiming we libeled the railroad. But he did this, instead. Oh, it was awful!"

She had covered her face with her hands, and she now was letting the tears come. Kincaid saw some printed pages among the torn and crumpled newsprint, and he picked up one of them. He glanced at the *Record's* front page, read the three-column headline:

"GUNS FLAME AS RAILROAD WARS ON SETTLERS; HOMESTEADERS BURNED OUT."

The three columns under the banner headline told about Saul Yeager being burned out by outraged farmers. It told about Mrs. Yeager's death a few hours after being driven from her home. Kincaid found a dramatic recital of the attack on his own place, of his being wounded by Rowdy Bowen. There was mention of U. S. Marshal Romain's attempt to evict the farmers from their land, and of how the Valley men were standing together against the trickery of the railroad's land office. Every inspired word the Logans had printed sided the Valley farmers and lay the blame upon the railroad. And at

the end of the story was this terse paragraph:

"The *Record's* investigation has found that Rowdy Bowen is a notorious hardcase from San Francisco's Barbary Coast and is in the pay of the T&M-P's land office. The *Record* will present evidence in court to prove that Bowen accepted payment from E. P. Harmon to incite the farmers against the new settlers, those innocent people buying up dispossessed land. It will be this newspaper's policy to support the Valley farmers when they fight this lawlessness in Court."

Kincaid dropped the paper and looked at Mary Logan. "You can prove that Rowdy Bowen is in the railroad's pay?"

The girl nodded. "It is true," she said, and then was defiant. "But I won't reveal the name of our witness—not to you. You're siding the railroad. You're in Len Cordrey's pay. That badge you wear is a mockery!"

ACROSS the room, Doc Shale had brought Bert Logan around. The newspaperman sat up while the medico bandaged his head, and he said bitterly, "They've ruined me, but I'll still fight them. I'll fight them to the end!" There were unashamed tears in his eyes as he looked about his wrecked shop.

Kincaid looked from him to the girl, and he saw that she was as determined to go on in this ugly game as her father was. He had his fear for them, and he said uneasily, "Better if you leave this town for a time." He met Mary Logan's eyes, and added, "I would not like to walk out of here thinking that you are still in danger."

Her gaze was steady. "You took our part tonight, Kincaid. Why?"

"I would have done the same for any person," he said. "But my worry for you, Mary Logan, is a new thing to me. I do not understand it."

The girl rose, her face losing its pallor and becoming suddenly radiant. She reached up her hands and touched his shoulders. "I think I understand it, Kincaid—and I know I like it. You and I, we are bound to be friends." There was no coyness about Mary Logan; she was honest and straightforward. "Very good friends, Kincaid. But we cannot be against each other in this ugly, treacherous game."

"No," said Kincaid, vastly stirred by the closeness of her. "I will turn in this badge to Len Cordrey, now that I know the truth of this business." He smiled at her. "I will be back."

He turned and went out, pushing his way through the gaping crowd.

On the street, Kincaid slowed up. With his sore ribs and the beating he had just received, he was in no condition to play out his hand. He needed rest and a drink, but resolve drove him out on Main Street. He wanted to break with Len Cordrey, to make the man take back the deputy marshal's badge. And there was one thing more; he wanted a showdown with Rowdy Bowen. Midway out Main Street, a farm wagon overtook him. It was Saul Yeager's wagon, and the old man called in a drunken man's voice, "Kincaid, is it true what the newspaper said about the railroad?"

Old Yeager was very drunk. His eyes glowed too brightly in the gloom, and he swayed unsteadily on his seat.

"It's true, friend," Kincaid said. "The railroad—through Len Cordrey, E. P. Harmon and Rowdy Bowen—urged the farmers to burn us out. They want public opinion and sympathy against the Valley farmers."

"A dirty, sneaking game," Old Yeager muttered. "But the railroad will pay. Me, I'll see to that!"

He drove on, the darkness swallowing him and his wagon. Kincaid walked on. He came to Len Cordrey's private car on the siding beyond the depot. He climbed to the rear platform, opened the door, stepped into the coach. Len Cordrey sat in an armchair with a drink in his hand. E. P. Harmon was with him. So was Rowdy Bowen.

Kincaid grabbed for his gun, but too late. Cordrey lifted his left hand. There was a derringer in it, the muzzle boring at Sam Kincaid.

Kincaid muttered an oath, cursing his own blind foolhardiness. He had walked into a trap, when he should have realized that these men—the poker-faced and dangerous Len Cordrey, the fat and craven E. P. Harmon, and the hardcase Rowdy Bowen—would set a trap for him. They of course, knew he had fought the rail-

road wrecking crew, sided the Logans, and they must have guessed that he would play his new hand through by coming to the private coach. So Kincaid's thoughts ran in the moment Cordrey's derringer covered him.

Harmon's pudgy face was moist and uneasy, but Rowdy Bowen uttered mocking laughter. Len Cordrey remained at ease in his armchair, glass in one hand and derringer in the other. The T&M-P's superintendent was a cool one. He said, "Rowdy, pull this bucko's fangs."

Kincaid's right hand was wrapped around the butt of his sixgun, and so he had his chance to draw. But it was a poor chance, in the face of Cordrey's snub-nosed derringer. Kincaid did not draw. He let Rowdy Bowen take the sixgun. And Bowen said, mockingly, "Shoot him with his own gun, Cordrey?"

Cordrey said, "Bowen, get the hell out of here."

Bowen's grin faded, and he muttered some protest under his breath. But he turned and left the coach, taking Kincaid's gun with him. With the hardcase gone, Cordrey said, "I savvy what's on your mind, Kincaid. You read Logan's newspaper, and you believe the nonsense he printed."

Kincaid nodded jerkily. "I'm through with you and Harmon, Cordrey. You're in a dirty game. Wrecking the newspaper office was an ugly business." He ripped the deputy marshal's badge from his shirt and threw it at Cordrey's feet. "I'm through."

Cordrey lay the derringer on the arm of his chair. "You jump at conclusions, friend," he said. "Logan libelled the railroad's land office. There isn't a word of truth in what he printed. As for what happened to his shop tonight, neither Harmon nor I had anything to do with it. Some of the boys—railroad employees—read those lies and took matters into their own hands." He made an airy gesture. "Why, I'm willing to pay Logan damages."

"You talk fine words, Cordrey," said Kincaid.

"You don't believe me?" Cordrey feigned hurt. "Look; if I was as bad as you think, do you suppose I'd let you walk out of here alive—to witness that Rowdy Bowen is a friend to Harmon and me?" He shook his head. "Not at all. Bowen is a friend. Harmon and I knew him in Frisco, years back, but I give you my word, Kincaid, that he is not in our pay. Logan lies when he says he can prove such a thing."

KINCAID had his moment's doubt. This was a matter of Cordrey's word against that of Bert Logan. And Logan might be mistaken. It was a toss-up between the two. Kincaid shook his head, and said, "I know nothing of that. But I'm done with the whole rotten game."

Cordrey shrugged, "Suit yourself, friend."

It turned out as simple as that. Neither Cordrey nor E. P. Harmon attempted to stop Kincaid when he turned to leave. He went out, closing the door behind him. He dropped down the coach steps, stood a moment in the darkness, thinking now of Rowdy Bowen who was somewhere out in the night—aware that he, Sam Kincaid, was unarmed.

But Bowen made no appearance. No ambush shot came to knock the life out of Kincaid, and he moved along the track, past the depot, and turned into Main Street. There were still groups of people on the street, folks talking over what had happened in the newspaper office. Kincaid walked the two blocks to the *Record* office, saw it still was lamplighted, and he shoved open the door and walked in. Bert Logan, still pale from his head injury, was in the rear of the shop trying to straighten out some of the wreckage. The man was alone.

Kincaid said, "Friend, you should be in bed. We can clean up this mess in the morning."

Logan carried an armful of ruined newsprint to the rear window and dumped it out. He turned, saying, "I wouldn't be able to sleep. I'll work until I play out. Mary went home to fetch me some coffee. . . ." His voice trailed away, and he looked about helplessly.

Kincaid gave him a hand, and as he worked he thought of Mary Logan. She was a lovely girl, fragile in one way and as courageous as a pioneer woman in another; she was educated and gifted, like no girl Kincaid had ever known. But tonight she had smiled upon him and had

spoken words of vast promise. Kincaid told himself, "I can hope, can't I?" And he helped Mary's father set up some of the damaged furniture.

An hour had passed, and Kincaid was saying, "Mary's staying long," when the shot roared. It was fired through that open rear window, and it was fired by a gun in the hand of Rowdy Bowen. Kincaid had a glimpse of Bowen's hardcased face as Bert Logan cried out and collapsed to the floor. Kincaid grabbed for his own gun, forgetting that his holster was empty. He saw the hand of Rowdy Bowen throw the smoking gun into the shop.

KINCAID leapt across the room, knowing before he grabbed up the weapon that it was his own sixgun. He knew, too, all in the space of a heartbeat, why Bowen had gunned down Bert Logan. It was a part of this devil's game. It was a planned thing; it had been planned in that private coach on the siding, by Cordrey and Harmon and Bowen. They wanted Logan dead, because he was a dangerous influence against their money-grabbing plans. And Rowdy Bowen, tricky to the last, had killed two birds with one stone. He had killed Logan, with Kincaid's gun!

A woman screamed. Kincaid whirled, the smoking gun in his hand, and Mary Logan stood in the doorway. The tin pail she had carried now crashed to the floor, spilling its steaming coffee. The girl stared wildly at the crumpled heap that was her father, and she cried out, "Oh, no—not that!"

People came running, pushing into the shop. Mary Logan lifted her stricken eyes to Kincaid. "You," she said dully. "It was you!"

A star glinted on the vest of an elderly man, and Kincaid knew he was Si Larue, the town constable. There was a rope about the neck of San Kincaid in this moment. He could almost feel it. He turned and went through the window where Rowdy Bowen had stood to fire that murder shot. He moved out into the darkness, the six-gun in his hand and hatred in his heart. Rowdy Bowen—*Rowdy Bowen!* Kincaid wanted to shout that name. He wanted to call Rowdy Bowen to a showdown. . . .

Kincaid prowled the dark alleyways. He hid when the hue and cry grew close. Armed citizens were helping Constable Larue in the manhunt, but the noise they made in search warned their quarry from afar. Kincaid ranged through the town, missing only the crowded main street. He spent an hour on his manhunt, but Rowdy Bowen eluded him. Once Kincaid had to hide for nearly an hour. A group of men trapped him, without knowing, at the rear of the feed store. He lay hidden in the bed of a wagon, perhaps praying that he would not be discovered. And it was while he waited for the men to move on that he heard a locomotive puffing down by the depot. He called himself a fool, then, for Rowdy Bowen would have gone to report to Cordrey and Harmon. That engine. Was it hooking up to Cordrey's private coach?

A sweat of impatience gripped Kincaid, but finally the way was clear. He crept from his hiding-place and ran through the darkness. He circled the depot. He was almost too late, almost. . . . The locomotive was pulling the coach from the siding. Kincaid ran forward. He jumped to the steps of the rear platform. He nearly fell, as the train gave a lurch in picking up speed. Kincaid clung to the platform's guard rail; he was out of breath, and weakness—from his wounds and his beating—kept him slumped there, in danger of dropping, on the narrow steps. The engine's whistle hooted into the night. The train was gathering speed.

Beyond town, by five miles, the tracks crossed a trestle that bridged Natchez Creek. The train was nearly on the wooden structure when Kincaid hoisted himself up and flung himself against the coach door. Through curtained glass, he saw Cordrey and Harmon and Rowdy Bowen seated in the parlor compartment. The fat man was dozing in his chair, but Len Cordrey was counting out yellow-backed bills into Bowen's reaching hand.

The door rattled back under Kincaid's weight. He was inside at once, waking E. P. Harmon, surprising Len Cordrey. Only Rowdy Bowen had the quick intincts of a gunfighter, and he grabbed out his sixgun.

Bowen fired from the hip, too fast for accurate aim, and his shot shattered the glass in the door. Kincaid fired and he

fired again, shooting the life out of Rowdy Bowen. He watched Bowen crumple and fall, and in that time Cordrey got out his derringer. The heavy roar of the pocket gun was like a blast. It was like no gunshot Kincaid had ever heard. The coach lurched wildly. Cordrey's shot missed, for the lurching of the car had flung the man off balance. Kincaid himself fell, thrown backward out of the car onto the platform. The racing engine had hit the trestle, but now it was plunging downward, dragging tender and coach with it, into Natchez Creek. For the bridge had given way. The blast had not been Cordrey's derringer; it had been the explosion of dynamite.

Kincaid flung himself clear of the wreck. He lay dazed and full of pain on the high bank of the chasm. A red glow blossomed, fire kindled by the coach's broken oil lamps swept out with a terrific roar. A man screamed in agony and desperate fear. Live steam, escaping from the engine's boiler, billowed upward in great hot clouds. A great hulking figure fought its way from the burning coach, a fat man, screaming. E. P. Harmon's clothes were afire. Kincaid ran to the man, shoved him to the ground, rolled him over and over to beat out the flames. . . .

Finally the horror of the scene faded. Kincaid bent over Harmon.

"Harmon, you will either go back to town and talk," he said savagely, "or you will die here. Make your choice!"

The fat man groaned. "Have pity on me, Kincaid. I'll talk!"

Back in New Hope, before witnesses, E. P. Harmon talked and told the whole truth. He talked because he was a suffering man, and because he had the fear of Sam Kincaid in his fat heart. . . .

The next day, a railroad wrecking crew started salvage work on the shattered train and smashed trestle at Natchez Creek. They found the bodies of Cordrey and Rowdy Bowen and of the engine crew. They also found another body, that of the man who had set the dynamite charge under the bridge—the body of old Saul Yeager who, drunk or mad, had sworn to make the railroad pay for the wrong done him. And no harsh word was said against Old Yeager, once the truth was known.

Bert Logan's funeral was the biggest in New Hope's history. Present were some of the T&M-P's officials, men who stoutly swore that Len Cordrey and E. P. Harmon had been working the tinhorn game on their own. These men, to show the railroad company guiltless, promised to make amends—offered all of Prospect Valley a new consideration.

The days passed, ran into months, and the *Prospect Valley Record* was once again published. Mary Logan was its editor, but she had changed her name to Mrs. Sam Kincaid. And Sam Kincaid? "I ain't much of a newspaperman," he would say, "but I sure can run that mustang press of ours!"

BORN FOR BOOT-HILL

By Philip Ketchum

THE four men left Tiffany early in the morning and took the road south along Wind river. They didn't talk much as they rode. They had considered this step they were taking for a long time and had reached their decision. But at least on the part of one of the men there still remained a few doubts and mental reservations.

"How do we know he'll do it," this man asked finally. "That is, how do we know he'll do it the way we want him to?"

Rud Willowby, who was the leader of the four, if they could have been said to have a leader, scowled at the man who was still worried. "Benetor needs the money," he answered abruptly. "And he'll do the job our way or he won't last. How about it, Jennings?"

Lou Jennings was thin and dark and had a gaunt, boney face and eyes like slate. He made a noise which might have been a laugh. "What you afraid of, Ollie?" he demanded.

It was Ollie Spence who was worried. Ollie Spence, who was a banker and who was very respectable and who liked to be sure of things, always. He had a little head, a little body, thin, tight lips and sharp dark eyes. "I'm not afraid," he answered quickly.

Sam Holt, the fourth man, glanced from Spence to Jennings and then to Willowby. Sam Holt was a big, broad shouldered man with a sun bronzed face. "I thought this was all settled," he muttered.

"It is," Rud Willowby snapped.

The four men rode on, turning away from the river after a while and angling toward the east. Noon brought them to rolling, green hills, and after a time they struck a road. They followed this to a wide, grassy valley, across which they could see a new cabin. A man was working in a small garden patch near it.

"I'll do the talking," Rud Willowby declared. "The rest of you back me up. Don't talk too much. When things are settled we'll leave."

No one disagreed and after a brief pause the four men rode on toward the cabin. . . .

Steven Benetor saw them coming. He straightened up and mopped a hand across his face and then walked in a loose jointed way toward the cabin and stood in the shade, watching the men approach, a dark, speculative look in his eyes. Steve Benetor was a tall man, thin, and with sloping shoulders and long arms. He was somewhere in the mid-twenties, but most people thought him older. He seemed older. He wasn't a man who smiled easily. He had never lived easily but once, and on that occasion he had actually lived less easily than ever before in his life. He had dark hair and clear, gray eyes and his skin was deeply tanned.

As the four men drew closer, Steve recognized Ollie Spence, and the scowl settled more heavily on his face. Steve had known the banker in Wendover City. He had never liked him. Bankers were supposed to be a cold and hard lot of men, but Ollie Spence had seemed to be almost inhuman in his relationships. Back in Wendover City, money had been the only language Spence had been able to understand. He would always listen to money. It could be bloody or crooked or stolen. It made no difference.

The four men pulled up in front of the cabin and one of them, a fat, prosperous looking fellow, called out a greeting. "We wanted to see you, Benetor. My name's Rud Willowby. We're from Cortez."

"Light down an' rest yourselves," Steve invited.

THE four men dismounted. Ollie Spence was saddle stiff. So were the others. None of them, apparently, used to much riding. The thin, dark faced man whom Steve was later to identify as Lou Jennings, led the horses to the corral fence

Sure, the job meant big pay to Steve Benetor . . . a hired badge on his vest, the law in his holster, cock-o'-the-walk in Cortez. Easy living, it was—except that at any moment he might be dry-gulched. Fine job, all right—except that four gunnies gave him orders, and he couldn't quit until they buried him in boot-hill.

and tied them there. The other three walked up to the cabin.

"To hot to go inside," Steve mentioned, "but there's water just inside the door if you'd like a drink."

Rud Willowby shook his head. "This oughtn't to take us long, Benetor. Maybe we'll all want a drink later. Perhaps even something stronger than water."

Rud Willowby wasn't only fat. He had a booming voice and the fat man's habit of grinning. His cheeks were ruddy and his eyes seemed to be buried deep in his head.

"We're from Cortez," he said again. "Maybe you've heard of Cortez?"

Steve had. It was a new town on the western slope of the Toltecs. Six months before it hadn't existed excepting as a wide, rocky gulch. A man named Patterson had discovered a rich body of ore in that gulch and almost over night, the town had been born.

"It's a great town, Cortez," Willowby boomed. "It's not one of these places born today an' gone tomorrow, is it, Holt? I reckon Cortez is here to stay."

"It's here to stay, all right," Sam Holt answered.

Willowby laughed. "Sam Holt," he explained, "is a miner. I reckon he owns half of the gulch, maybe more. He could buy and sell me and Ollie Spence and never notice the difference, and if he says Cortez is here to stay, it's here to stay."

Steve Benetor said nothing. He didn't think that any comment was yet necessary. "I'm in business in Cortez," Willowby continued. "I'm a merchant. I've owned stores in half a dozen states across the Toltecs an' back in Colorado and Kansas, too. When things started up in Cortez I moved in fast. Someone had to supply food and clothing and stuff like that. Hell, I can't mine gold, but I get along, just the same."

Steve imagined that Willowby did. He looked it.

"It's like this," Willowby went on. "Cortez grew too fast. Hundreds of people poured into the gulch. Some of 'em good people. Some of 'em bad. Some of 'em to mine for gold or willing to work for wages. Honest folks. Some of 'em gamblers an' leeches an' blood-suckers. You know the kind. You handled 'em in Wendover City, from all I've heard."

Steve Benetor knew what was coming, now. He had known, without any of this telling, what Cortez was like, and the reference to what he had done in Wendover City was a dead give-away. But still he didn't have anything to say. He might just as well get the whole story. He reached into his pocket for tobacco and papers and started building a cigarette. He had long, thin fingers.

"Rud Willowby's just about hit it," Sam Holt mentioned. "Things in Cortez are pretty bad. Not out of hand, yet, but something's got to be done pretty soon. The four of us, here, and a good many other folks want to make Cortez a decent place in which to live. We ought to have a school and churches and more decent people. But before we can get 'em we've got to clean up."

"You mean, clean up the town, of course," Steve said quietly.

Holt's eyes narrowed and a scowl came into Willowby's face but Steve's expression told them nothing.

"Yes, we want to clean up the town," Willowby agreed. "And we want you to help us."

STEVE BENETOR stared at his cigarette, remembering the days in Wendover City. He didn't like to think back to those days. In a way he could be proud of what he had dne, but he hadn't liked the doing. It had been an accident, really, that he had taken the job of town marshal. And it had been in deep anger over the unprovoked murder of the closest friend he ever had. The anger had lasted long enough to get him neck deep into trouble and he had stuck it out. He had done a good job before he was through, but when he had ridden away he had been finished forever with that kind of a life.

This was what he had been born to. Work in the open and on the range. This was what he liked, hard labor in the sun and a night to rest, cattle to raise and a garden and a home of his own. This was where he belonged.

"Well, Benetor, how about it," Willowby pressed. "Tell us you'll come to Cortez and help us out."

Steve Benetor shook his head, "Not a chance. I'm too happy where I am."

"What about—five hundred a month?"

"Not for a thousand."

The four men looked at one another and the puzzled expressions on their faces brought a brief smile to Steve's lips. He could appreciate their bewilderment. Five hundred a month was a lot of money. The average lawman would have jumped at it. In fact, five hundred a month was too much money for the job.

"Look here, Benetor," Holt said suddenly. "We're mighty serious about this. I own a fortune there in Cortez. All I have in the world is tied up in that town. I want to see it run right. Lou Jennings is in the same fix. So are Willowby and Spence. We've got to have you."

Steve shook his head.

"A couple of months, three months, and think of what you could do on your place here. You could use the money, I know. You wouldn't be giving up your ranch. A lot of fellows stop work on their own places to make a stake when there's one for the making."

Again Steve shook his head. "Not interested."

Rud Willowby moistened his lips. He looked from one to another of his companions. Holt gave a faint nod and Jennings, too. Spence gulped and twisted his hands together. Steve Benetor frowned, aware of a sudden feeling of uneasiness.

"I sort of hate to bring this up, Benetor," Willowby said after a momentary hesitation, "but we did a little checking up on things before riding out here. It seems you made a loan at the bank in Tiffany a few months back. Almost six months back, to be exact. The loan's almost due. I reckon you planned on getting it extended but maybe you won't be able to."

Steve dropped his cigarette and stepped on it. His eyes were frosty. "Why not?"

"Maybe the bank in Tiffany don't hold your paper any longer. Maybe the man who bought it will want to collect when the loan is due."

Steve looked over at Ollie Spence. He straightened up and took a step toward the man.

"Now wait a minute, Benetor," Willowby said sharply. "Don't blame Spence for this. Blame all of us. We need you in Cortez. We've got to have you. This is a mean way to go about it but the situation is desperate."

"So you bought up my loan."

"That's right."

Steve looked from one man to another. He had the sudden notion that they were all like Spence, that they weren't interested at all in Cortez, that they were only interested in what they could make in the town. One of them, Sam Holt, had talked of churches and a school and of making Cortez a decent place to live. He hadn't meant a word of it.

"You can get a man to look after your ranch here, easily," Willowby mentioned. "If you need a little money, why we'll loan it to you. And we'll stand back of you in Cortez. You'll not be alone in this thing as you were in Wentover City. You'll have help. All the help you need. Your appointment's all fixed with the town board. You just move in and take over."

Steve Benetor sucked in a long, slow breath. He held back the anger he was feeling, tried not to show it. He had the feeling of a man who had been cornered, pushed back against a wall, and who could find no way out. There wasn't a possible chance of raising the money to meet his note. If he failed to meet it he lost this ranch. Of course, he could lose it and start over again, but the way back was long and hard.

"SPENCE will tear up the note after you finish in Cortez," Willowby promised. "That's over and above your salary. It means a lot to us, Benetor, to have law and order in the town where we live."

Steve Benetor's eyes narrowed. That last phrase of Willowby's echoed in his mind. Law and order. Was that really what these men wanted? Law and order?

He turned suddenly and walked into the cabin. Through a curtained window he saw Lou Jennings loosen the gun in his holster. Lou Jennings, who had a thin, hawk-like face, but who was supposed to be a merchant. He stared at Sam Holt, the big, square shouldered man, who had been introduced as a miner but who didn't look hard enough to handle a pick. He stared at Ollie Spence, whom he knew, and at Rud Willowby, the fat man, supposedly a merchanat like Jennings. The fat man with the jovial smile which never reached his eyes. These four

were standing close together, whispering, and now and then glancing uneasily toward the cabin.

Steve slowly nodded his head. All right, they had him. They had him by as crooked a trick as men could play. They said they wanted law and order in Cortez, that they wanted to make the mining camp a decent place in which to live. Steve didn't believe it, but maybe he could go there on that principle and maybe he could give them what they had asked for, whether they really wanted it or not.

There was no other way in the world he could fight back. . . .

Announcement of the appointment of Steve Benetor as town marshal of Cortez was made a week later. It was made by means of a notice posted on the bulletin board on the front of Willowby's store, a notice signed by Ed Daniels, the town's mayor. And word of the appointment quickly sifted through Cortez.

Paul Stagge, who was acting as manager of the Silver Dollar saloon heard the news and thought over what it meant. Stagge was a big man. He served as his own bouncer and boasted that he was afraid of no man living, and perhaps he wasn't. Just the same, however, Stagge left Cortez that night, gave up his job and left. He had known Steve Benetor in Wendover City. He didn't want to have to line up against him here.

Carl Durant, who owned the Golden Pheasant and an interest in several other places, got the news from one of his dealers. He went home early that evening and watched Mary's face closely while he told her. Mary was his wife. She was young, slender, dark-eyed, beautiful. He thought that some of the color went out of Mary's face when he mentioned the new marshal's name and the old fires of jealousy which had never been completely extinguished within Durant's breast, flamed up again.

"Maybe you'll be glad to see him again, Mary," he said quietly.

Mary Durant made no answer.

"You really should have married him, you know," Durant went on. "At least he earns an honest living."

Mary Durant still didn't speak.

"Of course, he'll have his hands full, here," Durant added. "Something tells me a town marshal won't last very long in Cortez."

Mary's face did lose color at that but she turned and left the room without saying a word. Durant's laugh had a hollow sound. That night a man who was losing in a game which Durant was dealing made a remark which Durant didn't like and Durant went for his gun. He shot the man three times in the chest.

Word of the appointment of the marshal was later in reaching Bob Grady's camp, high above the gulch. There, by an open fire, Grady learned of it just after midnight when Cartwright, his partner, came up from the town with supplies.

"Maybe things'll settle down, then, and we won't have to camp here to hold our claim," Bob guessed.

"Yeah," said Jim Cartwright. "Maybe."

The flap of one of the tents near the fire opened and Ellen Grady looked out. Ellen was Bob's sister. She called, "Hi, Jim. What's the news?"

"They've appointed a marshal down in Cortez," Jim answered.

Ellen nodded. "It's about time."

The four men who had hired the new marshal had an unofficial meeting that night in the back room of Willowby's store. They were rather pleased with themselves.

"Have you told your men what you expect of 'em, Holt?" Willowby asked.

Sam Holt nodded. "I've told 'em. I've told 'em to stand back of the new marshal until I say different. What about Durant?"

"We'll let Benetor worry about Durant. Maybe we'll help him smash Durant. You wouldn't care, would you?"

"Not if you don't forget what I want."

Ollie Spence moistened his lips. "You mean, what we all want."

Jennings said, "Let's talk about it."

The four men lowered their voices and drew closer together.

STEVE BENETOR viewed what he could see of Cortez from the lower end of its long main street. He thought he knew about what to expect. In Tiffany, where he had stopped to check up on the ownership of the note he had signed, he had met a man who had just come from Cortez and he had talked to this man for a long time.

Cortez, he had learned, consisted of one main street which ran for a mile up a narrow, twisting gulch. A single row of buildings faced each other across this street. In a few places there were tents or shacks built back of the main street and on the higher slopes of the two hills lining the gulch. The diggings were on these hills, on the western hill the richer claims.

In all, according to the information he had received, there were maybe a couple of thousand people in Cortez, and by count, thirty-seven saloons or gambling joints along the mile of street. The buildings were of wood or canvas frame. Some were only tents or flimsy shacks. And a good many people camped on their claims on the two hills. The big men, according to his informant, were Ed Daniels, who had been named mayor, and who dealt in the buying and selling of claims. Rud Willowby, who owned the main store, and by rumor, owned most of the saloons. Ollie Spence, the banker. Sam Holt, the representative of a mining syndicate which was trying to buy up most of the good land. And a man named Bob Grady, who had the best claim in the entire area.

It was late afternoon when Steve reached the edge of the town. Already men were beginning to come down the trails from the diggings and were thronging the street. From where he was Steve could see a saloon's sign. He supposed he could have seen another from the other end of the mile and this notion gave him some idea of the job he was undertaking. There was a mile of street to be patrolled. No matter how good he was, things could go to hell at one end of Cortez while he was at the other. The job looked pretty tough.

His appointment had been announced the morning before, but Steve didn't know that. He rode on up the twisting street, past more than a dozen saloons, a land office, a mining company office, a barber shop, three restaurants, a hardware store, a feed store, innumerable unmarked buildings and the post office. Just beyond the post office he saw the sign of the Golden Pheasant, quite a large, tent roofed saloon. Across from it was Willowby's store. Steve pulled up there, and dismounted.

Rud Willowby seemed glad to see him and introduced a thin, stoop shouldered man as Ed Daniels, the mayor. Ed Danields went through the formula of swearing him in as town marshal and gave him a badge. Daniels had a tight skinned face and looked worried. He talked about the lawlessness in Cortez and the trouble they had beeen having.

"Durant's at the bottom of it," he declared. "He killed another man last night. Men say the other fellow started the trouble and that Durant gave him an even break, but I don't believe it. Durant never gave anyone an even break. He owns or controls half of the saloons in this town. He's got to be smashed."

"Carl Durant?" Steve asked quietly.

"Yes. Carl Durant."

Steve Benetor tutrned and looked out of the window. He hadn't figured on this. He hadn't figured on running into Carl Durant. He wondered suddenly about Mary and whether or not she was with her husband and the memory of Mary and Carl Durant and of Westover City and what had happened there stirred up an old bitterness in his heart.

"There a building next door you can have as an office and a place to sleep," Willowby was saying. "Behind it there's a dug-out which will serve as a lock-up. Here are the keys. I reckon you can start right in, but don't try to do everything tonight. Men have been dying pretty sudden in this town."

STEVE BENETOR took the keys and left the store. He glanced toward the next building, which was to be his. After a moment he turned that way. As he stooped to fit the key in the lock of the door he heard a bullet smash into it, inches above his head, and then, clearly, he heard the zing of the rifle.

Steve got the door open and swung inside. He leaned against the wall, near to the door, aware, suddenly, of the perspiration on his forehead and the shaky feeling of his knees. That had been close, too close. If he hadn't stooped to unlock the door he would now be lying on the board walk, outside, finished with this job before he had even started it.

The shot had come from somewhere on the hill, across and above the street. Steve moved to the window and stared through

it toward the hill, but he couldn't learn anything from what he could see. Here and there were piles of ore, dug from the hills. He could see plenty of thick shrubbery, half a dozen tents. The shot might have come from anywhere up there.

"Someone doesn't like it that I'm here, anyhow," he muttered. And he thought of Carl Durant and scowled.

A knock sounded on the door. Steve answered it and then nodded to the man who stood outside. He said, "Come in, Carl."

Carl Durant stepped into the room. He was a man not much older than Steve. He was tall, thin and he looked tired. There wasn't a good color in his face. He had dark, restless eyes. His coat was long and of the latest fashion and he wore a neat waist-coat and black trousers and a white shirt with a flowing, black tie. This wasn't much of a change from Wendover City, but Durant had aged since then. The lines in his face were deeper and his eyes more shadowed.

"I couldn't believe it when I heard you were coming, Steve," Durant said slowly. "I had thought you meant it when you said you were through with this kind of stuff."

Steve Benetor shrugged. "I'd thought so, too, but I was wrong."

"What's the matter? Money?"

"That, and other things."

"I could stake you, Steve."

Steve shook his head. He reached into his pocket for tobacco and papers and started making a cigarette. Durant found a cigar and struck a match. He held the match to Steve's cigarette.

"Maybe you knew I was here," he suggested.

"No. I didn't."

"I thought maybe—it was my wife."

Steve pulled in a long, slow breath. He stared into Durant's face, but he couldn't read the man's expression. He knew he was getting angry and he fought to hold the anger back.

"I didn't know you were here, Durant," he said again.

Durant looked at him steadily, as though trying to read his mind, as though trying to test the truth of that statement. Steve didn't lower his eyes. He recalled again those days in Wendover City. He had gone into the job green and in effect had taken on the whole town. Alone, as he had been, he wouldn't have lasted a week, but he had found help where he had least expected it. He had found help from Durant. Later, he had learned that Durant, while helping him, had also used him to wipe out a few personal scores. And there was the barb. At the time, Steve had thought this man was a friend.

Durant lowered his eyes. He took his cigar from his mouth and stared at it. "You know, Steve," he remarked, "Cortez isn't like Wendover City. Things might not work out the same, might not work out as easy."

"Maybe you're right," Steve shrugged.

"We're on different sides of the fence this time, Steve." The gambler had raised his head and was looking straight at him again. His voice had hardened, too.

"We're on different sides," he repeated. "I've got a good thing here, Steve, and I don't intend to lose it. Keep out of my places and we'll not have any trouble."

"Just like that, huh."

"Just like that."

Steve shook his head. "Nothing doing, Durant."

A tight smile twisted Durant's lips. He turned to the door, opened it, and then looked back. "One thing more," he said slowly. And for the first time his voice wasn't quite steady. It showed a sharp, brittle edge. "One thing more, Steve. Keep away from my wife. If you see her, don't even speak to her. She's out of your life forever."

Steve Benetor held himself steady. He made no answer. Carl Durant stepped outside and pulled the door shut after him.

STEVE left his office and found a livery stable not far down the street where his horse could be cared for. He had an unpalatable dinner in a crowded restaurant and hung around for a while, afterward, listening to the talk of fortunes to be made in the hills and to be lost over the gambling tables in Cortez. He took a walk after dinner to the far end of the street and then back again and for a while, then, he stood in front of his office, scowling.

Here was a mile of street to patrol, with saloons and stores all along it. While

he was at one end, all hell could break loose at the other. They had told him to start right in and he had to, but he wasn't really ready. He didn't know, yet, just how the forces in this town were aligned. He didn't even know all the forces. Durant had been right in one thing at least. Cortez wasn't like Wendover. This wasn't going to be easy at all.

It had grown dark, but lights from the buildings along the street thinned the night shadows. People were passing up and down the street, singly and in small groups, making their way from one saloon to another. Now and then Steve could catch parts of sentences or the sound of laughter or profanity. From the Golden Pheasant came the lilt of a violin. Three men on horseback rode down the street and a wagon, drawn by a weary team, moved up it. The tall, slender, black-garbed woman, heavily veiled, moved along the board walk and came to a stop a bare pace from where Steve was standing.

"Why did you come here, Steve?" she asked suddenly. "Why didn't you stay on your ranch?"

The voice was low and not very steady. Steve Benetor caught his breath. He said, "Mary! Mary Clay!" And then he remembered she wasn't Mary Clay any more. She was now Mary Durant.

"Don't stay here, Steve," said the voice behind the veil. "Please don't. For my sake."

Steve took a step toward her, but the woman said, "No," sharply. And then she turned and hurried away. A man who was passing, stopped and looked at Steve curiously and then looked after the woman. Steve shrugged his shoulders.

"No luck, Mister?" said the man.

Steve Benetor didn't give any answer. The man laughed and walked on.

A chilly wind had come up and was sweeping the length of the gulch. Steve buttoned his coat and turned up the collar. He decided he wouldn't learn very much standing here, and after another moment's hesitation he started down the street, taking his time, not hurrying. He hadn't gone very far before he heard Lou Jennings calling his name and from the sound of Jennings' voice he knew that something out of the ordinary had happened. He stopped and waited.

"They need you up the street, Marshal," Jennings said as he drew near. "There's been a fellow stabbed to death."

"Where?" Steve asked.

"In the Golden Pheasant."

A small crowd of men had already gathered around them. Steve nodded his head. He thought, "This is it. This is the beginning," and a vague apprehension shot through him, not because of any fear, but because he was being shoved into things too fast, before he had been able to sense the pulse of the town.

"Who was it?" he asked.

"Search me, Marshal," Jennings answered. "I just happened to come by there, heard a ruckus, heard what had happened and remembered I had seen you heading down the street."

Steve Benetor nodded again. He started toward the Golden Pheasant.

Under the wide canvas roof there was room for a long bar and maybe thirty tables and small, flimsily partitioned rooms toward the back. The hard dirt floor was sawdust covered. There were maybe fifty lamps in the place, strung on wires above the tables and just high enough so that a tall man wouldn't bump them with his head.

The place was crowded by the time Steve got there. It may have been crowded before, but word of what had happened had drawn in the curious from the street. Steve elbowed his way through the canvas framed doors and toward the back of the room where the crowd seemed thickest. A huge, heavy shouldered man with red tinged hair and an ugly face was waving at the crowd and telling them to get back to their games.

"It's all over," he was shouting. "Nothing to get worried about. I'll take care of everything."

STEVE BENETOR had shoved his way to the fringe of the crowd. Ahead of him, now, were two overturned tables and a broken chair. A man lay flat on his back between the tables. He wasn't moving. A knife had been driven downwards into his chest just below the throat. Scattered in the sawdust, around him, was a litter of cards and a little money.

Durant was standing near the red headed man. He caught sight of Steve

Benetor and his eyes narrowed. He touched the red headed man on the arm and said something under his breath. The red headed man looked at Steve, a scowl working into his face. He had a flat nose, puffy cheeks and thick lips. He needed a shave.

"Who is the man, Red?" someone asked.

Red shook his head, still watching Steve, and by now a few other had noticed the marshal's badge which Steve was wearing. They looked curious or perhaps a little dubious.

Steve moved forward, clear of the crowd. "What happened, Durant?" he asked flatly.

"Nothing that we can't handle," Durant answered. "I don't believe we sent for you, Marshal."

Someone in the crowd laughed and a grin came into Red's face. He moved up and took Steve by the arm and said, "Outside, Mister. We're a little particular here in this joint."

Steve lifted one foot and brought it down sharply on Red's instep. A bellow of pain broke from the man's lips. He jerked away and then swung heavily at Steve's head. Steve ducked under the blow and moved in. He sank both fists, one after another, in Red's fat-walled belly, straightened up then and caught Red under the chin. A glassy look came into Red's eyes. His knees folded under him and he went down. He tried to get up but couldn't make it.

All this had taken less than a minute. There had been no time for the usual cheers which accompany a fight. Those close enough to have seen it all seemed stunned at what had happened. There was an unnatural quiet in the Golden Pheasant.

Steve looked straight at Durant. "Don't try that again, Durant," he said quietly. "I'll use my guns on the next man. Now tell me what happened."

"Still riding high, aren't you," said Durant.

"High enough."

"It's a long fall, Benetor."

Steve Benetor shrugged. "What happened?"

"I don't know. There was a card game going on at a table back here. Four men, I think, and the dealer. I don't know what started the fight. I was across the room. It was over by the time I got here."

"Where's the dealer."

A faint smile showed on Durant's lips. "I wouldn't know."

Steve's eyes circled the room. "Any of you men close enough to see what happened? Any of you know who did this?"

No one in the room volunteered any information, though some of them must have known the answers. Steve Benetor scowled, yet he knew that this lack of response wasn't unusual. Under such circumstances the average man was always reluctant about giving information.

He stooped over the dead man, spread out his handkerchief and went through the man's pockets, piling on his handkerchief the things he found. From papers in the man's pockets he guessed his name was Jim Cartwright. To these things he added the knife which the murderer had used. It was a gristly job, pulling the knife from the man's throat, but Steve did it. Then wrapping up the man's belongings he got to his feet.

"Who's the undertaker here?" he demanded.

"Bert Straub," answered several voices.

"I want someone, then, to help me carry this body to Straub's."

Several men volunteered. Steve chose one. He glanced at Red who was sitting up, holding his head, and then he looked over at Durant.

"Find that dealer for me," he ordered bluntly. "Find him and send him to me by tomorrow noon or close this place down!"

The man who helped Steve carry Jim Cartwright's body to the undertaker's was named Rex Watkins. He was a man of about forty. He was short, stocky, bald and had a bushy, black mustache.

"Man, you sure handled Red Knowles," he said when their job was done. "I never saw Red handled before, and if I hadn't seen it this time I wouldn't have believed it."

Steve managed a grin. "I was lucky. I had him groggy before he knew what happened. Next time it might be different."

"I'm betting it wouldn't."

"Who is this Red Knowles, anyhow?"

"Just the bouncer at Durant's."

"You're a miner, Watkins?"

The man nodded. "That is," he qualified, "I've got a claim. There's ore in the hole I've put down but it's not high grade stuff. Not the kind of stuff Holt is interested in."

"Sam Holt's only interested in high grade stuff, huh."

"Yeah, or claims on Moose hill, to the west. He's bought up most of Moose hill, I reckon. Some of it dirt cheap, too."

THEY turned into one of the saloons to have a drink. Rex Watkins was in a talkative frame of mind.

"I've been here since this town was a pup," he said slowly. "Or almost that long, anyhow. I was here before there were any stores. Cortez has been a rough town, right from the beginning. We had a miners' committee in the early days and drew up laws about claims and when claim jumping was and wasn't claim jumping. There was some talk of a vigilante crowd, too, but nothing ever came of it. I guess we were all too busy making money and losing it. Then when things got bad again we picked a mayor and told him to hire a town marshal. That's where you come in."

"How did you pick the mayor?"

"A town meeting was called. Someone said we wanted Ed Daniels. He's all right, I guess. He knows about being mayor. He was mayor of some town back east."

"Did you see the fight in the Golden Pheasant, tonight, Watkins?" Steve asked.

Rex Watkins scowled. He took off his hat, rubbed a hand across his bald head and then put his hat back on. "I wasn't very close," he said slowly. "I heard loud voices and looked around. Two men were slamming their fists at each other. One of 'em got knocked down. He got up, sort of unsteady-like, then quick as a flash, pulled his knife. Cartwright didn't have a chance. He got out through the back way. He didn't wait around any after he had used his knife."

"Did you know him?"

"Never saw him before. He was about as tall as you. Black hair. Thin face. Pale. Maybe just a card shark."

"Who's Cartwright?"

"I didn't know him, either, but I've heard of a Cartwright who owned a part of Bob Grady's claim on Moose hill. I reckon Bob Grady's got the richest chunk of the hill that there is. He hasn't sold out to Holt, either."

They talked a while longer, then Steve left and moved on up the street. On his return and near the Golden Pheasant he ran into Rud Willowby and Lou Jennings.

"A terrible thing, this murder of Jim Cartwright," Willowby declared. "He was a fine man. If Durant can't stop that kind of a thing from happening in his places, you'll have to close him up."

Steve Benetor nodded. "How many places does Durant own?"

"Most of maybe a dozen."

"Can you get me a list of them?"

"Sure thing."

"And who owns the other places?"

"Different people."

"Find out who for me, will you? Ollie Spence ought to know."

"I'll talk to him."

Far up the street there came the sudden blast of shots. Steve jerked away and hurried to the livery stable. He didn't like the notion of trying to cover this town on horseback, but there seemed no other way.

ELLEN GRADY left the camp just after noon and took the trail down the hill to Cortez. She hadn't told her brother where she was going. Bob, she knew, wouldn't approve, or would have thought the trip hopeless, and perhaps it was. They could expect no help from the new marshal, he had predicted. Sam Holt had picked him.

Ellen was just past twenty. She was tall and slender and in blue jeans, boots and a man's shirt and coat, she looked more like a boy than a girl. If her folks had been living they would have thought it terrible that Bob had brought her to a place like this, but it hadn't been terrible. Ellen had enjoyed every minute of it up until late the night before when she and Bob had learned of Jim Cartwright's death. She had carried her own share of the work. She had had a part in this great mining boom and had known a deep satisfaction in what she had been able to do.

There weren't very many men on the street at this noon hour but the few who

saw her, waved or spoke and several stopped her to mention Jim Cartwright and offer whatever help they might be able to give. Ollie Spence saw her through the window of the bank and motioned her to come in but Ellen shook her head. She didn't like Ollie Spence. She didn't like his eyes, the way they seemed to look right through her. She didn't trust him. She had been glad when Bob finally decided not to take advantage of the banker's offer of financial support in the development of their claim.

The marshal, she had heard, had his office in the building next to Willowby's store and as she passed the store she thought of several things she wanted and for a moment debated doing her shopping first. She decided against that, however. It was more important to see the marshal.

The door of the marshal's quarters was partly open and from inside she could hear a man't voice, humming. She knocked on the door. The humming stopped and footsteps crossed the room and Ellen was suddenly apprehensive. After all, she thought swiftly, there was probably no point in this visit. Bob must have known what he was talking about. He had said that most marshals in towns like this were in reality little more than hired killers, selling the justice of their guns to the crowd which made the highest bid.

The door opened and a man looked out at her. He held a razor in one hand and the right side of his face was covered with lather. There was a towel tucked in the open throat of his shirt. The man hardly looked at her. He said, "Hi, sonny. come on in." And leaving the door wide open, turned back into the room.

Ellen Grady stepped across the threshold. The marshal's back was to her. He was stooping a little as he peered into the mirror on the wall. Ellen could hear the scraping sound of his razor.

"Be with you in a minute, sonny," the marshal promised. "Of all jobs in the world a man's got to do, shaving is the worst. I don't know why I don't raise a beard. Take my advice, sonny, and don't start shaving until you have to."

Ellen smiled. "I won't."

The marshal's body jerked. He lowered his razor and looked around at her, his eyes wide with amazement. They were gray eyes, Ellen noticed, and there was a clear look in them. Most of the other side of the marshal's face had now been wiped clean of lather and Ellen rather liked his appearance.

"WELL, I'll be damned," Ellen heard his say. And then, "Excuse me, Miss. I didn't—that is—"

Ellen shook her head. "That's all right, marshal. My brother says much worse things than damn. And I know I look like a boy in these clothes, but they're more practical than dresses up on the hill. Go ahead and finish your shaving."

Steve Benetor blinked his eyes. He turned back to the mirror and scraped off the rest of his whiskers, hurrying a little and knicking his chin. He took another glance at the girl. Her back was to him now and she was staring out of the window and Steve wondered why he had ever thought she was a boy.

Finished with his shaving, Steve toweled his face, dabbing several times at the cut on his chin. He put the razor away, emptied the basin of water out of the back door, put up his towel and turned back into the room. "I still don't like shaving," he grinned.

Ellen swung around to face him. There was no answering smile on her lips, now. She said, "I'm Ellen Grady. My brother has a claim on Moose hill. Jim Cartwright was his partner. I've come here to find out what you're going to do about Jim's murder."

The girl's voice was sharp, insistent. It betrayed some of the strain she was feeling. Steve frowned. He wished he had an adequate answer, but he knew he didn't.

"I don't know what I'm going to do," he said slowly. "I wasn't in the saloon when Cartwright was killed. The men who were there don't seem to be able to tell me much."

"Or are afraid to talk."

"Maybe."

"I'm not afraid."

"You weren't there."

"But I know what goes on in this town."

"What does go on, Miss Grady?"

The girl stared at him thoughtfully. "I wonder if you want to know?"

"I think I do," Steve answered.

"You know Sam Holt, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Maybe you've heard that he's been trying to buy up all the claims on Moose hill. He's been fairly successful, too. Even when men didn't want to sell. There was a man named Anderson who had a claim not far from ours. He refused to deal with Sam Holt. One of Holt's bullies got him into an argument and shot him to death. Holt bought the claim from a woman who said she was Anderson's wife. I don't think she was. There was another man named Hodkins who wouldn't sell. He disappeared a week ago and Sam Holt's men moved in and took over his claim. Holt said he had bought it. I don't believe that. There are other stories I could tell you, too."

"Maybe you think Sam Holt had something to do with Jim Cartwright's death."

"I could swear it. We have refused to sell, too. There were three of us. Jim's gone. That just leaves my brother and me. My brother will be next or even both of us. Maybe you can't believe Sam Holt would kill a woman, but you don't know him as I do."

"Talking about me?" asked a voice from the doorway.

Ellen jerked to face the door. Her hands were clenched at her sides. A flush of color showed in her face as she recognized Sam Holt.

"Come on in, Holt," Steve said easily.

Sam Holt nodded and came into the room. He smiled at Ellen showing a good set of teeth. He didn't seem at all upset by what he had probably overheard.

"I reckon I'm pretty bad, Benetor," he agreed, "but I'm not quite the character that Miss Grady suggests. I liked Jim Cartwright and am truly sorry about his death. At the same time, I want to buy the claim which he and the Gradys own and I intend to buy it but I don't mean to be held up."

"Who killed Jim Cartwright?" Steve Benetor asked bluntly.

"Why, I'm sure I don't know, but I can assure you it wasn't one of my men. To be honest, I don't have any."

"That's a lie," Ellen said flatly.

Sam Holt shrugged his broad shoulders. "What does a man do when a woman calls him a liar? I'm sorry you feel as you do, Miss Grady."

Ellen Grady looked over at Steve. High lights of color were still in her face. "What are you going to do?" she asked as she had asked once before. "Does that badge you're wearing really mean anything?"

"It does to me," Steve answered.

The girl turned away without another word. She left the room and angled across the street, walking with her head held high.

STEVE BENETOR and Sam Holt watched her from the window. "Poor kid," Holt muttered. "What happened to Jim Cartwright has upset her a lot. They were going to get married."

Steve said, "Were they?" And then, "Holt, who was it who killed Jim Cartwright?"

The miner shrugged. "I told you I didn't know. Probably some hot-headed fellow he was playing cards with."

"Not one of your men, huh?"

Holt swung to face Steve Benetor, a scowl showing on his face. "Just what do you mean by that?" he demanded.

"Probably just what you think," Steve replied. "I mean this, Holt. I'm going to find out who the man was and I'm hoping, for your sake, that he has no tie in with you. That wouldn't stop me, Holt. Not for a minute."

The scowl stayed on Sam Holt's face. His eyes narrowed. "It's not an easy job you've got here, Benetor. You could do with a few friends."

"Yeah. If they were honest friends."

Holt stared at the marshal. "What I dropped in to tell was that over at the Golden Pheasant the owner, Carl Durant, is offering ten to one that you won't last a week. I was going to suggest that we make up a pot and take some of Durant's money. Maybe that's not such a good idea."

"What odds is he offering on your chances of buying out the Gradys?"

Sam Holt nodded. "A pretty face and you lose your head, Benetor. I didn't think you were like that. Hell, I thought we had hired us a marshal."

"Maybe you have."

A sudden anger flamed in Sam Holt's face. He started to make some answer but held it back and turning abruptly away, he headed for the door. . . .

Steve Benetor climbed one of the trails

up Moose hill that afternoon and visited several of the mines. He talked casually to the men he met, asking few questions, listening mostly to whatever they had to say. The Grady mine was pointed out to him but he didn't go there.

Back in town he bought a few things he needed and carried them to his office and for a while after that he lay in his bunk, half dozing, and turning over in his mind the things he had learned. He knew more about Cortez, he decided, than when he had come here. He was beginning to get the feel of the place and it wasn't good. He didn't know quite how to rate what Ellen Grady had told him but he had a notion there might be some truth in what she had said. Even before coming here he had considered that the men who hired him probably had more in their minds than the desire to promote law and order.

He thought of those four men now. Rud Willowby, who ran the biggest store, Sam Holt, who was trying to buy up mining claims, Ollie Spence, whose bank could probably finance any necessary deal. And Lou Jennings. He couldn't place Lou Jennings in the picture. Jennings was supposed to be a merchant, but he had seen no store with Jennings' name. Carl Durant should have been the fourth man. If Durant had been, the four would have been the big four of Cortez.

Steve got up and had a cigarette. He dipped some water from the water barrel in the corner, washed his face, and then went out and crossed the street to the Golden Pheasant. It was late afternoon, now, and the place was already beginning to fill up. Steve looked around for Carl Durant, but didn't see him. He asked one of the two bartenders where Durant was.

The bartender noticed his badge and scowled. "How the hell should I know?"

"Where does he live?" Steve asked.

"I don't know that, either."

"Tell him to come over and see me soon as he comes in," Steve ordered.

The bartender shrugged. "I'll tell him, but he won't come."

Steve glanced around the room. Red Knowles, he saw, had just come in. The big man was staring at him boldly, his hands on his hips. He looked as though he was trying to make up his mind whether or not to start something.

Steve moved that way. He said, "Hello, Red. Where's Durant?"

Red moistened his lips. "He'll be here pretty soon."

"Tell him I want to see him, will you?"

Red sucked in a long, slow breath. He nodded his head. "I'll tell him."

STEVE grinned and moved on to the door. He saw Ollie Spence just going into Willowby's store. Sam Holt was behind him. Willowby, of course, would be inside. And where was Jennings? Maybe Jennings was there, too. It looked as though the four were planning a conference.

"Hey, Mister," said a boy of about nine, "are you the town marshal. Is that what that star means?"

Steve looked down at the boy and nodded. "That's right, sonny."

"Then I'm supposed to give you this."

The boy was holding up a folded piece of paper.

Steve took it, unfolded the paper, and read the brief message. The writing was in an angular script. It read:

"I must see you tonight. Can you come at eight. North end of town. I will be watching for you. It is terribly important that I see you."

There was no signature. Steve read the message twice then looked around for the boy who had brought it but the boy had disappeared. He tore the paper into bits and let the pieces fall to the street. His throat felt a little choked and he was aware of a stirring excitement deep in his body. The note was from Mary Durant, he was sure, and though every bit of judgment he had told him that he shouldn't see her, he knew that he would, no matter how unwise or how great the risk. . . .

At eight o'clock that evening the four men who had been meeting in Willowby's back room came to the end of their deliberations and Sam Holt stood up and faced the others.

"Then it's agreed," he said slowly. "We crack down on him. And if he bucks—we call on Lou Jennings." The others nodded. . . .

At eight o'clock that evening Ellen

Grady had finished straightening things up around the camp. She looked over at her brother and frowned. She said, "Bob, maybe we're wrong about him. Why don't you go see him, talk to him, find out if he won't help us."

Bob Grady's scowl deepened. He shook his head and went on staring into the fire. . . .

At eight o'clock that evening Carl Durant looked around at the crowd in the Golden Pheasant and noticed, particularly just how his men were placed. After that he turned back to watch the door. He hadn't sent word to the marshal about the dealer in the game the other night when Cartwright had been killed. He was open in spite of Steve Benetor's threat. He hadn't gone to see Steve Benetor this evening.

Staring around the room again he told himself that there wasn't anything to be worried about. But just the same he kept an eye on the front door.

At eight o'clock that night a man turned into a saloon which went by the name of the Last Chance. He was a short man, narrow shouldered, stooped. He had a good wad of money in his pocket. He was supposed to have left town but he wanted another drink, first. In fact, he wanted several drinks. In fact, he didn't want to leave Cortez at all. He had his drink and got to talking to the man next to him. He didn't notice Rex Watkins who stood on his other side and who, after a while, hurried out.

And at eight o'clock that night Steve Benetor moved up the one main street in the town and watched for some signal from Mary Durant and wondered why she wanted to see him and what seeing her would do to him.

Steve had tried to be honest with himself. He wanted this meeting with Mary and at the same time he was afraid of it. He wanted it because of all that Mary had meant to him and because of the grim hold of the past. He was afraid for the same reason.

The night was warmer than the night before. There were stars in the sky and the sliver of a moon and there was no chilly breeze. After a time Steve passed the last saloon. The street ran on for almost a quarter of a mile. Steve followed it, wondering if he had missed Mary's signal. And then, suddenly, he saw her, just ahead, standing in the path and waiting for him. She was dressed in black as she had been dressed the night before and he couldn't see her face, couldn't be sure it was Mary, yet in his heart he knew her.

HE said, "Mary," and stopped, not knowing what else to say, unable to add anything to the single mention of her name.

"We can talk here on the porch, Steve," Mary said, turning away from the path and moving toward the dark shadow of a house, some distance back. "There's no one here but us and few people walk by here at night."

Steve followed the woman to the porch. It wasn't much of a porch, but for Cortez it was probably of the best. There was a bench built along the front of the house. Mary sat down and indicated a place beside her.

"It's been a long time, hasn't it, Steve," she said slowly. "A terribly long time."

Steve nodded. He felt a little uncomfortable, a little unsure of himself.

"What about the ranch, Steve," Mary asked. "Didn't it work out."

Steve managed a smile. Mary's voice, he decided, hadn't changed at all. By closing his eyes he could imagine that they were both back in Wendover City and that the last long months had never happened.

"The ranch," he answered. "Why it worked out fine, Mary. Just as I had planned."

"But you're here, Steve. Why?"

"I needed the money."

"You said once that you would never again take a job like this."

"I had to, Mary."

The woman bit her lips. Steve strained his eyes, trying to make out the details of her face. She would still be beautiful, he knew. Nothing Durant could have done to her would have changed that.

"There was trouble last night—at the Golden Pheasant," Mary Durant said, her voice hardly more than a whisper. "You told Carl to send you the man who was dealer in one of the games. He didn't. You told him to close down. He won't, Steve. He hates you. He hates you more than one man ever hated another. He'll

kill you, Steve, if you go back there. Oh, maybe he won't, but he'll see that one of his men does. I know what I'm talking about. I know Carl Durant."

Steve Benetor shrugged. He didn't make any answer.

"Did you hear me, Steve. He'll kill you."

"Maybe so," Steve answered. "But I've got to go back."

Mary reached out and caught him by the arm. "Never, Steve. I won't let you."

"But you will, Mary."

The woman leaned closer, so close that Steve became suddenly aware of the smell of her hair and could even sense the warmth of her body. "Steve," he heard her saying, "Steve, take me away from here. Now. Tonight. Just as we are. I'll go with you anywhere. Anywhere, Steve."

She was in Steve's arms, now. Warm and alive and very real. Her lips were pressed against his and he could feel on her cheeks the moisture of her tears. This was what Steve had wanted for so long that he couldn't count the months. This happiness was the sum total of life. He could ask nothing more. Yet even while admitting all this, he pushed her away and got to his feet.

He wasn't thinking very clearly, now, he knew, and he couldn't find the words he wanted to say. There weren't any words to explain how he felt.

He stared at Mary who was still seated on the bench, looking up at him and knew how hopeless it was to ever make her understand.

"Later, Mary," he said slowly. "Later anything you wish, but there's something I've got to do first. A job I've got to finish."

"No, Steve. Please!"

The woman's hands reached out toward him but Steve Benetor turned away. He moved back to the path and headed toward the city, only vaguely aware of the course his steps were taking. He was suddenly where it was lighter and someone had called his name and was walking along beside him, talking.

". . . and he's there now, I think," the man finished.

Steve looked over at the man and recognized Rex Watkins, whom he had met the night before and who had told him a good deal about Cortez.

"Who's where?" he demanded.

"The man who was the dealer in that card game last night when Jim Cartwright was killed."

Steve came to an abrupt stop. "And where is he?"

"Back at the Last Chance. I recognized him when he came in. He's been paid off. He's supposed to get out of town."

THE Last Chance saloon was behind them. Steve loosened the gun in his holster and turned back. He came to the saloon and pushed open the door.

It wasn't a large place. There was a bar and several tables where card games were in progress. Steve's eyes raked the bar and came to rest on the man standing there who looked least like a miner, a short man, thin, and with the gambler's pallor in his face. He took a step that way.

The man at the bar turned and saw him and probably saw the badge he was wearing. The man's body stiffened. With no more warning than that his hand jerked under his coat and whipped out a gun. The fellow next to him let out a yell and ducked. Steve heard the roar of a shot echoing the sound of his own gun. He saw the man's body jerk, twist half around and then fold over and slump to the floor. The shot at him had been wide and high.

Steve didn't know the men here or what to expect from them. He kept his gun out and looked around the room. Most of the men who had been sitting at the tables had come to their feet. Those at the bar had moved away from the gambler's body. No one looked ready to start anything.

The gambler had been hit in the shoulder. He started rolling from side to side, moaning.

Steve Benetor put his gun away. "Any of you who want to can listen in on this," he announced. "Suppose we see what he has to say."

Moving forward, Steve knelt at the gambler's side. He tried a couple of questions but the man on the floor paid no attention to him. Steve scowled. He said, "Listen, friend. Maybe you'll live. That is, if we get a doctor here in time. What's worrying you, anyhow? Do you want to carry the whole weight of this thing alone?

All I want to know right now is the name of the man who knifed Jim Cartwright."

"Where — where's the doctor?" gasped the wounded man.

"We'll send for him," Steve promised. "After you talk. Who was the man?"

"His name was—Cannon. Harry Cannon."

Steve nodded. "If you're lying, you're finished, friend."

"I'm not—lying. It was Harry Cannon."

Steve Benetor looked up at the circle of men who had crowded around them. "Last night," he said slowly, "a man named Jim Cartwright was stabbed to death in a fight in the Golden Pheasant. There must have been fifty men who saw that fight, but until now I haven't been able to find anyone who could name the other man in the fight. This fellow here was the dealer, the house man in the game. Do any of you know Harry Cannon?"

Several of the men shook their heads. No one made any other answer.

Steve got to his feet, the scowl coming back to his face. "Harry Cannon," he said again. "Who is he?"

"I saw that fight, marshal," answered one of the men in the room. "I didn't know either of the fellows. Maybe a lot of folks didn't."

"What kind of a fight was it?"

"Short and hard. Cannon, if that's the other fellow's name, started it. He hit at Cartwright while they were sitting down. Cartwright got to his feet, quick. The table went over. Cannon jumped him, pulling a knife. He got out the back way. I tell you it was quick."

"Who else saw the fight?"

"A fellow named Lou Jennings who works for Willowby. He was standing right there, watching the game, when the fight started. He knows most everyone in town, I guess."

Steve's eyes narrowed. "Lou Jennings," he said under his breath. "Lou Jennings." And then, "Someone go get a doctor. And look after this fellow, will you."

Someone was already working over the wounded man, holding a folded cloth over the hole in his shoulder. Steve saw a man start out in search of a doctor. He headed for the door, stepped outside and started down the street.

Rex Watkins touched him on the shoulder. "Look here, marshal," he said, frowning. "Don't try to make too much from this but I saw Lou Jennings talking to a man this afternoon who looked a lot like the fellow who jumped Cartwright. He called the fellow Harry, too."

"And where would I find Lou Jennings, now?"

"Maybe at the Golden Pheasant or at the Gulch saloon or maybe any place."

Steve nodded. He said, "Thanks, Rex," and started walking faster.

CARL DURANT stood at the bar in the Golden Pheasant, completely lost in thought. Men whom he trusted were spaced around the room. He was expecting trouble and he was ready for it, but he was thinking clearly again and he knew that he wasn't playing this very wisely. He wasn't playing this like Carl Durant usually played a game.

When Jim Cartwright had been killed the night before, he had at first looked on the killing as just the result of a quarrel over cards. Then he had remembered Lou Jennings coming into the saloon just before the fight and he had discovered who had been killed and the picture had begun to grow clear. At about that time, Steve Benetor had shown up and with the appearance of Benetor, he had stopped using his head and had let his old hatred for Benetor take over. He hadn't played wise.

Jim Cartwright's murder had been deliberately planned, he was sure. Cannon, the fellow who had killed him, was one of Sam Holt's crowd. And Cartwright had been killed in his place with the intent of sending Benetor against him. He had had a chance, a few weeks before, of joining in with Sam Holt, Willowby and Spence, in a scheme to control this town. He had turned them down. He had never liked to play second fiddle to other men and Willowby was slated for the top spot in Cortez. Willowby who already held a controlling interest in a dozen of the saloons and most of the stores. A marshal was to be hired to back their play and make it look legal. He had had his chance to join in and had refused and now they were out to get him.

It was as simple as that. Holt wanted Jim Cartwright out of his way, so Jim Cartwright had been killed. Willowby

wanted to take over control of the saloons and gambling, so Cartwright had been killed in the Golden Pheasant. And the marshal these men had hired had been sent in to smash at him.

A tall, stoop-shouldered fellow came into the saloon and pausing just inside the door, swept the room with a quick, searching glance. Durant's eyes narrowed. The man was Harry Cannon. He had been in Cortez only a few days, but Durant had identified him as one of Holt's crowd shortly after he had arrived. It was part of Durant's business to know such men.

Carl Durant stared at Cannon for a moment and then reached his decision. He spoke to one of his own men and afterwards went back to his office, a small room partitioned off from the rest of the saloon. A few minutes later two of his men showed up with Cannon between them. Cannon looked nervous. He didn't quite understand this summons.

"Sit down, Cannon," Durant invited.

Harry Cannon frowned and as he sat down one of the two men slammed him suddenly over the head with his gun. A half startled cry, choked off by unconsciousness, broke from his lips.

"Tie him up, Pete," Durant said flatly. "and then go up on the hill. Get Bob Grady and bring him down here. Bring him in the back way. Tell him we've got the man who killed Cartwright."

Pete nodded. He tied Cannon up, gagged him and hurried out. The other man stood around, frowning, a little puzzled by all of this.

"Watch him," Durant said, and went back into the saloon.

A few minutes later Red Knowles came in and joined Durant and told him what had happened up the street at the Last Chance saloon. "He got Cannon's name," Knowles reported. "I reckon he'll be here any minute, now."

Carl Durant reached for a cigar. He lit it and puffed on it for a moment, thoughtfully, now. Then he nodded once more. He was playing this cleverly, now. Playing it the way Carl Durant should.

"Pass the word around that I've gone home, Red," he ordered. "Tell the boys to make no trouble if Benetor shows up. If he wants to close the place down, close down."

Red's eyes widened. He said, "Huh! You mean that, Carl? Just close down?"

"Just that," Carl Durant answered.

He left by the front door, went around to the back and entered his office. "Carry Cannon outside," he ordered the man who was guarding him. "We'll wait in the open."

STEVE BENETOR didn't find Harry Cannon or Lou Jennings in the Gulch saloon, which was up the street from Durant's place. He didn't find either of the two men in the Golden Pheasant. He had half expected to run into trouble in the Golden Pheasant, but there had been no trouble at all. He had been watched every minute he had been in the saloon, but no one had objected to his wandering around. Durant wasn't in sight. He had talked to Red Knowles and Red had answered his questions a little antagonistically, but without hesitation.

Now, standing in front of the saloon, Steve tried to puzzle this out. It wasn't like Carl Durant to go into hiding or to back down. It wasn't like Durant to dodge meeting him.

"Where to now," Rex Watkins asked.

Watkins was still with him. Steve looked around at the man and shrugged. He stared over at Willowby's store and suddenly, from the corner of his eye, caught the glow of a cigar or cigaret from the doorway of his office. A chill ran up and down his back and his hand went instinctively to his gun and then dropped away. If someone was waiting there for a chance shot at him, the opportunity had long been good.

Steve moved across the street and toward his office, still followed by Watkins. At the corner, he stopped.

"Who's there?" he asked bluntly.

Carl Durant stepped from the open doorway. "It's me, Benetor," he said slowly. "Bob Grady and his sister are here, too. And a man named Cannon. Cannon's in pretty poor shape."

Steve Benetor moved closer to the man, watching him narrowly. He said, "Durant, this isn't like you. When did you ever line up with the right side?"

"For a while in Wendover City."

"No, you used me in Wendover City."

"Maybe I'd like to use you again."

Steve made no answer. The scowl on his face deepened.

Steve made no answer. The scowl on his face deepened.

"Benetor, suppose I tell you something," Durant suggested. "San Holt is supposed to be buying up mining claims for an eastern syndicate. He isn't. The man who came out here for that purpose died a sudden and violent death just after he arrived. Holt is buying up the claims himself, hoping to get control of all the best claims before this eastern syndicate can get another man in. Ollie Spence is putting up the money. They mean to control this whole area. Willowby is with them. Willowby controls more of the saloons and gambling joints along this street than I do. Those three mean to run the town. They brought you in to back their play. The town had grown to the point where they had to have a marshal so they picked their own man."

"Why not one of their crowd?"

"They wanted a man with a reputation for being square. They had to make it look good."

"Where does Jennings fit in?"

"He doesn't, Benetor. He's just a gunhawk."

Steve Benetor nodded. He had a feeling that what Durant had said was pretty straight. His story about Holt fitted in with his own suspicions and what Ellen Grady had told him. And a man like Willowby might easily hold control of a good many saloons.

"Where do you figure in this Durant?" he inquired.

"I was asked to join them. I didn't You are supposed to put me out of business. You're not going to."

"So I turn on them. Is that it. I smash them so that you can take over."

Carl Durant chuckled. "Well, I would appreciate it."

Steve took a step forward, then stopped. "Durant," he grated. "Durant, you had better get away from here before I tear you apart. I played your game once. I'll never play it again."

Again the gambler chuckled. "You can't help yourself, Steve. You have all the weaknesses of an honest man. If you need any help, let me know."

Turning away, then, Durant headed back across the street.

STEVE BENETOR watched the man until he had disappeared through the doors of the Golden Pheasant and afterward Steve moved on to his own door and stared into the darkened room. Bob Grady came forward and mentioned his name. Grady was short and stocky and had a deep voice.

"I heard that talk, Benetor," he mentioned. "What are you going to do?"

"Where's Cannon?" Steve asked.

"Inside, here. He's tied up, gagged. I'd like to cut his heart out, but I want him to talk first."

Ellen Grady was standing at her brother's side. Steve could make out the vague blur of her face. He came into the office and heard Watkins follow him. He found the lamp and lit it and then pulled the curtains and closed the door and afterward stared at the bound figure of Harry Cannon. The man was conscious. He looked up at Steve and then looked away and started tugging at his bonds.

"You're a dead man, Cannon," Steve said bluntly. "By now, half of the men in this town know your name and what you did. If I turn you free you'll never get out of Cortez alive. Maybe that would be the simplest way after all."

Cannon quit struggling.

"Or maybe you'd like to talk first."

Stooping over, Steve loosened the gag and pulled it away. Cannon gulped. He started swearing. Steve shook his head and put the gag back.

"I could make him talk," Grady muttered.

Steve shook his head. He glanced at Grady and then looked over at the man's sister. Ellen Grady was watching him, a puzzled expression in her eyes, a slight frown on her face.

"It looks like Durant's got you coming and going," Watkins drawled.

Steve Benetor's lips tightened. He walked over to the bunk and sat down, an old bitterness twisting his stomach into knots. It had been this way in Wendover City. Durant had used him to smash the crowd in control and then had stepped into the foreground, himself. It was like that again, here. And he hated it.

"Why did you take this job?" Ellen asked suddenly. "Why did you come here?"

Steve looked up at the girl but didn't answer.

"Are you working for them?" Ellen asked. "Are you working for Holt and Mr. Spence and Willowby? What are you going to do?"

Steve still didn't make any answer. He got to his feet, went out the back way and crossed over to the dugout which Willowby had said he could use as a jail. He unlocked the door, stepped inside and looked around and then went back to his office. "I'm locking Cannon up," he announced. "Maybe he'll feel more like talking tomorrow. Grady, you had better take your sister back up to your camp on the hill. This is no place for a woman tonight."

"Ellen can take care of herself," Grady answered. "Where's this lock-up."

Steve shrugged. He stooped over and lifted Cannon to his shoulder and went outside again. Bob Grady followed him and watched him lock Cannon in the dugout.

"This place is Willowby's," Grady pointed out. "Willowby's probably got another key."

"But Willowby doesn't know what's happened."

"He'll find out."

Steve Benetor straightened. "Maybe I'll see him first. You'd better clear out of town, Grady. And take Ellen with you."

Bob Grady frowned. He looked at the dug-out uncertainly. Steve left him standing there and went back into his office. Watkins had gone. Ellen was alone.

"You knew Durant before, didn't you," Ellen said slowly.

Steve nodded. He stared at this girl and thought suddenly of Mary Durant and what she had wanted him to do and he couldn't understand why he had turned away. This was too completely the old pattern of Wendover City. There had been a night there when Mary had begged him to take her away. But he had turned back to finish a job he had started. A job for Carl Durant, though at the time he hadn't known it. And a job which had turned Mary against him.

Steve moved abruptly to the door.

"Where are you going?" Ellen asked.

There was a tight, humorless smile on Steve Benetor's lips. "Back to Wendover City," he answered. "Back two years."

CARL DURANT felt pretty good about things. His eyes took in the crowded tables and he listened to the pleasant sound of money as it passed back and forth, a good part of it to always end up in the pockets of his house men and eventually in his. He was using his head, now, he decided. He would let Steve Benetor take care of Willowby and Holt and Spence and then he could move in, just as he had once before. If Benetor failed he was no worse off. He was making a good gamble.

The door to the saloon opened and Sam Holt and Lou Jennings came in. Durant usually scowled when he saw these two men but he didn't scowl this time.

Holt and Jennings joined him at the bar and said the usual polite things. Durant bought them a drink. He noticed the way Jennings' eyes kept raking the room and he thought he knew why.

"Looking for someone, Jennings?" he asked casually.

Lou Jennings shrugged his shoulders. "No one in particular."

"I thought maybe you might be interested in Harry Cannon.

Sam Holt stiffened and shot him a quick look. Jennings grunted.

"If you are interested in Cannon," Durant went on, "why don't you ask the marshal about him."

Holt sucked in a quick, noisy breath. He glanced over at Jennings and Jennings nodded.

"What are you trying to tell me, Durant?" Holt asked.

"Just that the marshal arrested Harry Cannon a while ago. Of course Cannon wasn't in a very good condition and maybe he hasn't talked much—yet."

Sam Holt's face tightened. His hand dropped to his gun.

"Damn you, Durant," he grated. "If you've crossed us up—"

"What do you call what you did last night, Holt? After this, kill your men somewhere else."

"Take it easy, Sam," Jennings said under his breath. "We can handle Durant later."

Sam Holt looked around the room. Several men had their eyes on him, Durant's men. He shrugged his shoulders and let his hand drop from his gun.

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"You'll hear from us later, Durant," he said heavily as he turned toward the door.

Durant laughed. He watched them leave and continued standing at the bar with his head lifted a little in the attitude of a man who was listening for some expected sound from the outside.

Steve Benetor had seen Sam Holt and Lou Jennings enter the Golden Pheasant and he started across the street after them, then changed his mind and angled toward the darkened restaurant, next door. Those moving up and down the street paid little attention to him. Steve waited, wondering what Holt and Jennings wanted of Durant. He fingered his tobacco, but decided against a cigarette.

After only a few minutes the two men came out of the saloon. Holt continued straight across the street toward Willowby's store, but Jennings waited near the saloon. There seemed to be a light in the back part of the store. Sam Holt knocked on the door, loud enough so that Steve could hear it. He knocked again. After a while the door was opened and Holt stepped inside.

Lou Jennings looked up and down the street, then started straight toward where Steve was waiting and as he reached the restaurant Steve stepped out into sight.

"Hello, Jennings," he said quietly. "I've been wanting to see you."

Lou Jennings' body went rigid. His hand dropped down toward his gun but stopped, not touching it. He stared at Steve through close-slitted eyes.

"What's the matter?" Steve asked.

Jennings moistened his lips but made no answer. A puzzled look came into his eyes.

"I wanted to ask you about last night," Steve went on. "You saw Cartwright killed, Jennings, but you didn't tell me that. You were out in front of the saloon and saw me come out of the office and start down the street. You went into the saloon and back to the table where Cartwright and Cannon were playing. You were there when the fight started, then you chased after me. You know, it almost looks as though you might have signaled the start of the fight."

Several men who had been passing along the street had stopped to listen and as they caught the meaning of Steve's words they began to back away, to get out of the possible line of gun-fire.

Steve Benetor seemed unaware of them. He was standing easily with his arms at his sides and with his eyes fastened on Lou Jennings. And now as he finished talking, he nodded, as though he had thought back over his statement and found it good.

"Just what are you getting at, Benetor?" Jennings asked hoarsely.

"Why this, Jennings," Steve answered. "I've got Harry Cannon under arrest. When he talks I've got a notion he'll talk about you, some, and a few others. I'm just wondering if it wouldn't be wise to take you in now."

Lou Jennings leaned forward a little. Perspiration showed on his face. "What you wearing there on your hip, Benetor?" he demanded.

"Why a gun, Jennings."

"Reach for it, then!"

Steve Benetor shrugged. "Why sure, Jennings, if that's the way you want it."

STEVE'S hand slowly moved toward his gun and now Lou Jennings whipped into action, his hand scraping at his holster. The men near them shouted warnings and scrambled for safety. Steve Benetor clawed up his gun. He felt it kick back in his hand in the same instant as Jennings fired. A bullet scraped across the upper part of his leg. Steve's gun exploded again, and thought he heard several more shots from some distance away, but he wasn't sure. All his attention was centered on Lou Jennings.

A strange, sagging look had come into Jennings' face. The man's gun spilled from his hand. He took a step forward and his mouth opened and he tried to speak but the strength suddenly went out of him and he fell to the ground and afterward didn't move.

Steve Benetor unconsciously broke his gun and reloaded it and then put it back in its holster. He said, "Look at him, someone, and see how badly he's hit."

Several of the men crowded around Jennings' body. Steve tried to swallow the thick choked feeling in his throat. He looked over toward Willowby's store but there wasn't any more light or any sign of Willowby or Holt.

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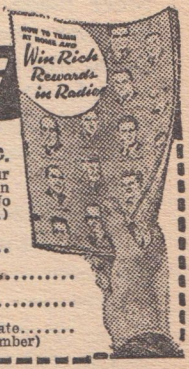

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"He's finished, marshal," some man reported.

"Then carry his body over to the undertaker, Bert Straubs. I want—"

Steve broke off, staring toward his office. The door had opened and Ellen had come out. He heard her calling his name. Steve Benetor remembered now the shots he thought he had heard just as Jennings went down and he started toward his office, running.

Bob Grady was inside, lying on the bunk. He was bleeding from a wound in the head and his shoulder was bloody and he was unconscious. Steve stared at him, then swung around to face the girl.

"What happened?" he asked harshly. "Why did you stay here, anyhow?"

Ellen Grady bit her lips. Her face was a little pale. "He—Bob was sure that Mr. Willowby would let that man—Cannon—escape. He was outside, on guard. He made me wait in here. I heard some shooting. When I got out there—"

The girl's voice broke off. She wiped a hand across her face and shuddered.

"Why didn't you go back up on the hill like I told you to do?" Steve growled. "Get me some cloth for bandages. Yell out the door for some one to go for a doctor."

Ellen turned to the door and shouted the message then started searching for bandage. Steve knelt at Bob Grady's side. He made a quick examination of the man's wounds. They looked worse than they were, he decided. The wound in Bob's head wasn't deep and the shoulder wound was high.

Ellen brought him some bandages and Steve made a pack and fixed it on the shoulder wound to stop the bleeding. Blood was already coagulating in the scalp wound. Steve decided to leave that open until the doctor could get there.

"You should never have stayed," he said again.

Ellen Grady faced him. "And why not. Cannon did get away, didn't he. Just whose game are you playing, Mr. Marshal."

"My own," Steve snapped.

He turned to the door and opened it and started outside. A bullet smashed into the door frame, shoulder high and another smashed through the room above his head. Steve caught a glimpse of the street outside, cleared now of all but a few men. He heard Willowby yell, "There he is. Get him!" And he ducked back inside just as several shots ripped into the building near the door.

"Put out the lamp," he ordered Ellen. "Put out the lamp and get down on the floor and stay there. Try to do what you are told this time."

ELLEN put out the lamp and crouched down on the floor. Shots smashed the window and ripped into the door and the outside walls. Ellen could hear voices shouting from the street. Steve Benetor had ripped the blind from the window and Ellen could see him kneeling at one side of it, his gun in his hand. He fired the gun twice and then dropped flat to the floor. He crawled past her to the bunk and got Bob Grady's body to the floor.

"Are you keeping down, Ellen," he asked, and he didn't sound excited at all.

Ellen nodded in the darkness. She made her way to her brother's side and got his gun. Steve was at the window again. Ellen moved to the back door and crouched there, waiting, and suddenly Steve Benetor was at her side, gripping her arm.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"Someone's got to watch the back way. I've got Bob's gun."

"Can you use it?"

A sudden anger flamed up in Ellen's body. "Of course, I can use it," she heard herself shouting. "Do you want me to show you?"

She pulled free as she said that and jerked to her feet and ran to the front window. Outside and across the street she glimpsed a crouching figure and caught the flash of a gun. She raised her arm and fired and from across the street a man screamed and then started cursing.

Steve caught the girl by the legs and pulled her to the floor just as a spattering of lead came through the shattered window. "What are you trying to do?" he demanded. "Kill yourself?"

"Leave me alone," Ellen cried.

Steve released her and suddenly started laughing. "Why don't we put off our scrap until later," he asked. "Suppose we both see what we can do about those men outside."

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The girl was silent for a moment. "Who are they?" she asked finally.

"Willowby's crowd, and Holt's, and maybe Durant's as well and a sprinkling of fellows who don't like the notion of having a marshal around to watch them."

"But the rest of the men in Cortez? Where are they?"

"Like all good men at this time of night, probably safe at home."

There was a sudden hammering at the rear door. Steve turned that way and drove three shots at the door. A scream answered the shots and the hammering stopped.

"They could burn us out," Ellen whispered.

"But they don't want to risk a fire which might sweep the gulch from one end to the other. Tomorrow, if they finish us off, they'll probably label themselves as vigilantes and say that I had gone bad and they had to do something about it. They'll be clever enough to cover up, all right."

"What'll we do?"

"Why, we won't let them finish us off."

There were more shots from outside. There was suddenly a lot of shooting and Steve could hear men's voices and none of the shots, now, were plowing into this building. Steve took a quick look through the window and then got to his feet. There were a good many men in the street, now. They had come from down the gulch and had driven Willowby and Holt and the others away. Steve could make out the figure of Rex Watkins, standing in the center of the street, shouting orders. The firing had stopped. A group of men were heading for the Golden Pheasant and others were cutting in back of the buildings. Some of the men were rounding Willowby's store and a few were coming toward Steve's office.

"All over, Ellen," Steve announced, opening the door.

He stepped out to greet the men and Watkins hurried up. There was a grin on Rex Watkins' face. "I hope you don't mind my army, Marshal, but I got to talking to a few of the boys and we decided we'd like to sort of help out. This town's needed a going over for a long time."

Steve tried to match Watkins' grin. He said, "Thanks, Rex. I want Willowby and Holt and Ollie Spence."

"What about Durant?" Watkins asked.

"Forget about Durant."

Rex Watkins scowled, then turned to face the men gathering around him. "How about it, boys," he asked. "Do you think we can round up those men."

"You're damned right we can," some one answered. "And a few more, too, who'd be better off dead."

"I want 'em alive, boys," Steve insisted. "And I need a doctor, too. Here at my office. Bob Grady's inside. He's been shot."

Under Rex Watkins' leadership the men stormed on up the gulch. Steve turned back into his office. He struck a match and lit the lamp and then looked at Ellen Grady. Her hair was mussed and there was a smudge of dirt across her face. He couldn't read the expression in her eyes.

"So they didn't finish us off," he heard her saying. "Are you always right, Mr. Marshal?"

"I'm not always right," Steve answered, "and don't call me Mr. Marshal."

Ellen turned to her brother's side. She looked up after a moment and said, "Well, don't just stand there. Maybe those men will forget about a doctor."

CARL DURANT watched the fight from a safe distance up the street. This bold and direct attack on the marshal wasn't like anything he had figured. However, it finally ended he knew that Willowby and Holt would make capital of it. They might even deny their part in it and condemn what happened and head another committee to choose a successor to Steve Benetor.

Durant found a place between two buildings and stood there in the shadows, observing and worried. He was there when Watkins arrived with his men from on down the gulch and when the crowd controlled by Willowby and Holt turned to flee. Willowby had been watching and directing things from a point closer to the marshal's office and now, as the others left, Willowby, too, started lumbering up the street.

Durant watched him and suddenly knew what he had to do. He waited until Willowby was abreast of where he stood and

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then he called the man's name, sharply, insistently.

"Rud! Rud Willowby! Back this way! Quick!"

Shots were still screaming up the street from Watkins' men. Just ahead of Willowby a man went down. There was no time for Willowby to think things over. He needed a haven and he had just heard his name called. He turned in between the two buildings and stopped. He was puffing heavily. He was a fat man, in no condition to run.

"What's back here?" he demanded. "How can we get out of this mess?"

Carl Durant made no answer. He drew his gun and sent four bullets pumping into Willowby's chest. He was standing less than three feet from the man. He couldn't have missed.

Rud Willowby's arms clawed at the air but found nothing to hang onto. He fell to the ground, his head coming to rest almost at Durant's feet. Blood was bubbling from his lips.

Carl Durant put his gun away. He took a quick look into the street and decided it would be a good plan to get away from here, but he didn't step out where anyone could see him. Instead, he walked to the rear of the building and kept behind it and several more as far as the bank. There, he made his way to the street and afterward he continued on up the gulch.

When he got home, Mary Durant was in the back room of the two-room house they occupied. She had a portmanteau on the bed and was packing her clothing and as Durant came in she straightened up and looked at him and then went on with her work. She didn't say a word and her face showed no expression.

Durant scowled. "What do you think you're doing?"

"I'm leaving," Mary answered shortly.

Durant went on staring at her, but Mary didn't look up again. Her eyes were red as though she had been crying. A sudden anger, so strong that he could hardly hold it under control, swept through Durant's body. He knew as he stood there that nothing he could say or do would change Mary's mind. Even from the very first he had never been able to reach her. She neither feared nor respected him. She had been more like a piece of furniture than a woman. He could never read what lay behind her eyes, never would.

"And where do you think you're going?" Durant asked.

"Away."

Carl Durant reached out and grasped the portmanteau. He jerked it from the bed so violently that it hit the far wall of the room.

"You're staying right here," he heard himself shouting. "You're staying here if I have to tie you."

Mary Durant looked at him, then, shook her head. "If you lay a finger on me I'll kill you," she answered clearly. "I'm leaving, Carl. For good."

Her voice showed no excitement and her eyes didn't waver. In just the same tone she might have asked him if he were coming home for supper or might have made some comment about the weather. Durant stepped forward and struck her across the face with his open hand, struck her so hard she fell to the floor.

"Get out," he grated. "Get out and stay out. Get out tonight."

STEVE BENETOR left his office and angled across the street to the Golden Pheasant. The saloon was closed and the men Durant had left there to take charge of the place were in the custody of Watkins' men.

Up the street a way a crowd was gathered around an opening between two of the buildings. Steve stopped there for a moment and caught a glimpse of Rud Willowby's body.

"His whole chest's been caved in by bullets," someone announced. "It looks like he got it right here, probably from one of his men."

Steve walked on up the street. He located a doctor and sent him back to the office to look after Bob Grady and then he continued on. He heard someone say that Harry Cannon had been killed and he caught a glimpse of Ollie Spence in the hands of a grim-faced crowd of men. Spence didn't look very happy. He was talking pretty fast, probably spilling the whole story.

At the far end of the gulch Steve paused in front of the house which belonged to Carl Durant and where he had visited Mary Durant earlier in the evening. Lights

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showed through the windows. Steve wondered if Mary were still up or if Carl Durant was here and he turned toward the house, knowing what he had to do. This wasn't going to end as it had ended in Wendover City.

No sounds reached him as he approached the house, then, when he stood in front of the door, he suddenly heard Carl Durant talking and there was a grating sound in the man's voice which instantly alarmed him. Steve reached out and opened the door. Beyond the front room and in the room to the rear he caught a glimpse of Durant standing over the crumpled figure of his wife.

Steve Benetor stepped into the front room. He reached for his gun, then let his hand fall away.

Carl Durant jerked around and saw him and clawed for his gun and Steve was never to know why he didn't whip up his and shoot it out, then and there. He started racing forward. Durant's gun caught on his coat and was slow coming up. Steve reached the door to the back room. He heard the roar of Durant's gun and felt a stabbing pain in his side, then his hands were on the gambler and he twisted the gun away and threw it across the room and smashed his fist into Durant's face.

Durant fell across the bed. He rolled swiftly to the other side and came up on his feet. He caught up a chair and swung it over his head and smashed it down at Steve as Steve came around the bed. Then, as Steve reeled backward, Durant hurled a pitcher at him.

The pitcher crashed into the wall above Steve's head. He stumbled to his knees as Durant swung the portmanteau at him. He got up again and drove Durant back against the wall, hammering at him with both fists.

Mary was up now and was cowering back in the corner of the room, her face a dead white. Steve caught a glimpse of her out of the corner of his eye. He screamed at her to leave, to get out of the house, but she gave no sign of having heard him. Durant's fist stabbed him squarely in the mouth and Steve stepped back and suddenly, then, Durant whirled and made it through the door to the front room.

He got on the other side of a table and shoved the table at Steve and then grabbed for a chair. Steve side-stepped as the chair sailed through the air.

Durant's face was bloody, battered, hardly recognizable. His clothing was torn. He was having a hard time breathing. He had caught up a chunk of wood from the box near the stove and was holding it shoulder high.

STEVE moved slowly forward. He was having a hard time breathing, himself. His side was soppy with blood and knife-like pains were shooting through his body. He had a notion that he ought to end this in a hurry and that if he didn't, it might end the wrong way.

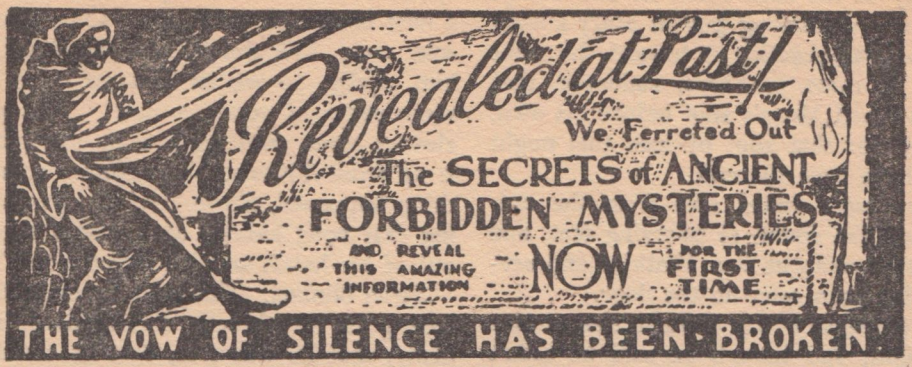
Suddenly, now, Durant swung the chunk of wood at his head. Steve ducked under it and lunged in. He smashed his fists into Durant's bloody face, pinning him against the wall.

Durant's knees buckled under him and he went down. Steve pulled him erect and hit him again and when Durant went down once more Steve still hauled him up and hit him.

There was no sign of life from the man when he fell this time. Steve stirred the gambler with his foot but Durant was completely unconscious. Mary's voice reached out to him, high and shrill in its warning and Steve swung around. He saw Mary in the doorway to the back room and then saw her jerk away and in the street doorway he saw Sam Holt. There was a tight, ugly look on Holt's face. His gun was in his hand, half lifted.

"You're a smart man, Benetor," Holt was saying. "Too smart to live."

Steve raised his hand and wiped it across his face. The pain in his side was growing worse. He stared at Sam Holt and knew that this was the end and as he saw Holt's gun come up he clawed desperately for his own. It was wedged deep and tight in its holster and it didn't come out easily. The roar of Holt's shot blasted against his ears and he felt the scrape of a bullet on his cheek. He heard Holt shoot again and then heard another shot and then he had his own gun up and was firing it and he saw Sam Holt twist around and stagger out the door and thought he heard him fall.



"The 7 Keys to Power alleges to teach," the Author says, "All the Mysteries of Life from the Cradle to the Grave—and Beyond. It tells you the particular day and hour to do anything you desire, whether it be in the light of the moon, sun, or in total darkness."

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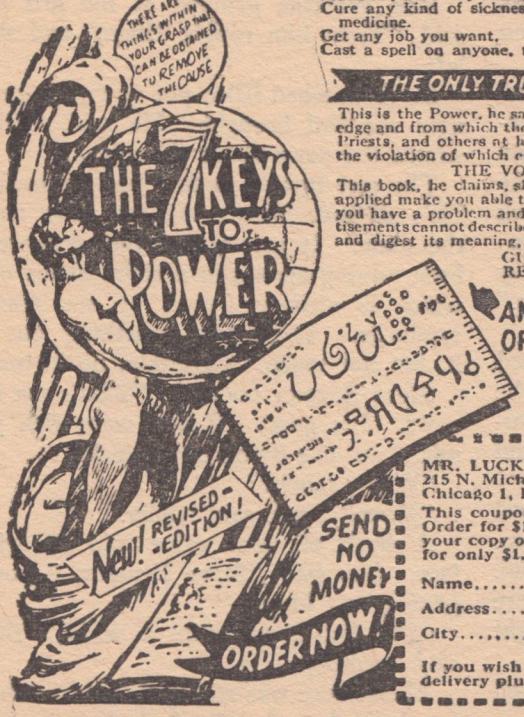

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He was on his knees, now, and in the doorway to the back room he saw Mary. There was a smoking gun in Mary's hand and she was pointing it toward the front door. It came to Steve, suddenly, that he had heard Mary's shot before his own, and but for that shot of hers this might really have been the end.

There were voices now from the outside, and the sound of hurrying feet, and in another moment Rex Watkins and several other men came in the door.

An emergency city council was chosen that night, and though he said he didn't want it, Rex Watkins was persuaded to act as marshal until such time as Steve Benetor could take over again. Before that, however, certain things happened which everyone knew about, yet which few people wanted to discuss.

Steve Benetor didn't know about those things for several days. In spite of his objections, the doctor had put him to bed and had kept him there, along with Bob Grady and a fellow named Martin Jackson and another called Hugh Webb. Ellen Grady served as their boss and nurse. Boss, because they needed one.

Rex Watkins told him the full story, as Rex knew it, one afternoon when Ellen allowed him to sit up.

"Cannon was the fellow who murdered Cartwright," the stocky temporary marshal said slowly. "He admitted it when we got him but tried to throw all the blame on Sam Holt. Some of the boys took him and strung him up in those cottonwoods at the lower edge of the gulch. They hung him right next to the other fellow."

"What other fellow?" Steve asked.

"Durant. It seems that Durant killed Rud Willowby. He was seen. And maybe Willowby needed killing, but the way Durant did it the boys called it murder, and I reckon it was."

Steve Benetor nodded. He couldn't feel that Carl Durant had deserved much more.

"What about Mrs. Durant?" he asked.

"I've heard she's gone home. Where that is, I don't know. I always thought she was a right nice woman."

Again Steve nodded. He was surprised that this news didn't disturb him.

"Willowby's dead, of course, and Sam Holt. There's a man in here from Chicago who's trying to straighten out Holt's affairs and who represents the mining syndicate Holt said he represented. There's a new banker in town, too. Ollie Spence sold out. We didn't have anything on him, really, so we let him go. He had some paper of yours, a note. That puzzled us some until we saw he had picked it up from Tiffany. You know, a funny thing happened, Steve. A guy was holding that note, looking at it, and it slipped out of his hands and fell into the fire."

Steve blinked. He had a funny, choked feeling in his throat. He realized, suddenly, that he was free, that he could go back to his ranch tomorrow. And then, through the window he saw Ellen Grady talking to a man. She stood very straight with her head held high and there was laughter in her eyes.

Rex Watkins said, "Hurry up and get well. I don't like this marshal's job."

"I don't either, Rex," Steve confessed. "Find someone else to take it. Will you?"

Ellen left the man out in front and came into the room. She said, "Hello, Rex," and then, "back with the others, Steve. You've been up long enough and I want my room again."

Rex Watkins grinned at the girl and said, "Treat him rough, Ellen," and then left.

Steve watched Ellen put down the packages she had brought. He said, "Ellen, what's the news about the mine?"

The girl turned to face him, frowning. "It's all bad, Steve. All the news about the mine. It seems that the vein we've been mining apexes in a claim above ours which is already owned by the mining syndicate. We'll get something out of it, but not much. Certainly, no fortune."

Steve Benetor nodded. "That's not bad news. It's good. If you were rich you might not like living on a ranch."

"Who's ranch?"

"Mine," Steve said boldly.

A flush of color came into the girl's face. She said, "Steve Benetor, if you're getting any ideas—"

"I've had them quite a while," Steve said seriously.

Ellen's face was still flushed. She shook her head but she didn't look angry and Steve grinned at her, glad for the first time that he had come to Cortez, and right now, in no hurry to leave.

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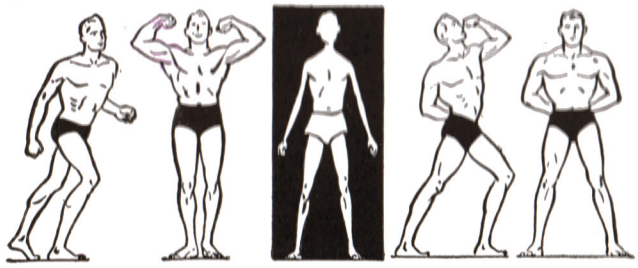

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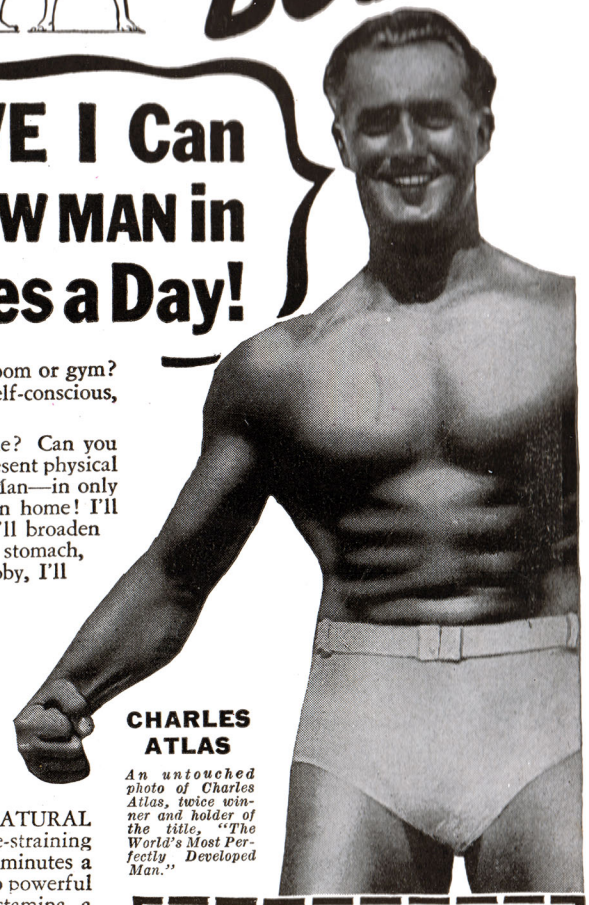

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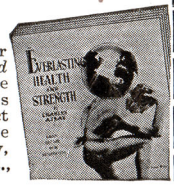

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