



ACTION

STORIES

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A.N.C.

"VENGEANCE IN MY HOLSTER"

A Novel of Two-Gun Justice

by **WILLIAM CHAMBERLAIN**

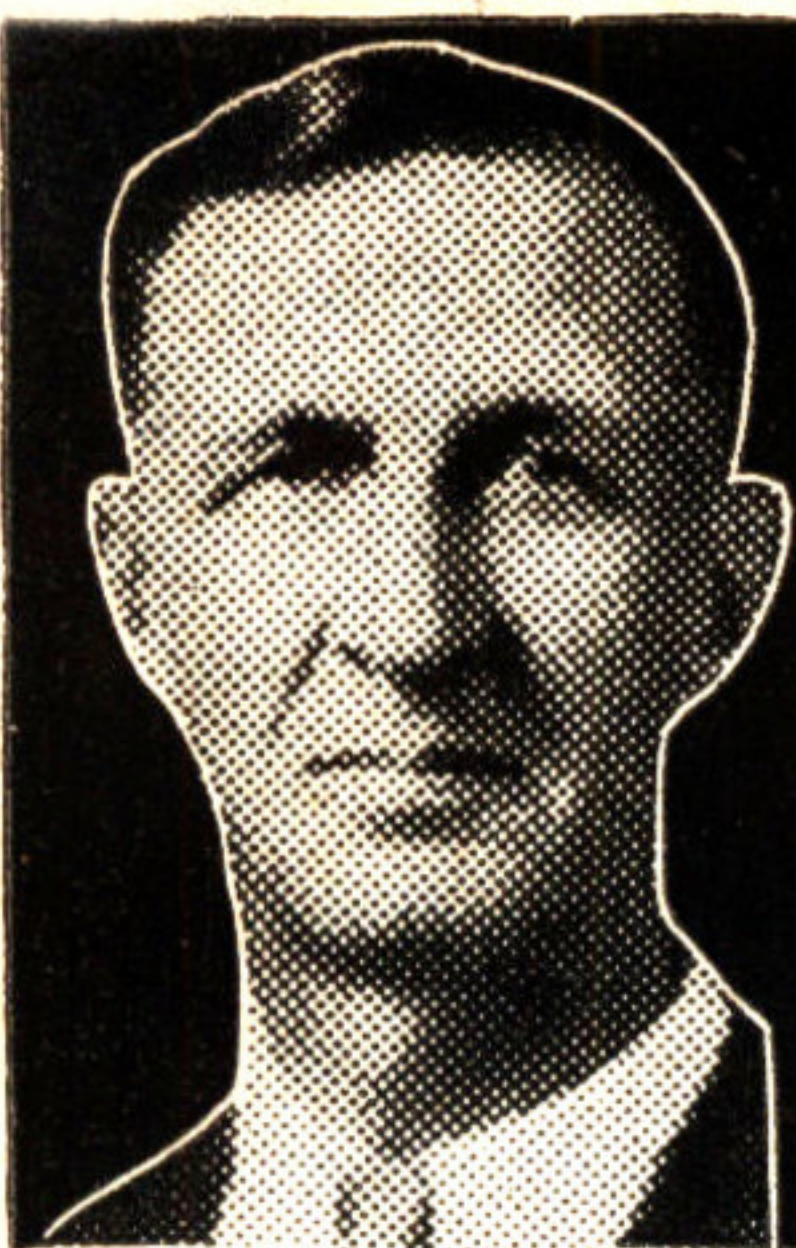
GHOST RIDER *of* HANG-TREE BASIN

A Blazing Novelet

by **ROLLIN BROWN**

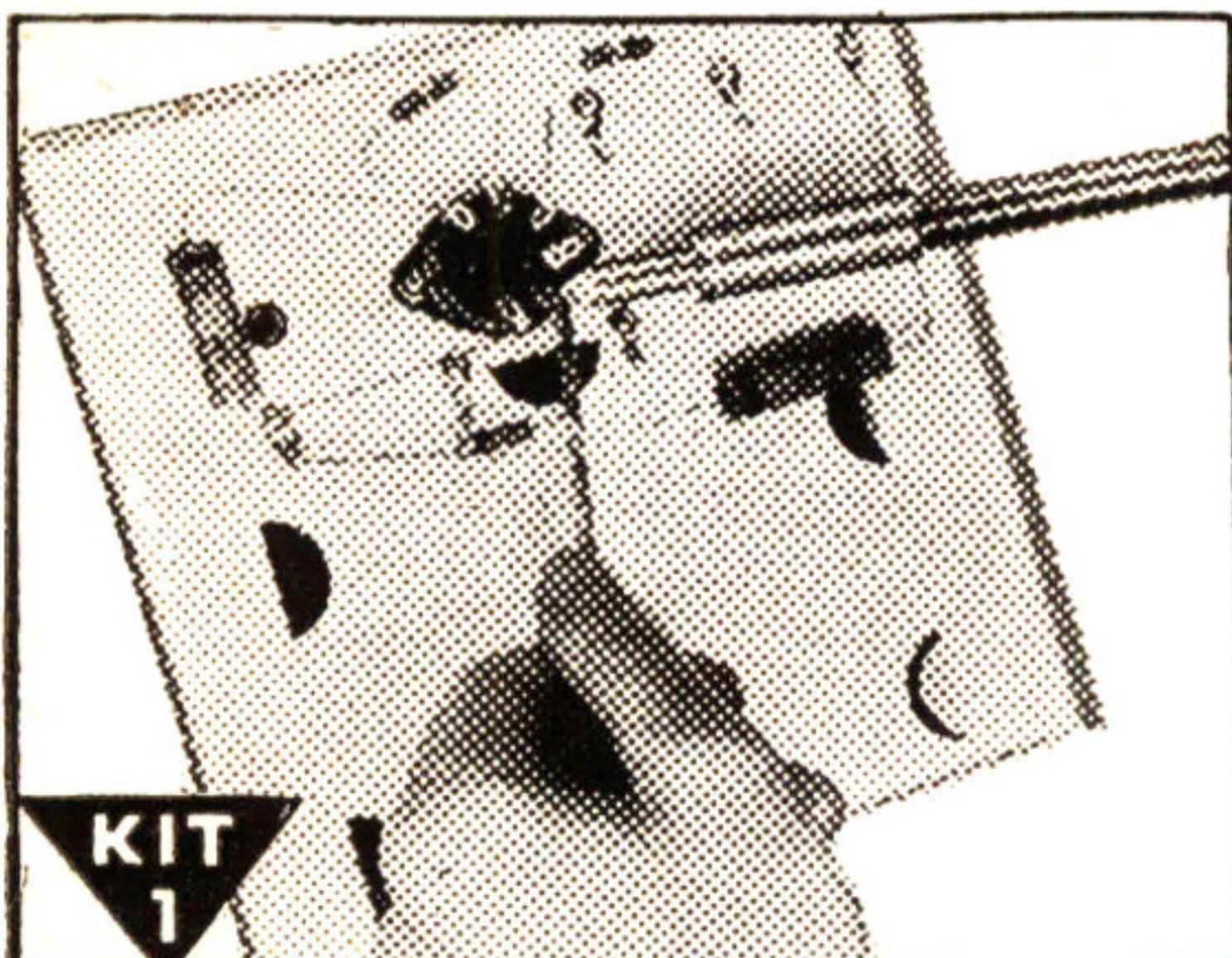


Anderson

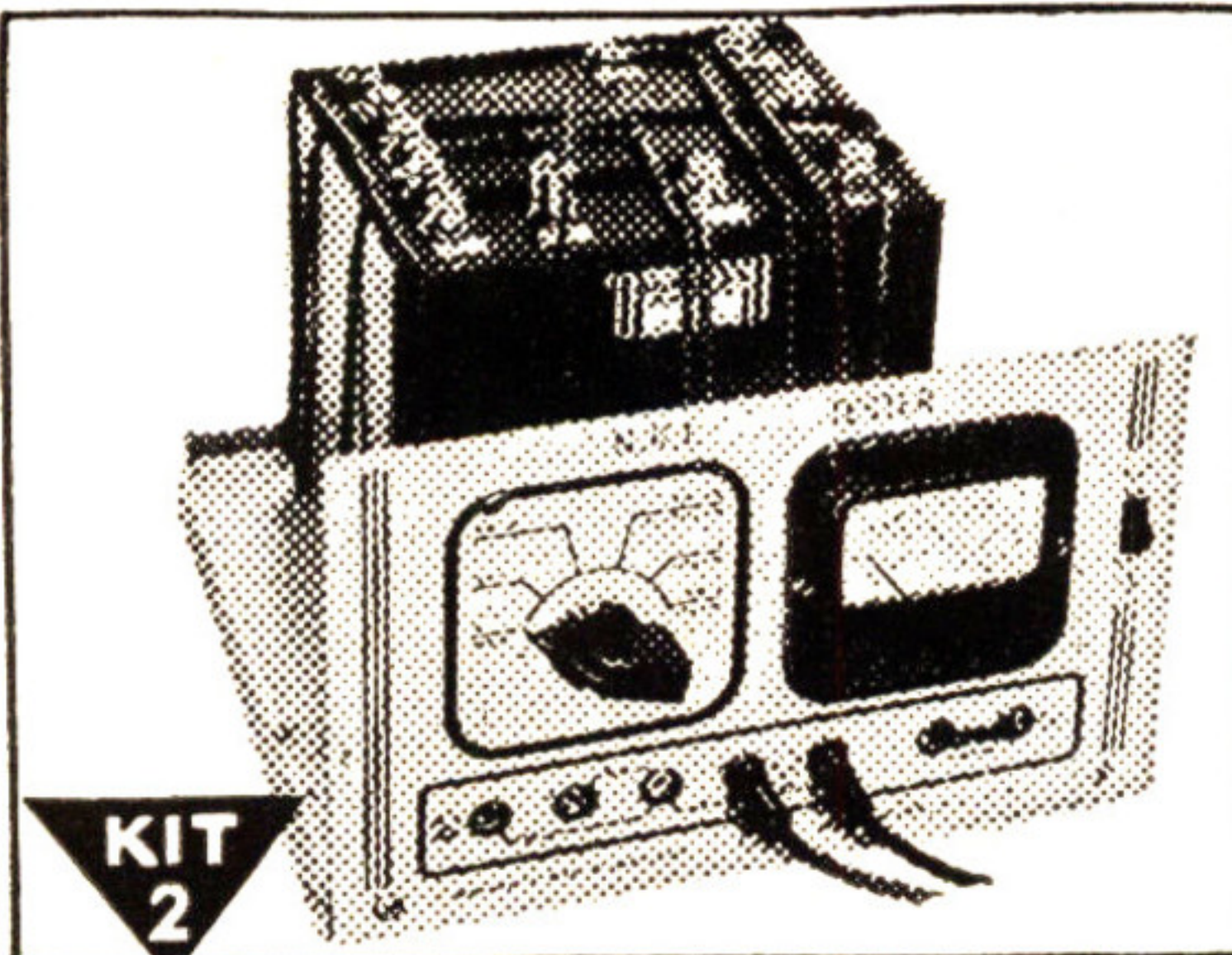


I Will Show You How to Learn RADIO by Practicing in Spare Time

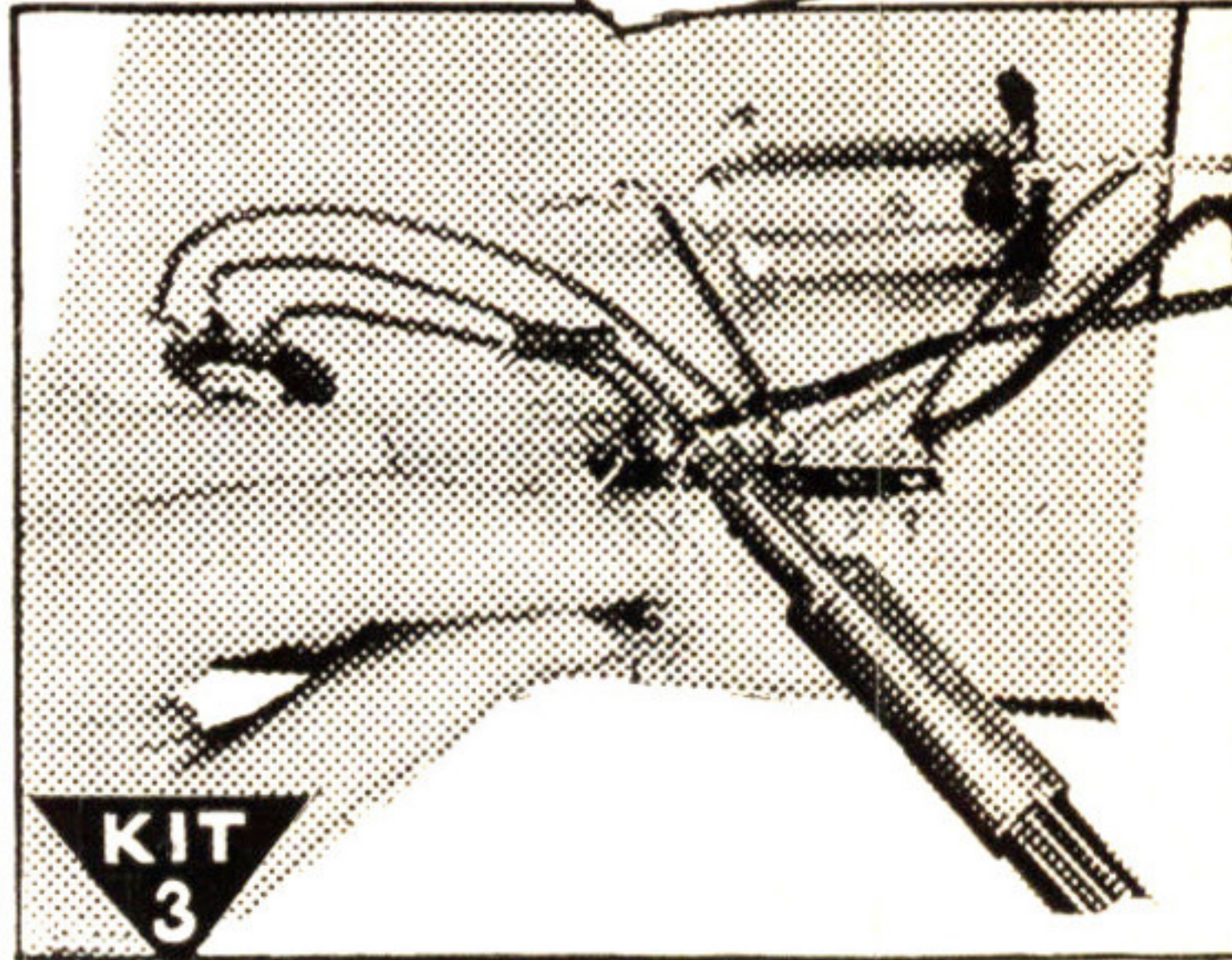
**I Send You
Big Kits
of Radio Parts**



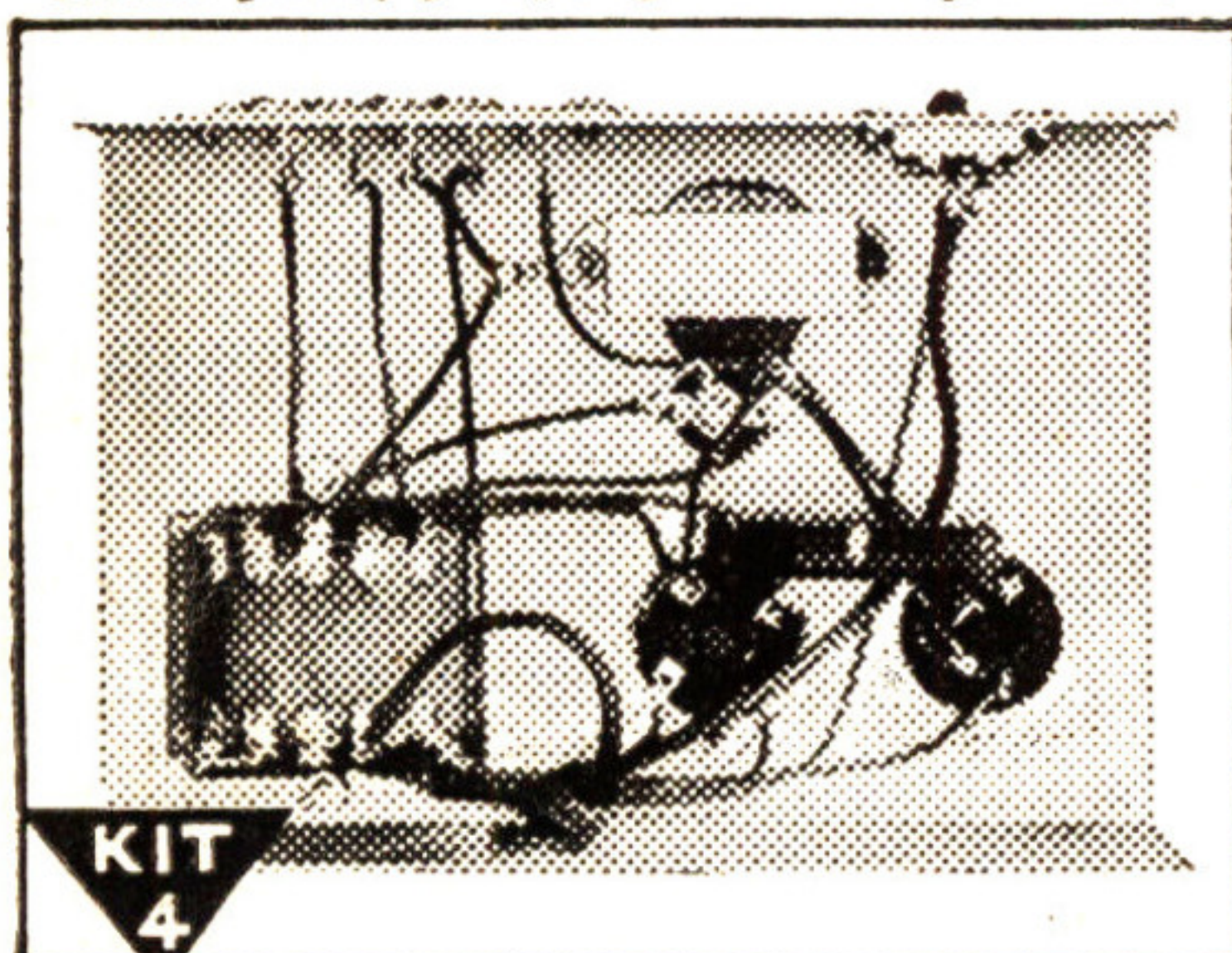
KIT 1
I send you Soldering Equipment and Radio Parts; show you how to do Radio soldering; how to mount and connect Radio parts; give you practical experience.



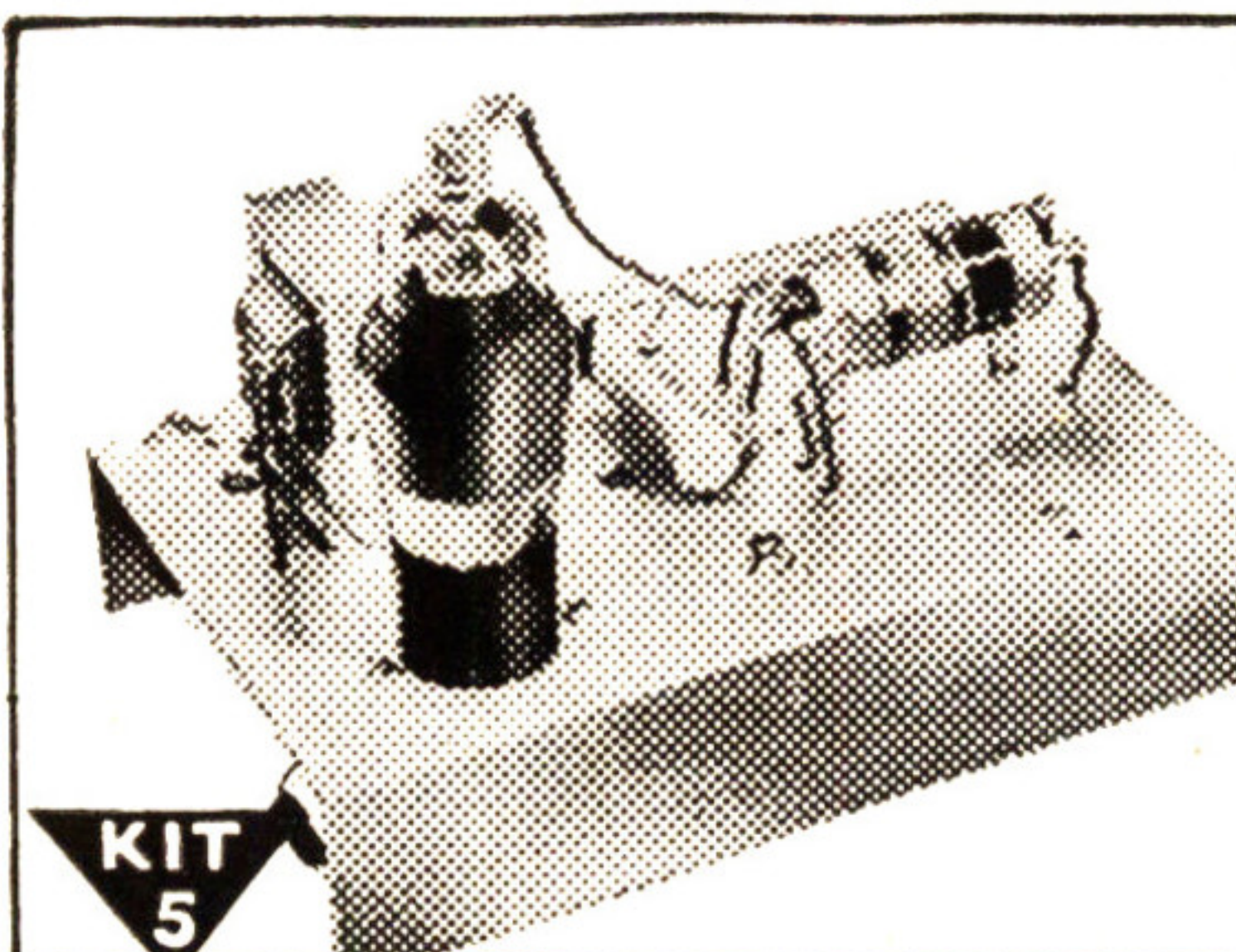
KIT 2
Early in my course I show you how to build this N.R.I. Tester with parts I send. It soon helps you fix neighborhood Radios and earn EXTRA money in spare time.



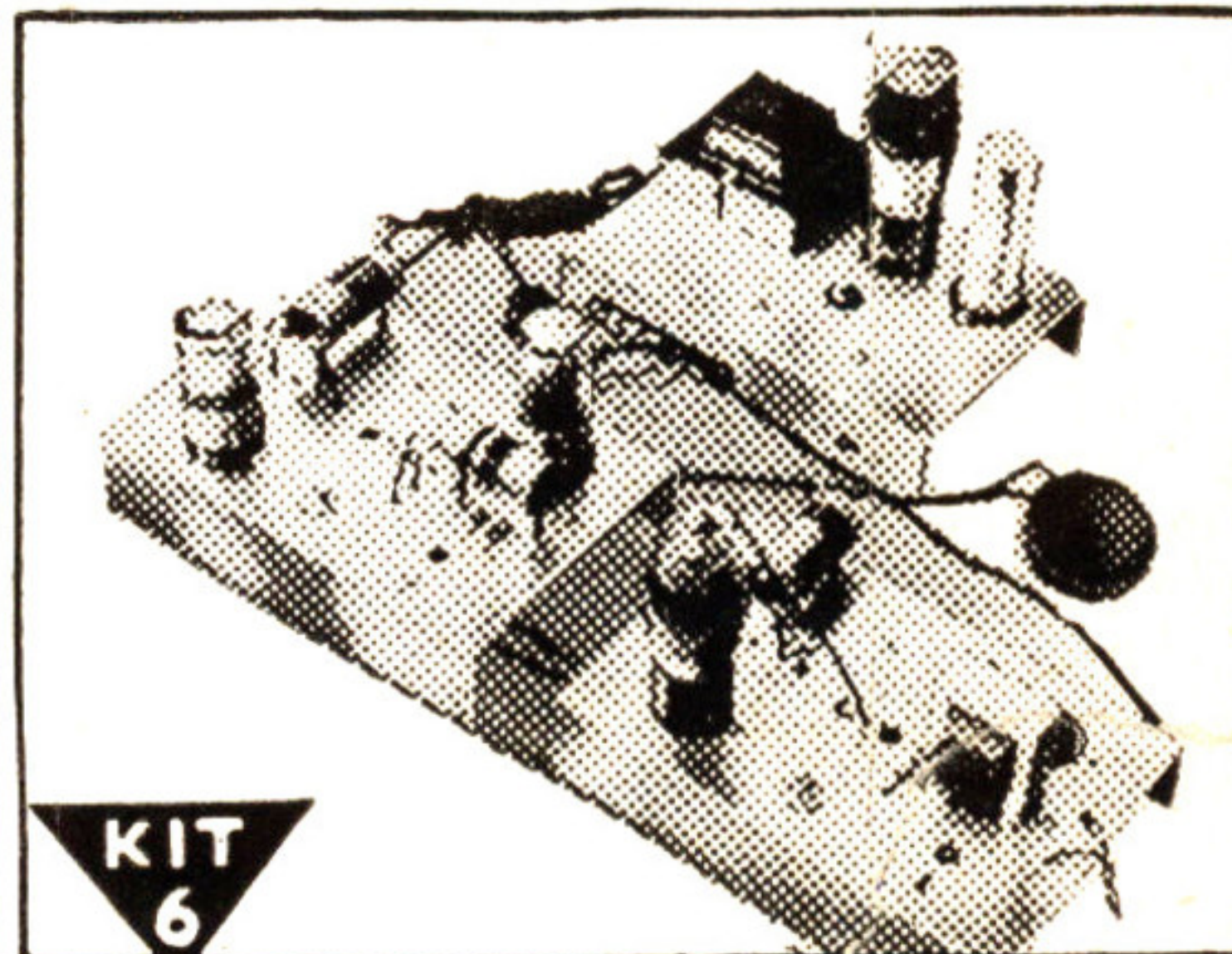
KIT 3
You get parts to build Radio Circuits; then test them; see how they work; learn how to design special circuits; how to locate and repair circuit defects.



KIT 4
You get parts to build this Vacuum Tube Power Pack; make changes which give you experience with packs of many kinds; learn to correct power pack troubles.



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Reg. U. S. Pat. Off.

ACTION STORIES

T. T. SCOTT, President

MALCOLM REISS, Gen'l Mgr. & Editor

"VENGEANCE IN MY HOLSTER" William Chamberlain 6

A complete Western novel

Only grim Steve Handrahan could follow that trail, as it thinned out across rocking dance-hall floors, vanished in thundering gunsmoke, or back-tracked through sudden pools of blood. . . . No trail could grow cold for Steve that was made by his dad's bushwhack killer.

GUN-SIGHT Allan K. Echols 40

Six lead slugs for a brace of killers—and a sparkling diamond for his girl. . . . Was this too big a load for even rugged young Rick Woodbine?

BOOT-HILL FOR SOD-BUSTERS William Heuman 48

When he rode in the town was a pot-full of hot lead coming to a nice boil. All that was needed to blow the lid off was a strange waddy named Smith. Well, his name was Smith—

GAMBLER'S DRAW William J. Glynn 68

Deputy McBride was greased lightning with a gun, but Sherry Carter had slippery fingers himself. And he had a hole-card no star-totin' gun-hawk could duck.

BLOOD-SPOOR OF THE DEVIL-STONES Dan Cushman 74

The white-skinned one crept through the jungle's malarial gloom. Chattering monkeys froze, eyeing the right arm that ended in a gleaming talon, the heavy guns, the hawk-like eyes. . . . It was Armless O'Neil, once more tracking treasure to its death-haunted lair!

GHOST-RIDER OF HANG-TREE BASIN Rollin Brown 98

Smashing novelet of the range

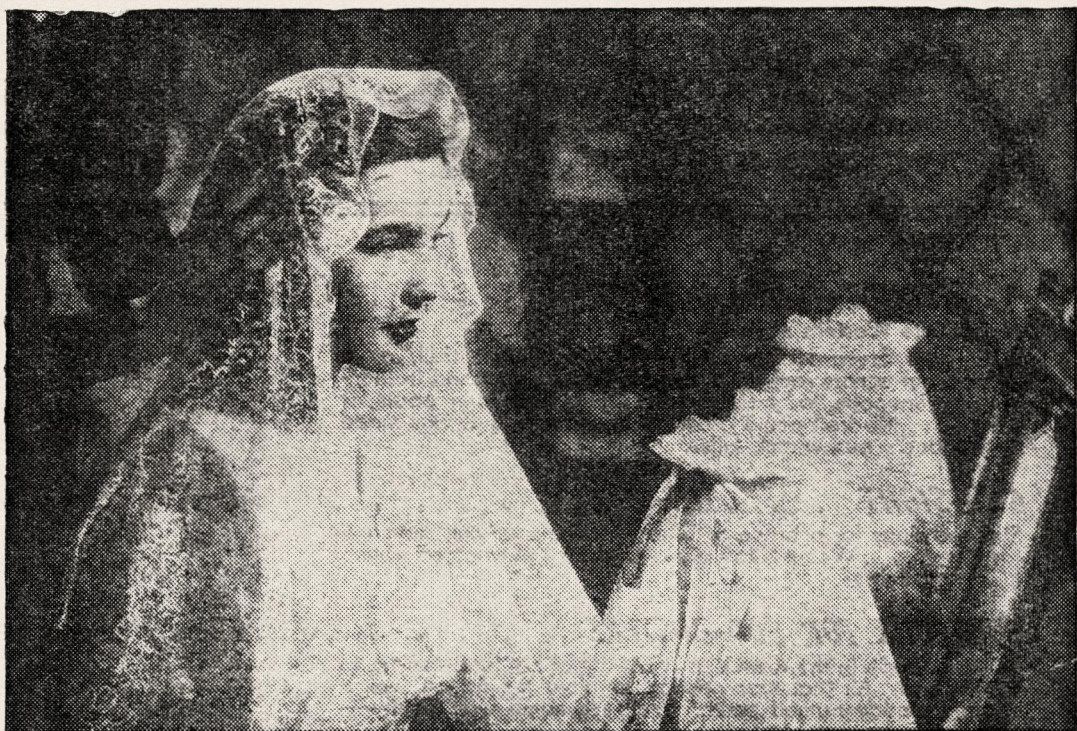
They hunted him across a land already scorched with gunflame and slaked with blood. And he ran and hid from them like a rabbit—until he was ready. Then Matt Cruze strode into town—and his crashing guns chanted the end of evil in that place.



THIS IS A FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINE



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"Vengeance In My Holster"

By William Chamberlain

Only grim Steve Handrahan could follow that trail, as it thinned out across rocking dance-hall floors, vanished in thundering gunsmoke, or backtracked through sudden pools of blood . . . No trail could grow cold for Steve that was made by his dad's bushwhack killer.

STEVE HANDRAHAN HAD been following the trail for close to three years when it finally doubled back on itself and led him once more toward the Mogollon Valley. He had lost it

often in those months but he had learned patience and was not discouraged—sooner or later he always crossed it again and he knew that eventually it would lead him to the man that he was looking for.

Nels Bronson swore and reached for his carbine.





In late August he left Montana, crossed the Bitter Roots and drifted on down to the Pahsimeroi. There, Lou Falkner, who ran a little store at the Forks, put him on the trail again. Steve rode in a little before sundown, tied his grey gelding at the hitching rack, and walked stiffly into the store.

Lou Falkner was reading a month's old newspaper, squinting through his steel rimmed glasses as the light faded. He heard the jingle of Steve's spurs and put the paper away as he pushed the glasses up on his forehead. It was a year since he had seen Steve but he showed no surprise.

"Yeah," Steve said. "I been ridin' some. Break me out a can of tomatoes, Lou."

He was a big man with wide, square shoulders and a lean face burned red by wind and sun. Good humor lay in the wrinkles about the corners of his eyes but there was a quiet watchfulness in the eyes themselves and a hard ruthlessness in the straight line of his lips. He hitched himself up onto the low counter and made a cigaret while Lou Falkner chopped open a can of tomatoes and dug a spoon out of a drawer.

"Goin' any place in particular?" Lou wanted to know, "or just ridin'?"

"Just riding."

Steve spooned out the tomatoes and ate with relish. It had been a long and dusty ride and the cool juice felt good in his mouth. Lou Falkner took off his glasses and put them on the shelf behind him and then pawed into a pile of dusty newspapers which filled the other end of the shelf.

"Hell," he said, "I almost forgot. I got a letter here for you."

Steve finished the tomatoes and tossed the empty can out of the door and into the dust of the road. "Didn't know that I'd left the Forks as a mailing address, Lou," he said. "Where'd you get it, Lou?"

Lou Falkner found the soiled envelope and slid it across the counter. "Feller named Deucy Sands was here a couple of weeks ago askin' if anybody had seen you lately. He was down from the upper country—Round City, I guess. Nobody had. Well, this feller said the last he heard you was over around Virginia City and he figured you might drift this way so he leaves a letter for you just in case."

"Uh-huh," Steve said absently. "Well, he figured right."

HE PICKED UP the envelope and looked at the pencilled scrawl on the front of it. That was Deucy's handwriting all right. Deucy Sands had been one of Idaho Red Handrahan's deputies on that evening twenty years ago when Idaho Red had been shot from behind in Round City. A drunken cowhand, named Esteva, had been hanged for the killing but it had been Deucy Sands who had come to Steve three years ago with the story that had convinced him that Idaho Red's murderer had

not jerked his life out at the end of a rope twenty years ago but still lived and prospered.

Not much of a story, at that—just a faint suspicion, at first—but it had been enough to start Steve out on the trail. He looked for a man named Parker Strange and that was little enough to go on. Deucy Sands had never told him where he had gotten that first faint whisper but he had a hunch that Deucy was ready to tell him now. And the trail now was leading back to where it had first begun—the Mogollon Valley. Steve Handrahan was not sorry about that.

He thumbed the envelope open and spread it out on the counter so that he could see it better in the last of the fading light. Deucy's handwriting wandered crazily but Steve could make it out. He read slowly.

Steve:

I think yore man is here in the valley. Get hear soon as you can. I will leave word with Manny Welsh at the Merrimac saloon where I will meet you. It will be better if nobody sees me talking to you right away. Ain't safe.

Deucy.

Steve crumpled up the letter and thrust it into the pocket of his Levis while Lou Falkner watched curiously. "Ain't somebody dead, is there?" he asked.

Steve stared at him absently as he began to make another cigaret. The good humor had gone out of Steve's face now, leaving his nostrils a little pinched and his mouth a hard line.

"I'll be riding up toward the Mogollons tomorrow," Steve said in a flat voice, ignoring the other's question. "I'll want cartridges and a little bacon and some coffee. Fix it up for me, will you?"

"Sure, Steve," Lou said. "Sure. Anything you . . ."

His voice trailed off and he stared with curious eyes at Steve's back as the latter whirled abruptly and went on out into the last of the sunset. "Huh," Lou Falkner said aloud as he listened to the sound of the grey gelding's shoes dying away in the direction of the corral, "for a minute there I could have swore it was Idaho Red hisself, the way Steve looked."

II

IT WAS THREE DAYS LATER when Steve Handrahan rode into Round City, coming in by way of the Bonanza trail. He turned the grey gelding into the dust of Utah Street and spurred the horse into a trot. Round City, he thought, looked little different than it had looked when he had last seen it nearly three years before. The false fronts of the stores and saloons were a little dustier and a little greyer, perhaps, and the cottonwoods, clustered at the lower end of town, a little taller. That was about all.

To his left sunlight was still painting the topmost peaks of the Mogollons but shadows were hanging low down here in the valley and it would soon be dark. He passed by the sagging picket fence which enclosed Tom Tremark's house, set back from the street under a single cottonwood, and he wondered—a little absently—whether or not Beth Tremark was married now. It didn't matter much. They had had that out on the night before he had left the valley when she had made it plain enough that he had to choose between her and the thing that he had set himself to. Well, he had chosen.

He dismounted at the Ajax Corral, unsaddled and carried him gear back into the dimness of the stable. Charley, a hunch-backed stable hand, was there and Steve tossed him a silver dollar; told him to see that the horse got good care. He had started on back toward Utah Street when he heard voices coming angrily from the little office which had been boarded off in one corner of the stable.

A voice said impatiently, "Damn it all, Mr. Keane, how in hell can Emory Folger be in Bonanza when he's serving out a life term in the pen? Your man must have just seen somebody else that looked like Emory, that's all."

Steve paused and rolled a cigaret—held it in his fingers unlighted while he cast back in his mind to identify the speaker. He placed him then—a worthless saloon hanger-on named Joe Rusk who had a cabin out near the edge of town. A second voice answered Rusk. It was harsh and had the rasp of authority in it and Steve guessed that it belonged to the man called Keane, but neither name nor voice

meant anything to him. He continued to listen, having no shame for his eavesdropping. There was something here in Round City that he had come back to find and he wasn't particular how or where he picked up any information that might come his way.

Keane's voice said, "My man wasn't mistaken. Folger was pardoned by the governor three weeks ago and he's come back to the Mogollons. I want to see him, Rusk. You're going to find him for me."

Rusk mumbled something that Steve couldn't hear and then Keane's voice cut in harshly. "You were friends. You're the one that he'll most likely look for if he comes to Round City."

The name "Emory Folger" had a faintly familiar sound to Steve but he couldn't place it at the moment. He let it pass and was about to go on out into Utah Street when Rusk's words stopped him. There was a sullen whine in the man's voice now—like that of a dog who has been kicked but is afraid to bite back.

"I don't want to get mixed up in it any more, Mr. Keane. That business has been over with for twenty years. Besides, there's still some here in the valley that think Emory was mixed up in that Idaho Red shooting and I . . ."

"Damn it!" Keane yelled explosively. "I don't care what he was mixed up in! I told you to get hold of him for me and either you'll do it or I'll send a couple of my riders around to see you! You understand, Rusk?"

"Yes, sir," Rusk mumbled.

Steve felt the skin tighten across his face at the mention of Idaho Red's name. He flipped his cigaret away and dropped his hand to the butt of his gun; then thought better of it and waited. There was plenty of time yet and a lot of pieces of the puzzle still to be fitted into place. He heard the scrape of Rusk's footsteps as the latter left the office—waited a moment longer and then went on toward Utah Street himself. He wanted to see what this man, Keane, looked like.

Ed Keane was just coming out of the door as Steve stepped out of the smelly gloom of the main stable. Keane heard his footsteps and swung around suddenly, his face glowering. He was a big man, Steve saw, heavy through the shoulders and with

a darkly sulky face across which thick brows were a heavy smudge. There was a certain elegance about his dress and an overbearing abruptness about his manner.

"Who are you?" Ed Keane demanded abruptly.

Steve made a fresh cigaret to replace the one he had thrown away and studied the other for a long moment without answering. Then he said softly, "Does it matter?" and turned on by Keane and into Utah Street. He knew that the big man was still standing there looking after him as he crossed Utah and pushed through the swinging doors of the Merrimac.

IT WAS the supper hour and the big place was empty except for a man who slept noisily with his head on a table in the far corner. Manny Welsh was behind the bar, looking at a copy of the Police Gazette and whistling through his teeth—a fat man with a few strands of thinning hair brushed across a shiny bald spot. He looked up at the sound of the door and then stopped his whistling to greet Steve as though he had seen him yesterday instead of the three years which had gone by since Steve had last stood at the Merrimac's bar.

He said, "Howdy, Steve. Kind of a stranger around these parts, ain't you? What'll you have—it's on the house."

"Whiskey," Steve said. They shook hands and then Manny pushed out a glass and a bottle.

Steve poured the drink and then stood with it in his hand without saying anything for a moment. Another customer came in and went to the far end of the bar and Manny went to wait on him. When he came back the liquor was creating a pleasant glow inside Steve and he could feel the tiredness going out of him.

"You come back to the valley for good?" Manny asked.

"Maybe," Steve told him. "Get word to Deucy Sands that I'm here, will you, Manny? I'll be staying at the Tovar House."

Manny nodded. "Yeah. I know. Deucy's been askin' after you." He glanced down the bar toward the other customer and then leaned forward and lowered his voice. "The valley's gone plumb to hell since you were here, Steve. You comin'

back wouldn't have anything to do with Ed Keane, would it?"

Steve shook his head and poured another drink. "Who's Ed Keane?"

Manny polished the bar and said nothing for a moment. Then the customer at the end of the bar finished his drink, said that it looked like rain and went on out into Utah Street. Manny Welsh seemed a little relieved to see him go.

"I forgot," he said. "Keane's come since after you left. He's the big rannymazoo around these parts now, Steve. He came in here a couple of years ago with plenty of money and bought up the Circle D when old man Winters died. Then he fired all of old man Winters' riders and brought in a bunch of his own. They're a pretty tough lot."

"Where'd Keane come from?" Steve asked.

Manny shrugged his fat shoulders. "Hell, I don't know. He's pretty close-mouthed and don't encourage no questions. Visitors ain't exactly welcome out at the Circle D, either. You remember Luke Christy—the feller you run out of the valley for beatin' up Deucy Sands with a singletree?"

Steve nodded.

"Luke's top hand at Circle D now. That'll give you a sort of an idea as to the kind of an outfit Keane's got. I'm just tellin' you so you'll know."

Steve finished his drink and placed the glass back on the bar, shaking his head as Manny reached for the bottle again. "You wanted to know if my coming back to the valley had anything to do with this Keane, Manny," he said. "Why?"

Manny Welsh looked oddly embarrassed and polished the bar again with his cloth. He took time to wash out Steve's glass and return it to the back bar before he replied.

"Well, I just thought maybe . . ."

Steve said impatiently, "Maybe what? Go on. You sound like this Keane has got the whole town spooked!"

"He just about has, at that," Manny said. "Well, I thought maybe you had come back because you had heard that he's going to marry Beth Tremark, Steve."

Steve thought that over and was a little surprised that it should mean so little to him now. Manny was mopping industrious-

ly at the bar but Steve knew that he was covertly watching and he knew, suddenly, that Manny had been hoping that he had come back to the valley to start a war on Ed Keane. The thought irritated him a little and he put his irritation into words.

"Beth Tremark can marry who she pleases," he said flatly, "and I've not come back here to put a finger into it one way or the other. From your talk I would guess that this Ed Keane has been stepping on toes here in the valley. Well, if you don't want your toes stepped on get a gun and shoot his leg off. There's enough of you here in the valley to do it, isn't there?"

"Hell, Steve," Manny said apologetically, "don't get sore. I just thought maybe . . . well, stories about you have been driftin' back here since you went away and you bein' Idaho Red's son and all, I just thought . . ."

"Forget it," Steve said. "Get word to Deucy Sands, will you?"

"Yeah. I'll do that. Drop in here around nine tonight. Maybe I'll have some word for you, Steve."

STEVE nodded and went on out through the swinging doors to the street. The Tovar House was on the other side and a block down—a rambling, two story building with peeling paint and a wooden awning which was in need of repairs. Steve climbed the steps and went on into the two-by-four office where faded and streaked wall paper lent an air of former opulence. There was a bell on the desk and he jangled it and waited until a pimply youth with buck teeth shuffled in from an adjoining room. He told Steve that he could have Number 4 and Steve nodded, pushed a dollar across the bar and went on up the creaking steps.

It was a narrow room with a cot that looked like its back was broken, a washstand with a chipped pitcher and bowl and a dirty window which looked down on the alley which ran from Utah to Henessey Street. Steve sluiced the dust from his face and arms and then went on back down the stairs to the dining room. A clatter of dishes and cutlery greeted him as he stood in the doorway for a minute while he spotted a place to sit. There were eight or ten people in the room, mostly men, and Steve saw no one that he either knew or

cared enough about to make a point of greeting them.

Ed Keane was sitting at a table in the far corner and Steve saw his eyes flicker in recognition as he found a table for himself across the room. There was a woman with Keane, her back to Steve, and after he had sat down he saw Keane lean across to her and say something. She turned, then, and he saw that it was Beth Tremark. For a moment Steve saw her wide, startled gaze; then she turned her head back quickly and went on with her meal. She and Keane left before Steve had finished with his coffee but the girl didn't look in his direction again.

Again Steve was surprised that it made so little difference. The three years that he had been on the trail had washed all of that out, he guessed. Well, it didn't matter. He called for a second cup of coffee and smoked a cigaret while he drank it, scowling a little as he tried to remember something which kept worrying at the back of his mind. Joe Rusk had mentioned a man named Emory Folger down there in the livery stable tonight and Steve knew, somehow, that that name had an important significance to him but he couldn't remember what it was.

He finished his cigaret and then went on back to the front porch of the Tovar House. The heat of the day had blown up the makings of a thunder storm, he noted absently. Fat clouds, heavy with water, hung low across the valley and, as he watched, lightning stabbed through them and a faint rumble of thunder rolled back from the bastions of the hills across the river. He was, Steve thought with a faint satisfaction, just as glad that he was sleeping with a roof over his head tonight rather than under nothing more than a saddle blanket. He looked at his watch and saw that it was nine-thirty.

Fifty yards away the lights of the Merimac were yellow rectangles against the gathering darkness and, as Steve turned in that direction, the first drops of the rain began to splash heavily against the dust of Utah Street. He quickened his pace and pushed through the swinging doors of the saloon just before the downpour let loose in earnest.

Hanging kerosene lamps lighted the big room and Steve saw that the evening

crowd had not yet begun to fill the place up. Manny Welsh was no longer behind the bar, his place being taken by a thin, hatchet-faced man that Steve didn't know. A poker game went on at one of the tables at the far end, the play desultory and quiet. The bar was empty except for three men grouped at the end away from the door and deep in low-voiced conversation.

Steve glanced casually toward them but their faces were turned away. There was something familiar about the shoulders of the biggest of the three who stood with his back to Steve but that was hardly to be wondered at. Steve had grown up here in the valley—there would still be many here that he knew. He hooked a boot over the rail, ordered a drink and turned the glass around in his fingers while he listened to the rain and tried to remember where he had heard of Emory Folger.

He was still puzzling over it when a man's voice broke harshly into his speculations. "So you're back, are you?"

STEVE swung slowly toward the rear of the room, his perceptions reaching out and warning him of danger and his muscles tightening to meet it. The man at the bar, whose back had been turned to Steve, had faced about and was coming forward slowly with his two companions following. It was Luke Christy, Steve saw—squat and thick-set man with long arms and a shiny scar which ran from his cheek bone to the point of his chin. Steve had put that scar there in Bonanza four years ago after Christy had clubbed little Deucy Sands.

Christy stopped a half dozen feet away and Steve leaned his elbows on the bar and gave the other a hard attention. "Hello, Luke," he said and allowed his conversation to die there.

The two men with Christy were strangers to him but he decided that they were close enough to Luke Christy's caliber to be dangerous. One was a half-breed with mean eyes and a lithely wicked look about him; the other was an old man with a grey stubble of beard on his seamed cheeks and a malicious curl to the corners of his mouth. All three were drunk, Steve saw—not so drunk, though, that they couldn't cause a lone adversary plenty of trouble.

Luke Christy wet his lips angrily with

his tongue as he stared at Steve. "So you're back," he said again. "Maybe you think that you're goin' to run roughshod over people around here like you used to do, Handrahan?"

"Maybe," Steve told him in a flat voice.

"Maybe you'd like to try and run me out of the valley again, huh?"

Christy had lifted his voice hoarsely and now the players at the poker table had laid down their cards and were watching curiously. A man came through the swinging doors, saw what was going on and slid swiftly along the wall until he was out of the line of any possible gun fire. These things Steve noted but paid no attention to; he hadn't moved but still stood with his elbows hooked over the bar and his dark face watchful and telling nothing.

"Maybe I would," he murmured in answer to Luke Christy's question. "What about it?"

He could see the anger rising behind the other's eyes and laid his attention onto it heavily, trying to gauge the exact moment that it would break out of Christy's control. The halfbreed was sidling a little to the left but the older man stood where he was, plucking at his chin with the fingers of his left hand while he watched.

"You'll be doin' the running, Handrahan," Christy said hoarsely. "Ed Keane runs this damn valley now and the sooner you find it out the better off you'll be."

"Ed Keane doesn't run me," Steve said coldly. "Tell him that for me the next time you see him, Christy."

"I'll tell him all right!"

"Fine. That's fine. If you're through I'll go back to my drinking. The whiskey'll taste better if you go on back to the other end of the bar. You put a smell on it."

Christy's heavy face darkened. "You'll do your drinking some place except here then," he said hoarsely. "I'm going to give you until midnight to get out of Round City, Handrahan."

Steve smiled tightly. "No," he said, "I like it here. What are you going to do about it, Luke?"

Swift, expectant silence folded the big room so that a poker chip, knocked from the table by a careless elbow, clattered with a tremendous loudness. Steve Handrahan, those watching knew, had left Luke Christy no way out. He had either to back

down on his play or make it stick here and now. For a moment indecision lay across Christy's face like the slackness in a blanket; then he said something indistinctly under his breath and his right hand flashed down to his gun. For a big man he was fast—but not quite fast enough.

Steve pulled the trigger on his anger and allowed it to ride. His right hand slammed at the other's belly and the big man doubled over with his breath going out of him in a long sigh as his half-drawn gun dropped from his fingers. Steve kicked it away as his left hand reached for the half-filled bottle on the bar. As Christy tried to straighten, Steve smashed him across the base of the skull and the glass splintered, driving Christy back to his knees again.

Steve swung back to the other two who stood with their hands at their sides, frozen by the devastating swiftness of what had happened. Cold, controlled anger thinned Steve's lips to a flat line and little spots of ice danced up and down at the backs of his eyes.

"Either of you two want a part of this?"

The half-breed shook his head numbly, being careful not to move his hands. His eyes shifted uncertainly to Christy who was on his hands and knees on the floor, trying to get his head up, and then moved back to Steve. The old man said nothing.

"There was some talk about leaving the valley," Steve said harshly. "Good enough! The three of you will be out of the valley by sun-up or I'll put you all under ground! You understand? Now get out of here! You stink up the place!"

They got Christy by the elbows and lifted him to his feet. He swayed drunkenly, shaking his head back and forth as the other two pulled him toward the door. Just before they reached it Christy stopped, pushing against the wall to steady himself as he looked back at Steve.

He said, speaking thickly, "That's the last time, by God! That's the last time!"

"Get out," Steve told him curtly. "Don't come back."

THE THREE of them went and Steve followed them after a minute, pausing on the way to pick up the gun that he had knocked out of Christy's hand. He

punched out the shells and watched while they stepped down into the mud of Utah Street; then threw the gun after them and stood, leaning against the awning post, until they disappeared in the direction of the Ajax Corral.

The rain had stopped and a half moon was beginning to break through the clouds over the Mogollons. Wind, blowing from the east, was cool and sweet and the feel of it was good against Steve's face. He waited for a moment there in the shadows, turning over in his mind the things that had happened in the short time that he had been back in the valley. He remembered what Manny Welsh had hinted at and knew that it must be so. There was something wrong here; something that hadn't been here at the time he had left three years ago. And, whether he liked it or not, he knew that he was being drawn into it.

A man came along the board sidewalk, his boots making soft scraping sounds against the wet planks, and as he passed one of the windows of the Merrimac Steve saw that it was Manny Welsh. Steve waited until the other had come abreast and then said, "Manny," in a low voice.

He saw the other start and half-turn and the movement increased Steve's irritation a little. Round City was getting spooky as a grave-yard, he thought. Then said as much to the other man.

Manny didn't answer at once. He ranged himself beside Steve, took a cigar from his pocket and got it going. Then he said finally in a low voice, "Deucy said he'd see you tonight at eleven o'clock in the wagon yard behind the Ajax," and went on through the swinging doors and into the saloon.

Steve stayed there on the sidewalk looking across the moonlight, scowling a little as he wondered why Deucy Sands was scared. It wasn't like the little man. Well, he'd find out in good time, he guessed. His watch said that it was a little before nine and he went on across Utah Street and entered the Tovar House. In his room he lighted the kerosene lamp and stretched himself out on the sagging cot.

It came to him presently who Emory Folger was.

Two days before Idaho Red Handrahan had been murdered out there in Utah Street, the Forbes gold train had been held

up in Bonanza Canyon. When Idaho Red got there he had found the two guards and the packer dead and Emory Folger lying up in the slide rock with a bullet through his hips. The gold was gone but Emory Folger had refused to tell who his accomplices had been even after he had been sentenced to hang for the killing of the guards and the packer. Later his sentence had been commuted to life imprisonment because of doubt that he had done the actual shooting.

Steve lay there watching the bugs circle about the smoking kerosene lamp while he turned the old story over in his mind. And the more that he thought about it the greater became his conviction that there was a connection between Emory Folger and the shooting of his father out there in Utah Street.

IT WAS ten minutes to eleven when Steve sat up again, pulled on his boots and went on back down the stairs, leaving the light burning in his room for anyone who might be interested in looking. He paused just inside the door to light a cigaret and then as he stepped on out to the porch he saw a man's shoulders bulking against the moonlit street. He recognized Ed Keane and became quietly watchful as he sensed that Keane had been waiting for him.

The rancher came to the point without delay. "You're Steve Handrahan?" he asked curtly.

"That's right."

"Why have you come back to the valley?"

Steve allowed smoke to trickle through his lips as he considered the question. He had had an instinctive dislike for this man from the time that he had seen him first down in front of the stable. He held it in check for the moment, though; Ed Keane was interested in Emory Folger and Steve wanted to know the reason for that interest.

"Happens that I was born here," Steve said. He teetered a little on the soles of his boots, thumbs hooked in his belt while he studied the other's bulky figure and greying hair. The man must be twice Beth Tremark's age, he thought. "Maybe I came back because I like it, Keane."

"I've heard about you," Keane said violently. "You may just as well understand

now that I run Round City. There's not going to be any more things happen like what happened in the Merrimac tonight."

"Maybe you'd like to tell me," Steve murmured.

He sensed the anger that was pulling at the other man but Keane spoke again, controlling his voice with an effort. "You beat up one of my riders tonight and told him to get out of town. I don't stand for that, Handrahan. You may as well know that I've sworn out a warrant for your arrest—Sheriff Tremark will serve it on you when he gets back to town in the morning. If you're smart you won't be here by then."

A faint warning bell jangled in the back of Steve's mind. From what he had seen of Ed Keane, the man was not one to depend on warrants and arrests to remove people who got in his way. There was something behind all this—something more than just the desire to impart a threat which had caused Ed Keane to wait for him here on the porch of the Tovar House. He tried to put his finger on it but couldn't.

He pitched his cigaret away and said without lifting his voice, "What you do here in the valley is your own damned business, Keane. But if your Luke Christy or the two with him cross my path again I'll shoot first and ask questions later. I don't like 'em and I don't like you and what I said about them being out of here by sun-up still goes. Goodnight, Keane."

He went on down Utah Street, walking without hurry and not attempting to keep to the shadows. At the Assay Office, a one-story building with dirty window panes, he paused for a moment to glance back toward the upper end of town but the street was empty. An alley cut back from the Assay Office and Steve stepped into it and, after a minute, he saw the open gate of the wagon yard.

A voice whispered out of the dark shadows, "Mr. Handrahan?"

"Yeah. Hello, Deucy."

The crippled little man didn't say anything more but led the way across the yard to where a shed made a patch of deeper shadow. A couple of lumber wagons had been pulled in there and Steve sat down on the tongue of one of them.

"I got your letter on the Pahsimaroi,"

Steve said. "I take it that you've turned up something, Deucy."

"I've turned up plenty, Mr. Handrahan," Deucy said. "But, before I tell you about that, did you know that Emory Folger is back here—out of the pen? I hear tell that the Governor pardoned him."

"What's he got to do with what you've found out, Deucy?" Steve asked.

The little man squatted down with his back against a wagon wheel and made a cigaret but didn't light it. He turned his head to peer across the shadows of the yard and then lowered his voice cautiously.

"I think he's got a hell of a lot to do with it, Mr. Handrahan," he said. "He's right here in Round City this minute but I don't think there's anybody but me and Doc Shandy that knows it. That no-good Joe Rusk was askin' around about him this afternoon but Doc Shandy's got him hid out in a cabin up the river aways."

Steve said again, a little impatiently. "What's he got to do with Idaho Red's killing, Deucy?"

"Look, it's this way," Deucy said slowly, as though he was picking his words, "when I wrote you that letter I figured that I had found out who gunned your dad from behind but now I ain't quite so sure. I've talked to Emory Folger though, Mr. Handrahan, an' I'm damned sure that he *does* know."

"Did you ask him?"

"I asked him all right but he wouldn't say. He'll tell you though, I think. He's pretty much changed."

"Changed how?"

"Prison done something to him, I guess. His hair's clean white and he's pretty shaky. That ain't the way he's most changed, though. Seems like he's all sort of dead inside. If a feller didn't know it to be a fact he would never believe that he was the same feller that held up that gold train."

Steve sifted tobacco into a paper, rolled the cigaret and licked the flap shut—then sat holding it, unlighted, between his fingers. Across the wagon yard a horse snorted and then stamped restlessly. Deucy Sands got up from where he had been squatting against the wagon wheel and rubbed at his lame leg while he moved a little out of the concealment of the shadows.

Steve said in a flat, hard voice, "Who was the one that you figured did it when you wrote that letter, Deucy?"

"You won't believe it," the little man said in an earnest voice. "I didn't believe it for a long time myself. Tom Tre—"

A GUN slammed suddenly—three times—from the darkness of the shed opposite, the sound making harsh and spanging sounds in the closed space. A bullet plucked at the shirt between Steve's left arm and his side and then smashed into the boards at his back. He spun sidewise, throwing himself flat as he jerked his own gun clear. For a moment everything was quiet; then he heard the quick hammer of running foot-steps in the direction of the alley. He shot twice at the sound, swore as he knew that he had hit nothing and then scrambled back to his feet, keeping close to the wagon. Quietness had settled down across the moonlight again.

As he reached the corner of the shed he saw the vague shadow of a man's figure slide through the patch of moonlight by the Assay Office and he slammed a third shot at it. It was no good and for a moment longer he stood listening. Then he heard the sound of a horse being lifted into a run out in Utah Street and he knew that there was no chance now of catching the man who had tried to bushwhack him back there in the wagon yard. As he reloaded he swore suddenly under his breath.

The certainty began to grow on him that he knew now why Ed Keane had stopped him there on the porch of the Tovar House. Someone had followed him down to the wagon shed—someone who had not wanted him to learn what Deucy had to tell him. Then sudden apprehension laid fingers on Steve as he realized that he had heard nothing from the crippled little man since that first shot had spat out of the darkness.

He called, "Deucy!" in a hoarse whisper but got no answer and swore bitterly.

Deucy was lying close beside the wagon wheel—still alive as Steve dropped down beside but his breath was coming in whistling gasps and the coldness of death was already spreading into his hands. Steve's exploring fingers found the two holes in the left side of Deucy's chest.

"Tom Tremark," Deucy said. Then he

said, "Tom Tremark," again and died, the breath going out of him in a long sigh.

Steve laid him back and squatted there on his heels for a long moment, his thoughts black. He had liked the little man and now Deucy was dead because he had found out one of the things that Steve had wanted to know; found it out and died before he had had a chance to tell it. Well, when the score was totalled up, Deucy's would be included in it.

After a little he got back to his feet and pulled a grain sack from the wagon. He spread it over Deucy and then went slowly on back toward Utah Street, keeping to the shadows now. He turned right in the direction of Doc Shandy's cabin. As he came abreast of the picket fence around Sheriff Tremark's yard, he saw something white move in the shadows and then a woman's voice came softly toward him across the night.

"Steve!"

III

JOE RUSK'S CABIN WAS A HUNDRED yards back from the road at the edge of town—a low, squat building huddling in the moonlight. A dog barked as Keane rode up and dismounted. He tied his horse at the broken down hitch rail, saw that three other horses were already tied there and then went on across the yard to knock on the door. Lamplight streamed out in a yellow rectangle as the door opened.

Keane went in, ducking his head a little to clear the doorway as his eyes swept across the disordered room. Luke Christy and his two companions were there, he noted; it had been Joe Rusk who had opened the door—a seedy, broken-down rider with a faintly vacant face. There was a stove, a few shelves against the walls, chairs and a table which held a smoking kerosene lamp and a couple of half-empty whiskey bottles. Rusk closed the door and pushed out a chair for the big rancher.

"You find out where Emory Folger is yet?" he asked Rusk.

"Not yet," Rusk said nervously. "I got some fellers lookin' around thought. I ought . . ."

"He's here in Round City," Keane said curtly. "You have him out at Circle D by tomorrow, Rusk. You understand?"

Rusk nodded uncomfortably, sucking at his lips as he rubbed a hand across his bald head. Keane paid no further attention to him but swung back to Duke Christy and his two companions who were sitting at the table. Christy returned Keane's stare insolently and reached for one of the bottles.

"I thought I told you to stay under cover while you were in Round City," Keane said coldly.

"Hell," Christy said in a careless voice, pouring more whiskey into his glass, "a man's got to have a little fun, Keane. All we done was go into the Merrimac for a little drink."

"And then get tangled up with that damned Handrahan!" Keane said angrily. He sneered a little as his gaze slid across Christy's bruised face. "I hear that he tagged you, Christy. Tagged you good. Well, it serves you right."

Christy's heavy face slowly grew a darker red and his eyes were mean as he lifted the glass and downed the raw liquor. Keane saw the change in color of the other's face and smiled tightly to himself as he drummed on the table with the tips of his fingers. He knew well enough how to use such men as Luke Christy—and how to make them the most usable, too.

"And in front of a saloon full of men who have got good reason to hate you, too," Keane added in a contemptuous voice. "You'd better stay out of Round City from now on. The kids are liable to throw rocks at you if you don't."

Christy shoved his chair back and dropped his right hand beneath the edge of the table while fury boiled up in his eyes. "Maybe you'd like to have a try at throwin' rocks," he said viciously. "If you would . . ."

Keane leaned forward and put his hands, palm down, on the top of the table while his frosty eyes caught Luke Christy and held him. A faint draft from the open window flickered the smoky flame of the kerosene lamp so that shadows danced against the far side of the cabin wall.

"Take it easy, Luke," Keane said with his voice suddenly mild. "Maybe I rode you pretty rough. Forget it. The thing is that this damned Steve Handrahan has come back to the valley and I don't like it. He's liable to put a finger into things that

I don't want a finger put into right now. Understand?"

Luke Christy stared at his employer for a long minute. Then he grinned. "You wouldn't be suggestin' that you want this Steve Handrahan bushwhacked, would you, boss?"

"Did I say so?" Keane smiled thinly. "I just hinted that I might be willing to pay a little bonus if Handrahan was to leave the valley tonight—permanently.

Luke Christy grinned and leaned back in his chair while he glanced at his two companions. Then he waved a hand toward Keane. "Meet your new boss, boys. Cold-blooded louse, ain't he?"

Indian Charley, the half-breed, stared at Keane with unwinking eyes. "Me," he said, "I think um good deal," he grunted. "That Handrahan he make trouble. One hundred dollar a-piece we get to take these feller out an' lose heem, I thenk, eh?"

Luke Christy roared with laughter and slapped a big hand against his thigh. Nels Bronson, the old man, sat with the lamp-light filtering across his seamed face while he said nothing. There was a wickedness in his pale eyes which chilled Keane a little—he didn't exactly know why.

"Now, there's an Injun for you, Keane," Luke Christy said. "An, by Joe, his terms are just the terms we'll take. A hundred dollars a-piece an' paid right now—an' it's a cheap job at that."

ANGER flushed Keane's face with a sudden wash. Then, for the second time within minutes, he put his anger behind him, knowing that he played for stakes that were too big to risk and that he either had to get rid of Steve Handrahan or take the chance of losing Circle D and the whole of the position that he had built up for himself during the past two years here in the valley. Without saying anything he took a well-filled wallet from his pocket, counted out a hundred dollars in each of three piles and pushed the money across.

"Ride on to Circle D when you get through," he said in a tight voice. "I'll see you tomorrow morning—but I'm not interested in anything else you may do to-night."

Luke Christy picked up the money and smoothed it between his fingers as he

pushed his chair back from the table. He poured himself a last drink and then went across the cabin to pick up the saddle carbine which he had leaned against the wall.

"Let's go," he said.

Keane smiled tightly. "I might tell you boys that I saw Handrahan going down Utah Street a little while ago. He left the Tovar House and turned into that alley by the Assay Office. If a person wanted to find him that wagon yard back there might not be a bad place to look."

Luke Christy grunted an assent and the three of them filed out into the moonlight; presently Keane heard the sound of their horses moving out along the road which turned into town. Joe Rusk was staring at Keane with a fascinated gaze as the latter came back from the door and Keane swore a little under his breath. The other had been sitting in the shadow of a corner and, for a moment, Keane had forgotten about him. Now Rusk slouched forward and poured himself a drink with a hand that shook a little.

He downed the liquor, spilling a little of it on the front of his shirt, and then wet his lips with his tongue as he looked at Keane. "Ain't you forgot something, Keane?" he asked.

"Forgot what?"

"You ain't paid me nothin' yet," Rusk said.

Dark blood rushed into the rancher's face as he swung around on the smaller man, cursing. "Pay you? Pay you for what?"

"That's murder," Rusk said, licking at his lips again and grinning with a silly and vacant expression. "Murder is what you just paid them fellers to do. If I was to go to Sheriff Tremark an' . . ."

Uncontrollable anger suddenly blazed behind Keane's eyes. Firewood was stacked beside the door and his fingers closed about a pine stick an inch and a half in diameter as he jumped toward the smaller man. Rusk was suddenly aware of his danger and tried to dodge but he was too late and the blow caught him viciously across the Adam's apple as he stumbled back—dropped him to his knees. Keane stood over him and swung the club again—twice—and Rusk toppled to the floor with blood running from mouth and nose.

"So you'd tell, would you, my friend?"

Keane said, breathing hard. "Well, you won't tell now."

He tossed the club away and went back to the table. His hands were steady as he poured a drink for himself. Rusk was dead, he knew; he could tell by the loose twist of the man's limbs and the way that his eyes had rolled back into his head. Well, he'd gotten what was coming to him.

Keane stood for a moment longer, glancing about the smelly room of the cabin. Then he swung away and went out, closing the door behind him. As he swung into the saddle and headed for the Merrimac he regretted only that he would not have to find someone else to run down Emory Folger.

THE MERRIMAC was full as he pushed through the swinging doors and elbowed his way to the bar. He called for whiskey, nodding at Manny Welsh as the latter brought it. "Say," he said, "this feller Handrahan is a friend of yours, isn't he?"

At the mention of Steve's name the men on either side of Keane stopped talking and listened. Manny Welsh nodded curtly. "Yes, sir. He's a friend of mine."

Keane raised his voice a little. "Well, he must of just seen a ghost up at Joe Rusk's cabin because I saw him ride away from there like the sheriff was after him as I came by a little bit ago."

Manny Welsh was just about to answer when a fusillade of gun fire racketed from the lower end of town. Men suddenly stampeded for the door but Keane did not follow. He smiled a little thoughtfully, finished his drink and then went out unhurriedly to where he had left his horse. He guessed that he would have no further cause to worry about Steve Handrahan.

IT WAS after midnight when he rode up to the cluster of rambling buildings which was headquarters for Circle D. The moon was far over now, its lower edge touching the ragged tips of the Mogollons, and the pale light washed across the corral and the saddle shed. Beyond, sheltered by the moon shade of a half dozen cottonwoods, the main ranch house lay quietly with light showing in a single window.

Keane unsaddled and turned his horse into the corral; then he went on toward the house, his mind busy with his plans.

Florence Ridley was waiting for him in the doorway—a dark, exotic looking woman of thirty about whom the valley wondered, talking steadily the while. She had come into Round City on the stage two months before. For a week she had stayed at the Tovar House, keeping to her room and seeing no one. Then Ed Keane had driven up in a buggy one afternoon and she had ridden off to Circle D with him, taking her trunk along.

She closed the door after Keane and then followed him to the center of the room. She was tall, her head coming above Keane's shoulder, and she possessed a full, lush figure and wide eyes. For a moment Keane stood looking at her critically while he slapped the dust from his clothes. Then he swung away, jerking his shoulders impatiently.

"Why in hell aren't you in bed, Flo?" he demanded.

"Why in the hell should I be?" she asked him sardonically.

Keane walked across the room and took a bottle from a cupboard built against the wall—brought it back to the table and got two glasses. He poured generous drinks into each and dropped heavily into a chair beside the table while he stared absently at the shine of the lamplight on the window. Presently he stirred himself and tossed his drink off, grimacing a little; then he turned to look at Florence Ridley with an unwinking stare.

"Well, get it off your chest, Ed," she told him. "Whatever it is."

"Get your things packed," Keane said heavily. "Baldy will drive you in tomorrow. You're catching the stage back to Dudleyville."

Florence Ridley laughed at him, her laughter making a pleasant and tinkling sound in the big room. She sipped a little at her drink; then put it down and wandered around the table to stand, staring out of the window and into the darkness while she ran her hands down across her slim hips.

"So that's the way it is, is it, Ed?" she asked softly a minute later. "And then I suppose you'll bring that putty-faced little Tremark girl out here to Circle D, eh? Going to marry her, Ed?"

"What if I am?"

She turned around, laughing at him lazily.

ily. "I didn't know that you were the marrying kind. I don't recall that you ever offered to marry *me*, Ed—yet I'd make you a better wife than that little idiot ever will. You're bad, Ed—just as bad as they come—and you've got to have a woman who knows it."

Keane poured more whiskey into his glass. His face was a little flushed now and he gulped greedily at the liquor. Florence Ridley strolled back to sit on the edge of the table, swinging a long leg as she looked down on the man. There was a faint hardness that was beginning to settle about the corners of her mouth.

Keane said heavily, "It's not what I want, Flo. It's what I've got to do. Tremark is getting jumpy and the only way that I can be sure of keeping him in line is to marry Beth. Then he won't dare kick over the traces."

"And throw *me* to the wolves, eh?"

Keane made a vague gesture with his left hand and slumped deeper into his chair. A tin clock on a shelf said that it was a little after one and outside the wind had risen so that it rattled the panes of the windows.

"What else can I do?" Keane mumbled. "I'll see that you're taken care of, Flo."

She laughed at him—brittle laughter which did not reach her eyes. "Back in Whispering Smith's dance hall, I suppose. Don't think that it's going to be as easy as that, Ed."

"Arguing won't do no good," Keane said stubbornly. "I've got my mind made up—and Baldy will take you in tomorrow. A woman with your looks won't have any trouble in getting along, Flo."

Anger suddenly twisted Florence Ridley's face. Keane had tossed his quirt onto the table when he had come in and now she snatched it up as she straightened. It whistled a little as she swung it across the lamp light and its heavy thongs raised two vivid welts against Keane's face. His chair crashed backwards and he fell heavily.

"I'll use a gun next time," Florence Ridley said in a flat, even voice. "Just keep that in mind, Ed."

Keane got slowly to his feet, rubbing a hand across his cheek and swearing hoarsely. He lunged toward her but she had been watching for that and pushed a chair into his path. He stumbled across it and fell

again, striking his head against the edge of the table. As he got to his knees he heard the door slam and by the time he had gotten it open again he saw that Florence was three-quarters of the way to the corral. He started to follow—then thought better of it and went on back to pour another drink.

IV

STEVE HANDRAHAN WAITED IN the shadows by the picket fence as Beth Tremark came up. The well-remembered sound of her voice stirred him a little but he put the thought away and concentrated on Deucy Sands lying back there in the wagon yard.

"Steve," she said. "Steve, what was that shooting?"

She came close to the fence and stood with her hands on the palings while she looked at Steve with her face curiously drawn and tired in the moonlight. The white dress that she wore made her hair seem blacker and Steve was conscious that she was no longer the leggy kid with whom he had used to ride but a mature woman, now, possessed of a woman's beauty. He made a cigaret slowly, smoothing the paper carefully between his fingers while he tried to readjust his thoughts.

He murmured finally, "Deucy Sands was shot a little while ago."

"Deucy Sands?"

"A crippled rider," Steve said with bitterness edging his voice. "A man of no importance to anyone—except Deucy Sands. He's dead."

He heard the swift intake of the girl's breath and watched her lift a hand to her throat. "Who did it, Steve?"

"I don't know but I can guess."

"Ed Keane?" Her voice was so low that he scarcely could hear the words.

"I think so," Steve said flatly and brutally. "If he didn't do it then he knows who did. I'm told that you're going to marry Ed Keane, Beth. Is that right?"

The girl dropped her hands from the fence and half turned as though she was going back to the house. Steve thought that she wasn't going to answer his question but she did finally. "Yes, I guess I'm going to marry him, Steve."

"Why?"

He saw the swift hardening of her face

as she swung back so that she was looking at him squarely. For a moment he forgot Deuce lying back there in the wagon yard; forgot, too, the long trail that had brought him back here to the valley. He regretted just a little that it was not possible to wash out those years—forget them and take up his life again where he had left it off.

"Does it concern you, Steve?" Beth asked harshly.

"Maybe it does."

"No, I don't think so. That all ended when you left three years ago, Steve. I told you so then."

A little bitterly Steve knew that it was so—a thing done and no use arguing about it now. There was another thing that troubled him, though, and he put it into words.

"What about Tom?"

"Dad?"

"Yes. Where does he stand in all this?"

Beth said slowly, "I don't know what you mean, Steve. In all this what?"

Impatience came back to tighten Steve's lips into a thin, hard line again. He lighted his cigaret, the flare of the match glowing briefly across the flat planes of his face, and tasted the smoke before he answered. When he did, his voice was bleak and tired.

"You're a woman—not a little girl. I've been back here less than twelve hours but even I can see that Ed Keane has put a spite on the valley and before that spite is done with there's going to be more than just lame Deuce Sands' death. Where does Tom stand in this? Is he Keane's man?"

"And if he is?"

"That's all that I wanted to know," Steve said harshly. "Goodbye, Beth. It looks like you and I are on opposite sides of the corral from here on in."

He went on down the street toward Doc Shandy's cabin, his boot heels tapping hollowly against the boards of the sidewalk. Beth Tremark watched him go, her hands clutching the palings of the fence until the knuckles glowed whitely. Then she started to cry silently and turned on back toward the house.

DOC SHANDY'S cabin was just off Utah Street and Steve went up a path overgrown with weeds. There was no light in the window but Steve kicked against the

door until an angry voice finally answered him.

"What the hell do you want?"

"In," Steve said tightly. "It's Handrahan, Doc."

"Oh, it is, is it?" Doc Shandy's voice answered angrily. "It's not enough that I have to get up in the middle of the night but I have to get up in the middle of the night for you!"

Steve could hear him climbing out of his bunk, still grumbling, but after a minute a lamp flared and the door opened. Doc Shandy was a lean, cadaverous man with drooping mustaches and a whiskey-reddened nose. He stood holding the door with one hand and hitching at his shapeless drawers with the other. Steve went in and pushed the door shut behind him.

"I'll take a drink if you've got it," he told Doc Shandy in a flat voice.

Doc Shandy waved a hand toward the half-empty bottle which stood on the table in the center of the room. The glass beside it showed that Doc had not gone to bed empty. Steve poured himself a small drink and watched while the other filled a tumbler half full and then tossed it off.

"Need it for my dyspepsia," Doc said, coughing and then grinning across his skull-like face. "That's a damned lie, of course. I don't need it at all but I damned well like it. Who's dead now?"

"Deuce Sands," Steve told him soberly. He sat down in one of the rickety chairs. "Shot twice through the left chest. There's nothing that you can do for him in a professional way, Doc."

"Then what the hell did you get me out of bed for? Who did it?"

"Person or persons unknown," Steve said wearily. "At a guess, though, I'd say that Luke Christy had a finger in it. He and I had words together in the Merrimac tonight and it might be that those bullets were meant for me. I'd appreciate it, Doc, if you'd see that Deuce is taken care of."

"Where is he?"

"Down in the wagon yard behind the Assay Office."

"Why don't you do it yourself?"

Steve lifted his glass and took a small sip of the whiskey while he gave Doc his flat attention. Doc Shandy was one of the few men in Round City that Steve really trusted—a drunk and meaner than hell but

he wore no man's brand except his own.

"I want to keep out of sight for a little bit, Doc," he said. "I've got a hunch that Tremark is going to be looking for me by morning. I had reason to come back here and I don't want to spend a part of my time locked up in jail. Keane's got a warrant out and unless I miss my guess Sheriff Tremark will serve it."

"Kill the fat fool," Doc Shandy said hoarsely. "He's been overdue for a killing for the past twenty years to my knowledge."

Steve shook his head and poured a little more whiskey into his glass. "I'm lookin' for a buck with bigger horns, Doc. You're an old timer in these parts. Can you remember back to the time that a man named Emory Folger held up the gold train in Bonanza Canyon?"

Doc Shandy picked up the bottle and filled his tumbler three-quarters full, emptying the bottle. He squinted at it for a moment and then went to the cupboard and returned with a fresh bottle. He sat down again and lifted his bare feet to the edge of the bunk—if the whiskey had any effect on him it was not apparent except in the increased brightness of his eyes.

"I can remember damned near anything I want to," he said maliciously. "And I can forget damned near anything I want to, too. Go ahead and ask."

"You remember when Idaho Red was gunned out there on Utah Street?"

Doc Shandy's face suddenly twisted into an angry mask. "Do I remember it? Of course I remember it, you young fool! Your dad was a friend of mine!"

STEVE NODDED. "I know. Three years ago Deucy Sands stumbled onto something in Bonanza Canyon that indicated that a man named Parker Strange was one of the gang that helped Folger hold up that gold train. I've been looking for this Parker Strange for three years and I've followed him back here to the valley. Then Deucy left a letter for me over on the Pahsimeroi saying that he had found out something more. I think that Parker Strange is the same man that killed Idaho Red."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I think that Deucy did but he was killed before he could tell me.

He said something about Tom Tremark but I couldn't get what it was and then he cashed it. Did Tremark and Idaho Red ever have trouble?"

Doc Shandy packed tobacco into his pipe and held a match over the bowl. The rank smell filtered through the cabin, heavy and oppressive against the sultriness of the night. It didn't bother Doc. He eased his feet more comfortably against the edge of the bunk and grunted a little.

"Maybe. There's a lot of it that I don't know, Steve. Tom Tremark come to the valley a couple of years before that business in Bonanza Canyon. He was a pretty steady young feller at first—had a nice wife and kid—and he took a job with Al Weber who was runnin' the stage an' freight line out of Bonanza. Tom and your dad wasn't what you'd call chums but they was friendly enough, I guess. That winter, though, Tom's wife run off with some other feller and it busted Tom up pretty bad. He quit his job with Al Weber and took to drinkin' pretty heavy and runnin' around with a no-good bunch. He got into a little trouble now and then—nothin' very serious, I guess—but Idaho Red kept tellin' that he was going to get into big trouble if he didn't watch his step. Tom didn't like to be told none."

Steve stirred a little and dropped his burned cigaret to the floor. "Could Tom Tremark have been the one that did the shooting, Doc?"

Doc Shandy didn't appear to have heard the question. He unfolded himself from his chair, went across the cabin and peered into the black mirror of the window for a long moment. The lines in his face were deeper as he came back to the table again and poured himself another drink.

"Whiskey's a bad thing," he mumbled absently. "I can't say that it's been a good friend to me. Still, it has its uses. Pour yourself a drink, Steve." He wandered around the cabin a little more and then came back to sit on the edge of the tumbled bunk. "The blow-off came two or three days before the Bonanza Canyon business. Tom was in the Merrimac pretty drunk that afternoon when your dad come in and Tom started talkin' loud about your dad bein' the one that persuaded his wife to run away. Idaho Red made him eat his words there in front of the crowd."

"You figure that Tremark was the one that did the shooting, then, Doc?"

Doc Shandy shook his head. "Hell, I don't know, Steve. There wasn't no evidence that said he did."

"Deucy Sand died trying to tell me something about Tom Tremark," Steve said soberly. "Yet I've been following the trail of a man named Parker Strange. Where does that tie in, Doc?"

"I never head of nobody named that."

"If my guess is right, he was one of the men that held up the gold train and got away. There's a link in there somewhere, Doc, and it ties up to somebody here in the valley. Did you know Emory Folger?"

"Yeah. I knew him. He was a likeable feller in a lot of ways." Doc Shandy stopped for a minute and pulled at his scraggly mustache. "He's back here, Steve. I guess you knew that."

"I heard it. Maybe he's got something that he'd like to say now."

Doc Shandy shook his head and started to say something—then stopped with his head tipped a little on one side. Boot heels tapped on the floor of the wooden porch outside and then knuckles hammered against the door, the sound making a booming and disquieting sound in the night. Doc Shandy turned his head, then, and stared angrily at the door as though it was to blame.

"All right. All right," he said. "Who is it?"

A heavy and somber voice said from beyond the planks of the door, "Sheriff Tremark. Let me in, Doc."

For a brief instant Doc Shandy swung his glance back on Steve but the latter paid no attention as he tipped off his drink and then busied himself with a cigaret. Doc grunted and then shuffled across in his bare feet to open the door.

TOM TREMARK was a big man, heavy through the shoulders and with a craggy face and white eyebrows that matched the whiteness of his hair. He came in, two men unknown to Steve following him. All of them were heavily-armed and Tremark stood at the edge of the lamplight with his eyes telling nothing as he looked slowly about the small room. Then his glance came back to Steve and stayed there.

"Sorry to trouble you, Doc," he said finally. "Only we trailed Steve here to your place and I've got a warrant for his arrest."

Steve leaned an elbow on the table, turning the tumbler about in his fingers. "So, Keane's got you pulling his chestnuts out of the fire, has he, Tom? What's the charge? That I slugged Luke Christy and told him to get out of town? That's something that you might well have done a long time ago yourself."

Faint surprise lifted Tremark's eyebrows a little. He shook his head a little and came farther into the room. "Steve," he said, "I kind of hate to do it but I got to arrest you for murder."

The pattern was all disordered, Steve thought irritably as he put down the glass and straightened in his chair. The two men with Sheriff Tremark crowded in through the narrow doorway and were standing there, watching narrowly. They'd do what they were told to do, Steve knew. Whatever the game was, Tremark held all of the cards right now.

"Whose murder?" Steve asked softly. "It wouldn't be for killing Deucy Sands, would it?"

Sheriff Tremark blinked a little and Steve could see him turning this over in his mind. "What about Deucy Sands, Steve?"

"Deucy was killed maybe an hour ago in the wagon shed down behind the Assay Office," Steve said, slapping his words out at the three men who stood in front of him. It pleased him to see the wash of uncertainty run across Tremark's face.

"How do you know, Steve?" Tremark asked. "What the hell is all this anyway?"

"I was with him," Steve murmured. "It wouldn't be too hard to guess that I was the one they were after, would it, Sheriff?"

"Who was after, Steve?"

"Figure it out for yourself," Steve told him shortly. "You're sheriff, aren't you? Who is it that I'm suppose to have killed?"

"Joe Rusk. We found him in his cabin up at the other end of town and you was seen runnin' away from there at just about the time the shootin' must of took place."

"Who saw me?"

For a moment Tremark didn't answer.

Then he glanced over his shoulder at his two deputies and they shuffled forward a little so that they flanked Steve on either side. Doc Shandy sat on the bunk in the shadows, watching with a faint spitefulness on his face but saying and doing nothing. Then Tremark jerked his heavy shoulders.

"It ain't no use to put up a fuss, Steve. You got to come along and I'll see that you get square treatment. Ed Keane is the one that saw you."

Steve's mind went back to the conversation that he had heard down in the Ajax Stable earlier that evening. He smiled tightly, though he was not amused. He had, he knew, taken Ed Keane a little too lightly and now Keane had him just about where he wanted him. For an instant he toyed with the idea of going for his gun—settling the thing here and now. Then he caught the warning in Doc Shandy's eyes and the slight shake of the other's head.

"Take his gun, Whitey," Tremark said in a voice which sounded a little strained. "I'm sorry about this, Steve. I—"

"Never mind that," Steve told him harshly. "Save it for Keane. All right. I'll go."

The four of them filed on out into the night and presently the echo of their footsteps died away.

AFTER a little Doc Shandy sighed and then unfolded himself from the bunk to pour a last slug of whiskey into his glass. He was just finishing it when he heard knuckles again tap cautiously at his door.

He said, "For Pete's sake, go way. I'm going to bed!"

The knuckles paid no attention but came back again, more insistent now. For a moment Doc considered blowing out the light and climbing back into his bunk. Then the habits of twenty years asserted themselves and he sighed a little and went on toward the door. A slim rider stood there, clad in Levis and booted and spurred.

"Well, what do you want?" Doc asked sourly.

A voice said, "Can you tell me where I can find Steve Handrahan, Doctor? I'm told that he's here in Round City and that he's a friend of yours."

It was a woman's voice. Doc Shandy

flinched a little, remembering his underwear as he crowded himself behind the open door. He thrust his head out turtle-wise.

The woman came on into the cabin, pushing the door shut behind her while she stood looking—amusement lighting her eyes a little as she saw Doc Shandy's discomfort. Doc knew who she was, then. The Ridley woman that Ed Keane had taken out to Circle D some months ago. He blushed embarrassedly and shuffled across to the bunk to pull a blanket off and wrap it about himself.

"Madam," he said, "sit down. I can offer you a drink and a cigar. I can also offer you some good advice. Round City ain't no place for a woman to be runnin' around in at this time of night."

She sat down at the table and smiled at him suddenly and Doc Shandy, a little surprised, thought that he liked her. He poured whiskey into two glasses and pushed one of them toward her. She looked at it for a moment, as though she didn't see it; then picked it up and tipped the liquor down as a man would do. Afterward she leaned her arms on the table and looked at Doc with a flat, direct stare.

"You haven't answered my question yet," she said.

The whiskey was beginning to make little patterns in Doc Shandy's brain now and he felt old and tired. For a moment he had forgotten what it was that this woman wanted to know. He wished that people would go away and let him alone so that he could go back to bed. Then Florence Ridley flung a hand toward him and her impatient voice brought him back.

"Where can I find Steve Handrahan?" she demanded for the second time.

Doc Shandy blinked a little; then grinned sardonically and shrugged his thin shoulders. "In jail," he said. "Our good Sheriff Tremark and a couple of Ed Keane's waddies come and took him out of here just before you came in. Now will you please get the hell out of here yourself, lady, and let me go to bed?"

"I saw them go," Florence Ridley said under her breath, paying no attention to Doc Shandy's request, "but I didn't know that Steve Handrahan was one of them."

"What you want him for?"

"He's got to help me."

Doc Shandy cackled drunkenly. "He can't help you now, girl. Steve needs plenty of help right now himself."

Florence Ridley put her hands on the table and looked at them for a long moment. Then she got back to her feet slowly and turned toward the door. "I guess you're right," she said. "Well, he's going to get it, Doctor."

"What?"

She smiled at him faintly. "Nothing for now. Just forget that you saw me tonight, will you? I'd appreciate it if you would."

V

THE FALSE DAWN WAS MAKING a thin, grey pattern against the window when Steve awoke from a sodden, dreamless sleep. For a moment he lay on the hard cot and tried to remember where he was; then memory came back to him and his mind groped out trying to fasten on whatever it was that had awakened him. It came again, a dry scraping against the bars of the window over his head. Then a voice whispered softly.

"Steve. Steve Handrahan."

He got up and moved around the foot of the cot until his face was close beside the window. Outside the jail shadows made a complex pattern under the cottonwoods and just beneath the window he saw the pale blur of a woman's face—saw that fingers were pushing something toward him through the bars. It was a heavy key and, as he took it, his fingers sensed the softness of a woman's hand.

A voice that he remembered vaguely said, "There's nobody around, Steve. I'll wait for you in the willow grove at the bend of the creek. It's better if I don't attract attention by staying here."

"Who are you?"

"Let that go for now. And hurry."

For a moment Steve debated with himself. He had attempted no resistance when Tremark had arrested him—something stubborn in him saying that this was the best way to bring the whole thing to a head. Later, he had doubted the wisdom of that and now he doubted it again. Finally he shrugged, pulled his boots on and went across to the single door of the jail. Someone else was dealing the cards now and he didn't know the game but he'd play along

for awhile—it might be that his luck was in.

The lock slid back easily and he swung the door open a little and looked out into the waning starlight. He saw and heard nothing and, after a minute, stepped on into the chill of the morning, pulling the door closed behind him and locking it again. At the back of his mind he had half expected that this was a trap and that the blast of gunfire would greet him but nothing stirred and he walked swiftly toward the willows fifty yards away.

He pushed on through them until he could hear the murmur of the creek and then he saw a cigaret-end glow in the half light and a vague shadow detached itself from the deeper shadows. A woman dressed in rider's clothes, Steve saw. He stopped and waited until she had come up to him and it was not until then that he saw that she had a belted gun in her hand and was holding it out to him. He murmured something under his breath and buckled it about his waist where its weight felt heavy and comfortable.

"I'm Florence Ridley," she said and waited a little as though she was expecting him to say something. He didn't and she went on, speaking quickly as though she was afraid that he wouldn't stay to listen. "I was in the dance hall in Virginia City the night that you fought McVain a year an' a half ago. Do you remember now?"

"I remember the Tivoli."

"When I saw you I thought that you would be a good man to come to if I ever needed help," Florence Ridley said with a sharp directness. "Well, I need help now—badly."

"That's why you got the key for me?"

"Yes, that's why. Listen, Steve, I know why you were in Virginia City and I think I know why you're here in the valley now. You want something and I think that I can give it to you—but for a price."

Steve waited and presently she moved closer to him so that he could smell the fragrance of her hair. He studied her face absently and saw character there and a faint desperation. When he didn't answer she went on.

"It just happens that I love Ed Keane, Steve. Don't ask me why." She laughed a little bitterly. "There have been a lot of other men that I might have loved instead

but it had to be him. I want to keep him. Now do you understand?"

Steve shook his head slowly. "What can I do about that?" he asked. "I never saw the man until I rode in here yesterday."

She answered his question with another question. "Did you kill Joe Rusk, Steve?"

"No, I didn't kill him."

"I didn't think so," she told him—then was silent for a long minute, biting at her lower lip. "Ed did it," she said finally with conviction. "I know it. And I think that Sheriff Tremark knows it, too, but he doesn't dare say so. That's the hold that I've got to have on Ed."

"You said that you had something I wanted," Steve said harshly. "It's going to be daylight pretty soon. Tremark, or one of his men, will come down and see that they've got an empty jail. Suppose you tell me what you're talking about."

"All right. You rode into Virginia City looking for a man named Parker Strange. Well, until he came back here to the valley, Ed Keane went by that name. That was the thing that you wanted to know, wasn't it?"

"Yes," Steve said soberly. "That was one of the things that I wanted to know. Now I'm not sure that it's enough."

HE STOPPED for a moment, turning the thing over in his mind. Then he told her about the letter that he had had from Deucy Sands over on the Pahsimeroi and about how Deucy had been killed back there in the wagon shed. "It still don't put the brand on the man who shot Idaho Red in the back," he told her.

"This will," Florence Ridley said in a tired voice. "I had hoped that maybe it wouldn't have to be told but a thing like this is about the same as an avalanche, I guess—once it gets to rolling there is no stopping it until it has gone all of the way. Ed Keane and Tremark were with Emory Folger in Bonanza Canyon that day. When Folger was hurt they pulled out, cached the gold and then holed up right here in Round City. They figured that that way Tremark wouldn't be suspected and Ed Keane could keep out of sight—he wasn't known in the valley then. Well, I guess that it didn't fool Idaho Red."

So it circled back to Beth's father after all, Steve thought absently. Well, things happened so and there was nothing that

could be done about it. Across the creek the sage clumps were beginning to take shape and substance in the dawn. A bird whistled cheerfully and there was a faint smell of smoke on the thin, clear air. Without thinking he rolled a cigaret; then tossed it away unlighted.

"Go on," he said.

"The two of them were drinking heavily," Florence Ridley said. "Tremark was the worst. Idaho Red came to the cabin that night to talk with Tremark about the hold-up but Tremark was too drunk to know what was going on. Ed Keane was hidden in the cabin, though, and he heard enough to know that Red suspected something so he followed him back down Utah Street and shot him in the back down by the Ajax Corral."

"You're sure of this?" Steve asked harshly.

Florence Ridley shook her head. "I've got no proof but that's the story, I think. I've put it together from a bit here and a bit there. I met Ed Keane in Butte three years ago—he was still Parker Strange, then. He liked me and told me that he was coming back here to the Mogollon Valley to collect something that was due him. He'd been in prison for a mail robbery, he said. Well, he collected, I guess, because he bought Circle D and then, a little while ago, he wrote and said that I could come. Now he's kicking me out again, Steve."

"Why?"

"It doesn't matter," she said tightly. "He's not going to get away with it."

"No," Steve told her in a flat, even voice, "no, he's not going to get away with it. I came back to the valley to find the man who killed my father. It looks like I've found him."

Florence Ridley swung around with a swift, violent gesture. She laid her hand on Steve's arm and he could feel the desperate clutch of her fingers as she thrust her face close to his own.

"Wait, Steve!" she cried. "Don't make your mind up yet. I've told you what I know but I'm not giving it to you for nothing. I told you that I wanted something in return."

"I know," Steve said. "What do you want?"

"Ed Keane!"

"No," Steve said. "What you've told me

has got no value if I do that. He killed Idaho Red and now he's got to pay for it."

"Steve," Florence Ridley said, "Idaho Red's been dead for twenty years and killing Ed Keane now won't bring him back to life. And, if it's punishment that you're thinking of, my way will torture him worse than any rope ever could. Don't you see?"

Steve didn't answer. Some sixth sense had suddenly warned him that danger lay somewhere beyond those willows. A twig had snapped with a faint crackle and, farther down the creek, a magpie had begun to scold with a shrill and outraged clamor. Steve motioned for the woman to be quiet while he listened but she either didn't see or paid no attention.

"Don't you see, Steve? He'll be running—always running. He can never go to sleep at night without the knowledge that someone may just be waiting for him to close his eyes. He can't take a drink without thinking that the man at the other end of the bar may be the one who is . . ."

STEVE heard the rustle in the willows, then, and knew that he had been right. He swung an arm toward Florence Ridley, trying to pull her to the ground, as a rifle blazed out with a ringing crash of sound which tore open the morning. A half-dozen other shots rang out and Steve felt a hot iron run along the upper part of his leg. He yanked at the gun as he fell, rolling himself into the shelter of a little hummock. He saw, bitterly, that he had been too slow and that Florence Ridley lay in a crumpled heap and he knew that she had been hit.

The gunfire died away as abruptly as it had come and Steve lay there, holding his fire and swearing under his breath with a bleak and chilling anger as he waited. Then he saw the tips of the willows stir a little and a man's voice said hoarsely, "My God, Luke, you killed the Ridley woman! This ain't—"

Steve forced himself to fire deliberately, spacing his shots at the height of a man's belly across the willows. Then the same man's voice yelled again.

"To hell with this! I'm getting out of here!"

Steve punched the hot shells out of the cylinder of his gun and crammed fresh loads in, his fingers steady and nerveless.

Before he could finish, he heard the sound of heavy bodies crashing away through the brush and, a moment later, gravel spattered down stream and the splash of shod horses in the water drifted back in the quiet morning.

Steve got slowly to his feet and went over to drop on one knee beside Florence Ridley while he gently straightened her out. She had been shot through the breast, he saw, and a glance was enough to tell him that she was dead. There was a strangely peaceful look on her face and, as Steve got back to his feet favoring his creased leg a little, he was somberly glad that he had not had to answer her last question.

"Likely enough you saved my life," he said gently. "I'm obliged and it's not likely that I'll forget it. And—I'll send Ed Keane along to join you," he added with lines making his face look hard and old.

Back in the willow clump he found where three men had stood, the spot patterned by scattered empties. Luke Christy had been there, he knew; probably it had been Indian Charley and Nels Bronson with him. He should have thrown his gun on the lot of them when he had had them together back there in the Merrimac, Steve thought bitterly. If he had done so Deucey Sands and this woman would both still be alive now. Well, the thing was done and it couldn't be helped. He stepped out of the willows to see Sheriff Tremark come around the corner of the jail a hundred yards away. He moved at a clumsy trot with his gun drawn and behind him came Doc Shandy and a gaunt, white-headed man that Steve hadn't seen before.

Steve pushed his own gun back into the holster and went on toward the little group as he saw them pull up sharply and halt to wait for him. Sun was just beginning to push above the spires of the Mogollons and the morning was sharp and cold. Steve shivered a little in the chill breeze as he pushed on by Sheriff Tremark without speaking and sat down on the steps of the jail while he fumbled for tobacco and papers.

"What—" Tremark began hoarsely.

Steve said, jerking his head toward the willows, "Over there by the creek. It's the Ridley woman. She's dead but you'd better go over and look at her, Tremark. I'll still be here when you get back."

Doc Shandy swore in a tired voice while Tremark stood there with his feet spraddled a little and an uncertain expression on his heavy face. "Come on, Tom," Doc said then. "For Pete's sake, can't you ever get anything through your thick head? It's none of Steve's doing—and if he says he'll be here when you get back then he'll be here."

The three of them moved slowly away as Steve sifted tobacco into the folded paper and slowly smoothed it out with his fingers. Then, after he had licked the flap shut, he dropped the cigaret between his boots and sat staring at the long shadows which were cast by the early morning sun.

VI

FOUR MILES OUT OF TOWN Luke Christy pulled his blowing horse down to a walk and swung his arm for his two companions to move up abreast on the trail. His face was sullen and heavy as he looked at the two out of the corners of his eyes.

"Well?" he asked.

They, too, were sullen and uneasy—Nels Bronson hunched over as though the cold bit unbearably at his thin shoulders and the breed, Indian Charley, scowling as he yanked viciously at his horse's head. In front of them the valley, still shadowy in the early morning, dipped in a series of rolling waves to where a dark line of trees marked the river eight miles away.

"It was a mistake," Luke Christy said hoarsely. He cleared his throat and spat. "She moved just as I shot, damn her. Anyway, she got what was comin' to her—she must have been spillin' everything she knew to that damned Handrahan."

"Me, I don't know anything about it," Indian Charley said, grunting a little. "I get one hundred dollar to kill this Handrahan. Me, I don't shoot at anybody else."

Luke Christy cursed him, dropping a big hand to the butt of his gun and swinging his big bay across the trail so that he blocked the way of the others. For a moment the three horses milled uncertainly in a tight little knot as Christy crowded his two companions. The man's eyes were dangerous and tenseness knotted the little group into a quick and watchful hostility.

"We're all in this business together,

damn your eyes!" Christy said harshly. "If you think that either of you are going to pull out and leave me holding the sack you've got another think coming and we'll settle it right here and now! You understand?"

It was the thin nasal voice of Nels Bronson that broke the tension. "Take it easy, Luke," he said mildly. "There ain't any reason that I can see why any of us should be into anything. Hell, this is our story. We were watching for Handrahan to come out of Doc Shandy's after we didn't get him at the wagon shed. Only, when he did come out, Tremark had him under arrest for killin' Joe Rusk and we figured that there wasn't nothin' more that we could do. Handrahan would probably hang for murder, anyway. So we come on back to Circle D and we don't know nothing about the Ridley woman."

"If we headed back to Circle D last night how come we ain't ridin' in until this morning?" Luke Christy asked sourly but he dropped his hand away from the gun.

"That's easy." Nels Bronson grinned through his stained teeth. "We was disappointed at not gettin' a crack at Handrahan so we had a couple of bottles an' we stopped to kill them on the way. Then we stopped some more to sleep it off. Keane ain't goin' to think nothing of that because it won't be the first time it's happened."

Luke Christy blinked heavily while he turned the thing over in his slow mind. Finally he swung around to the breed. "What you think about it, Charley?"

The latter nodded sullenly. "It will work, maybe."

The panic, which had been riding Luke Christy since the three had left Round City, began to die away as he swung his big horse back into the dust of the trail and gouged him with a spur. Arrogant self-assurance crept back into his scarred face and he grinned as he lifted his horse into a trot, the others following.

"Hell, you're right," he said. "I never thought of it that way, Nels. By now old Tremark has found out that Handrahan has busted out of his two-bit jail and likely enough has got a posse out after him. It ought to be easy enough to drop the word around here an' there that Handrahan killed the woman himself—an' nobody is

goin' to give a damn what *he* has got to say about it."

They jogged along for a half mile while the sun got higher above the Mogollons and the chill of the morning burned off. Presently Luke pulled a bottle from his pocket, took a long drink and then passed it on back to Nels Bronson.

"Ain't no use goin' into Circle D smellin' like no rose," he said, grinning hugely. "If we been on a bender we ought to smell like it. Here's breakfast, boys."

THE trail dropped into a shallow gulch and followed it, winding through clumps of aspen; then slanted upward again at a gentle climb until it came out on the sagebrush flat again. Christy slid around in his saddle to look back as they reached the far side and then yanked his horse viciously to a stop as he swore. A half mile back along the trail dust boiled up in a yellow cloud as a rider came swinging through the aspens, his horse running hard.

"Something's broke loose in town," Christy mumbled under his breath. "There ain't nobody that runs a horse like that just for the fun of it. Maybe he's takin' word to Keane about the Ridley woman."

Nels Bronson spat and loosened the carbine in the scabbard beneath his leg. "What if he is?" he asked in a tight-lipped voice. "Our story still holds water. Anyhow, there's three of us to one of him. Let's wait and see what he's in such of a hell of a hurry about, Luke."

He slipped the carbine out and backed his horse into the shelter of the tall sagebrush at the edge of the trail. For a moment Luke Christy hesitated; then he grunted assent and waved to the breed to take the trail's other side. Down below the rider disappeared in the trees for a moment and then his horse struck the foot of the gentle slope and came on up, blowing hard. Horse and rider were forty yards away when Nels Bronson yelled.

"Haul up, you, unless you want a bullet through your gizzard!"

The man straightened suddenly in the saddle, yanking his horse into a sliding stop which threw dust up in a spewing cloud, as he saw the three riders across the trail in front of him. Then, at Christy's command, he walked his horse on up the

trail and sat there with his hands on the horn of his saddle and sweat cutting little furrows across the dust which coated his face.

"You're that new deputy of Tom Tremark's, ain't you?" Luke Christy asked him, his eyes narrowed. "The one that come ridin' in from the Upper Country a couple of weeks ago."

The man shook his head. "I ain't no deputy any more," he said. His eyes slid furtively across the brands on the horses that the three men rode and some of the scare went out of the back of his eyes. "Say, ain't you fellers Circle D riders?"

"What if we are?" Christy asked roughly.

"Look, I'm workin' for Ed Keane, too, and there ain't no call for gunplay. Ed got me a job as deputy so I could sort of keep an eye on what Tremark was doin'. Now I got to see Keane because all hell has bust loose in town."

Nels Bronson drawled, "Keep talkin', kid. We sort of like to know more about this all hell that you claim has busted loose."

The rider flung out a hand in a vague gesture of protest. "We're wastin' a lot of good time but here it is if you say so. Tremark has busted himself over the traces. He's got a warrant out for Keane for murderin' a feller by the name of Joe Rusk and he's gettin' a posse together right now to come out to the Circle D and serve it. He means business and there's talk that he says he's goin' to bust Circle D wide open. Soon as I heard about it I forked a horse and started high-tailin' it for the ranch."

Nels Bronson eyed him sourly; then slid the carbine back into the scabbard as he looked at Luke Christy. "Sounds like we'd better ride," he said.

Luke Christy hunched his shoulders and narrowed his eyes a little. "Maybe we'd be smarter to break for the hills, Nels. There's a hell of a lot about this business that I don't savvy and what I do savvy I don't like. There's this Steve Handrahan comin' back, for one thing. His old man was a bad one, I hear, an' it sort of looks like this Steve takes after him."

Bronson sneered at him. "No guts," he said. "Make your break if you want to—me, I'm goin' on to the ranch. Ed Keane has got this alley sewed up tight and he's

got enough on old Tremark to lead him around by the nose. I figure that anybody that runs out on Ed Keane is in for a hell of a lot more trouble than either Tremark or this punk, Handrahan, can ever make for 'em. You coming, Charley?"

The breed grunted and nodded his head. Bronson waved an arm at the messenger who had come from town and then pushed his horse back into the trail. "Come on," he said. "Let's ride. If Luke wants to head . . ."

His words trailed off and he reached for the stock of the carbine again as the sound of a shod horse clicked off in the sagebrush to the left, horse and rider still hidden by the folds of the ground. "There's too damn many pilgrims wanderin' around out here this morning to suit me," he mumbled under his breath.

Then the horse came up over the little rise, a slender rider swaying in the saddle, and the ex-deputy reached out to lay a hand on Bronson's arm. "Hold it," he said quickly. "That's no man. That's the Tremark girl."

"Yeah," Bronson said tightly. "So I see."

BETH TREMARK didn't see the tight little group of riders waiting there at the trail's edge until she was a short hundred feet away. She had been riding, hands on the horn and her eyes fixed listlessly on her horse's ears, while she went over the events of the night for the hundredth time. The shock of Steve Handrahan's arrest for the killing of Joe Rusk had left her sleepless and, after a bitter quarrel with her father after he had returned from locking Steve in the jail, she had saddled her horse and ridden out of town at just about the same time that Steve was breaking jail. She had wanted to be alone where she could try and think things out; now, she was no nearer a solution than she had been when she started.

The creak of saddle leather as a horse shifted uneasily broke into her reflections and she looked up, startled, at the little knot of men who blocked the trail in front of her. Then she recognized the squat figure of Luke Christy and came on. He was one of Ed Keane's riders, she knew—nothing unusual that he should be here on the road to Circle D. As she reached the

trail she nodded good morning and started to swing her horse in the direction of Round City.

Then Christy's horse danced sideways, bumping into her own mount and she frowned a little with annoyance. "Mornin', Miss Tremark," Luke said, grinning confidently at her. From a little distance Nels Bronson watched Christy narrowly, wondering what had gotten into the man who had been ready to ride for the hills only a moment before. The cheerful bluster had come back into Luke Christy's voice and then Bronson grunted under his breath as he guessed what the other was up to.

Beth Tremark said curtly, "I'd like to get by, if you don't mind, Christy. I'm in a hurry to get back to town."

"Why?" Luke asked in an insolent voice.

A flush spread across the girl's face but she held her temper, slackening the reins in her fingers for a moment. "I can't see that it's any of your business," she said coldly. "But, if it is, I want my breakfast among other things. Now get out of my way."

"Nope," Christy told her. "I just got a little hunch that Ed Keane would like to see you at Circle D right bad this morning. So you're goin' out there with us. Savvy?"

Beth Tremark said through tight lips, "Get out of my way, you fat toad!" and jumped her horse at him. It was no good; Christy had been expecting it and he jammed the big bay in close as he grabbed for the girl. His fingers hooked in the collar of her shirt, half ripping it from one shoulder as he yanked her from the saddle.

She struck heavily in the dust and then Christy was off his own horse and reaching for her again. She struck wildly at his face but he was too big and too fast as he bent her arms behind her and yelled for the others to come and help.

"One of you grab her horse!" he bel-lowed. "Give me your rope, Charley. We're takin' this little wildcat to Circle D. Then maybe that damned Tremark won't be so keen on all of this war talk he seems to be makin'!"

The breed slid down off his horse and padded through the dust, grinning evilly. Beth Tremark, panting and her face white and scared, kicked at Christy's ankles as they scuffled there. Then the breed dropped

the loop of his rope over her head and yanked it tight above her elbows.

"Behave yourself, sister," Luke Christy told her. "If you don't I'll enjoy slappin' some sense into you. You're going to Circle D if I have to pack you across your saddle like a sack of potatoes. We're not just playing now and you might as well get that through that pretty little head of yours."

"Steve Handrahan will kill you for this," the girl panted.

"O-ho," Christy said. "So it's Steve Handrahan, is it? Well, maybe he will—if he don't get himself killed first. Give me a hand, Charley. We'll boost her up into the saddle and rope her feet."

Sheriff Tremark's ex-deputy had taken no hand in what was going on and his eyes were shocked as he sat watching. Now he wheeled his horse suddenly.

"I ain't goin' to have any part in this!" he yelled. "To hell with you and to hell with Ed Keane, too!"

He drove spurs into his horse, lifting him into a run on the back trail towards Round City. Nels Bronson swore and reached for the carbine but his horse reared and Bronson had to fight the animal down before he could get the weapon clear. When he finally reached the lip of the gulch the rider was a good two hundred yards away. Bronson dropped on one knee and began to shoot carefully. At the third shot he saw the rider sway sideways for a moment; then he recovered his balance, leaning far forward, and in a moment was out of range.

Bronson came back, stuffing cartridges into the magazine of the carbine. "Got away," he said tightly. "Let's ride."

VII

DOC SHANDY MADE COFFEE and fried eggs on the small stove at the back of the cabin while he listened to the story that Steve repeated wearily to Sheriff Tremark. The two were seated at the table which was still littered with the whiskey bottles that Doc Shandy had killed last night. The gaunt, white-headed man that Steve had first seen at the jail earlier, sat on Doc's bunk with his elbows on his knees while the morning light, coming through the dirty window to his left,

glinted against the tight skin of his face. He was Emory Folger, the man who had planned the robbery of the gold train in Bonanza Canyon twenty years before.

"Well, that's the story," Steve said. "You can believe it or not. There are plenty of details that I reckon Folger can fill in if he wants to. I don't give a damn. There are other details that Doc Shandy can give you. Is that right, Doc?"

"That's right."

Sheriff Tremark sat with his hands spread out on the table and his face was grey and old. "It's true enough," he mumbled under his breath. "Only you have not heard the whole of it. I was drunk, like the woman said. Ed Keane—he was Parker Strange then—made me believe that I was the one who had killed Idaho Red. He said that I had killed him there in the cabin and that he had then carried Idaho down to Utah Street and dumped him there by the corral."

"Holy hell!" Doc Shandy said under his breath. Tremark seemed not to have heard him.

"Keane said that he was a stranger in the valley and that would make people suspect him so he lit out—meant to come back when things had quieted down a little. I heard he got caught in that mail robbery—then I didn't hear anything more for close to fifteen years—not until he come back here to the valley an' bought the Circle D."

Emory Folger stirred in the bunk by the window. His voice was flat and expressionless and it showed neither regret nor anticipation. "What about the gold?" he asked coldly.

Tremark shook his head. "I never went back to it. I don't know—probably Keane got it. He paid a big price for Circle D, I know. When he came back to the valley the first thing he did was to put his spite on me again. I've jumped through the hoop for him ever since he's been back. I didn't want to but there was always Beth that I had to think about."

Doc Shandy, frying eggs at the back of the cabin, swore and spat on the floor. Tremark turned to look at the old man with lack-luster eyes; then turned back with his head dropped against his chest. Over in the bunk, Emory Folger threw back his head suddenly and laughed with

a thin cackle which had little merriment in it.

"Gawd a'mighty!" he said, "You take it hard, Tom. You and Strange ran off and left me to face the music there in the canyon alone. And *you've* been running loose for twenty years while I've been cooped up behind stinking prison walls!"

Tremark paid no attention. "How can I be sure about the rest of this?" he asked in a querulous and uncertain voice. "There's Rusk and the Ridley woman . . ."

DOC SHANDY suddenly slammed the pan full of eggs to the cabin floor and stalked across to the table, his white mustache bristling as he wiped his hands on the flour sack which he had tied about his waist as an apron. Steve stared at him indifferently, making a cigaret, but it was not at Steve that Doc's stare was directed. He glared down at Tremark and the sheriff could not return the smaller man's scornful gaze.

"You listen to me, Tom," Doc Shandy said. "For a hell of a lot of years I have been delivering the kids here in the valley and patching up the broken legs and poulticing the gun shot wounds of you and the rest of the rowdies around here. And during most of that time I have watched you sneaking around with your tail between your legs. For the last three years I have had to watch worse while you pimped for that louse out at Circle D. And now, when you've got a chance to act like a man, what do you do? By God, you sit there with your head in your hands and moan!"

Doc Shandy swung on his heel with a swift motion and his thin shoulders seemed to square a little as he went across to the cupboard at the far end of the cabin. He fumbled there for a minute and, when he came back, he was buckling a gun belt about his waist. Steve looked at him soberly and then felt a sudden warm spot for the little man begin to spread in him.

"Either you're goin' to lead a posse to Circle D," Doc Shandy said, "or I'm goin' to do it. And, if I do, I'll see to it that you hang along with a lot of other mangy coyotes that have been running these hills too long!"

Over on the tumbled bunk Emory Folger stirred his skinny frame with a quick animation. "Count me in, Doc," he said.

"Only, Parker Strange or Ed Keane or whatever he wants to call himself is mine. You hear? I have bought him with twenty years behind a jail fence."

Sheriff Tremark stirred his thick shoulders a little and pushed back his white hair as he stood up. His face was flushed and red as he glanced first at Steve; then turned his slow gaze to Doc Shandy who was standing in front of the smoking stove with the gun belt sagging loosely against his hips.

"It's hard to break a pattern," Tremark mumbled. "Still, the pattern's got to be broke. I'll get a posse, Doc. We'll head for Circle D in half an hour. I take it that the three of you will ride with me."

"You're damned right we will!" Doc Shandy told him. "If I were you, Tom, I'd move myself right fast in gettin' started on this, too!"

Tremark nodded, a faintly dazed expression still shadowing his heavy face as he turned toward the door. Fresh morning wind came in as he opened it; then it closed behind him and the three who remained in the cabin could hear his footsteps echo hollowly as he went on down the board walk. Doc Shandy glared for a moment and then went back to pick the frying pan up from the floor.

"Hell!" he said sourly, breaking fresh eggs into the pan. "And then they shoot a man like Idaho Red!"

"Let it go," Steve said. "Let it go."

Doc Shandy shrugged and carried a coffee pot to the table. "Get some of this grub into you—you, too, Emory. This business is like a cancer, Steve. It's been growin' here in the valley for a long time and now we've either got to cut it out or the patient dies. You know what I mean? Well, we're goin' to make a clean cut today."

Steve nodded and kicked a chair around to the table. The coffee was hot and good and presently he began to feel better. Outside the dirty window Round City was beginning to come to life. Across the way at the Ajax Corral the hunch-backed stable hand was swearing as he forked out hay and the Bonanza stage rattled down Utah Street toward the Tovar House. Doc Shandy was still mumbling angrily as he stamped up with eggs and flapjacks.

"There ain't any other way," he said. "Either Tom Tremark goes through with

this or he brands himself as being in the other corral and he swings along with the rest of them. You used to be sweet on Beth, didn't you, Steve?"

Steve jerked his shoulders. "Yes," he said shortly.

"There's none of us that would think any the less of you if you were to ride on out of the valley this morning," Doc Shandy said in a curiously gentle voice. "After all, it ain't exactly your fight an' . . ."

Steve swung around angrily and laid a bleak stare on the older man. "The hell it isn't!" he said harshly. "Why do you suppose I came back to the valley in the first place?"

Doc Shandy smiled with a tight crisping of his lips—as though he had made a desired point—but Steve was listening to the scrape of feet outside the door and paying no attention. Sheriff Tremark came back in then and his face was grey.

"Get ready to ride," he said harshly. "I've got fifteen men saddling now."

They were a mile on their way—a tight and compact little group that rode purposefully and without much talk—before Sheriff Tremark told Steve and Doc Shandy that his ex-deputy had ridden back into town with a bullet through his chest and word of what had happened out there on the road to Circle D. Steve said nothing but Doc Shandy, riding a little behind, pursed his lips.

"The sins of the fathers," he mumbled.

IT WAS ten o'clock in the morning when Luke Christy and his two companions, towing Beth Tremark's horse behind them, rode into Circle D. An old man stared with startled eyes from the blacksmith shop but other than that the place looked deserted. Christy, all of his bravado returned now, led the little procession past the empty corral and the bunk house and up to where the rambling ranch house sprawled in the morning sun. As they rounded the corner Ed Keane came out onto the verandah, blinking a little.

He stared for a long moment, his mouth dropping open a little as he saw Beth Tremark. Then his lips tightened into a harsh line and red boiled up into his face as he dropped his hand to his belt—remembered tardily that he had left his gun back inside the house.

"What the hell is this?" he demanded thickly. "Beth . . ."

Luke Christy, enjoying himself as he saw that Keane was unarmed, said, "Take it easy a minute, Ed, until you hear a couple of things that I've got to tell you about this."

He slouched there in the saddle, his weight on one leg, while he told Keane the things that he had learned. The latter listened, his heavy face settling into ever deeper lines as he guessed the answer with increasing certainty. If Tom Tremark was riding to Circle D with a posse, the thing that he had held as a secret was a secret no longer. Keane did not try to fool himself—it was, he knew, a showdown and there was no choice left to him except to fight or to run. He stirred himself a little and then was aware of the girl's eyes staring scornfully at him. The sight of her torn shirt and dusty hair stirred him to a show of anger that he didn't really feel.

"I didn't have anything to do with this, Beth," he said in an attempt to save face while, at the same time, the back of his mind was busy calculating the advantage that possession of the girl might give him. Then he swung his stare back to Luke and his two companions. "Let her loose, damn you! I'll settle with you later for this!"

Luke Christy shook his head. "Nope. Not yet, Ed. We figure that if Tom Tremark is headed this way with a posse he ain't goin' to be just after you. He's goin' to be after all of the rest of us, too. Well, we got his daughter and it looks right much like she's our ace in the hole. Tremark's been backin' you up in some pretty shady deals since you come to the valley. I figure that maybe the girl can persuade her old man that maybe he'd better just forget about this warrant business and let things go along like they were before."

Beth Tremark said between her teeth, "I wouldn't lift my little finger to save any of you!"

Luke Christy turned in his saddle a little to leer at her with his mouth slack and loose. "I reckon you would, sister, if you were persuaded right . . . an' I'm a pretty good persuader."

"Listen, Beth," Keane said hoarsely, throwing out a hand, "the whole thing is a mistake. Just as soon as I can talk to Tom . . ."

She swung a furious face toward him. "Make these fools untie me!" she stormed at him. "I'm riding back to Round City right now! Do you understand? And what I'll have to tell will be enough to see that the lot of you hang! Now let me go!"

Nels Bronson, who had ridden a little way beyond the ranch house to where he could see down into the valley, now spurred back. His face was tight and his eyes were bright and hard.

"Keane," he said, "where are the rest of the boys?"

"At the upper ranch."

"All of them?"

"Twelve," Keane said irritably. "Ed Forrester's got the rest of them working the middle fork of the Quartz."

Nels Bronson spat and then swore. "That's a good day's ride from here—even if we could get word to them."

"Well, what of it?" Keane wanted to know.

Bronson stared at him with a flat, intense look. "Keane," he said, "we'd better be ridin' fast for the upper ranch. There's a big cloud of dust maybe five miles down the valley and it's my guess that that is Tom Tremark with his posse. From the way they're travellin' they sure mean business."

THE rancher rubbed a hand across his face and then his mouth settled into a heavy, stubborn line. The thing could be put off no longer, he knew. He was ruined if he either submitted to arrest or ran; on the other hand, holed in at the upper ranch with close to a score of his riders behind him, he might bargain with Tremark. The sheriff was a weak man and his daughter's safety would be a powerful argument—Tremark could find some way to satisfy Round City. Keane made up his mind swiftly and felt a little up-surge of elation now that the indecision had left him.

"Catch up a horse for me," he said abruptly to Nels Bronson. "We're riding for the upper ranch."

Beth Tremark demanded again, "Are you going to let me go, Ed Keane?"

He looked at her without saying anything; then wheeled sharply and disappeared into the house. A moment later he

came back, his gun belted about him and two rifles in saddle scabbards in his hands. Nels Bronson, he saw, had caught up a horse and was throwing a saddle onto it over by the blacksmith shop, working with swiftly efficient haste. Keane stepped down into the dust and went to stand close to Luke Christy, the neck of the latter's horse hiding him from the girl.

"Did you get Handrahan last night?" he asked in a low voice.

Christy shook his head. "We were too late. We lay for him outside Doc Shandy's cabin but when he come out Tremark had him under arrest an' we didn't get a chance. We figured—"

"Never mind," Keane said harshly. "Too bad you didn't but it can't be helped now. Handrahan is the weak link in any plan to bargain with Tremark. You think he's in that posse?"

"Yeah. Doc Shandy, too. We'll get 'em both once we get 'em into Wagon Wheel Canyon."

Keane swore fretfully and went around Christy's horse to hand one of the scabbarded rifles to Indian Charley. He said over his shoulder, "Luke, you and Charley drop off when we get to the mouth of the canyon and work up into the rim rock. Pick off Handrahan and Doc Shandy and then go on to the ranch by the upper trail. Understand?"

Luke Christy turned a little to look at Beth Tremark sitting on her horse, her hands tied to the saddle horn and her face stony. Then he shook his head. "Nope," he said and spat deliberately. "We're all in this thing together, Ed, and we're all going to the ranch together. If you want to stay at the mouth of the canyon I'll stay with you but I don't stay alone."

For a moment Keane's eyes were murderous and the fingers of his right hand twitched. Then he saw the watchfulness in Christy's face and turned away, shrugging his shoulders. He had lost his authority over these men, he knew; he would not get it back again until he was a free agent once more with the weight of the law and Circle D behind him. When that time came he'd not forget to make Luke Christy sweat good, he thought grimly. Then Nels Bronson came trotting up, leading a powerful black, and Keane swung himself heavily into the saddle.

They moved out at a smart trot, Nels Bronson and the breed leading and Luke Christy bringing up the rear. Between them were Keane and Beth Tremark, Keane leading the girl's horse. After a while the trail left the valley and began to angle upward into the foothills of the Mogollons which lifted, somber and forbidding, above the flatness of the valley floor. The trail steepened but Nels Bronson held the horses to a steady trot; turning now and then in his saddle to look back across the carpet of purple sage which lay across the valley.

After three-quarters of an hour of riding they reached the mouth of Wagon Wheel Canyon—a black gut which poured the east fork of Quartz River out of the upper valley. Here they reined in for a little to allow the horses to blow and Keane took field glasses from his saddle bags and dismounted to focus them on the ranch below. A half dozen horsemen were riding straight toward the ranch house, he saw; two other tight little groups of riders were flung wide on either flank to approach the house from the side.

"Expecting a fight," Keane muttered.

He jammed the glasses back into the saddlebags and flung up his right arm in a gesture to ride. Behind him he heard Indian Charley cluck at his horse and then the little column moved on and was lost after a minute in the gloom of the steep-sided canyon.

STEVE HANDRAHAN and Doc Shandy rode with Sheriff Tremark across the dusty flat in front of the horse corral as they headed for the front of the deserted ranch house. They held rifles at the ready but it was plain enough now that Ed Keane had gone. As the three halted in the lee of the deserted verandah one of the posse shouted and then came around the corner herding an old man in front of him.

"Hey, Tom," he said, "I found this hidin' in the blacksmith shop."

It was a broken down rider known as Johnny Grubbs, Steve saw. He eased himself in his saddle and made a cigaret while Johnny hobbled across the dust on bowed legs. Tremark, his face yellow and sick looking in the noon sun, motioned for the man to stop.

"Where's Keane?" Tremark asked.

Johnny Grubbs spat and looked at the circle of riders which was closing in from three sides now that it was apparent that the birds had flown. Then he jerked his thin shoulders. "You got me, Sheriff," he said, squinting against the glare. "Ed Keane don't tell me a hell of a lot as to where he's goin' when he goes."

There was a shade of insolence in his voice—he had seen Tom Tremark ride out to Circle D with a posse before but he had never seen anything much come of it. Doc Shandy pushed his horse closer and there was a wicked look in his eyes. The old man was enjoying himself.

"You'd better by a damn sight do some good guessing then," he said. He turned to the sheriff. "Tom, I reckon this ranny is as good as the next to start in on."

Tremark hesitated for a moment; then he nodded his head and spoke a curt word to one of his cowboys. The rider shook out his rope, flipping the loop open, and the bravado suddenly left Johnny Grubbs.

"Wait a minute! Wait a minute!" he yelled. "I'm just a hand that works here an' I ain't gettin' mixed up in any of Keane's crazy doings! I'll tell what I know."

"Get to telling then," Doc said.

"Luke Christy and Nels Bronson and the breed rode in here maybe an hour and a half ago," the man said sullenly. "They had the sheriff's daughter with them tied to her horse. Luke talked to the boss for a little bit and then all of them headed for the hills."

"Where's the rest of Keane's crew?" Steve demanded harshly.

"Part of 'em are over on Quartz River. The rest are up in the upper valley."

"Keane take the trail to the upper valley?"

"He headed that way."

"How many riders has he got up there?"

"Ten—twelve, maybe," Johnny said. Christy's regular crew—most of 'em."

Sheriff Tremark straightened his shoulders. "We're wasting time," he said shortly. "Come on, let's go."

It was well after noon when they reached the mouth of Wagon Wheel Canyon. Fresh trail marks showed that a party of riders had been that way earlier and there was little doubt but that Keane had

headed for the upper ranch. Tremark waited until Steve and Doc Shandy had pushed their horses up beside him.

"There's a trail that goes up over the rim rock," he said. "I've never been over it but some have—I guess it's pretty bad. You know it, Steve?"

"I know it," Steve told him shortly. "It's a horse killer but you can get over it."

"Keane knows well enough that we're coming after him," Tremark went on heavily. "He can give us a hell of a fight in the canyon—maybe even keep us from gettin' through. If we could get a few men across the rim rock and down in behind him it would make things better."

"I'll get across," Steve said in a flat voice. "I'll take Slim Stevens and Marty along with me. Doc had better stay with you."

Steve didn't bother to conceal the reason why he thought that Doc Shandy should stay with the sheriff—Tom Tremark had gotten too used to doing what Ed Keane told him to do. Tremark understood the implication and his face darkened a little; then he shrugged his heavy shoulders.

"Suit yourself," he said.

Emory Folger stirred himself a little in the saddle. "I'd like to go along the rim with you, Steve," he said.

Steve shook his head. "It's a rough trip," he said, then added bluntly, "and you haven't been doing a hell of a lot of riding lately, Folger. You'd better go along with the rest."

THE old man sat there with his hands folded on the saddle horn while he looked at Steve. There was a tight, hard quality about his face which hadn't been there before and Steve, noting it, realized that maybe he was making a mistake here. He wasn't fooling himself any about the toughness of the job that lay ahead and, while Slim Stevens and Marty were both good boys, they—like the rest of the posse—were just townsmen or cow hands. Emory Folger was something else—he was the man who had held up the gold train in Bonanza Canyon.

Folger guessed what he was thinking. He said, "If Keane's crew tries to make a fight in the canyon Keane won't be there—not if I know that yellow louse. He'll be

back at the ranch with the girl trying to figure out some way to save his hide. I told you once that Keane is mine. I bought him!"

Steve suddenly threw up his hand. "You win, Folger. If you can't keep up don't expect us to wait for you—but you can come along if you want."

He swung his horse off the trail to the left and started toward a brush covered ridge which angled up toward the top of the canyon. Emory Folger followed with Slim Stevens and Marty coming along behind. Doc Shandy sat calmly watching them go.

"Steve'll do it," he said finally. "Let's ride, Tom."

Steve and his three men entered the timber presently—pinon and jack pine—and, after an hour's hard climbing, they reached the backbone of the ridge. They followed no trail, Steve angling back and forth as he searched for the easiest way up. Here on top, though, there were occasional indications that riders had gone this way to the upper valley. A windfall chopped through here and there; old horse droppings or an ancient blaze with the pitch dry and old on it. The main ridge continued to climb toward the scarred cliffs which they could see when infrequently the timber opened a little.

It was hot and the day was still except for the gentle *whoo* of the wind across the tree tops or the shrill cry of a camp robber which flapped away at their approach. Steve pushed the horses hard, concentrating his attention on the faint trail and forbidding his mind to speculate on what might be going on there at the upper ranch or down in Wagon Wheel Canyon. He had no illusions as to what Keane might do once he realized that he was trapped.

The four of them threaded their way across a mile-wide slash where a forest fire had passed leaving a tangle of down timber. The going here was slow and hard. Farther on there was a wicked slope filled with slide rock where they had to pick their way on foot, hauling their uneasy horses after them and threading a path toward the broken and weathered boulders which had fallen from the rim and which lay ahead. Steve guessed that it was two o'clock by the sun when they finally reached the rim.

THEY stopped to breathe the horses for a little and to eat the sandwiches which they carried in their saddlebags. Emory Folger's face was lined and drawn—white with a sickly pallor—but he said nothing as he crouched in the shade of a boulder and made a cigaret with shaking fingers. Steve looked at him sharply; then shrugged his shoulders. Six miles of tough going still lay ahead of them and, if Folger couldn't make it, nothing much could be done about it now.

He got stiffly to his feet and said, "Let's go,"—the first words he had spoken since they had left the rest of the posse down at the mouth of the canyon.

"Much farther?" Slim Stevens asked, getting up with his face sweat streaked and his shirt clinging damply to his shoulders.

"Half a dozen miles maybe," Steve told him. "It'll take us close to sundown to make it. It's bad country."

He jerked his hand briefly toward the tangled upheaval of broken cliffs and towering spires which gleamed redly in front of them. The gut of the Wagon Wheel lay off to the left and, beyond, the Mogollons lifted fold on fold. Steve swung himself into the saddle, stiff after the short halt, and waited impatiently for the others to mount. Folger got to his feet with an effort; then sank back with his face twisted in pain and a hand pressed tight against his thin chest.

"What's the matter?" Steve demanded sharply.

Sweat beaded the old man's face in great, glistening drops and he shook his head a little as though to drive away a fog which had drifted in front of his eyes. Slim Stevens dropped from his saddle again and went across to kneel by the old man, swearing a little under his breath.

"I'll be all right," Folger said weakly. "It's just the height—makes me go sort of dizzy once in a while. My heart ain't very good any more."

Slim got to his feet again and came across the dozen yards to where Steve waited. "He's done for," Slim said in a low voice. "Only thing to do is leave him here and send somebody after him later, Steve. He'll die sure if we try an' take him across that country out in front."

They unsaddled Folger's horse and tied the animal a little ways off the trail; then

spread the saddle blanket and laid the old man on it in the shade of a boulder. Folger didn't say anything. His eyes were closed and he was breathing heavily. Marty, a freckled faced youth with slim shoulders, looked at Steve.

"He's pretty bad off, he said uncertainly. "Maybe one of us ought to stay with him, Steve."

The latter shook his head while his mouth tightened into a grim line. "He took his chance," he said. "The rest of us have got a job of work to do at the upper ranch. The only thing we can do is to send back for him later. Come on."

The shadows were beginning to lengthen swiftly when Steve finally led his two riders out of the timber and onto a shelving slope which dropped steeply. Below them some ancient glacier had scooped a great bowl out of the hills and the sun down there was still bright on grass and sage. To the left Ed Keane's upper ranch clung to the edge of the broken hills—a cluster of squat buildings half hidden in the jack pine. Smoke curled from the chimney of the main cabin and horses milled in the corral.

Steve pulled up at the edge of the timber while he studied the layout below, his ears straining for some sound that would tell him whether or not Tremark and Doc Shandy and the rest of the posse had reached the upper end of the canyon. He heard nothing at first except the steady whine of the wind in the trees and the restless movements of the horses behind him.

"They should have beat us here by a good hour," he said under his breath, "unless Keane's men jumped them while they were still in the canyon. If there was a fight down there we might have heard it and then again we might not have. I'd give a lot to have a good pair of field glasses right now."

Then the wind died away for a moment and he suddenly heard the sound that his ears had been straining for—the far away and muffled spang of a rifle followed by a dozen more. Then the wind came back again and the murmur of the trees drowned out the sound of the fight that went on down there.

Steve sent his horse plunging down the slope with Slim Stevens and party pound-

ing close behind him. They had covered less than half of the distance to the flat when pistol shots echoed sharply from the direction of the clustered buildings—then a man came around the corner of the main cabin, running awkwardly toward a saddled horse which had been hitched at the corral. He flung himself up and spurred madly toward the upper end of the meadow.

“It’s Keane!” Steve yelled in a hoarse voice. He swung an arm toward the two men behind him. “Head him off! I’m going on down to the cabin!”

He drove spurs into the flanks of the tired grey and headed straight down the slope in a billowing cloud of dust as his two companions raced away at an angle.

VIII

THE SUN HAD DISAPPEARED behind the rim rock and shadows were beginning to fill the canyon as Ed Keane crouched behind a boulder and pushed fresh cartridges into the magazine of his rifle with shaking fingers. A rifle whanged off to the left, the sound echoing hollowly back and forth between the broken walls. It was answered by three more shots, all coming from a rocky shelf a hundred feet above the canyon floor. Keane winced and ducked as he heard a bullet whine spitefully as it ricocheted off the rocks.

Luke Christy crawled through the brush, sweat shiny on his scarred face as he looked at the big rancher. “We’re done for, Keane,” he said grimly. “Half the boys have quit and gone on over to Tremark. He’s not after them and they know it. The only thing left for the rest of us is to scatter as soon as it gets dark enough and take a chance on getting back to the hills.”

Keane sat there blinking stupidly at the other. Then suddenly near panic darkened his eyes. “No,” he almost shouted. “They’ve got nothing that they can prove on me! I shouldn’t have let you talk me into making a fight in the first place! You’re the one that kidnapped the girl, Christy! I’m going to . . .”

His voice trailed off uncertainly as Christy squatted there, looking at him. “You’re going to do what?” Christy asked in a flat and dangerous voice.

“Nothing,” Keane mumbled.

Christy spat contemptuously. “And you’re supposed to be the tough gent that’s been running the valley for three years now!”

He crawled off through the brush again. For a moment Keane crouched there staring after him; then rifle fire boiled out of the far side of the canyon once more and swift, unreasoning fear gripped the man. He left his rifle where it lay and began to inch backwards through the boulders which lined the floor of the canyon; after he had gone fifty yards he scrambled to his feet and began to run, the skin between his shoulder blades tight against the bite of an anticipated bullet. He was panting hoarsely as he reached the empty meadow.

His chest seemed on fire and a sharp pain stabbed at his side as he slowed to a walk, keeping to the shelter of the trees along the meadow’s edge and making his way back toward the ranch. It was fifteen minutes later when he crossed the little creek and paused for a moment to give the little cluster of buildings a careful survey. He had left Nels Bronson here with the girl but he could see no sign of the man now and he grunted with satisfaction.

He would take the upper trail and, with a little luck, he would be in Round City before daylight. He had money in Round City—plenty of money. With that in his hands Sheriff Tremark or any of the rest of them would play hell catching him. For a moment he thought of taking Beth Tremark with him; then gave the idea up as being too risky. To hell with her, he thought. Let Luke Christy or some of the rest take her on back into the hills with them and see how Tom Tremark liked that!

He went swiftly across the little flat toward the corral. A couple of sheds screened him from view from the cabin where he had left Nels Bronson and the girl. He caught up his big bay and his hands were steady as he saddled the horse and then tied him to the corral gate. When he had finished he loosened his forty-five in its holster and went swiftly across toward the big cabin. There were certain things there that he had to get before he left—Nels Bronson might try to cause trouble but Keane was ready for it, he thought.

He crossed the porch, walking softly on the balls of his feet, and pushed open the

door. It was dim inside as Keane slipped through. Then his mouth dropped open a little and he stood, frozen in his tracks, as he stared. Nels Bronson was sitting at the table with his arms stretched out, palms up, and his thin face twisted into a malevolent mask. Beth Tremark stood across the table from him. Her clothing was torn and disarrayed and there was a long scratch across one cheek but her eyes were bright and hard, and the gun in her hand was steady.

Keane said involuntarily, "My God, what . . ."

The girl started and half turned toward the door, the gun swinging away from Bronson for a moment. It was what the man had been waiting for. He heaved the table up and over as he jumped for the girl, yelling at Keane.

"Grab her, Ed!"

Panic seized Keane as he jerked at his gun—saw Beth swing back and shoot. Nels Bronson staggered as Keane fired twice wildly; then the latter dodged back through the door and started running crazily for the corral. He got a leg across his horse, swearing viciously as he tried to wipe the picture of Beth's face from his mind—a flashing picture of her crumpling with a hurt, surprised look in her eyes after his second shot. He knew, then, that his luck had run out as he spurred across the meadow.

There was a shout on the slope high above him and he saw three riders explode out of the timber. They split and two of them were swinging wide to cut him off as he beat madly at his horse.

STEVE yanked his badly-blown horse to a stop in front of the cabin and dropped to the dust, gun in hand. The cabin door was swinging open and, as he went through, the smell of burned powder was thin and acrid against his nostrils. His eyes adjusted themselves to the dimness and Steve swore bitterly at what he saw. Nels Bronson lay in the middle of the floor, his legs sprawled loosely, and Steve stepped over him to cross the cabin and drop on one knee beside Beth Tremark.

"Beth!" he said hoarsely. "For God's sake, Beth!"

She was limp as he lifted her into his arms and pushed back her hair. The bullet had plowed a long furrow across the side

of her head and Steve's fingers shook as he explored the wound—then the breath went out of him in a long sigh as he found that it was shallow—just a scratch.

He picked her up from the floor and carried her through a doorway which led off the main cabin. There was a bunk with tumbled blankets beneath a window and he laid her tenderly on it; then went to find something for bandages and to heat water. Shouts from the yard outside stopped him abruptly.

Through the window he saw that three men on foot were running heavily toward the corral. He recognized Luke Christy and the breed, Indian Charley. The third man he didn't know. A tight and grim satisfaction settled over Steve as he walked slowly out onto the porch and stepped down into the dust.

He called piercingly, "Christy!"

Luke Christy stopped, his scarred face twisted and heavy. Then Indian Charley turned to look, his dark face shining in the dying sunlight, as he dodged for the shelter of the saddle shed followed by the third rider. Christy half turned to jump for safety, too, but Steve's voice held him.

"Make your play," Steve said thinly. "I'll put a bullet between your shoulder blades if you try to run."

Steve moved forward through the dust with a vast deliberation, stopping when he was ten paces away from the bigger man. He heard vague yells from the direction of the canyon and guessed, without caring much, that Tremark and Doc Shandy were coming. Then he put everything else out of his mind and laid the weight of his attention onto Luke Christy standing there with the sunset behind him.

"Make your play, Luke," he said again. "Make your play."

Christy hesitated for a long second and then his hand flashed down. Steve saw it coming and laid his bullets in a tight little pattern against the big man's breast; indifferently he saw dust fly from Luke's blue shirt and felt the weight of his own gun as it slammed against the crotch of his hand. Luke Christy's bullets thudded into the ground around him, lifting little spurts of yellow dust, and Steve watched the man come on, bending lower and lower, until his knees crumpled and he sprawled forward on his face.

"Well, you got what you asked for, Luke," Steve said somberly.

A bullet nicked at the shoulder of his shirt and he shook himself out of his momentary lapse, remembering Indian Charley and the other Circle D rider. He dropped behind a wood pile, reloading with fingers completely steady. A bullet coming from the saddle shed ripped a splinter from a chunk of wood as Steve saw, a quarter of a mile down the meadow, Tremark and his riders coming on at a run. He could pick out old Doc Shandy, waving a rifle.

Indian Charley saw them, too, and made a break for the corral zigzagging as he ran. Steve's lips tightened into a thin line and he thought of Beth Tremark back there in the cabin as he got to his knees, steadying the gun across the wood. The shot banged against the coming night and Indian Charley somersaulted and then lay spraddled in the dust. The other rider came out of the saddle shed then with his hands in the air and his voice shrill as Doc Shandy and the rest pounded up.

"Don't shoot," the man was yelling. "For God's sake, don't shoot!"

Steve holstered his gun and walked slowly back toward the cabin. He felt old, tired, oddly empty; he would, he thought, like to lie face down in the sun on some grassy slope and sleep for a long time. Sheriff Tremark and Doc Shandy were dismounting by the corral and they called to Steve but he didn't look back.

Beth hadn't moved and he went across to her and stood looking down, his thoughts bitter. She had been his for the asking once but he had put her aside to go chasing off on a trail twenty years dead. Now the trail was ended and what was left? On a sudden impulse he bent down and kissed her gently on the lips.

"Goodbye, Beth," he murmured. "I'm the only one who can know just what a fool I've been."

He started to straighten but she stirred a little and then one of her arms was about his neck holding him. Her eyes opened and there was understanding and promise behind them.

"Not goodbye, Steve," she said drowsily. "Not goodbye ever again."

Behind him Steve could hear the tramp

of boots coming into the other room. He felt good all at once.

THE flat country below was in purple shadow as Ed Keane reached the rim rock. Sunlight still lingered here—a scarlet wash against the pinnacles and spires that rimmed the canyon. He had long since outdistanced his two pursuers, their horses already badly blown when the chase had started. Barring accident, he thought, he was as good as free right now.

He pushed his horse hard, hoping to get the bad going behind him before dark; pulled up finally where the ridge swung off toward the right and angled toward the slide rock. For a moment he sat there in the saddle, looking back to where the sunlight still lingered on the higher peaks of the Mogollons. Then he smiled thinly.

"The fools," he said aloud.

He clucked to his horse and was lifting the reins when a voice cut through the quiet. It was a voice that Keane remembered and the sound of it hit him like a sledge in the pit of the stomach. He swung toward it, his hand dropping to his hip.

"No, Ed," it said gently. "Don't do that."

Emory Folger was sitting with his back against a rock a dozen feet away and he held a rifle in his hands. His face was a stark, dead white and he coughed a little but the muzzle of the rifle was steady.

"Everybody has been a fool except you, haven't they, Ed?" he said. "Yes, I guess maybe that's right."

"Wait." Keane said desperately. "I've got money, Emory—lots of money! We can—"

"How much money does it take to pay a man for twenty years behind stone walls, Ed? Can you think of a figure?"

"Wait! Wait!"

"No, Ed," Folger said, his voice still gentle. "I've been waitin' for twenty years but now I reckon my waitin' is all over with."

The blast of the rifle echoed back and forth against the crags. Ed Keane stiffened, an awed expression spreading across his face as he slumped forward. He slid from the saddle head down as the last of the light began to fade from the far spires of the Mogollons.



Rick triggered his own gun carefully.

GUN-SIGHT

By Allan K. Echols

Six lead slugs for a brace of killers—and a sparkling diamond for his girl. . . . Was this too big a load for even rugged young Rick Woodbine?

RICK WOODBINE APPROACHED the dark shadows of the livery stable in better spirits than he had known in many years. There were many lights blinking in lawless Paint Rock on this Saturday night, but young Rick did not see them. He had eyes only for the light that he hoped to see in Ellen's eyes when he gave her the diamond ring which he carried in its green velvet box in the pockets of his faded levis.

He had not even stopped at the saloon for a drink, but had bought the ring and turned back toward the livery stable as quickly as he could make it, for now he had a new purpose.

For four years he had lived for only one thing—to find Mordon Cox and Jude

Garver. Now he had two things to live for; to kill Cox and Garver, and to marry Ellen Bailey.

His four-year search ended at the livery stable where he ran into Garver.

A MAN started to walk out of the dark interior of the stable. There was something about the carriage of the man, the short quick steps, the erect head with face hidden under the big black hat, which shot a warning through Rick, and he froze still.

He was within a dozen feet of Garver as the man glanced warily up and down the street before emerging from the dark stable door. Then Garver's eyes lit on Rick's dim figure—and held there. The man's body slid back into the doorway until the shadows almost concealed it.

Now the suddenness with which he had come upon this one of his enemies left him powerless to act for the moment. And during that moment the furtive Garver had slid his body back to safety.

He called out, "Just a minute, Garver. I want to see you." Rick drew his gun and took a few steps toward the open door. Garver could be waiting just within for him, and to step around the door could be suicide. There was no way of knowing just what Garver would do. Garver was tricky.

It came to Rick that there were two big doors at the rear of the livery stable which were kept closed at night. Garver couldn't get out that way without having a job of opening them which would give away his position.

Rick Woodbine could go into the stable, or he could wait for Garver to make the first move.

But he could not wait. He had been on the trail too long, following the pair and then losing them, and getting close again. The memory of the burned-out home, of his father lying under the big oak where he fell as he ran out of the flaming cabin, all these things were too overpowering in him. He chose to have it over now.

He reached the edge of the livery stable door and stood against it a moment, waiting. No sound came to him. He thumbed back the hammer of his gun with as little sound as possible—and heard no answering click from within.

Then he slid quickly around the door jamb and was inside the dark building with his back against the wall. No shot exploded at him. He stood and listened, carrying his gun high.

The silence was absolute, the darkness complete, as though the whole building were holding its breath. The smell of the stalls reached out to him, and then the faint tramp of a horse's hoof, the switch of animals' tails; a tiny rattling sound as a rat ran across the loft floor over his head. There was no sound from Garver.

He put out his foot, testing the soft, spongy earth. He took a few more steps and stopped. He heard a man sniff, as though trying to keep from sneezing.

He said, "Garver, shuck yore cutter."

A voice answered him in the darkness. "Don't come no closer, Woodbine."

Rick tried to place the voice, but it seemed to echo from stall to stall, and he could not tell exactly where it came from.

He took three quick steps away and said, "I said shuck yore cutter, Garver." He shifted again.

Garver's voice came back out of the blackness. "Look, Woodbine, it's all over, four years ago. Gimme a chance. I'll hit the trail."

"Are you coming out?"

"Woodbine, I was working for Lindley. I just done what he told me. Even your dad was hiring gunhands."

"Not to burn out people's homes and then back shoot 'em. You coming out?"

Rick took three more quick steps away from the sound of his own voice. And kicked over a feed bucket. The bucket rattled, and Garver's gun roared, spitting orange flame. The bucket bounced away from Rick's feet.

Rick triggered at the flashes from Garver's gun, once, twice, a third time.

Garver grunted, and the sound of his body thumped against the soft ground. Then Garver was groaning.

"Hit?" Rick asked.

"Yeah."

"Then throw your gun this way."

It was a long moment before a sound came to Rick's ears, a soft thud against the straw flooring.

Rick walked slowly toward the sound of the man's groaning. Then he said, "Hit bad?"

Garver shot at Rick's voice from near the ground; his slug tore Rick's hat off.

Rick triggered his own gun once at the gun-flame. He heard Garver's grunt, as though the wind had been knocked out of him. There was no other sound in the livery stable.

Rick lit a match. The gunman was slumped against a stall, his hat cocked over one eye, his gun in the dirt, and his hand over a spot seeping blood out of his chest.

"Still a sidewinder, eh, Garver?"

Garver groaned. "I'm dying . . . Get me a doctor."

"Where's Mordon Cox?" Rick countered. "Wherever you are, he's close around."

"Get me—"

"I'll get the doc—after you tell me where I can find Cox."

"You let a man die—"

"Talk."

"He's in the mountains. We holed up back of Thornton's—"

Garver's mouth bubbled red, and he slid down into the dirt. He had no further need for a doctor.

Rick heard footsteps now and he looked up to see the dark forms of several men outlined in the door. They were standing there, not risking going into the dark interior.

"It's all right," Rick said. "It's over."

Somebody stopped in the office and got a lantern, and soon half a dozen men stood around the body of Garver. Among them was Stern Bailey, Ellen's father. There was no organized law here in the Jackforks, but men instinctively turned to the storekeeper for leadership.

Bailey was a big man, and grave, and he stood with his hands in his pockets and kept his eyes off Rick Woodbine while the sight of the dead man registered on the others.

Rick's first impulse was to tell Bailey the whole story, but he did not know where the sympathies of these other men lay, and Cox might be warned before Rick found him. And yet he knew that Bailey was expecting an explanation.

"We had some personal trouble," he said suddenly. "He drew first."

He saddled his horse and rode out of the stable, and did not look back.

THE Bailey place was several miles out of town, and he found Ellen waiting for him. He was late, and she was silent, as though expecting an explanation. He noticed this, and it did not make him feel good. His fingers toyed with the box in his pocket.

For four years he had lived in the hope of coming face to face with Cox and Garver. He had lain under the stars and dreamed of it, he had ridden weary miles with their faces before him, and he had come at last to the Jackfork Mountains where most wanted men eventually came to hole up, and he had waited expecting them to come. And he had killed Garver.

Therefore he should have been happy. But somehow the thing he had hoped to do for so long gave him no happiness. He was touchy, and his nerves were on edge. Cox was still somewhere here in the hills.

All the eagerness with which he had looked forward to the moment when he put the ring on Ellen's finger, all the expected happiness seemed to have deserted him, to have been driven away by his encounter with Garver. It left him grim, tense.

He could feel this thing between them as he went into the simple living room and they both sat on the sofa. She was waiting for him to speak, and he found it difficult to begin. The tension grew, and built up until he could not let it go on. And then he spoke, almost angrily.

"You remember me telling you about the two men that killed my dad? Well, I found one of them tonight."

Ellen bit her lips. She was young, very small, and yet ordinarily there was a dignity and a gravity in her beyond her years. Now she twisted her handkerchief and was at a loss for words. The silence continued.

"Well," he said impatiently. "I should think you'd at least say I'd done right. You act as though I'd murdered a man."

"I don't think you've murdered a man," she answered. "But I don't think you've done right, either."

"No? Why not? Those men shot my dad in cold blood. They were paid to do it because a range hog named Lindley wanted my dad's land. There wasn't any law there to touch them. Why shouldn't I be the law?"

"Because revenge is never right," the girl answered. "Even if they were murderers, it doesn't do you any good to kill them."

"It doesn't?" Rick snapped.

"Does it? Are you any happier, now that you've killed a man?"

"What's happiness got to do with it? I acted like a man, didn't I?"

She shrugged. "I should think that happiness had a lot to do with the way a person acted. And killing can't make you happy; it can only make you more bitter."

Rick felt a deep discomfort, as though she had probed a hidden sore spot which she had no right to find. Killing Garver had not given him the satisfaction he had expected, but he did not want to admit that, even to himself. He had one more man to kill before he was through.

THINGS were not going as he had planned them for this visit with her, and he blamed the killing for that. He did not want to talk about it. He took the ring out of his pocket.

He opened the box and handed it to her. "I was in town to get you this," he said.

It was not the way he had planned it, and this added to the trouble within him. He suddenly wanted to rush out of the room and get drunk.

Ellen held the plush box in her hand and Rick saw tears welling in her eyes. Her lips tightened, and she did not look at him. She was silent a long moment, and the silence was so long unbroken that he had to break it.

"Well, it's yours. I reckon I ought to put it on your finger."

Her pale hand trembling, she slowly laid the box over on the lamp table at the end of the sofa. "I think we'd better wait a while, Rick."

Because he could not follow the reasoning of her mind, he was angry at her. "Why?" he asked sharply.

"We had better wait, Rick."

He got up and stood before her. The blood was throbbing in his temples, and he knew that the anger rising in him was not reasonable, but he could not help it. He knew, too, that he was saying things to hurt her, but he could not help that, either.

"I see. You know I won't be satisfied until I get the other man. And you're against it. You want me to be yellow."

"No, Rick." There was pain in her voice. "I want you to be a man. A big man. One big enough to know that revenge is wrong."

He reached out to meet her halfway. "As soon as I've found Cox, I'll be through."

"You'll be through until you feel that somebody else deserves killing," she said with despair in her voice. "I wish you could see—it's pride that demands revenge."

"I want to finish my job."

He picked up the ring box and looked at the stone. His mouth went tight, and he laid it down again on the marble top table.

"A man has to do what he has to do," he said. "If you don't want to wear that ring, then throw it away or something. It won't be any good to me any more."

He left the house and his horse felt the lash of his quirt as he made his way back to town. He passed Stern Bailey on the road with only a curt "howdy" and headed toward the saloon.

Stern Bailey found Ellen crying in the living room, with the ring box clutched tightly in her hands. The big man took his daughter in his lap as though she were still a child, and let her have her cry out before he spoke to her.

"What was on his mind?" he asked.

"He found one of the two men he was looking for and killed him. It didn't give him the satisfaction he expected, and he's puzzled and angry about it. He'll have to find the other one and kill him, too, and if he does that I don't think anything can save him. He wouldn't listen to me."

The old man patted her head. "He's a good boy, honey, but he's at the cross-roads right now. He's got strength—too much, maybe—and he's reached the point where he's got to decide how to use it. It's his own problem, and nobody can settle it for him."

"I wish I knew what he was going to do tonight," she said. "I feel as though I'd driven him to do something desperate."

"I think you don't have to worry about tonight. I've got a hunch that he's going

to get good and drunk before he decides what to do next. It's not easy when you kill a man. You love him, don't you, honey?"

"I'd love him if he killed a dozen men—but I don't want him to do it."

RICK had been standing at the short end of the bar for half an hour. He had taken his fourth drink, and the liquor was without taste and without effect upon him. He wanted it to take hold and sweep away the confusion in him, so that he could get his mind clear enough to find out what was wrong. But the liquor would not co-operate, and he was all mixed up about everything. He took another drink, and still his mind was a formless jumble of disconnected and bitter thoughts.

He looked around at the few remaining customers, half a dozen men quietly playing poker at a round table, a rancher and a youth who was apparently his grown son quietly drinking further down the bar and discussing a fencing project—and a hairy old man with dirty gray whiskers and worn out clothes, who stood at the bar with his head bowed over the drink in his trembling hand as he stared vacantly at it and mumbled unintelligible words to himself.

The old man shoved his glass back at the bartender, and the bartender shook his head.

"That's all for tonight, Crawdad. You'd better strike out home. It's a long ride to Thornton's Crossing."

Rick heard the name Thornton, and jerked out of his own reverie. Garver had been hiding out back of Thornton's.

The old man growled, "I got to have another one. Coxie'll pay you when he comes in. He's got money."

The bartender shook his head. "Never heard of the man. We do a cash business."

"Never heard of Cox?" the old dervil grumbled. "He's my new pardner. He's got money."

"But you haven't. Better run on Crawdad." The bartender took the bottle from in front of the old man and put it on the backbar. Rick tapped on the bar with his glass and the bartender came up to pour him another drink.

"Who's the old man?" Rick asked.

The bartender sucked on a gold tooth

and grinned wisely as he poured Rick's drink.

"That's the original Two-gun Pete of the Jackforks," he said. "He killed four men about thirty years ago, and he's never got over it. Range war or something, I don't know. Anyway, he had to hide out, and he's been living back there in the hills for twenty years, eating poke greens and squirrel, and dreaming about the days men were afraid to push him around."

It seemed to Rick as though the bartender were trying to show him what the future held in store for him, and yet the bartender could not have known what was in his mind.

"Kind of a sorry specimen," he observed.

"Yep. But better off than most of them proddy hombres. Most of 'em's in boot hill, but he's still alive—if you call that living."

Rick looked at the man, and though he would have sworn that his own liquor was not affecting him, he seemed for a moment to see through the man's whiskers—and he was looking upon his own face, grown old and wrinkled. Cold chills shot through him, and he gulped another drink down.

"Fill it up again," he told the bartender, "and pour the old man one."

That was all old Crawdad needed. He came down the length of the bar to join his benefactor. Three drinks later he was telling Rick his personal history, from the day he was the fastest gunman on the Tacos range down to date. Tears filled his red-rimmed eyes as he mumbled hoarsely on.

"Maybe I ain't what I used to be," he said, "or people wouldn't shove me around like they do. But they'd better lay off'n me from now on. I got me a couple of new partners, and they're as handy with a gun as I used to be. Spittin' image o' me thirty year ago."

"Cox?" Rick asked easily, pouring another drink for the old one.

"Yeah. Know him? Him and me and a man name o' Garver, we're bunkin' up together." It was clear to Rick that the man hadn't heard about him killing Garver.

"Do I? We burned a lot o' powder together here and there. I'd sure like to see that old side-winder again."

"Nothin' keepin' you from it, except a little ridin'. Come on out to my cabin an' surprise him."

"I might do that," Rick agreed thoughtfully. "Far?"

"Naw. Nine-ten miles. Man, will he be surprised!"

"Yeah. I hope so. Drink up and let's ride, friend."

THEY had been on the dark trail for something more than an hour, the old man riding beside Rick on a sway-backed gray horse, weaving in a wornout saddle to the point where Rick had to occasionally reach out and catch his shoulder to keep him from toppling off.

The old man spoke between long stretches of silence, broken only by the creaking of saddle leather and the thumping of hooves against the night.

"Swelldest spot a man ever saw, we got out there," he mumbled. "Nobody couldn't find the place in a thousand years. Plenty to eat; fish, deer, everything. Even got old Thornton raisin' our beef for us." He giggled. "Thornton's been tryin' to catch me ten-fifteen year. I coulda put a bullet in him a hundred times, but what for? I need him to raise my beef. Man needs a little spendin' money once in a while, don't he?"

"Been hid out here long?"

The old man studied the question a long time. "Must be twenty year, or such. Only place a man can live free. Law comes to a country and a man can't protect his rights without them looking for him with a hangnoose. Country like that ain't fitten for a white man to live in, so I come here. I tell you, they didn't walk on me in the old days. A man's got to stick up for his rights himself, not go crying to some water-veined law to protect him. He can't let himself be tromped on."

Rick pushed this idea around in his mind. It was the same idea that he had been carrying around with him for a long time. He was convinced that he believed in it. But now, somehow, coming as it did from the lips of the old derelict, it didn't sound just right. He resented sharing his ideas with a person of this stripe.

"Gets kinda lonesome, don't it?"

"Lonesome? Hell, no. I don't like people. Hate 'em all. They'll all use you if

you give 'em a chance. Don't trust none of 'em."

Somehow Rick recognized that this attitude was somehow the cause of the old man becoming a derelict. But when that recognition came he quickly thrust it from him, because it stood between him and his determination to kill Cox.

"I won't be like him," he said to himself. "After I pay Cox what I owe him, I'll quit. I won't keep on and end up like him."

"You know," the old man said, "once I—" he broke off with a grunt. His body swayed toward Rick and all Rick's efforts to brace him could not keep him in the saddle. His weight slid out of Rick's grasp, and he fell to the ground between the horses, and lay moaning.

Rick pulled his animal to a stop, and the other horse stopped beside him as Rick dropped from his saddle.

The old man lay on his back with his hand across his chest. His breath came in short gasps broken by moans.

"What's the matter, Pop? Sleepy?" Rick was impatient to get the old drunk up and going again.

"No, it's this again. Been gettin' it regular." He patted his chest over his heart.

"You'll be all right in a minute."

The old man seemed to have suddenly turned cold sober. His words were distinct, and his mind seemed to have cleared.

"No, not this time," he said between labored breaths. "I can tell."

"Just don't talk."

"That ain't no good. Nothing ain't no good. I ain't going no further."

"Yes, you will. You'll be all right after you rest a while."

"No. A man knows when he's reached the end of the trail."

There was such a tone of finality in the man's voice that Rick became convinced. The man was no longer the old fuzzy-brained drunk; he was a man who clearly saw that he was dying.

"I'll go back and get a doctor—"

The old man shook his head. "He wouldn't come. Who'd bother with me? Nobody cares what happens to old Crowdad—"

"How about Cox? If you're in a bad way—"

"Cox don't care about nobody but Cox. He's a skunk—"

"You said he was a pardner—"

"As much a pardner as I ever had, but he ain't nothin' to brag about. Just a gun-slissing skunk—like I am. Sore at the world, and has to hide out to keep men from stamping him into the ground like they'd a done me if I hadn't hid out. Well, ain't no use now cryin' about it. But I got a brother, and he's got a family. Mighta made me feel better if I was with my own folks. They wouldn't hold it against me, things I done wrong. You wouldn't mind gettin' me a drink, would you?"

"I haven't got any whiskey—"

"I mean water. There's a spring branch about two hundred yards ahead. That's where we'd have followed it down about a hundred yards to the deer trail that leads to my cabin. If I had a drink—"

"I'll get you one," Rick said, and hit down the trail toward the branch.

When he got back with his hat full of water Crawdad was dead.

BECAUSE he could not find his way in darkness beneath the trees of the hillside, Rick sat and waited for daylight. And as he sat beside the dead derelict and smoked, there was a battle going on within him which he didn't like. He got up with a curse and threw his cigarette down, buckled on the gun he had thrown on the grass beside him, and started down to the ravine.

"To hell with it," he snapped. "When a man's been on a trail for four years, it ain't right to expect him to call it off just to please a woman."

He followed the ravine down until he found the deer trail in the gray of the dawn and got down on his knees and lit a match. He saw the imprints of hooves on the trail, and set out following it. Half a mile deeper into the woods, he stopped short as he came to a clearing with a small pole shack in the middle of it.

A man had come out of the shack, stripped to the waist, but wearing a hand gun at his hip, and was pouring water from a bucket into a pan on a bench beside the shack. The man stooped over the pan and began washing. A freshly skinned beef hung from a tree branch beside the

cabin, covered with sacking material against the flies.

The man was Mordon Cox.

His back was to Rick, but Rick recognized the flaming red hair the man doused in the water.

Rick lifted his gun. His breath sucked in slowly. He caught the limb of a sapling with his left hand, holding the forearm stiff laterally, and rested the barrel of his Colt over it for steadiness. He sighted down the barrel, lined it up squarely on the middle of Mordon's back.

The bullet hole he had found in his father had been square in the middle of the back.

Rick took up some of the slack in the trigger—then halted his finger. Something took his attention, held it a moment, and then sent a shudder through him. He blinked his eyes and sighted again down the gunbarrel to the man's back. And again he saw the thing which had halted him.

He raised his head from the sights, looked ahead, puzzled, and then looked back through the sights.

When he looked along the sights, there appeared to be a diamond ring just ahead of his gun, and it seemed that he was aiming directly through the ring.

Impossible, yes, but it was as though the ring he had left with Ellen now hung suspended in midair directly between him and the man he was going to shoot.

Such a thing was impossible. Rick rubbed his wrist across his eyes, and looked again. Then he laughed softly, but his laugh was uncomfortable.

A spider had spun a web between two limbs of the persimmon tree ahead of him, a wide trap for flies with concentric rings spreading out from the center. Rick had been aiming his gun right through the small, center ring of the web, a ring no larger than a finger ring—and set with a sparkling diamond of dew.

Shaken, Rick stepped back into his concealment and pondered a long moment. Then he holstered his gun and walked out into the open and down toward where Mordon Cox was drying his head on a flour-sack towel. He was almost upon Cox when the man dropped the towel and spun around.

Rick stopped, and the two men faced each other. Recognition came to Cox, and he stiffened, then waited silently, his weight balanced on his toes.

Rick did not speak, but turned and looked at the cowhide hung over a saw-buck. The green hide, just recently peeled off the dressed calf hanging on the tree limb, bore the Circle T brand.

Mordon Cox was made of stronger stuff than Garver. A barrel-chested heavy-necked man with stiff red hair, his face was granite hard and his eyes frigid green.

Rick said, "I'm taking you to Thornton's. Keep your paws off your gun."

"Why? You work for Thornton?"

"I'm ranching around here, same as Thornton. If he caught anybody stealing my beef, I'd expect him to do what I'm doing. Turn around, and keep your hands clear of your gun."

Cox spread his hands. He turned slowly until his back was toward Rick—and spun the rest of the way around, using the split second while he was spinning to grab his gun. As he came back around facing Rick, his gun was coming up blazing. His

bullet cut a furrow along Rick's scalp as it knocked his hat sailing.

Rick triggered his own gun carefully. He aimed directly at the man's arm, and his slug tore through the man's elbow and shattered the joint of the elbow and plowed halfway up the arm. The man's gun fell from a hand that would never draw another weapon.

Rick stepped up and grabbed the gun, while Cox stood and looked in stunned wonderment at what was left of his forearm. Rick came up and examined it.

"Elbow's all busted to pieces," he said. "Probably lose your arm. Get your shirt and I'll try to stop the bleeding enough to get you to town."

Cox was still dazed. "I thought you was going to kill me," he mumbled in an incredulous voice. "You could have shot me dead just as easy. I don't understand."

"Sure I could," Rick said. "I don't understand it either. But get a move on you; I've got important business to take care of."

He was in a hurry to tell Ellen about a dewdrop on a cobweb.

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Ransom's gun was coming down, the barrel lining

Boot-Hill For Sod-Busters

By William Heuman

THE HOTEL LOBBY WAS half-filled with the curious awaiting the arrival of the night stage. They weren't expecting anything, and they weren't going anywhere, but they were here, and Cheney Smith realized this nightly vigil meant something in a small town. It provided the contact with the out-

side world, without which they considered themselves cut off from civilization, alone in this vast world of buffalo grass, of sagebrush, mountain and desert.

Sitting in the wicker chair that commanded a view of the main doors and the hotel bar, Cheney let the old newspaper fall down on his lap. He took a cigar from his



on Cheney's chest, when Cheney's bullet hit him.

When he rode in the town was a pot-full of hot lead coming to a nice boil. All that was needed to blow the lid off was a strange waddy named Smith. Well, his name was Smith—

coat pocket, bit off the end, and stuck it in his mouth. He was searching idly for a match when he saw the two men come through the front door, heading toward the hotel bar.

They were ranchers just in from the range, and they hadn't even been to the

barber shop for their usual Saturday night shave, haircut and bath. Alkali dust clung to their clothes; there was a gray tinge of dust on the stubble of their beards.

One man was tall but solidly-built, with bleached blond hair under the flat-crowned hat; the second man was shorter and older, having a gray mustache and cold blue eyes.

He spotted Cheney first and stopped immediately, giving him a long hard stare. The taller man paused by the bat-wing doors leading from the hotel lobby into the bar to glance back impatiently, and then he, too, saw Cheney in the wicker chair, lighting his cigar, blowing out the smoke.

Cheney watched them out of the corner of his eyes as he picked up the newspaper again and pretended to read. He was thinking then that these were not the only men who had stared at him curiously this night since he'd ridden into Long Bow and registered at the hotel.

In the barber shop an hour ago he'd sat in the chair having his jaws scraped, and he'd been aware of the fact that every new customer coming into the shop suddenly hushed up when they saw him. Even the barber had little to say and seemed anxious to finish with him.

Cheney had shrugged it off, knowing that a small cow town was a walled city where every man knew every other man's business, and was suspicious of strangers. He'd been in dozens of them, and they were like peas in a pod in this respect. It took months before the newness passed off and a man nodded to you in the street.

THE TWO RANCHERS still stood near the bat-wing doors watching him grimly. He saw them speaking, but could not hear the words, and then both men turned and walked over to the desk where Cheney had registered earlier that afternoon. He'd signed the book, *C. Smith, Montgomery*. Montgomery, Montana, had been his last stopping place. He'd worked on the big Deuce ranch there, doing well, picking up extra money breaking horses. He had enough in the money belt around his waist to start his own small spread, and for two months he'd been on the move, crossing most of Montana, dipping down into Idaho, and then into Wyoming, looking for the place—free grass, water, not too many people . . . Long Bow was the best prospect thus far.

He'd approached the town from the north, moving over a series of low hills. The grass was hock-high; there was water, a clear running stream twisting through the hills, and he'd seen only three ranch houses. He had no doubt that there were more to the south, to the west and east, but

there was plenty of land here and he hadn't run across too much stock grazing on it.

The two men at the desk were leaning over the pine boards now, their backs to Cheney, speaking with the clerk. Both of them carried guns—the tall, blond-haired man packing a pearl-handed Colt on his left hip and the shorter man with a heavier Navy Colt on his right hip.

The desk clerk looked over their heads at Cheney sitting in the chair, and then he consulted his book, frowning a little as he did so. Cheney watched the three of them over the top of the newspaper, curiosity running through him.

And then he heard the rattle and rumble of the stage as it entered town from the east. The lobby emptied miraculously, except for the three at the desk. Cheney stretched his long legs and pushed his flat-crowned sombrero back on his head. He wanted to step outside on the porch, also, but he itched to know why the two ranchers were concerned with him. He'd never seen them before; he'd never been within five hundred miles of Long Bow until now.

They had turned around now and were coming across the lobby, the tall, blond man rubbing his hands on his faded levis, lips tightly pressed against his teeth. The shorter man was smiling, but it was not a pleasant smile. He had his hands hooked in his gunbelt as he walked. He'd lighted a cigarette at the desk and he had it in his mouth now, tilted toward the ceiling.

Cheney put the cigar back in his mouth, lay the paper on his lap, and looked up. He made no effort to open the conversation, knowing that the burden lay on them. They stood in front of him in the empty lobby, the tall man with his legs spread, rubbing his long hands together now.

Outside, Cheney could hear the stage come up with a rattle of harness and chains. A man yelled, "Throw it down, George."

The tall blond man said tauntingly, "C. Smith, Montgomery, Montana. That's a hell of a joke, my friend."

"Is it?" Cheney asked. He made no motion to get up. He sat there, puffing on the cigar, a small smile playing on his lean brown face. His eyes were pale blue, but they were getting lighter in color now, the skin crinkling at the corners.

"We shot up a chap named Smith last week," the short man said. "Run him the hell out o' the county."

"Every Smith is different," Cheney said around his cigar.

"They all work for the same rat," the blond man said tersely. "They're all rats themselves."

Cheney looked up at him, still smiling, but all the good humor gone out of him. He hadn't worn his gun coming down from his room because Long Bow looked like a peaceful town, and he hadn't anticipated going much farther than the hotel lobby tonight. The kind of talk the blond man was handing out now was very definitely gun talk. He was in an ugly mood, riled up to the point where he was ready to fight.

"I figured," Cheney said softly, "I might like this town. Maybe I was wrong."

"Reckon you won't get time to like it," the short man grated. "You'll be dead long before that, Buck." He took a step forward. "Now start amblin' along."

Cheney looked past him. He could see the clerk looking at them. Outside he could hear the hum of talk, heavy boots on the porch, the stamping and puffing of horses.

Cheney said deliberately, "When I'm ready, friend."

The short man's right hand shot out, the palm open. He slapped the cigar from Cheney's mouth, knocking it across the room. The tips of his fingers grazed Cheney's lips.

Cheney had had both hands on the arms of the chair, ready to get up as he spoke. He was half out of the chair when the blond man slid his gun out of the holster.

A woman said curtly from the door, "Put that gun up, Bill Tate."

THE BLOND MAN spun around, a sheepish grin on his face. Cheney looked that way, too, and watched a tall, dark-haired girl stride across the room toward the desk. She was looking at Bill Tate coldly, and then her dark eyes flashed down to Cheney, still sitting in the chair. The contempt in her eyes was as apparent as a slap in the face.

She walked past the three men, clad in gray traveling clothes, the dust of the stage still on her. She said to Cheney, scarcely looking at him, not even breaking her stride, "You'd better get out of this town."

Cheney Smith moistened his lips. He noticed that Bill Tate had slid away the gun and stepped back. The crowd was coming back into the lobby now, talking loudly, pushing around them. Bill Tate said softly, "Smith, you got your damn orders."

He wiped his mouth then and headed for the hotel bar, the short man following him. Cheney sat in the chair, watching them go, watching the girl at the desk. She was receiving a key from the clerk who was smiling at her ingratiatingly. She did not register in the book, which meant that she reserved a room at this hotel all the time.

She went up the stairs with the key, Cheney still watching her, the newspaper in his lap. She was slender, but not thin. There was a certain animal grace about her which he'd never before observed in a woman. He was positive this girl could ride a horse as well as any man.

Aside from the girl, who had been the first one in the hotel lobby from the street, no one seemed to have observed the incident. Cheney looked across at his broken cigar on the floor over near one of the spittoons. He got up then and walked toward the bar, pushing through the batwing doors. He spotted Bill Tate and the short man at the other end of the bar, talking with a third man.

The bar was fairly crowded now as the crowd in the lobby, having satisfied its curiosity, was ready to engage in the more serious business of the evening—drinking and card-playing.

Cheney walked down along the bar without any haste, lips pursed a little as if he were whistling to himself. Neither of the two men saw him as he came up, stepping around a drinker who was just moving away from the bar.

Very deftly, Cheney reached forward and slid the Navy Colt from the holster around the waist of the short, mustached man. He tossed the gun aside, and stepped around the little man who had felt the movement and was whirling around in astonishment.

Bill Tate saw him. He was holding a glass of beer in his right hand and he tried to set it down on the bar quickly. Cheney hit him on the side of the jaw before he could do so, knocking him along the bar up against another drinker, upsetting that man

so that both of them sprawled on the floor.

Tate was somewhat stunned by the punch as he rolled off and started to get to his feet, hand reaching for his gun, shaking his head, looking around stupidly.

Cheney was on top of him almost before he got off the floor, snatching the gun away from him, tossing that aside also. He whirled and swung with his left fist as the little man charged him. He hit this man full in the stomach, making him belch as he doubled up in agony.

Reaching forward, Cheney placed his right hand on the short man's head as he was bent over, arms across his stomach. He pushed, sitting the man down on the floor, and then he turned to face the tall Bill Tate. He said gently, "You still in this, Tate?"

Tate grinned, flashing white teeth. He had recovered from the punch somewhat, and he charged in now, swinging both fists wildly. Cheney stood his ground and lashed out savagely—short, vicious punches to the face. He was as big as Tate and fully as heavy. He started to back the blond man to the bar, never relinquishing the attack.

Tate sagged, straightened up, cursed, and then took another stiff jolt on the jaw which sat him on the floor. He wanted to get up, but he couldn't. He sat there, shaking his head.

Cheney stepped around him, lifted him up by his armpits and propped him against the bar. He poured a drink from the bottle out of which Tate and the others had been drinking. He said, "This one's on me, Tate."

He walked away then, leaving the crowd in the saloon staring after him. He heard a man say softly, "Now who in hell is he?"

"One o' Ransom's boys," another man stated emphatically.

Cheney crossed the lobby and passed out through the main doors to the street. He stood there on the porch, rubbing his knuckles gently, wondering who Ransom was, the man for whom he was supposed to be working. He had little doubt now that the two cow men, Tate and his friend, had supposed him to be somebody else with an assumed name. The "Smith" part of his name strangers never took seriously in a country where many men wanted to conceal their identity.

There was a saloon directly across from

the hotel, and two men stood to the right of the bat-wing doors, looking across at him. A piano was banging inside the saloon and a man was singing. From up the street came the music from a four-piece orchestra, and the shuffle of heavy boots on a dance floor, interspersed with an occasional cowboy whoop.

The two men outside the saloon were staring across at him, and Cheney frowned, hoping that these two were not also mistaking him for someone else, and wanting to make an issue out of it. They did not appear to be cowmen. One of them wore a derby hat and both of them wore shoes instead of boots.

Stepping off the porch, Cheney walked to the corner and then down the alley to the hotel livery stable where he'd left the big chestnut that afternoon. He'd had his experience with hotel hostlers, knowing that if they weren't checked on occasionally an animal suffered, especially the horse of a stranger.

He found the chestnut munching hay in one of the rear stalls. He stood there for a few minutes, rubbing the big horse's neck, still wondering about the fight in the hotel bar.

The stable was empty, but a pitchfork was stuck into a pile of hay which had just been pulled down from the loft. Cheney had come through the main entrance from the street, but there was another opening which led onto a side alley. A lantern hung from a nail in one of the rafters near the main door, providing the only light in the stable.

Cheney stepped out of the stall, moving past the pile of hay on the floor, toward the main door. He had just passed the side entrance, and was stepping around a few bales of hay, when he heard the light rush of feet across the floor behind him.

HE CAME AROUND quickly, but not quickly enough. He caught a glimpse of a vicious, pock-marked face very close to his own. He was bringing his right arm up to protect himself when there was an explosion against the side of his head. It was harder than a fist, something blunt.

He was knocked to his knees, and then the pock-marked man hit him some more, rolling over on top of him and clubbing viciously with a blunt instrument. Dazed,

Cheney tried to free himself, but he was on the floor in a poor position to fight back, and that first blow had taken his strength.

He was clubbed a half dozen times around the head before the blackness closed in around him, and yet he was not entirely unconscious. He was aware of the fact that he was being "rolled", his precious money belt being stripped from his waist. He wanted to fight then, but he couldn't move hands or legs, and he was thinking that it was a hell of a joke on him being robbed of his money in this small, apparently peaceful little town where he hadn't even taken the precaution of carrying a gun. He'd been in a dozen real tough cow towns and rail-heads where a man's life was in his hands every second, and had never been touched.

He heard a shout then, and the man who had jumped him hopped off and darted through the side entrance to the alley. Cheney tried to sit up, but his head was still whirling. He was conscious of a little, gnarled old man squatting down beside him, asking him if he was all right.

"I'll git the sheriff!" the old man was yelling. "I'll git the sheriff, mister!"

CHENEY nodded and the old man ran off. Cheney sat up, feeling warm blood flowing down the back of his neck. He groped futilely for his money belt, but it was gone. He felt a little sick, then, remembering how much he had expected to do with that money.

He climbed to his feet, pulling himself up by the bales of hay. He remembered seeing a water barrel just outside the entrance and he lurched that way, nearly falling again before he reached it. He lowered his head into the cool water, holding it there until it cleared. He came up, and then he ducked again. The second time he came up somebody slapped his shoulder. He heard a voice saying, "Best thing for it, friend. That'll take the spider webs away."

The old man who had found Cheney was saying excitedly, "There were two of 'em, Sheriff. They had this young feller on the floor . . ."

The sheriff and the old man passed on into the barn, leaving Cheney by the water barrel. He heard the sheriff say, "Here's a dime, Zeke. Get yourself a glass of beer."

Cheney re-entered the barn just as the old man hastened out, wetting his lips in anticipation. He found the sheriff sitting on a bale of hay, dangling his legs, rolling a cigarette. Cheney stared. He'd never in his life seen a man sitting on a bale of hay with his boots not even touching the floor!

The sheriff's fat little stomach bulged around his gunbelt. He wore a star on his vest and his hat was on the back of his head, revealing thin brown hair plastered against his skull. He had a round face and small bright blue eyes. He was grinning at Cheney as he spoke.

"Feel better now, young feller?"

Cheney wiped the water from his face with his hands. He rubbed his head gingerly. "You always some place else when the trouble starts, Sheriff?"

There was no malice in his voice, and the sheriff of Long Bow recognized this. He extended the cigarette toward Cheney and then struck a match for him. "It's sleepin' that does it. I mean not gettin' enough of it. I was catchin' two winks before the fireworks started."

"Far as I'm concerned," Cheney said, "the fireworks are all over."

"How much you lose?" the sheriff asked.

"Two thousand dollars," Cheney said.

The fat little sheriff stared at him and then whistled, "You think you'd know him again if he showed up?"

"I might," Cheney nodded.

"One o' Ransom's boys," the sheriff nodded gloomily. "While they're here they pick up any other little job they kin get."

Cheney smiled grimly. "A little while ago," he stated, "I heard say that I was on Ransom's side. Hell of a business when both sides jump a man."

The little sheriff's blue eyes widened. He said softly, unbelievably, "You the chap just jumped Bill Tate an' Ernie Hendricks in the Grant bar?"

"They asked for their fight," Cheney observed.

"Because they figured you was a Ransom man," the sheriff grinned. "You can't blame 'em." He added when Cheney only frowned, "Ben Ransom's the feller behind the Emigrant Aid Society that's bringin' the nesters into Chavez County. Ben's supposed to have about fifty toughs already in this town protectin' his nesters. You see how they 'protect' tonight."

"Ranchers fighting this emigrant outfit?" Cheney asked.

The little sheriff nodded. "One time when the cattlemen are right," he stated. "Damn range up here is good for nothin' but cows. Them settlers plow up the land an' it'll be desert in five years. Stella Chadwick knows that; every other rancher on the bench knows it. I'm thinkin' even Ben Ransom knows it, but he don't give a damn—but this ain't gettin' you back your two thousand dollars, friend."

"Stella Chadwick," Cheney repeated, "Tall girl, dark?"

"Runs the Slash C," the sheriff nodded. "One of the biggest spreads in the county. Runs it like a man. Tate and Hendricks are two of her boys."

Cheney Smith rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. "No place for a woman in the cattle business," he observed.

"You don't know Stella," the sheriff grinned. "Now let's look for them two thousand you lost." He got up, hitched at his gunbelt and said, "Name's Broder. Ed Broder."

"Smith," Cheney said. He walked toward the door and he heard Sheriff Broder say behind him,

"You'll git in trouble in this county with a name like that, young feller."

CHENEY went up to his room, strapped on his gunbelt, and came down again. He found Sheriff Broder waiting for him in the lobby. Broder looked at the Smith & Wesson .44 Cheney carried low on his hip. He tugged at his chin and he said, "We'll have a look in the Silver Dollar first. That's Ben Ransom's hang-out."

Cheney spotted the pock-marked man standing at the bar with two other men. One of the men was heavy-set, thick-necked, dressed in black. He was grinning, half-facing the door. The face was hard, brutal, thin-lipped, heavy-jawed. He had sea-green eyes, narrow and close-set.

"See him?" Ed Broder asked.

"Pock-marked man at the bar," Cheney said tersely. "He has a hell of a nerve staying in this town."

"Man on his left," Broder said, "is Ben Ransom. All the toughs in this town know that Ben stands behind 'em. That gives them nerve."

Cheney started to walk forward. The pock-marked man spotted him before he was halfway across the room. He said something hurriedly to the heavy man at his left, and Ransom turned around, leaning both elbows on the bar, a cold grin on his face.

The third man in the party set down his glass and turned also, the three of them presenting a united front, leaning their backs against the bar, hands free, dangling from the wrists.

Cheney pulled up in front of the pock-marked man. He said softly, "Reckon I'll have that money belt back, friend."

Ed Broder said, "Ransom, you stay out of this."

Ben Ransom laughed. He was looking at Cheney curiously, sizing him up. He said, "Now, brother, Duke don't know anything about your money belt, do you, Duke?"

"Hell, no," Duke grinned. "I got plenty o' my own money."

Cheney looked at Ransom. He said, "You in this?"

"Why not?" Ben Ransom asked.

Cheney heard the slight movement to his right. There was a flash of gun metal, and Sheriff Broder was saying casually, "Here's a reason, Ben." He was holding his six-gun on Ransom, a gun which had come out of the holster with incredible speed.

Ben Ransom looked down at the gun. The pock-marked man looked at the gun also, and then Cheney hit him full on the jaw, nearly driving him over the bar. He grabbed at the pock-marked man's right hand as it slid inside his coat, reaching for a gun. Yanking the hand up, he hit his man again, sending him staggering back against the other man who had started to back away.

Ransom still stood where he was, frowning, watching Cheney work. Duke slid down to his knees, scrambled up awkwardly and was hit a third time. He slumped to the floor.

Cheney glanced at the third man who had scrambled back along the bar and was watching him, making no move to go for his gun. Cheney saw the reason then. The tall blond Bill Tate, his face somewhat swollen, was standing behind this man, holding a gun on him.

Smiling at Tate, Cheney walked forward

and picked up Duke, propping him against the bar. He felt around the man's waist for the money belt, but it was not there. He heard Ben Ransom say softly, "Jack, you're asking for trouble."

Cheney ignored him. He said to Duke, "You think you can remember where you cached that money belt?"

Duke was swaying on his feet, looking at him stupidly, only half-conscious. Ed Broder said, "I'll lock him up, Smith. He might remember in the morning."

"He'd better," Cheney grated. He looked at Bill Tate, "Thanks for backing this play, friend."

"I don't like you," Tate said gruffly, "but I like these dogs less."

Ben Ransom was still looking at Cheney, green eyes narrowed. He hadn't moved from his position since the fight started. He said now, tersely, "You better get some friends in this town, Smith, if you figure on staying here."

Ben Ransom had Duke by the arm and was jerking him along toward the door. Cheney looked at Ransom coolly. "Any time you want some of that, Ransom, you can have it, too."

He thought for one instant that Ransom was going to accept this challenge. The emigrant aid company man's weight came of the bar, and then he relaxed again, grinning coldly.

"I'll keep it in mind, Smith," Ransom said.

Cheney followed Ed Broder out into the street. He watched the little sheriff crossing the street with his prisoner, unlocking the door of a small brick structure wedged in between two stores.

Broder came out a few minutes later and fell in step with Cheney who was walking toward the hotel. He said thoughtfully, "That was damned good advice Ben Ransom gave you, Smith."

Cheney didn't say anything. He was thinking of the money, the plans he'd had. There was the possibility the pockmarked Duke would turn it up with the threat of a prison sentence hanging over him, but it was only a possibility.

"Stella Chadwick is taking on riders," Broder said, "if you don't mind working for a woman boss."

"I'll think about it," Cheney said. He'd had in mind the thought of taking employ-

ment with one of the outfits in the vicinity before buying his own stock. He wanted to see how bad these Wyoming winters were before investing his money.

II

HE HAD HIS MIND MADE UP for him in the morning. Ed Broder knocked on the door, came in and sat down when Cheney opened it for him. Broder said sorrowfully, "That damn jail house never was too strong, Smith."

Cheney looked at him. "Duke gone?" he asked.

"They broke him out," Broder muttered. "Reckon it was my fault, Smith. Had to step out last night to bring in a drunk at the other end o' town. They shot off my locks while I was gone an' run Duke out. Reckon the whole job was kind o' planned."

Cheney nodded. "That was Ben Ransom's work," he said.

"Nobody seen 'em," Broder stated. "It happened about four o'clock in the mornin'. They worked pretty fast." He added, "I ain't seen Ransom around this mornin'. He'll turn up with a story that he was out o' town last night when it happened."

Cheney Smith moistened his lips. He tried not to think of the two years he'd spent earning and saving that money. He said, "I'll look up Miss Chadwick, Sheriff."

"I'll look out for that two thousand," Ed Broder said. "Hope we can run it down some day, Smith."

Cheney found Stella Chadwick in the hotel dining room having her breakfast. Bill Tate and Ernie Hendricks had just joined her. They were standing at the table, hats in their hands when Cheney, came through the door. Cheney walked between the tables, slipped off his hat, and waited until the girl looked at him.

Bill Tate turned around, frowning. Hendricks looked at him, and then rubbed his stomach gently.

"Hear you're taking on riders," Cheney said.

"That's right," the girl nodded. "You looking for a job?"

"I could use one," Cheney told her.

"We're riding out in an hour," Stella Chadwick said. "I pay forty a month."

"I've worked for less," Cheney said, "and I've worked for more. I'll ride along with you."

Stella Chadwick was studying him quietly as if trying to read him. He said coolly, "I'm not Ben Ransom's man. They robbed me of my money belt last night. I'm broke."

"All right," Stella said, "You're on. Hendricks here is my ramrod."

Cheney turned to look at the small man with the mustache. He said, "Well, well."

Ernie Hendricks reddened under his tan, and Stella Chadwick said sharply, "I never like trouble between my men. You'll remember that—?"

"Smith," Cheney finished for her.

"What are you hiding from?" Bill Tate jeered.

Cheney only grinned at him. He put on his hat and said to Stella Chadwick, "I'll be ready when you ride out."

He held the faint hope that he'd run into Ben Ransom before leaving Long Bow that morning, and he stopped in several saloons before going to the stable to saddle the chestnut. Ransom was not around. He spotted Sheriff Ed Broder sitting on the porch outside the Silver Dollar. Broder had his hat pulled down over his eyes and his boots up on the rail.

Cheney was going past him, thinking he was asleep when Broder said softly, "Smart move signin' up with Slash C, Smith. You won't regret it. You might even live longer."

Cheney nodded and kept going.

HE HAD his chestnut out in front of the Grant Hotel when Stella Chadwick came out in riding clothes. Bill Tate had a big bay horse waiting for her. She climbed into the saddle, nodded curtly to Cheney, and then rode down the street.

Cheney fell in behind Tate and Hendricks. They rode north out of Long Bow, and Sheriff Ed Broder still sat in the shade of the Silver Dollar porch, boots up on the rail. Cheney saw Bill Tate glance at the sheriff as they rode past, and then Tate said something to Hendricks.

Riding up closer, Cheney spoke to Tate as they passed the last building before heading out across open country.

"Whose side is Sheriff Broder on in

this fight between the cattlemen and the nester?"

Tate said sourly, "Broder upholds the law in this county. There's no law says nesters can't come in and settle down if they damn well please."

"Pretty rough on the cattlemen, though," Cheney observed shrewdly, "if they all settle down along the water and put up their fences."

"They won't," Bill Tate said tersely.

"But there's no law," Cheney said.

Ernie Hendricks had been listening in on this. The Slash C foreman said grimly, "Where there's no law you can always make one to stand."

Cheney considered this for a moment, seeing clearly the spot Ed Broder was in. The little fat man undoubtedly favored the cattle raisers, but he couldn't throw the force of the law on their side. He had to ride the fence, see that law and order was maintained even when Ben Ransom "protected" his settlers with half a hundred big city toughs he'd imported for the job.

Cheney said, looking straight toward Stella Chadwick a dozen yards ahead of them, "Miss Chadwick hiring gun hands to make the law stick?"

"No," Hendricks snapped. "She's not taking you on because you're tough. You're a Slash C rider. You do as you're damned told. No more."

"That can get a man a piece of ground six feet long by four deep," Cheney said innocently.

"You can always ride the hell out of this country," Hendricks said quietly.

"I'll hang around," Cheney smiled.

They went up over a rise and they left Long Bow behind them. Two miles out of town they left the dirt stage road and turned up a wagon trail which ran due west through rolling cattle country. Cheney saw groups of stock bearing the Slash C brand.

They went across a small pebbly stream and then up a ridge. There were more cattle grazing along the slopes here, and a rider was coming down along the east bank of the stream, riding at a fast trot.

Stella Chadwick pulled up and waited for him. Hendricks and Tate came up with Cheney behind them. Cheney heard the man's terse words.

"Twenty-five nester wagons up along

Bone Creek, Miss Stella. Must o' come up over the pass last night. I'm thinkin' Ransom's in Metropolitan City right now fixin' up their homesteadin' papers."

"Bone Creek!" Ernie Hendrick gasped. "Why damn 'em."

"Women an' children with 'em," the rider said. "They're plannin' to stay, Miss Stella."

Cheney watched the girl's face as the Slash C rider spoke. She was hit hard by this, but she gave no other indication of it than a faint tightening of the lips.

"We'll ride over," Stella said quietly. "I want to talk to them."

The four men fell in behind her as she turned her bay east again, riding around a fringe of the herd in front of them. The Slash C man who had just come up looked at Cheney curiously.

Cheney said to Bill Tate, "Your Bone Creek water pretty important?"

Tate laughed bitterly. "That's part of it," he said, nodding back over his head in the direction of the clear-running stream they'd just left. "You put twenty-five or thirty families along it, with each of 'em taking a hundred and sixty acres under the Homestead Act, and what have you left? Ransom will see to it that every one of them files rights along the Creek. They'll run up their barb wire fences to keep our stock away from it so it won't be spoiled, and Slash C is finished."

"No other water?" Cheney asked.

"A few water holes here and there," Tate told him. "They dry up in hot weather. Bone Creek is our life."

Cheney watched Stella Chadwick riding ahead of them, straight in the saddle, shoulders tense. Bill Tate went on bitterly.

"Ransom is out to break Slash C first. That's why he brought his nesters up here. Ben used to ramrod this outfit when Stella's father was alive. Jack Chadwick kicked him off the ranch for rustling stock he was supposed to be herding. Ransom would like to see every head bearing the Slash C mark curl up and die."

"What does Ransom get out of this?" Cheney asked curiously.

"He works for the Emigrant Aid Company," Tate explained. "The emigrants pay him for settling them on good land and making all the arrangements with the government."

THEY STRUCK Bone Creek a few minutes later, the stream they had crossed earlier being one of its smaller tributaries. The Creek was about fifteen yards wide, a few feet deep, sandy bottom.

Cheney saw the nester wagons half-hidden in a cottonwood grove a short distance up along the water. They had evidently just come in and the wagons were still loaded down with furniture, battered, trail-weary vehicles, the enormous loads only partly covered with yellowed tarpaulins.

There were children playing down along the edge of the Creek, and women bringing up water for the mid-day meal. Several milk cows stood in the water contentedly. A rooster was crowing as the Slash C party rode up.

Cheney spotted five horsemen swinging in from the east, just approaching the grove from that direction. He said to Bill Tate casually, "That chap up front looks like Ransom to me."

"It is," Tate growled. "Reckon he's just coming in from Metropolitan City."

A group of nesters had come out to the fringe of the grove and stood there, watching them. They were farmers—men who wanted nothing more than a piece of ground to cultivate—water, grass and sunshine. Their grandfathers had crossed the eastern mountains to settle in the valleys of Kentucky, Tennessee and the midwestern states. They had picked up now, with that territory filled in, and were moving farther west.

Stella Chadwick dismounted and walked toward the men. Cheney, Tate and Hendricks followed her slowly, and then Cheney saw five men come into the grove and slip out of the saddles. A moment later a heavy-set man with a thick neck and grinning red face pushed through the trees and walked toward them. It was Ben Ransom.

Miss Chadwick was talking quietly to the farmers when Ransom came up. Cheney could hear some of the words. She was trying to explain to them that years ago a group of nesters had tried to farm along the Bone, but after they'd plowed up the grass sod and harvested a few good crops, the top soil began to wash away in the spring rains. Their land had turned to desert and they'd had to pick up and go again.

It was sound logic, and Cheney could

see that the farmers were listening, the worry coming into their eyes. Stella Chadwick went on to explain that the country on the other side of the Rimrock Hills was better adapted to farming, that there were nesters working the land there who had been in the country for eight and ten years and had prospered each year.

"This is cattle country," the girl said quietly. "It's open range land and cattle drift in bad weather. You'll have to fence in every piece of property you plant, and you know what barbed wire costs. The west slope of the Rimrock Hills is still open country and there are no cattle."

Ben Ransom was rolling a cigarette on the outskirts of the crowd of farmers. He put the cigarette in his mouth, lit it, and said softly, "Ask her, boys, if she's not worrying about her water when she's asking you to travel another hundred miles. You men know soil. Any of you ever see better farm land in your lives? Where did you ever see grass like this?"

Stella Chadwick said tersely, "Slash C has used the Bone Creek water for forty years, Mr. Ransom, and you know it."

"Who gave it to you?" Ben Ransom grinned. "Who says you can keep it and not let any of these good people use it?" He turned and he said to the farmers, "Boys, we've already filed on this land. Tomorrow we'll survey every parcel and you can build your sod shanties."

Cheney spoke up from the rear. He said calmly, "Ransom, you work pretty fast, stealing water rights or a man's money."

Ben Ransom stepped around so that he could see Cheney better. He glanced back at the four hard-faced men behind him, and then he said grimly, "Smith, I heard your damned talk too much already."

"You'll hear more of it," Cheney told him easily. "These boys know that you once rode for Slash C, and that Jack Chadwick kicked you out for rustling his stock."

Stella Chadwick glanced around at Cheney quickly. She said, "Smith I'm not looking for trouble."

"Private matter," Cheney observed. "This rustler's pal stole my money belt."

Ben Ransom was walking forward, face a dull red. He stepped around Stella Chadwick and he stood in front of Cheney, head thrust slightly forward, green eyes narrowed.

Ernie Hendricks said behind Cheney, "Them other boys won't do anything, Smith"

"Neither will Ben Ransom," Cheney smiled coldly. "Will you, Ben?"

Ransom swung from the hip. He was a heavier man than Cheney, though not as tall. There was plenty of brute strength in his powerful frame, and Cheney could see that he was the kind of man who could absorb a terrific amount of punishment without wilting. The heavy jaw line and the thick bull neck were indicative of this.

Ransom's first punch caught Cheney on the side of the jaw as Cheney tried to swing his head away. He went down on his haunches and a woman screamed from the direction of the wagons.

Deliberately, Ben Ransom unbuckled his gun belt and tossed it aside as Cheney climbed to his feet, smiling, slipping out of his own belt.

Bill Tate said "Watch his boots, Smith. He damn near killed a man in Long Bow last week."

RANSOM RUSHED, coming in like a bull, head lowered, swinging heavy fists. Cheney stepped away from him, ripping up with his punches, catching Ransom in the face, cutting him around the eyes. He moved easily, coolly, knowing that a fight like this was not going to be decided by a single punch. Ben Ransom depended upon his enormous strength to wear a man down. After that it was easy—but not for the man in front of him!

Cheney stepped back carefully, picking his way over the uneven ground, letting Ransom walk after him, blood trickling from his cut eyes. A nester was shooing away the children who had flocked over when the fight started. The nester women who had been in the vicinity were walking back toward the wagons, catching up their children.

Ben Ransom said thickly, "Smith, I never gave a man the kind of licking I'm handing you."

Cheney leaped in like a cat and smashed his right fist against Ransom's mouth, pulverizing the lips. Ransom's head went back, but his weight was still forward as he came in again, stalking his man, heavy fists clenched.

Cheney noticed that Stella Chadwick

had not left the scene. She stood on the side, holding a riding whip in her hands, lips tight. Raised on a ranch, Cheney knew that she'd seen her fist fights and the sight of a little blood didn't sicken her.

Ben Ransom made a flying dive for Cheney's knees, trying to grapple him and throw him to the ground. Instead of leaping back, Cheney brought his right knee up into Ransom's face, catching him full in the nose. There was the nauseating crackle of bones as the bridge of Ransom's nose went in.

Ben Ransom let out a small yelp—something which came up from inside of him before he could stifle it. The blow had stunned him and he crouched on hands and knees, shaking his head, blood pouring from his nostrils.

Cheney waited for him to get up, knowing that he would. The four men with Ransom stood in a semi-circle a dozen yards away, watching the fight. Ernie Hendricks and Bill Tate were behind Cheney, both of them with their hands on their guns. The nesters, silent and grim-faced, watched the fight from a little distance.

Ransom got up, the blood dripping down on his shirt front. The broken nose had sickened him, taken some of the strength from him, but he was not through. He kicked at Cheney's leg with his right boot, missed, and nearly went down, and then Cheney rushed him, lashing out savagely with both fists, driving his man back.

He didn't give Ransom time to get set now and defend himself. He drove the heavier man back toward the Creek into the shallow water, hitting viciously, getting his full strength behind each blow.

Ransom's head rocked on his shoulders as he staggered away. He nearly fell once as he floundered in water up to his knees. Then he lurched forward and tried to grapple Cheney around the waist. Deliberately, Cheney beat him off, still hitting his man with full, swinging blows.

Ransom went down on his knees in the water, head on his chest. He crouched there swaying a little, looking around for his man out of puffed eyes which were rapidly closing. He tried to get up, but he couldn't make it.

Cheney stepped out of the water and walked over to where he'd dropped his

gun-belt. He picked it up and buckled it on. Ransom's men went out into the water and helped the stumbling man to dry land.

Stella Chadwick was walking to her horse, flicking her whip at some bushes growing along the Creek. Cheney, Hendricks and Bill Tate followed her. Hendricks was the only one who made a comment. The Slash C foreman said quietly, "You'll do, Smith."

THEY reached the Slash C ranch house a half hour later. Stella Chadwick turned her horse over to Bill Tate. She looked at Cheney, frowned, and then walked to the house.

Cheney smiled after her, blowing on his raw knuckles. He followed Hendricks to the coral, unsaddled, and let the chestnut into the enclosure. He said to Hendricks, "What will she do now? I don't think she wants to fight the farmers."

"She won't do anything," Hendricks scowled. "Reckon somebody will have to do it for her. I'm not seeing that damned Ransom break Slash C."

"How many boys you have here?" Cheney asked him.

"Twenty," Hendricks said.

"Against Ransom's fifty," Cheney pointed out, "and all gun fighters." He started to roll a cigarette as they walked toward the bunkhouse. He said thoughtfully, "Ransom must be in a pretty big business if he can afford to carry fifty men with him."

"Might not be big now," Hendricks said. "I believe Ben has plans. He'll populate this whole county, run every rancher out of it, an' bring in his farmers. He'll get them, too, because the first two or three years they'll have good crops and they'll invite their friends and relatives back home. Ransom will clean up then, but he has to make this first play stick."

"And we'll have a whole damned county full of broken farmers," Cheney said, "when that top-soil washes away."

"Which Ben Ransom won't see or worry about," Hendricks growled. "He'll be in another part of the country working the old 'boomer' stunt."

Cheney ate with the crew, looking them over in the bunkhouse. Hendricks nodded toward Cheney when they sat down.

He said, "Smith."

III

IT WAS DURING THE AFTER-noon that the pot began to boil. Cheney saw groups of men in the barn, out near the corrals, talking and gesticulating. It was five o'clock before Hendricks approached him. They'd been branding a half dozen yearlings in one of the branding pens. Hendricks sat on the fence, smoking a cigarette. When Cheney passed him with a smoking iron, he said, "We're ridin' out tonight, Smith."

Cheney looked at the iron. He said, "Bone Creek?"

Hendricks nodded. "We don't figure Ransom has his toughs up there yet, an' we're thinkin' if we can throw a good scare into them nesters they'll think twice before settlin' down here."

"It might work," Cheney admitted, "and it might not. When a man's looking for a home for his wife and kids he won't scare too easily."

"We can try it," Ernie Hendricks scowled. "If it don't work we'll have to think of somethin' else."

The entire crew was in the bunkhouse for the evening meal. None of them left when the meal was over and the cook cleaned off the dishes. They sat on their bunks or they played cards, smoking and saying little. Cheney stood in the bunkhouse door, a cigar in his mouth, one shoulder against the sill. He'd seen a rider come up to the main house a few minutes before and go in. It had been too dark to identify the man.

Hendricks came over and he said, "Better close that door, Smith."

Cheney closed it and walked over to his bunk and sat down. Bill Tate sat on the table beside Hendricks when the Slash C foreman started to speak.

"We'll split up into two parties," Hendricks said. "Bill here will take ten men an' ride up along Crow Creek, an' then swing down along Bone. He'll ride in from the west, comin' in behind thse grove. The rest of us will go right across the Creek."

"We just ride, Ernie?" one man asked.

"Shoot your guns," Hendricks growled. "Make a hell of a lot of noise. Run off their stock an' make 'em go out an' look for it tomorrow."

Cheney puffed on his cigar and looked

at the floor. He didn't like the plan for two reasons. In the first place it was futile, and in the second place they were liable to run into Ransom's larger group of riders and have real trouble.

Ernie Hendricks was saying, "Reckon we'd better pull up our bandannas over our faces just in case some of 'em get too close."

The door opened then and Sheriff Ed Broder stepped in, smiling benignly, hat on the back of his head. Cheney saw Stella Chadwick behind him.

Broder said coolly, "Boys, it won't work."

Hendricks stared at him grimly, and then at Miss Chadwick who was stepping in behind the sheriff. Hats came off in the room. Cheney stood up and tossed his cigar away.

"Why?" Hendricks asked stubbornly.

"Main reason," Ed Broder told him, "is that Ben Ransom has near fifty boys along the Bone kind o' hopin' Slash C men will show up."

Hendricks looked at Stella Chadwick. The girl said quietly, "I know you men want to help me, but I don't want help this way. I'd rather have you stay away from that camp, Ernie."

Hendricks stared at her helplessly. "We ain't lettin' 'em take our water, ma'am—" he started to protest.

"We're not giving up without a fight," Stella Chadwick told him, "but not that kind of fight."

"Miss Stella has a little plan in mind," Ed Broder said. "Might work out better than tryin' to scare 'em, Ernie."

"Your dad," Hendricks muttered, "would have busted 'em up pretty quick, Stella. Reckon they never would have got as far as this if he'd been alive."

"More law in the country now," Broder grinned. "Man has to respect the law, Ernie."

"Hell with it," Hendricks said disgustedly.

Cheney followed Broder out when the little sheriff left the bunkhouse with Stella Chadwick. He followed the fat man down to the corral where Broder had tied his horse. He said, "You figure on riding over to Bone Creek, Sheriff?"

"Might have that in mind," Broder nodded.

"I'm still looking for two thousand dollars," Cheney said. "Our friend, Duke, might be over there now."

Broder turned to look at him. "Might not be a bad idea for you to ride over with me, Smith. Like to be deputized?"

"Why not?" Cheney smiled.

They rode away from the ranch house five minutes later, Cheney carrying his star in his vest pocket. He said to Broder, "What do you have in mind?"

Broder spat to the side. He said, "Stella an' I figured if we could get a delegation o' them nesters to ride over with us to the other side o' the Rimrock Hills an' talk with the farmers who worked this territory—an' failed—they might see it different."

"Ben Ransom won't stand for that," Cheney observed.

"That's why I'm bringin' you along," Broder grinned. "While you're lookin' fer Duke among the crowd I figured I'd have a word to say in private to one o' the nesters. I'll have a couple of 'em slip out o' camp tomorrow, talk as if they were ridin' in to Long Bow fer supplies. They can head over to Slash C then an' Stella can take them across the Rimrocks afore Ransom even knows they're gone. Once they get talkin' to them other farmers they'll never try to settle on Slash C range."

"And no bullets fired," Cheney said.

"We hope," Sheriff Broder smiled.

THEY RODE IN to the cottonwood grove an hour later, spotting the campfires twinkling among the trees when they were still quite a way off. As they were crossing the Bone a rifle cracked and a slug passed over Cheney's head. A man yelled. "Hold it up, boys."

They stopped in mid-stream, the water up to the horses' hocks. Broder called quietly, "I'll hang the next man that opens up on me with a rifle. This is Sheriff Broder of Long Bow." He started to ride forward then, Cheney following him. There were no more shots. A line of men stood along the bank, watching them as they came out of the water into the firelight.

"Ransom ain't here," Broder said softly. "Reckon he's in Long Bow gettin' patched up. That's all the better."

Very briefly, Broder explained his mission to Ransom's men in the grove. Cheney

counted about twenty of them, the others being still strung out around the camp.

"We're not lookin' fer any trouble," Broder said. "There's a boy broke out o' my jail last night. I'm figurin' to put him back. Heard he was out at this camp."

"What's that damned Slash C man doin' with you?" one man growled suspiciously.

"Deputized him tonight," Broder explained. "He was slugged by the feller I had in my jail. He's after his money."

Cheney scanned the faces quickly. The man, Duke, was not with this group. He started to walk among the wagons, a cigarette in his mouth. He saw Ed Broder doing the same thing, stopping at one of the wagons to have a word with a big, raw-boned farmer. He passed on, and a few minutes later he stopped and spoke again to another farmer.

Cheney made his round of the camp and came back to where Broder was talking with Ransom's men. Broder said to him, "See him?"

"Not here," Cheney growled. "He's skipped again."

"Ransom around?" Broder asked one of the men.

"He ain't," the man snapped.

"Tell him we was here," Ed Broder grinned, "an' we're still lookin' fer Duke."

They rode out of the camp, across the Creek, and Broder pulled up a mile beyond the Bone. He said, "Tell Miss Stella three o' them farmers will be out at her place tomorrow noon. She'd better head right out to the Rimrocks with 'em."

"You going back to Long Bow?" Cheney wanted to know.

"Figured I'd keep an eye on Ransom," Broder nodded. "I'd watch him, myself if I were you, Smith. No man takes that kind of lickin' without a comeback. He'll go fer your back next time."

"I'll watch him," Cheney said.

Broder turned his horse and headed east in the direction of Long Bow, while Cheney sent the chestnut at a fast lope toward the Slash C ranch. He was less than a quarter of a mile away from the spot where he'd turned off from Broder when he heard the horse coming after him, running up a grade.

Thinking it was Broder, coming after him to tell him something he'd forgotten to say, he pulled up and waited. The horseman

coming up the slope made no effort to conceal himself. He rode at a fast trot, faintly outlined against the sky.

Cheney called, "That you, Broder?"

There was no answer. The man below waved a hand to him and still kept coming. He was less than thirty yards away now. Cheney was reaching for his gun, the first real premonition of danger coming to him, when the six-gun cracked. He saw the flame from the muzzle first, and then he felt the slug nick his right cheek.

He fell off the saddle as if he'd been hit, striking the ground, rolling a few yards, and then coming up on his belly. He had his gun up then, lined on the man riding towards him, very clearly outlined now. He shot twice, and he heard a short cry.

A riderless horse pounded past him seconds later. He still lay on the ground, listening, holding the gun steady. He could hear a man breathing heavily in the grass less than fifteen yards away.

The breathing stopped. Cheney waited fully ten minutes before making a wide circuit of the spot, coming up in the rear. Pushing the grass aside, he reached forward, his hand coming in contact with a man's chest. It was wet with blood.

Striking a match, he held it over the dead man's face and then let the match go out. The man on the ground was Duke, the pock-marked man. Cheney sat there for a few moments, frowning, knowing now that Duke had been at the nester camp, probably hidden out in the brush beyond the firelight. Of his own accord, or paid by Ben Ransom to do the job, he'd ridden after them when they left the camp. He'd cleverly assumed Cheney would be thinking the very thing that he did when he rode up—that Ed Broder was coming after him to impart additional information.

Feeling over the dead body, Cheney's fingers located the money belt. He unstrapped it, gratified, and then whistled softly for the chestnut. The horse trotted up.

In thirty minutes Cheney was talking to Stella Chadwick on the porch of the ranch house. He said, "Broder's sending three of the nesters here tomorrow noon. They'll ride out with you to the Rim-rock Hills."

"What happened to your cheek?" Stella asked quietly.

Cheney was standing in the lamplight, hat in hand, as he spoke. He said, "One of Ransom's boys made a play for me to-night. He won't try it again."

Stella Chadwick took a deep breath. "If you knew Ransom as we know him you'd leave this country. He'll never stop trying to kill you as long as you're both alive.

"I hope," Cheney said softly, "that the next time he tries it himself."

IV

IT WAS ONE O'CLOCK THE NEXT afternoon when Cheney saw Stella Chadwick coming down toward the barn. He'd just ridden in himself, having brought in a few more unbranded yearlings. He said when the girl came up, "Figured you'd be gone, Miss Chadwick."

"They haven't arrived," Stella told him. "You sure Sheriff Broder spoke to them?"

"He said they'd be here," Cheney frowned, "Reckon they ran into a little trouble, Miss Chadwick. Ransom wouldn't want them to go if he knew about it."

Stella Chadwick stood in the entrance way. She started to say, "I hope—" and then stopped suddenly. A rider was pounding toward them, swinging through the fringe of cottonwood trees which bordered the ranch house, driving down past the corrals.

The rider slipped from the saddle in front of the barn, and Cheney recognized him as a Slash C hand. Stella said tensely, "What's happened, George?"

"Just run across three dead ones in a draw two miles east o' the Bone," George said grimly. "I was ridin' out o' the draw to come here when Ransom an' his bunch opened up on me. They chased me clean to the Bone."

"Who were the dead men?" Stella Chadwick said slowly.

George shrugged. "Didn't know any of 'em," he admitted. "Looked like some o' them damned nesters over in the grove. Shot in the backs—all of 'em. They didn't have time to put up any kind o' fight."

Miss Chadwick looked at Cheney. Her face was very pale, and her voice a little unsteady as she said, "Would you mind

riding into Long Bow and bringing back Sheriff Broder?"

Cheney nodded. He walked down to the corral where he'd tied the chestnut. When he rode out he saw Stella Chadwick walking toward the ranch house, head downward. He knew what she was thinking. There were three families up in the cottonwood grove along Bone Creek who would be minus husbands and fathers.

In Long Bow Cheney found the sheriff's office closed and a lock on the door. He went into the Silver Dollar saloon and queried at the bar. The bartender said he hadn't seen Ed Broder since the previous evening.

"Early or late last night?" Cheney asked the man.

"Early," the bartender said after thinking a while. "Ed usually drops in here about midnight for a last check. He didn't show up last night."

Cheney stepped outside on the porch and rolled a cigarette. He watched a boy go past rolling a heavy barrel on the wooden sidewalk. He crossed over to the Empire Saloon and put the same question to the bartender, receiving the same answer. Broder had been seen early the previous evening, but he hadn't been in for his usual nightly check before closing time, and he hadn't been seen in town today at all.

Riding out of Long Bow at mid-afternoon, Cheney found himself rolling this thought over in his mind. If Ben Ransom had sent a man to shoot *him* down, there was the possibility Ransom had also had Ed Broder trailed after he left the nester camp last night. Ransom may have been expecting Broder's move and, knowing that the sheriff sided with Slash C, had taken the quickest means of putting him out of the way. Broder could very well be lying in a draw himself this minute, a bushwacker's slug through his back.

Instead of riding straight back to the ranch, Cheney headed out over the possible course Ed Broder would have taken the previous night after leaving the nester's camp. He dipped down into a half-dozen draws, and then rode the chestnut along the course of a tiny dried-up stream, searching through the tall grass.

It was impossible to pick up any single trail through here because Slash C cattle

grazed on these hills, and there had been many riders moving back and forth, leaving tracks.

At six o'clock in the evening he returned to Slash C, having found nothing. Ernie Hendricks met him as he was unsaddling. The Slash C foreman said quietly, "What about Broder?"

"Couldn't find him," Cheney admitted. "He wasn't in Long Bow since last night."

"Bushwhacked?" Hendricks asked grimly, "like the three nesters who were supposed to turn up here?"

Cheney looked at him. "I didn't find him," he said. "I looked." He said when Hendricks turned back toward the bunkhouse, "Miss Chadwick tell you?"

Hendricks nodded. "Ransom got word of it," he said. "He had the nesters followed and shot down. Then he takes the story back to the camp that they were killed by Slash C men. He must know Broder's not around to rope that story."

Cheney whistled softly. "Will the nesters believe that?" he asked.

"Why not?" he asked. "They know we don't want them in this country an' that we'll fight like hell to chase them out. Those murders are supposed to be warnings we're sending out."

"They'll never run now," Cheney observed. "This will make them bitter."

"Which is what Ransom expected," Ernie Hendricks scowled. "I'm expectin' trouble tonight, Smith. I'm thinkin' Ben Ransom, his toughs, and the nesters will be around here tonight to burn us out."

"Burn out Slash C?" Cheney gasped.

"Ransom's always wanted to do it," Hendricks grated, "an' he has his chance now. Broder's probably dead; Ben has maybe seventy-five men behind him against our twenty, an' he has his reason in the eyes of most men."

CHENEY thought about that. He walked up to the house and knocked on the door, waiting on the porch till Stella Chadwick opened it. When the girl came out he said quietly, "Hendricks thinks that Ransom will raid your place tonight. I couldn't find Broder so he won't be able to stop it. You figure on fighting them?"

"I don't want anyone killed," Stella said slowly. "What do you think happened to Broder?"

Cheney shrugged. "Ransom tried to have me murdered last night," he observed. "I don't believe he has any more use for Broder than he has for me."

Stella Chadwick was silent for a moment. "If they come," she said, "I'll talk to Ransom. Will you please tell Hendricks that?"

"You'll talk to Ransom," Cheney told her, "after your place is burned down and your cattle stampeded."

The girl didn't say anything to this, and Cheney shrugged and left the porch. He gave Hendricks the order in the bunkhouse and Ernie Hendricks swore steadily for five minutes. Bill Tate came in at the end of it, and Tate said tersely, "Any damned Ransom hand comes near this bunkhouse will get a bullet in him, an' I'm hopin' the first one is Ransom himself."

Cheney smiled. Instead of waiting for supper, he walked into the kitchen, had a cup of coffee, and then headed for the barn. In five minutes he was swinging across the meadow to the east of Slash C. The night was cool and clear with a crisp breeze coming down from the high pine-covered slopes to the north. The night was still very young and there was plenty of time.

Cheney pulled up when he reached the Bone, slid from the saddle and made a smoke. He stood there at the edge of the water, seeing silent groups of cattle standing on the opposite bank, wondering again what had happened to Broder. The little fat man was nobody's fool and, knowing the humor of Ransom and his men, he could be depended upon to take extra precautions. Still Broder was missing at a time when he was desperately needed.

Cheney threw the half-smoked cigarette into the water, and then rode up along the Bone. He was within a quarter of a mile of the nester encampment when he pulled up, slipped his hand inside his vest pocket, and took out the silver star Ed Broder had given to him.

He was grinning a little as he rode on, the star pinned to his vest, shining in the faint moonlight. Opposite the encampment he let the chestnut walk into the water, making no effort to conceal himself. The splashing drew a quick warning from the other bank.

CHENEY kept riding, ignoring the bullet which whined over his head. He came up on dry land, trotting the horse toward the big fire which burned near one of the wagons. He saw the groups of men there, watching him grimly. There were no women or children, and he knew then that he'd walked into a conference between Ransom's toughs and the nesters.

He spotted Ransom standing on the opposite side of the fire, his smashed nose patched with adhesive tape, big hands on his hips.

"Who in hell is that?" Ransom snarled.

"Nobody with him," a man called from the Creek.

Cheney pulled up in the firelight, his back toward the Creek. He didn't dismount. Looking over the group he could see the grim-faced farmers here with Ransom's crowd. There was bitter hatred in their eyes as they looked at him, recognizing him as a Slash C rider.

"Smith," Ben Ransom said softly. His green eyes flicked to the badge on Cheney's chest. "So you're a lawman, too," he murmured. "Who in hell are you after tonight?"

"You," Cheney smiled. His right hand dropped, coming up with the Smith & Wesson, lining the gun directly at Ransom's broad chest.

"For what?" Ransom snapped.

"For the murder of Sheriff Ed Broder," Cheney said coolly. "Get your boys away from the back of me, Ransom. If they shoot me I'll have you before I'm dead."

Ransom's eyes widened at the mention of Broder's name. Surprise came into his eyes, and it was genuine. It was all Cheney needed to know, the reason he'd come here. Broder was not dead.

"You're a damned fool," Ben Ransom said, "if you think you can make that stick."

"I can try," Cheney grinned at him. "Drop that gunbelt, Ransom."

Ben Ransom looked at him steadily, making no move, and then his eyes shifted to the right and left, and Cheney knew some of his men were edging in behind him, cutting off his retreat to the Creek. He kept the gun lined on Ransom's chest, and then suddenly jabbed his spur into the chestnut's flank, digging deep.

The big horse, surprised, and stung,

started to buck violently. Cheney yelled as he fought to keep his seat, at the same time edging the chestnut away from the fire.

Men in the vicinity scrambled out of the way of the wildly-kicking horse, giving Cheney plenty of room. Cheney fired twice into the air, whooped, and jabbed the spurs again, sending the chestnut down along the bank of the Creek at a frantic gallop.

Ben Ransom roared, "Stop him!"

A gun cracked, and then another. Cheney hanging low over the chestnut's neck heard the slugs whine over his head. He let the big horse run, following the course of the stream, and then he suddenly plunged into the water where the Creek narrowed to only a few yards.

Scrambling up on the other bank, he listened for a moment, making sure Ransom had sent none of his men after him, and then he headed straight for the Slash C ranch. He found Ernie Hendricks with Stella Chadwick on the porch. The Slash C hands stood below in small groups, smoking, their cigarettes making red spots in the darkness.

CHENEY heard Hendricks say tersely, "They ain't runnin' us off this place, Miss Stella. None o' these boys have any use fer Ransom, an' if he comes bustin' in here he'll run into lead."

Cheney had left his horse back by the corral. He came up on the porch and he said, "Ernie, I'd say Ransom was moving across Bone Creek now, and he has his nesters with him."

"That settles it," Hendricks growled. He stepped from the porch and walked toward his men.

Cheney said to Stella Chadwick, "I found out that Broder's not dead, and I think I know where he went."

The girl looked at him anxiously. "If Broder were here he could convince the nesters that Slash C men didn't murder the three men who were coming here to see us."

"I'm sure," Cheney said, "that Broder was the first one to know of the deaths of the three nesters, and that he headed straight for the Rimrock Hills to bring back some of the farmers there. He knows

now that that's the only way to prevent the nesters from settling along Bone Creek."

"He should be here pretty shortly." Stella Chadwick said.

"I'd say tonight," Cheney nodded. "He'd be able to get changes of horses all along the way and, if he left this morning, he should be back around midnight."

Stella Chadwick was about to speak when one of the men below called sharply, "Riders comin' up."

"All right," Ernie Hendricks yelled. "They're askin' fer it."

Cheney grasped the girl by the arm. He said quietly, "You can't stop it now. Better get inside."

Stella stepped into the house. Her voice was steady and cold as she spoke.

"I'm not afraid of Ransom," she told him. "I'm ready to fight him, but I hate to think of these farmers getting mixed up in it. They have wives and children waiting for them back at the camp."

Cheney grinned. "If you have a gun," he said, "better get it and keep the door locked."

He ran from the porch, racing down toward the barn, just as a file of riders tore down past the fringe of cottonwoods. Bill Tate yelled from the barn, "Give 'em hell!"

Half a dozen of Hendricks' men were huddled behind the largest corral. They started to fire as Cheney went past them. Hendricks and Tate were firing from the barn, and Cheney saw one horse go down as Ransom's bunch tore in.

Dropping to his knees at the corner of the barn, Cheney fired twice at a horseman coming past the bunkhouse. He saw the man throw up his arms and slump from the saddle. A man was yelling loudly, "Spread out—spread out."

Cheney waited for Ben Ransom's hard voice, didn't hear it, and knew for sure then that this was only a feint attack, and that the main drive would come from another direction.

Riders were scurrying around the far side of the main corral, shooting at the bunkhouse and the barn as they raced by. They kept low in the saddles and made themselves elusive targets.

Racing for the barn door, Cheney stepped inside. He called, "Hendricks!"

"All right," the Slash C foreman growled.

"Give me eight men," Cheney said. "This is only part of the attack. I'm sure Ransom is coming in from the south, probably through the orchard."

"Go ahead," Hendricks₃₁ said after a moment of hesitation. He₁ snapped off names and men stepped out of the darkness inside the barn, approaching the entrance way.

"Keep low," Cheney told them, "and run like hell. We're going around the back of the house and then through the orchard." He'd noticed the little orchard the first day he'd come to Slash C. Several dozen fruit trees had been planted directly behind the house, bordering a little stream, which was part of Bone Creek.

Gun in hand, Cheney darted out through the doorway, hugging the wall of the barn, and then raced across twenty-five feet of open space between the barn and one corner of the ranch house. As he crossed this space he saw a window on the east wing of the ranch house open, and a rifle barrel protrude through the opening.

The rifle cracked, and a rider racing along the far stretch of the corral was knocked from the saddle. Cheney Smith was smiling as he reached the house and turned the corner, the eight men running with him. A man behind him muttered, "That Miss Stella, she's a damned good shot."

Cheney cut in among the trees, leaped the small stream, which was about a yard wide at this point, and kept running toward the fringe of the orchard. He could hear men coming up now, a score of horses, running very hard. He called softly, "Start shooting when they're in among the trees."

The eight men with him spread out, taking cover behind the small trees, squatting down.

Cheney heard Ben Ransom's voice as the men up ahead of him₂ burst in among the trees. Ransom was saying, "You, Whitey. Take eight men. Swing in around the bunkhouse. You'll find most of 'em in the barn."

Cheney crouched on the ground, gun tight in his hand.

He said, "This is it, Ransom."

THE HORSEMAN up ahead of him stopped. He could see them vaguely in the shadows, horses stamping the ground. He could hear the creaking of the saddles and the heavy breathing of the animals.

Ransom swore. A gun cracked and the slug clipped a twig from the branch above Cheney's head. Cheney fired into the huddle of men. He heard the men with him open up, also, their guns breaking the stillness of the night back here.

A half-dozen saddles were emptied by this first volley. The remaining horsemen scattered as Cheney leaped up and charged forward, firing as he ran, the eight Slash C men following him.

Cheney fired at the fleeing figures, reloaded, and then raced back through the trees. A small hay shed had started to burn at the far side of one of the corrals as he came back toward the ranch house. Guns were crackling from the bunkhouse and from the barn.

Crouching, Cheney raced past the porch corner, skipped around a water trough, and kept going around a small corral. He heard two of the men who had been with him in the orchard, running along in the rear. As he ran he heard Stella Chadwick's rifle crack again.

Gun tight in his hand, he raced around the corral, meeting Ransom and a half-dozen riders almost head-on as they made a circuit of the corral with the intention of driving in toward the barn entrance.

He could see Ransom's tense face in the glow of the fire. Ransom's mouth was open, his gun barrel pointing toward the sky as he rode at breakneck speed around the corral.

Ransom's gun was coming down, the barrel lining on Cheney's chest, when Cheney's first bullet hit him, Cheney flattened against the corral bars as Ransom's sorrel horse tore past, Ben Ransom's body rocking in the saddle.

Two more bullets smashed into Ransom from the guns of the men behind Cheney. The impact of the lead nearly lifted Ransom out of the saddle. Crouching, Cheney fired once at the men coming after Ransom. He hit one man, and the others swerved away from the corral.

A bullet struck one of the corral posts inches from Cheney's head; another slug

tugged at his hat, but missed his skull entirely. Turning his head, Cheney saw Ransom fall from the saddle as the sorrel horse raced past the bunkhouse. His body hit the hard earth with a sickening thud, his hat rolling off, coming to rest a few feet from the bunkhouse door.

There were more riders coming in then, and a man was yelling, "Hold it up—hold it up."

Cheney lifted his head up above the corral bars, watching this new group coming in. There were a half-dozen of them, Sheriff Ed Broder riding in front, gun in hand, a smile on his wide, fleshy face as he came into the firelight.

A Ransom man, dismounted, standing at the corner of the bunkhouse, sent one shot at Ed Broder, missed, and Broder knocked him off his feet with two lightning shots from the big gun in his hand.

"All right," Broder warned. "This is the damned law. I'll hang the next man that uses a gun."

The firing slackened down, and Cheney heard the sound of horses running in the night, hoofbeats dying away. Ben Ransom still lay where he had fallen, on his face, arms outstretched.

Slash C men started to come from the bunkhouse and the barn, holding their guns, watching carefully. Bill Tate had blood on his left shoulder, a dark stain which was moving down his body. Ernie Hendricks was grinning, clicking empty shells from his six-gun.

Broder called loudly, "Any o' you nesters with Ransom's crowd better step out for a little parley."

Cheney saw Stella Chadwick coming down the steps from the porch. She walked steadily, head up, lips tight. Cheney heard her give orders to several of the Slash C hands, and they immediately went to work on the burning hay shed, tearing it down, spreading out the hay so that it burned up quickly.

Men were drifting into the firelight, and Cheney recognized some of them as the nesters he'd seen down at the encampment. Stella Chadwick, Broder, the men Broder had brought back with him, and several of the homesteaders who had been with Ransom, went into conference on the porch. Ed Broder came over. He

said, "You get your money back, Smith?"

"I got it," Cheney nodded. "You came in time, Broder."

Ed Broder grinned wryly, "Hell of a ride fer a man my weight," he said. He started to walk toward his horse and then he turned around. He said, "Now what's the real namè, friend?"

"Smith," Cheney said.

Broder frowned. "Stubborn as a damned mule," he said, and he walked on. Cheney waited until the homesteaders had left before he walked up to the house to have his talk with Stella Chadwick. The girl said,

"I want to thank you for your part in this business, Smith."

Cheney nodded. "Reckon you can thank me any time you want, Miss Chadwick," he smiled. "I figure on being your neighbor."

"Neighbor?" Stella Chadwick stared at him.

"Nice piece of range land north of the Bone," Cheney told her. "I didn't see any stock on it. Thought I'd settled down there and raise my own beef."

"We—we'd be glad to have you," Stella Chadwick smiled. "There's enough room for all of us." She paused and then she said, "Slash C will be losing a good hand, Smith."

"You might be getting a better neighbor," Cheney observed. "The good Book says a man should 'love his neighbor as—'"

"All right," Stella Chadwick broke in hurriedly. "I have to see Hendricks."

CHENEY watched her step from the porch. He was grinning as he took his hat from his head and pushed a hand through his hair. He was whistling softly as he walked down to the bunkhouse. He found Bill Tate in the bunkhouse, sitting on a chair, having his wounded shoulder attended to.

"What in hell you got to whistle about?" Tate asked sourly.

"Love thy neighbor as thyself," Cheney grinned, "Reckon that's pretty easy, Bill."

"You're loco," Bill Tate growled.

"I feel all right," Cheney Smith said softly.



McBride triggered again,

GAMBLER'S DRAW

By William J. Glynn

Deputy McBride was greased lightning with a gun, but Sherry Carter had slippery fingers himself. And he had a hole-card no star-totin' gun-hawk could duck.

EXCITEDLY, FROM THE CORNER of his mouth, the furtive-eyed little hostler whispered, "He's here, Sherry. He made his brag, an' said he's goin' to run you out—clean up Pawnee Springs. No more gamblin', see? No more rough stuff. The sheriff sent him up here from the county seat, an' I thought I'd better warn you. That red-head deputy's goin' to . . ."

Sheribiah Carter smiled tolerantly and held up a slender white hand.

"All right, Joe," he said softly, protestingly. "Thanks, but I haven't finished my coffee. Surely your brave new deputy can wait for a man to greet the sun—to open his eyes?"

"He ain't my pick," the livery man hissed. His beady eyes darted to the Waterbury on the dining room wall. "It's three o'clock in the afternoon, Sherry. He says you only got till sundown!"

"My hours are not those of other men," Sheribiah responded carelessly. "In good

time, Joe. In my own very good time."

Some folks in Pawnee Springs called Joe a footpad and drunk-roller, a no-good hanger-on at the bar, particularly Sheribiah Carter's Buckhorn gambling house. During the day he was a hostler at the livery barn.

Joe said, "You're a fool, Sherry. Them grand manners of yours ain't goin' to work this time. That new deputy has a bad gun rep. He's poison. You got plenty sand, maybe, but you ain't no gunman.

"So?" Sheribiah Carter's heavy black eyebrows arched. "You're certain of that?"

Joe grunted disgustedly, suddenly whirled around and scurried out onto the walk and vanished from sight.

Sheribiah Carter sighed deeply and leaned back in his chair, leisurely blowing his cigar smoke at the Continental's fly-specked ceiling. He was a whimsical man in his late thirties, and now he sat in lonely state, idling over his coffee, the breakfast dishes in mild disarray on the white table cloth. He stared through the wide front window of the eating house into Pawnee Spring's dusty main thoroughfare, his brief nod to a passer-by a condescending gesture.

Fifteen years on the cow-country frontier, from tent-town grab-all to gambling palaces, had given him a certain blase regard toward danger, of rep-building gunmen, bounty-hunting lawmen and the occasionally-met stern upholder of law and order.

During the two years he had resided in Pawnee Springs, building up his Buckhorn, he had depended to a great extent on his quick-shooting little lookout, one Paint Guran, to expedite trouble when it reared its ugly head. True, he himself had to take a hand and help Paint more than a few times, but his help had been more in the nature of moral support than anything else. However, when it came to marksmanship, a two-bit piece at thirty paces was not beyond Paint's ability.

Sherry hooked his thumbs into his buff waistcoat and crossed his long, slim, gray-clad legs. The tails of his immaculate black broadcloth cutaway divided behind his chair to touch the spur-scarred floor like the wings of some huge beetle. Carter was a handsome man, and aware of it, profes-

sionally pale-faced from long night hours over the gaming tables. He wore his jet black hair rather long and carefully brushed back from his high, white forehead. Gray laced his temples, matching the color of his silk cravat.

HE FLICKED DUST from his gleaming congress-gaitered boot-shoes and rose to put on his silk-tile. Gathering up his short, heavy cane, he gave the hat a final jaunty pat and sauntered out into the little cowtown's shimmering heat.

At the first interesection he stopped to gaze proudly at the gilt-trimmed false front of his gaudy Buckhorn, thrusting up boldly on the side street. He was in no hurry to begin the day's work and smiled pleasantly at Sam Brant, standing in the doorway of the general store.

Brant glared coldly at him, quickly turned his broad back and entered his store.

Sheribiah's high, flat shoulders moved in a shrug, but his pale face colored slightly at the rebuff. It had become increasingly difficult for him to accept the cool demeanor of the business men of Pawnee Springs.

Carter moved on, openly admiring his appearance in the store windows as he passed along the boardwalk. At Mike Lanciano's barber shop he hesitated, feeling of his long hard jaw. Then his alert eye picked up the little knot of men coming toward him. He spun around to face them. He became graven, quietly observing them, a curious half-smile on his full-lipped mouth.

The big man in the lead hailed him, a bony-faced man wearing a tied down six-shooter on his lean hip, and with bright red hair that thrust out from beneath his black Stetson like a lick of flame.

Sheribiah saw the gleam of the deputy's badge on the man's calf-skin vest and twirled the heavy cane in his long, supple fingers.

Waiting until the red-head was near, he said. "The new law of Pawnee Springs?" His droll tone skipped up the scale to end in a question, its impertinence stopping the deputy in mid-stride.

"You're Sherry Carter?" the lawman queried sharply. His eyes were very blue

in his saddle-brown face, keen and unblinking. His high-bridged nose suggested an eagle's beak, sharp at the end and pointing to the paper-thin lips that sprouted a long silky mustache. "Your money-bleedin' in this town's got to stop, Carter," he went on quickly. His broad shoulders moved under his double-breasted flannel shirt. "I want to see your Buckhorn closed by night. Get it? And at sundown you move out on the stage—for good."

Sheribiah's lean frame stiffened. "Who are you to tell me what to do?"

"McBride. Red McBride," the deputy said harshly. "These men here have seen my credentials," he added and waved a bony hand at the little group standing around in a circle, like curious dogs waiting for a fight.

"I run a straight house," Sheribiah Carter said.

"You wouldn't," the deputy replied. "There'd come a time when some poor devil's roll would be too big. You'd want it. You'd take it, one way or another."

"He would that," Pat Brian, the teamster put in, glaring at Sheribiah. "Shure, an' many is the time he's done it, too."

"McBride, you are indeed a dangerous person," Carter said with heavy sarcasm.

The deputy grunted. "Big enough. An' if you figger to carry this to your hired gunny—Paint Guran—you'll find him with a chunk of my lead in his ribs, ridin' west on a stolen hoss. A scared monkey, if I ever seen one."

Carter knew a touch of fear then. If this man had beaten Paint to the draw, he was no swaggering bluff, for Paint was fast. He smiled coolly. The deputy's thin lips gathered and seemed to explode.

"Tinhorn!" he burst out. "You've had your warnin' now." Suddenly his big hand flicked out and slapped loudly against Carter's face.

Sheribiah jerked back, his great dark eyes blazing. "By Godfrey!" he exclaimed.

Swiftly, the deputy spat. "I'll put a chunk of lead in *your* snake-guts if you don't clear out by sundown you ham-actin' crook!" With that, he turned and went back down the walk.

RAGE surged beneath Carter's long face. "By Godfrey," he muttered and stared after the deputy's retreating back. Someone in the little group tittered. Another made a rude noise with his lips and tongue. Sheribiah heard it. It was for him.

"Clear out, all of you, he ordered imperiously. "What is this to you?"

One of them took it up, an overalled nester from over on the Republican. He spat and said, "We got somebody to take our side now tinhorn. Dep'ty McBride'll bring you to time, yuh dang fraud. Us settlers got some say about this town. We got famblies, women an' kids. This dang hell-hole's gotta quiet down."

"And go to sleep you ugly clod," the gambler snapped. Then stepping in close to the nester, he swung his cane and cracked it down as the man made a move for the old six-shot Starr percussion in his belt.

The nester yelled and grabbed at his numbed wrist.

"Brave tinhorn" he snarled. "But all us boys here seen you backwater in front of the dep'ty, didn't we?" His shaggy head swiveled to his fellows for confirmation but there was no answer. They had slipped quietly away. And, with a quick fear on his face, the nester followed them, ducking into the general store.

Carter laughed softly then and seeing the nester's kid gazing at him open-mouthed from beyond the tie rail, spun him a silver dollar.

The kid gaped and backed up against his dad's old democrat wagon. Sheribiah moved on, his shoulders sagging slightly. The deputy's insult had burned deeper than he would allow himself to believe.

In his hotel room, Carter paced the floor from commode to bureau and from window to brass bed. Twice he stopped in front of the mirror over the bureau and looked at himself, frowning. He held up his short, strangely heavy cane and looked into the round hole in its end. The shaft was in reality a long barrel—a cane-gun. He inspected the folding trigger in the curved handle, the bar hammer. He chuckled harshly. A single-shot percussion cane-gun wouldn't help, even one altered to take a .41 caliber derringer cartridge—if it wasn't loaded and it hadn't been for

months, with Paint Guran rodding his trouble. He sighed deeply and threw it on the bed. He removed his hat and coat and went to the carpetbag at the end of the bed. Opening it, he took out a tangled leather shoulder harness and strapped it on, nestling the holster under his left armpit. Then he whipped out the snub-nosed .44 Colt Bulldog and swung out the loading gate to inspect the loads. The single-action was a good gun and the hard rubber handle fitted his slender hand. A surge of confidence filled him and he sat down on the bed and thought of Paint Guran. He held no sadness for the little gunman's defeat. The tough gun-hung lookout had known his risks and had taken them. Sheribiah had paid him fighting wages. But the fact remained stark and clear in the gambler's mind.

Paint had met a faster man. And now there was nothing between himself and that deputy's lightning draw.

"Damn him!" Sheribiah whispered and took out his gold watch to snap open the heavy hunting case. Four o'clock. He had about two hours to go before the sundown. He wound the watch and cursed under his breath when the stem bound on a tight spring and then snapped to run free, broken.

He stepped to the commode and from the drawer took a pint bottle of whiskey, pouring out two fingers in the water glass. He downed it abruptly and coughed as the bite of the drink spread hot fingers in his lean stomach. After that he practiced his draw.

"Slow" he muttered and tried again and again. A fine sweat broke out on his high forehead and on his long upper lip. His blue silk sleeve-holders hampered him and he ripped them off. Next he unfastened his starched cuffs and threw them into the carpetbag. Suddenly his ear caught a soft knock on his door. He drew his six-shooter and yanked the door open.

"Sherry?"

THE Buckhorn bartender stood there in the hallway heavy short-coupled, in tucked-up apron and white bar vest. His pouched blood-shot eyes bugged in their sockets. "For the love of the old Harry himself," the barkeep gasped. "What in—"

"Nip," Sheribiah greeted the man. "Come in come in." He motioned to a chair.

Nip Steinburger waddled into the room and waited until Carter closed the door.

"Sherry, that dep'ty's waltzin' all over the town. Twice he's been in the Buckhorn—since throwin' the scare into Paint. Watchin' watchin'! That man's eyes has put ice in my gizzard. You better skeddadle, and fast. Or by golly he'll—"

"Shoot me" Sheribiah finished for him. He laughed. "Rest those aching feet, Nip," he said good-naturedly "and have a good drink of real liquor for a change."

Steinburger's moist eyes roved to the bureau and rested briefly on the bottle of bonded whiskey. They came back to Carter, narrowed, speculative.

"You been drinkin'? I never knowed you'd take a drink Sherry. This—this dep'ty ain't got your wind up, has he?" His glance went to Carter's shoulder gun, and he shook his round, clipped head. "Won't do no good, Sherry," he said sadly. "This here's been buildin' a long time. Now the blue-noses got that dep'ty for a champion, our time's runnin' out. Ain't I seen him stand there and beat Paint to the draw, then pistol-whip him 'till Paint cried like a kid?"

Steinburger's fat chin quivered on his short neck. "Nope, an' there's somethin' else. We jus' had trouble down in the Buckhorn. Big-footed nester name of Johnson. He come in an' picked a fight with old Dad LeMonte. Dad was drunk as per usual an' this nester pulled out a' old cap-an'-ball Starr an' shot him—"

"Dad LeMonte?" Sheribiah snapped. "He's not—dead?"

"No," Steinburger wheezed, "but his gal, that tippynose Marie LeMonte you been shinin' around an' not breakin' the ice with—she's madder'n a critter in a bog hole!"

"Lucky at cards, you know," Sheribiah said lightly, theatrically.

"An' unlucky in love," Nip replied with heavy humor. "Nope, Sherry. You can't stay in Pawnee Springs, not with that ice-eye dep'ty. I hear he done slapped you an' called your hand?"

Sheribiah's dark eyes sparkled. "Will you leave that man out of your conver-

sation?" he snapped. "I'll take care of him!"

Steinburger shrugged and waddled to the door.

Carter shut the door behind the bartender's thick shoulders. Going to the bureau, he poured himself another drink, four fingers of it, and tossed it off as before, gasping as the liquor constricted his throat.

"Afraid, hell," he said and, putting on his coat and hat, went down into the lobby, onto the gallery and into the street.

HE WAS passing Jones' Saddlery when he saw her. Marie LeMonte locked the door of her notion shop and when she turned around Carter was there beside her, his silk hat in his hand.

"Marie," he said softly, "I just heard about your father. I—"

The girl faced him. She was pretty, young and gray-eyed. Her dress held her snugly at breast and tiny waist, flaring out at trim ankles to sweep the boardwalk. Her slim shoulders were taut and a brittle anger touched her eyes. She said, "My father will live, but no thanks to you, Mister Carter."

"Marie, I'm sorry," Sheribiah said.

"Please—you're a gambler. You've lost this hand," she said shortly and walked hurriedly down the walk.

Sheribiah's dark eyes followed her. There was no smile on his face now, and his shoulders slumped dejectedly. Marie's words seemed to hang in the air, hot bullets that hurtled at him. He went on, his face bleak with his thoughts.

The whiskey no longer warmed him and he strode along, head down.

Joe darted from the livery barn as he passed, and grabbed him by the arm. Surprised, Sheribiah jerked to a stop, his whole body trembling, a quick anger on his face.

"Joe!" he said. "Don't ever do that again. You've added a dozen gray hairs to my head."

The hostler's little eyes widened. "Sherry, you got the wind up. You're tremblin' like a cottonwood leaf in a blow."

Anger flooded the gambler's lean face. "That's not true," he heard himself shout stridently. "That's a lie. I'm not afraid."

Joe backed up against his barn, his mouth an ugly gash.

"I thought you was gonna front fer us fellers that don't love the law none?" he said. "But you're scared. It's plain in your face, Sherry. An' I thought you was a regular heller on wheels. Maybe the boys is right. Maybe you're yellow!"

Sheribiah was immediately sorry for what he did next. But it was too late to still his hand. Joe reeled back from the force of his blow, the blood trickling from his mashed lips.

"You no-good tinhorn," Joe grunted. Then he wheeled and darted back into the black mouth of the livery barn like a wounded prairie dog.

Chagrin filled the gambler. He wiped his knuckles on a silk handkerchief. They were all against him now. He did not turn off toward his Buckhorn as he had intended, but angled across the street, heading back for the hotel.

In his room, he stumbled to a chair and sank down wearily, only to get up again and turn the key in the door. A fine sweat beaded his lips. His brain was a jumble of conflicting thoughts. Emotion tingled along his back, made his fingers tremble, chilled his blood. . .

He wasn't drunk. The liquor he had taken no longer had any effect upon him. Could it be fear . . . ?

He went to the window and yanked it open, starting like a green bronc at the sharp rattle of the iron weights inside the window frame. He drew a great breath of the warm air into his lungs and paced to the bureau. The white face that peered at him from the mirror wrung a curse from his taut mouth.

Suddenly picking up the water pitcher, he hurled it at the mirror. The glass splintered, tinkling on the floor. He stared, aghast at what he had done, and forced himself to sit down quietly.

But he was unable to remain seated, try as he would, and jumping up again, went to the window. The sky had lost its brassy glare and the sun dipped down toward Lone Mountain in the west. A dog yapped on the edge of town, and below in the street a half-dozen tipsy Circle R riders clattered wildly by, heading for their outfit. Somewhere a baby cried, and the pale man standing silently at the window

let the drape swing back on its hooks. He wiped his handkerchief over his damp brow.

Why, he asked himself, was the town so against him? Surely it wasn't his fault that old LaMonte had been shot. And the Buckhorn—men would gamble, always. If not with chips and cards, with land and railroads, with cattle. Why, even these settlers crowding in on the range were gamblers with nature, betting their sweat and brawn that they could beat the weather, grasshoppers, hail, rust, cowmen, and make a living.

"Life's a gamble," Sheribiah said, and picking up the bottle of whiskey, he drained it.

"No red-head gunman is going to show me up," he snarled. "I'll meet him, damn him."

But the Buckhorn would have to be closed. He knew that now. Possibly, with the gambling done with, the town would know a measure of the peace they seemed to want. A sly grin spread over his face. Yes, he would meet McBride. He thrust his hands out before his eyes. They no longer trembled.

They thought he was afraid, and by Godfrey he *was*. But he'd go out there and meet their deputy. He grabbed up his cane-gun and loaded it.

QUIET lay over Pawnee Springs when Sheribiah emerged from the hotel and stalked out into the street. It was a strange quiet, not the quiet of day's end, but rather the quiet of fear, of shut doors and drawn blinds and peering eyes.

Sheribiah put the sun at his back, smiling at his own astuteness. "Ol' Sher'biah," he chuckled, "never lost a good hand—yet." He saw McBride, big shoulders swinging, his long legs striding forward relentlessly. His pale eyes were like slits of fire, reflecting the sun. He stopped, feet planted in the dust, his right hand near the six-shooter on his hip.

"You had your warnin', Carter," the deputy jeered. "You got a shoulder gun. I

can see the bulge. Lay down that cane an' come a-shootin'."

Sheribiah walked slowly forward. His fear was in his dark eyes, his fear of not being able to make a graceful exit. The night stage was pulled up next to the hotel gallery, ready to go in a matter of minutes. He gripped his cane-gun, his pat hand, and waited.

Sheribiah stopped twenty paces from the waiting deputy, and suddenly his right hand was a blur of swift motion. He put all the skill Paint Guran had taught him into his draw—and was slow by a fraction.

The deputy's .45 crashed and was followed by the thunder of Sheribiah's Bulldog Colt. The gambler stiffened, swaying slightly, and McBride spun half around, his gun-arm lead-ripped and showing blood. But he could still hold his gun and triggered again.

Sheribiah felt the fan of the lead past his cheek, and felt the pain over his ribs where the deputy's first shot had cut through his skin and muscle. He could not hold up his Colt and dropped it.

McBride crouched, holding his .45 in both hands now.

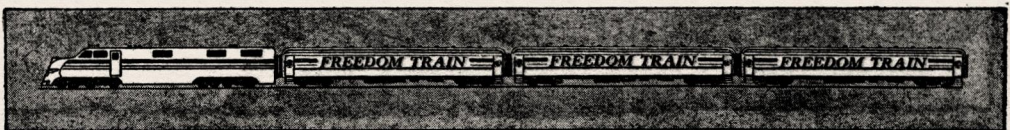
"You want the rest of this, Carter?" he called hoarsely.

"Double or nothing," Sheribiah shouted. "I always play to go through." His cane-gun barked and McBride sat down in the street, staring stupidly at his two bleeding arms.

Sheribiah straightened up and righted his silk-tile. "There you are, gentlemen," he said, bowing stiffly at the shacks and buildings along the street. "I give you your lawman, slightly used up, but still able to draw his pay. And now . . . adieu."

It took considerable effort to twirl his cane, but Sheribiah managed it and climbed into the stage.

And as the frightened whip snapped up his six-horse team, Sheribiah Carter was seen to lean out the coach window, his silk-tile in his hand, bowing gravely to Pawnee Springs as the stage pulled out





BLOOD-SPOOR OF THE DEVIL-STONES

By Dan Cushman

The white-skinned one crept through the jungle's malarial gloom. Chattering monkeys froze, eyeing the right arm that ended in a gleaming talon, the heavy guns, the hawk-like eyes . . . it was Armless O'Neil, once more tracking treasure to its death-haunted lair!

THE LITTLE STERNWHEELER swung from the broad channel of the Ubangi and plowed slowly through acres of water hyacinths. At last it thumped to rest against the rotting steamboat dock of Port Andrais, French Equatorial Africa.

Port Andrais lay on a small strip of red-baked earth separating river and jungle. There was a whitewashed government house, a decrepit two-story hotel roofed partly in corrugated metal and partly in thatch, the palm-nut storehouses of the

Kongo Societe, a couple of trade stores and Arab second-hand *sauks*. Surrounding the town in a rough crescent stood the gabled and cone-shaped huts of Bakete tribesmen.

Twenty years before, during the diamond excitement, Port Andrais had thrived and bustled, but now it merely sat waiting for its destruction by the three dominant forces of Central Africa—ants, damprot, and jungle growth.

Armless O'Neil stood by the rail for a while after the boat had come to rest. He spat. The town was even worse than he

He crawled after her, his lower lip hanging loose.



remembered it. It was about the worst he had ever seen.

"Port Andrais, *bwana*," said the mulatto mate, coming up beside O'Neil and saluting with two fingers touching the brim of his white cap.

O'Neil nodded and started away, motioning for Bobolongonga, his black "boy", to follow him. They walked down the plank, across the warped dock, and up a sidewalk supported by bamboo piles.

Armless O'Neil was thirty-five, or maybe a little older. His face was broad with a perpetually saturnine expression, bronzed the hue of a Chinese idol by years of tropic sun. He was not tall, but his breadth of shoulder made him large. A steel hook projected from the left sleeve of his white coat, flashing regularly in the evening sunlight as he walked along. Bobolongonga, a black from one of the Katanga tribes, was a particularly magnificent specimen, and he carried a large dunnage roll and uniform can as though it weighed ounces instead of a good fifty kilos.

The hotel stood back from the street, screened by a single row of raffia palms. It was a wandering building with double verandahs, constructed originally of bamboo and African stucco, but since repaired with all manner of materials.

Bobolongonga set down the dunnage near the copper-screened front door and paused to wipe his forehead on the sleeve of his long, loose, kuftan.

He spoke, addressing O'Neil after the Moslem manner, "Hear me, O master, before you enter that door. I would not trust that infidel, Canton Johnny, beyond sight of a rhino's eyes. Perhaps he is even now waiting inside to put a nine M.M. slug through thine intestines. No, I would not walk in by day and let that Canton Johnny—"

"To hell with him," growled O'Neil.

"Do not forget, O Master, the back wages thou owest me. Before committing suicide on the gun of that unbaptized swine thou could at least—"

"And to hell with you, too."

HE WENT INSIDE. Jalousies had been pulled against the setting sun, and the room was dim, smelling of mildew, rotting floor boards, and cheap cognac.

"*Monsieur!*" said a tall, black-mou-

stached man, bowing from his place behind the short bar. "I am Pierre Raux, the proprietor. May I welcome you to our poor *maison*?"

"You may!" said O'Neil, walking to the bar. He paused to look around the room cluttered with tables and sagging rattan chairs. At one side was a small stage and an upright piano with some of its keys missing. "Where's Farago?" he asked after a moment.

"In heaven, I presume. The fever. Two seasons ago."

O'Neil showed no emotion. "Cognac?" He said, then, rapping his hook for emphasis, "*French cognac!*"

"*Monsieur!* We have the Courvoisier, brandy of Napoleon!" Then, without making a move to get it—"At *eleven hundred francs* the litre."

"The Courvoisier," growled O'Neil. "And make damned sure the seal isn't broken."

Pierre Raux went far below the bar for the bottle. He held it up for O'Neil's inspection, fondling it, turning it slowly. The sticker was intact and apparently genuine, so O'Neil drew crumpled French banknotes from his pocket and counted out the eleven hundred.

"With ice!" he said.

"Ice!" Raux laughed and called a house-boy who was sleeping on a floor mat near the back door, sending him for water from the evaporation cooler. The bottle was dew-beaded and cool. O'Neil mixed water and cognac half and half.

"Is Canton Johnny here?" he asked after tasting it.

Raux moved suddenly at sound of the man's name. "Canton Johnny!"

"Yes. Is he here?"

"*Today* he is here."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Only that Canton Johnny is one ver' seek man. He has the wounds, the infection, and now the fever that dries the blood."

"Blackwater?"

He shrugged. "Perhaps. One fever, the other fever—they end up the same, no? Ten days ago the mission doctor was here. He left some little pills. Paracodin for the pain. That was all. When a doctor leaves only the pain-killer, what hope is there left? Our Canton Johnny is not long for

this land of mosquitoes, and heat, and boiled water, my friend."

Raux eyed the excellent cognac which O'Neil was pouring for a second sun-downer.

"We should perhaps drink to the repose of his soul, no?"

"You'll furnish your own brandy to drink to the repose of his soul at eleven hundred francs the litre."

"Ah!" Raux sighed and dribbled a few drops of cheap Morocco in a glass. The two men drank and stood for a while in silence. Somewhere upstairs a wireless was noisy with jazz band and static.

O'NEIL had half expected Canton Johnny to be waiting for a chance to put that 9 M.M. slug through him that Bobolongonga had mentioned. He'd traveled a long way for that bullet—across the eight hundred kilos of river and jungle from Brazzaville to see the man who hated him.

It had started down in Katanga. Canton Johnny was an American like himself. They had been friends, though Canton was a killer with a police record as long as an Arab's nose. Johnny had been working a gem placer on the Union Miniere concession by the dark of the moon, and somehow he got the idea that it was O'Neil who informed on him. They had met in the Metropole Hotel at Elizabethville where Johnny tried to puncture O'Neil's ribs with a machete, and O'Neil responded by hurling him twenty feet to the Avenue d'Etoile.

Johnny had promised to get even, and Johnny wasn't the type who forgot. Then, a week before, a message had come to O'Neil in Brazzaville. A message from Canton Johnny. Canton said that Americans must stick together. He'd been wrong about O'Neil and wanted to square things. As a sign of good faith he was including a pebble, and he advised O'Neil to look at it against the light before throwing it away. The pebble was wrapped in a cigarette paper, and proved to be a sky-blue diamond, uncut, worth Heaven knew how many thousand of these worthless francs.

So O'Neil had come. Despite suspicion, he had been dragged by curiosity and hope of gain to steaming Port Andrais.

"Where is he?" O'Neil asked.

"He sees no one, *Monsieur*."

"He'll see *me*."

"Canton Johnny, he is—how will I say it? he is a dangerous man. He has—gun."

"So have I!" growled O'Neil.

"He has tees gun, *Monsieur*. Every time his door open, thees gun is pointed. Only the houseboy who carries the water he lets in."

O'Neil made an impatient gesture and drew the letter from a pocket of his rumpled white coat. "Does that prove we're friends?" he asked after Raux was through reading it.

"Ver' well, but do not tell him it was I who tol' you which room is his. Las' night I move him and promise to tell nobody. It was his wish. He fears someone would come to kill him. Pah!—who would kill a man with only a week of breath left in him?"

"Where's his room?" O'Neil insisted doggedly.

"It is number fourteen off the back verandah, and may the *bon Dieu* give you his protection, *Monsieur*."

O'Neil dropped the bottle of cognac in his coat pocket, went out the front door, and up the verandah stairs. The verandah was old, and it wavered beneath his weight as he walked along. The sun was down and evening mists were creeping in from the jungle. A wireless was on in one of the rooms bringing in the Brazzaville station over intermittent machine-gun volleys of static.

He turned a corner and paused, looking at the screened door of number fourteen, considering what a fool he would be to walk inside. Canton Johnny was headed over the hill, and he probably had resolved to take O'Neil with him. The diamond had only been a come-on to win his confidence.

O'Neil stood near the slatted bamboo wall, listening. There was no sound inside. A big hippo fly kept beating his head against the netted, glassless window. With an habitual movement O'Neil touched the heavy Walther automatic in its shoulder holster, then, with a swift movement, he opened the door and stepped inside.

He stood for a moment with his back to the light. The room was small and dark. There was a woven-grass chair, a pitcher and bowl, a bed surrounded by a billow of grayish mosquito netting. A man lay on the bed, only his outline discernible. On the

floor, just beneath the man's dangling right hand, came a bluish gleam of metal—a pistol but the man made no move to pick it up.

"Come on over, O'Neil," the man said in a husky voice.

O'Neil walked on and lifted the curtain. He looked down on the face of Canton Johnny. It was so wasted, so dehydrated and brown that he would not have recognized him had he not known.

Canton Johnny was about forty. He had been big-framed and muscular once, but the fever had dissipated the protein in his body until it seemed to be nothing except knuckles, and tendons covered by dry-stretched skin. He looked mummified except for his eyes which were quick and intensely blue.

Then O'Neil noticed his ears. Canton's ears had never been unusual, but now they were twice the size of ordinary ears, swollen, perforated by rectangular holes almost an inch across. His arms, too, were deeply scarred as though by hot metal, and the left one was twisted so it reposed on his chest, palm up.

"You see I came, Canton," said O'Neil.

"Sure you came." Canton Johnny twisted his mouth, showing his yellowish teeth in a smile.

"You've been marked up since I saw you last," O'Neil remarked, his eyes still on the grotesque ears.

"I make the wrong kind of friends."

That was all—no explanation.

"Why did you send for me?" O'Neil asked.

"You read my letter, didn't you? I wanted to kiss your cheek like a French general before lighting out for the pearly gates."

There was no doubting it now that their eyes had met—Canton still hated him as intensely as ever.

O'Neil growled, "Give me the *real* reason."

Instead of doing so, Canton said, "I had a hell of a time holding out for you, O'Neil. No—not the fever. I'll fight that off for a week or two yet. It was Walski. You remember Walski?"

O'NEIL nodded. Igor Walski had once been a plantation owner down in Belgian territory, but the colonial gendarmie ran him out for hanging one of his native

boys by the feet and skinning his back with an *essesse* lash.

"Is Walski here?"

"And not only Walski! Gino is still with him."

Gino had been Walski's half-black whip boss. O'Neil had seen neither of them for five or six years, and had once heard that Walski was dead.

"What about them?" O'Neil asked.

"Nothing that you couldn't guess. Walski just wanted to catch me sleeping some night so he could take me out in the jungle and let his man work me over with an *essesse* whip."

Canton lay on his back, grinning, fingering the revolver with his long, dehydrated fingers.

"What did they want of you?"

"The same thing you want." His hand crept fumbling across the floor and found a break in the woven palm floor mattings. He drew out a piece of rag with its four corners drawn together in a knot. His fingers trembled and it took him almost a minute to open it. The effort tired him. He lay still, eyes closed, breathing rapidly. Then he jerked himself to consciousness and thrust out his cupped hand.

"He wanted to know where I dug up these!"

Pale, evening light filtered in strips through the half-closed bamboo shutters; it fell on the pebbles in Canton's hand and was transformed to brilliant shafts of blue fire. They were diamonds of miraculous quality and color—gems worth the fortune that Armless O'Neil had sought through his fifteen malarial, bug-crawling years in the African tropics.

Canton's hand commenced jumping from fever weakness, and one of the diamonds spilled across his wrist and fell to the floor. O'Neil took his arm to steady it.

"Stare at them, damn you!" Canton cackled. "They're what you've been looking for ever since you came from the States. A fortune, O'Neil!"

The whole thing bore a stamp of unreality. This dismal room—close with the heat lingering from afternoon; the man dying of God only knew what tropic fever; and in the midst of it these diamonds so hard and brilliant like a cool stream of water running through hell.

Canton went on, "Look at that color,

O'Neil. And the refraction!—even those Borneo stones don't have the fire these do. Rub one of them in the dark and it will glow like a cat's eye. Ye gods, what they'd be worth in Amsterdam!"

O'Neil released the man's wrist and stepped back. His skin was dry, and hot, and it felt of the grave. O'Neil wanted to wash with soap and water to take away the feel of it, but he stood as he was, the mosquito net draped over his broad shoulders, looking down on Canton's face.

He said, "Why did you get me here?—just to stick those rocks under my nose and make me sweat because you'll die and take the secret along with you?"

"No. I brought you here to give them to you."

The words had been somehow expected, but they jolted O'Neil anyway. His eyes were slitted and suspicious in the midst of his broad, copper-tanned face.

"You don't believe me, O'Neil! Well, take them. All of them. Put them in your pocket. Carry them to Johannesburg and those Dutch gem-buyers will pay you a thousand pounds, bloodsuckers though they are. Go ahead, take them! See for yourself that Canton Johnny repays evil with good."

Dying or not, Canton Johnny would never repay evil with good. He still had the soul and the conscience of a cobra.

He dumped the diamonds in O'Neil's hand, and with a slow movement O'Neil let them roll in his coat pocket.

Canton grinned, "And not only will I give them to you, my *friend*, but I will also tell you where I got them, and where you may get a bucketful more."

Canton tried to sit up. He made it part way and paused, resting on his elbows. He exhaled as though his lungs were collapsing and fell back.

"You get it!" he gasped.

"Get what?"

"The map! Haven't you heard, O'Neil—an old tropical tramp like you? You of the T.T.T. brotherhood? Every treasure has its maps. Africa is full of maps—maps to Sheba's mines, and the lost tombs of the Blue Nile, and the lost cities of Belshazzar. Treasure maps south of Suez are like beans in Boston. So, when that mission doctor let me know I would not live, I drew a map for *you*." He pointed to a spot

next to the floor. "It is there, behind that broken wall-mat. Walski had it in mind to search my room one night, so I had the black boy put it there."

The room had "breathing walls" of flat palm fronds woven over bamboo frames and set checker-board fashion against the main beams of the building. O'Neil went to one with a broken corner which Canton had pointed out. There was a dusty little recess behind it. He glanced to make sure that a cobra or green mamba had not been tied to strike him, and found the bit of folded paper that had been placed there.

He unfolded it, holding it to the evening glow that found its way through the shutters. It was a scrawled map showing a section of the Lullala River leading to the half-explored Nonge Hills. Here and there, in the Nonges, landmarks had been marked with numbers and keyed with descriptions at the bottom of the page.

O'Neil refolded the map and thrust it in his pocket. He walked back to Canton who was lying very still.

"Get out!" Canton snarled, his eyes glistening between narrowed lids. "Get out, now that you have it, and let me die in peace. I'm sick of looking at your ugly Irish face,"

II

O'NEIL STEPPED TO THE VINE-shaded verandah. The wireless was still on full blast, mixing the voice of a newscaster with roars of static. Whoever owned the set must have gone away and forgotten it, for no one could have endured it at close range. He drew up suddenly noticing that the door next to Canton Johnny's was slightly ajar. It had been closed when he came up.

It was a homemade door of raffia strands woven over a bamboo frame and he could not see through it. Like the door to Johnny's room it was weighted to close automatically, but a bit of matting had folded up and caught it. It could have been accident, that folded matting, or someone might have fixed it in that manner to stop the little, thumping sound its closing would have made.

O'Neil listened. No sound. Without rapping, he hooked the door and flung it open. Someone in the dim interior made a sud-

den move, muttering a guttural curse. Dimly he could see two men. One of them, a huge white, was seated in a chair close to the wall, his beefy legs sprawled out; the other, a native, sat crosslegged on the floor.

"Hello, Walski," O'Neil said.

Walski, the white man, was about forty-five. His hair was blonde or gray—it was hard to tell because he had it roached so close to his skull. His face was hairless with a pink albino cast. Once, perhaps, he had been a magnificent physical specimen, but some of the muscle had dissolved into fat. His eyes were small and pale, the lids apparently lashless, his eyebrows consisted of a half dozen hairs on each side. He was dressed in sweaty whites with the buttons unfastened revealing his abdomen.

The native, who was as much Arab as black, wore a dirty red tarboosh and short kuftan. He leaned forward, squat and massive-shouldered, hand on the leather-wrapped handle of his machete, apparently ready to spring on the intruder the second his master gave the signal.

Walski listened to O'Neil pronounce his name, then, with a ponderous movement, he pushed his weight from the chair and stood, balanced on feet that were preposterously small for his bulk.

"So it is you, O'Neil." He dried the palms of his hands by rubbing them on his pants legs. "My *good friend* O'Neil!" he added, thrusting his right hand out.

O'NEIL stood with one shoulder against the door, watching Walski's pale eyes for a sign of trickery. He grasped the man's hand and dropped it abruptly.

Walski grinned in his heavy jowled manner and said, "O'Neil, I heard those British askaris shoot you down in Rhodesia."

O'Neil laughed. "I'll outlive the whole British Empire by the way it's going. Of course, that's just an Irishman's view."

"Ho!" said Walski, shaking his jowls. "This your room, Walski?"

The big man stood for a while, watching O'Neil with his tiny, swine eyes. "If it is not my room, why would I be in it?"

"You'd be in any room in this hotel if it suited you."

Walski chuckled and slapped the little, three-legged table with one massive hand. "I am honest man. Straightforward man.

Like you, O'Neil. So I tell you straight out I know about diamonds Canton Johnny bring back from Nonge hills. And, like all men, I am interested."

"So you followed me up here and listened through the wall."

"The wall is thin. Maybe I overhear something. By accident."

"All right, you heard what Canton said to me. What are you going to do about it?"

"Yah, what?" Walski lowered himself slowly into the rattan chair. It sagged to one side beneath his weight. He drummed the table top with his blunt, pink fingers. O'Neil had once heard how the man in one of his rages had crushed the skull of a native boy with those hands, and seeing them in front of him made it easy to believe. Walski went on,

"For nine years I have look for blue diamonds. One I find by native in Kanba-Kamba, one I see bought by gem dealer in Wadeai, one at N'cimbo. You see?—each one near Nonge hills. I ask questions of many old men and they tell me every twenty year as long as stories have been told natives bring out maybe one blue diamond. So once I go to Nonge Hills with ten men. I will show you." He pulled up a pants leg and showed an old wound in his thigh. "Assagai spear and blood poison. So I fail, but I swore someday to get diamonds." He slammed the table, "To get rich on diamonds and go home to Warsaw if any more I could find it. And now that damned Canton Johnny, that—"

"Now that you know, what are you going to do?" O'Neil repeated doggedly.

"You're in hurry?" leered Walski.

"You're not the type I enjoy talking to."

Walski flushed. He was notorious for the animal fury of his temper, but for now he held it in check.

"Yah—I will tell you what I do. You have map—so with you I will cut three ways. You, me, and my man Gino who has been faithful like—"

"You must think I'm a damned fool."

"Half then. Fifty-fifty we will—"

"The hell with you."

"Then perhaps you would like I take all?"

Walski stood up, shaking his legs so the white pants would quit sticking to the insides of his thighs. He breathed hard

through his open lips and O'Neil could smell the onion koos-koos he'd eaten for supper.

Walski's right hand made a scarcely perceptible gesture to Gino, his whip-boss. Gino had been sitting crosslegged at O'Neil's left. At the signal, his legs responded like released springs, and he came forward with the quickness of a leopard.

O'NEIL had expected something of the kind—it was the rapidity of movement that took him by surprise. He rammed the heavy, woven-raffia door with his shoulder. It caught on the loose matings outside, delaying him for a fraction of time. Gino's hand came from beneath his kuftan, clutching the long, heavy bladed machete.

He held the machete underhand, with the keen edge of its blade up. He ripped with it in an upward movement, intending to disembowel his victim.

For the second O'Neil was helpless, caught off balance by the sticking door. There was no time to draw his pistol from its shoulder holster. Instead he bent forward, swinging down with his hook arm.

The hook sang along the keen blade and took hold in the bronze guard just above Gino's hand. It was only a momentary delay. Gino twisted the blade free and rammed forward, driving the point. O'Neil twisted aside, and the machete drove itself deeply into the door casing.

The casing was made of baobab wood. It was soft and corky. The machete was embedded a good four inches and hung fast as Gino tried to retrieve it. O'Neil brought his hook arm around, laying open the shiny, brown skin on his skull. The hook came back, and caught the cinched midriff of his kuftan. With a snap of powerful shoulders, O'Neil sent him spinning across the little room.

Gino struck the woven wall of palm and bamboo, tearing a ragged hole. He was on hands and knees, his baffled eyes roving the room. He started to get up.

"Enough, you fool!" cried Walski.

It had happened in a quick burst of violent movement. Perhaps three seconds had passed since Walski gave the signal.

O'Neil started to follow the native whipman, and suddenly drew up. Walski had

backed to the inner wall, and in his right hand was one of those big, forward-heavy Mauser pistols.

"Give them to me!" Walski hissed.

"Give *what* to you?"

"The map—the stones."

Gino was still baffled by his fall. He staggered to his feet, located O'Neil in the doorway, and started forward.

"Keep away, you fool!" Walski roared.

But Gino's brain had room for only one thought. He reeled forward, hands outstretched. He was in the line of fire with Walski cursing him. O'Neil stepped from the door, caught it with his toes, and slammed it in Gino's path. He drew his automatic and waited. Walski was bellowing a mixture of French and Congoese, cursing the black man. The door remained closed. O'Neil backed around the corner, colliding with Bobolongonga who had mounted to the verandah on the run.

"You are well, O master?" breathed the big black.

"I'm alive, as usual."

O'Neil turned, putting away the Walther, and strode to the lower verandah. Two French army officers, looking like navy men in their white, tropical uniforms were seated in a small, screened compartment eating a supper of hard bread and oily plantain salad. O'Neil had lost the bottle of Courvoisier in the scuffle. He dug crumpled hundred-franc notes from his coat pocket and bought another.

He sat at a corner table with the bottle in front of him, watching night creep in from the jungle. Pierre Raux carried a chair around the room, standing on it to light the petrol lamps.

"We should leave this port of infidels, Master," Bobolongonga intoned. "That Walski will put a nine M.M. slug in thy intestines and—"

"I wish you'd stop having everyone and his concubine putting nine M.M. slugs in my guts. Try seven-sixty-fives for a change, or maybe a good old American thirty-eight."

"All the same, O Master, he will kill thee and leave me mourning for my back wages. 'Pity the master who dies in his manservant's death,' those are the words of the Prophet, O armless one."

O'Neil only laughed. He made it a practice to owe his "boy" at least six months'

wages for fear he might desert and return to the Katanga in homesickness for his two wives.

TIME PASSED. A native, very fair with Fulbe blood came in, sat cross-legged with his back against the toothless piano, and commenced playing an execrable tune on a silk-stringed kora. Far away, in the native village, three or four tomtoms were already beating out the rhythms of the evening dance. A breeze bearing the odor of jasmine rustled the bamboo jalousies surrounding the lower verandah. It was an excellent evening, had O'Neil been in a mood to enjoy it.

O'Neil spread out the map that Canton had given him and bent over it, memorizing its details. His face, under the petrol lamps looked more than ever like an image of Buddha cast in bronze. Around him a dozen men, black, mulatto and white, sat at tables drinking cheap cognac and Brazzaville beer, mixing the garbled tongues of Central Africa.

The door opened and Igor Walski came in.

Walski was alone. He stood just inside, blinking at the lamplight. His eyes rested on O'Neil and he plodded over. There were filthy tennis shoes on his feet and through them his weight shook the termite-eaten floor.

O'Neil said, "Sit down, Walski. I've been waiting for you."

Walski lowered himself into a sagging chair. He leaned forward, elbows on the table, eyes never moving from O'Neil's.

O'Neil said, "I know what's on your mind, so there's no need in wasting energy to say it. You came to offer me a proposition. When I turn it down you intend to wait your chance and stick a machete into me and take the map for your own use." O'Neil drew the map from his coat pocket and held down one corner with his hook while unfolding it. He spread it and scrutinized it once again while Walski bent forward, trying to see.

Walski was quite close with his hand edging across the table. With an abrupt movement, O'Neil jerked the map away, twisted it in a loose roll, and stood, holding it in the flame of a petrol lamp.

"You fool!" hissed Walski, trying to grab it.

O'Neil swung his hook, fending the big man off while the paper burned down to his fingers. He threw the blackened remnant on the floor, grinding it with his toe.

"Now, Walski, it wouldn't do you a damned bit of good to slide that machete between my ribs, would it?"

"I could—"

"Sure, you could still torture me, but not right now. Not with that black gendarme outside. And torture is a troublesome business. Now get out. I'm sick of looking at your swine face."

Walski had a notorious temper, and it burned through him now. He booted a rattan chair from his way, rolling forward on his small stub feet. The massive strength of him swelled beneath his cotton coat. His hands closed on the sides of the heavy, cedrelas table. He lifted it so one of its legs rammed the ceiling making him stagger for balance. For a second he paused with the table held high, then he drove it with all his massive strength at O'Neil's head.

O'Neil hooked the table, deflecting it so it grazed him and splintered on the floor.

A gendarme's whistle shrilled through the room. Walski stopped. With a struggle he curbed his fury and stood rocking on the balls of his small feet. He breathed deeply and turned, looking at the gendarme who stood in the doorway, chrome-plated Mas pistol in his hand.

"So. I break table. I pay." He swept his arm to include everyone in the room. "Hear me, I order it! Cognac for everybody. With honest coin I pay!"

III

O'NEIL CLIMBED THE VERANDAH stairs to the room that Pierre Raux had assigned to him. Bamboo and woven palm and cobwebs—but it had cross ventilation from north and east, the screens were intact and there was netting around the cot so it was good enough as these jungle hotels went.

O'Neil unstrapped his hook and lay on his back with the netting lifted so the night breeze fanned him. He smoked a long, Moroccan cigarette tinged with hashish. The drums were thum-thumming in the Bakete village. He wondered how it would seem to lie down in any town, any-

where, and not have those damned tom-toms hammering through the darkness. Bobolongonga was stretched beside the cot, snoring solidly.

O'Neil went to sleep with the cigarette still burning in his fingers. He awoke suddenly with Bobolongonga bellowing and smoke biting his throat.

HE FIRST thought his cigarette had set the bed afire. He arose to a sitting position and saw that there was no flame in the room although it was dense with smoke. He paused to strap on his hook, pull on his white pants, stuff the Walther automatic in its holster.

Men were shouting outside, their cries mixed with roar and crackle of burning thatch.

The maison was going up in flames. Dry as gunpowder after the long dry season, it would be a heap of fine white ashes before a half-hour had passed.

A cobblestone ripped through the shutters almost striking Bobolongonga. It had been thrown from below to awaken them.

"Get the dunnage," growled O'Neil, waiting stolidly by the door.

Bobolongonga lifted the dunnage roll and uniform can, and O'Neil followed him to the verandah.

There was no fire on the west side yet, but the entire eastern half of the building was roaring flame.

"You go down," said O'Neil, stopping short of the stairs.

"But Master—"

"Go down and stop worrying about your back wages!"

O'Neil turned and hurried around the corner. Heat riding the bright light of flames struck him with an impact that made him pause. He hurried on with arm thrown up to protect his face. Even the floor was hot under his feet.

The fire seemed to have started on the second floor. It had already turned most of the thatch roof into a high-blazing torch, and was creeping more slowly across the lower story. Canton Johnny's room, number fourteen, was on the edge of it.

There was no getting to the door. O'Neil went inside number thirteen where he had battled Walski and Gino a few hours before. Firelight found its way through the loose walls, letting him see his way. He

repeatedly drove his hook into the bamboo and palm wall until he had torn out a section large enough for his body.

"Canton!" he cried, hoarse from the smoke in his throat.

No answer. Flaming bits of wood and grass sifted from above, lighting Canton's room. The mosquito netting surrounding the bed caught fire and burned in a series of bright puffs.

O'Neil expected to see the man lying in its blazing circle, but the cot was empty. He was not on the floor, either. The dunnage bag which had been leaning in the corner that afternoon was gone.

O'Neil grabbed a blanket and held it over him as he blindly found his way through the door. Bobolongonga waited for him at the foot of the stairs.

"He is dead then, and may Allah rain mercy on his fevered cheek," quoted the black man.

"He wasn't there."

Men were dashing around and a half-dressed French officer was issuing useless orders. No one had seen Canton come from his room.

There was a high-rolling minute of intense heat as the fire reached an apex, then it diminished rapidly leaving the building's heavy timbers blazing against the night sky.

"You see?" said Bobolongonga. "That Canton Johnny lied to thee. The infidel said he was sickened unto death, and then, when thou slept, what did he do but set this fire and creep away, leaving thee to be roasted alive."

"I've seen too many men with fever. Canton had it. If he got out of there, he had somebody's help doing it. And his dunnage was gone, too."

He inquired and found that no one had seen Walski nor Gino escape, either.

At dawn there was only a wide area of ash so cool that natives walked through it barefoot, sifting it for money. The day passed, and there was no word of Canton nor Walski. After siesta, O'Neil obtained ten Bakete peddlers and a dugout canoe and, without even delaying until morning, he set out for the mouth of the Lullala. From there he traveled northward toward the unexplored Nonge Hills, leaving the mystery of Canton and the hotel fire behind him.

THE Lullala wound from swamp to swamp, low and brackish with its shores rarely visible through the trees which grew down into the water. For two days progress was slow and zig-zag with the patient, tall Baketes hunting a canoe channel among interminable mudbars where crocodiles slept like driftlogs in the sun. The second night was spent on a shoulder of soggy earth running down to the swamp; on the third night the last of the swamps lay behind them and O'Neil stretched his brown-silk tent beneath a ledge of gray sandrock within the clear and welcome sound of running spring water.

There had been early rains here, and the jungle was putting on its new green color, comparable to spring in more temperate zones. It was solid and luxuriant; farther away, to the north, O'Neil knew that the "great bush" would break away leaving wide areas of soudan and, farther still, the purplish Nonge Hills would rise before him.

Forty years previously Colonel Piquet Gsell, fresh from conquests in the upper Niger, had set out to place the Nonge area under French "protection," but after five weeks the brave colonel withdrew, lacking a good third of his legionnaires behind him and no one except occasional adventurers had entered the area since.

On the fourth day, with the Nonge Hills a purple line in the distance, the Lullala's current became more swift, and that evening the jungle broke for the first time, revealing a low hillside terraced with millet patches, and nearby a village of pointed huts where scrawny, naked natives fled on seeing O'Neil and his hook arm.

After patient use of sign language Bobolongonga lured a couple of them in, their assagai spears pointed apprehensively, and concluded a dicker for a quantity of dried cassava meal and some yams as large as a man's head.

The heavy, truculent expression on Bobolongonga's face when he returned made O'Neil ask what was wrong.

"There were three strange canoes past here yesterday, Master," Bobolongonga said, dumping his basket of yams in the canoe. He lifted his arm, pointing out the purplish Nonge Hills. "They went thus. And leading them was a white man. A white man huge as a great ape. So they

said." Bobolongonga smiled grimly, "Dost thou know such a white man the size of a great ape, Master?"

O'Neil's eyes narrowed. He was right about Walski, then. "Well?" he barked, seeing that Bobolongonga still had something to tell.

"A very strange thing, Master. They said there was a sick *bondele* lying in one of the canoes—a sick white man under a mosquito net."

"Are you trying to tell me that Walski was carrying Canton Johnny along?"

It was impossible, of course. The man couldn't have lived that long, hauled up the jungle river, burned out by fever and infection. Bobolongonga stood very straight, eyes protruding at the thought that had struck him.

"I have heard, Master, that there are men who can make the dead walk. The dead without souls, Master. Sometimes they beat the black drum over the grave of one dead his first day and he must rise to do his bidding—"

"You fool!" snarled O'Neil. "Talking that voodoo nonsense. Do you want to wake up tomorrow and find our paddlers all gone down the river?"

The Bakete boys had been apprehensive ever since their home country of the swamps were past—and now this talk of black drums and the walking dead!

Although it was evening, O'Neil issued the command to keep going. Even when darkness came O'Neil stolidly refrained from signaling the canoe ashore, so the Bakete kept going, their paddlers rising and falling in weary rhythm. The huge, yellow moon of the tropics rose to light the river. Close before them, magnified by moonlight, rose the broken outline of the Nonge Hills.

"They say it is easy for men to die in those hills," said Bobolongonga.

"And easy to grow rich."

"I saw a dead man once who left his sons three thousand camels. His burial robes were of silk and his coffin was gold, but, behold, his skin was cold and his eyes closed as tightly as the eyes of the poorest slave who dies on the whipping post. Listen to me, O Master—"

"Listen be damned!" said O'Neil in a tone that made Bobolongonga fall silent and sulk at the forward end of the canoe.

Another hour through moonlight and Bobolongonga broke the silence, "Behold, my belly sticketh to my backbone, as the wise men of thy race hath said!"

O'Neil growled something about hoping to glimpse the light of Walski's fire and rapped the canoe's gunwale with his hook, signaling the paddlers to hunt a camping place.

They awoke at the edge of a country that was rugged and beautiful, a country of magnificent forest with moss-grown crags rising through mist.

They had traveled an hour when a talking drum broke the silence, beating a rapid two or three minutes. In the far distance another drum had picked it up. The Bakete paddled a little swifter, their eyes apprehensive and rolling. About noon the thundering current beneath a waterfall barred the way.

O'Neil explored a zig-zag portage trail and returned in time for a late siesta. That night O'Neil was awakened with Bobolongonga's broad hand on his shoulder.

"Didst thou know they were gone, Master?"

"Who?" asked O'Neil, sitting up.

"Those cowardly Bakete. And they have taken their canoe with them."

It only amazed O'Neil that Bobolongonga had not gone along. He shrugged, smoked a cigarette and then went back to sleep.

The Bakete had taken the canoe and most of the provisions, but the uniform can, two rifles and a quantity of ammunition were untouched. After a cold breakfast, O'Neil and Bobolongonga climbed the trail above the falls.

"Is it as thy map told thee?" Bobolongonga asked, gazing across a wide valley in the hills.

O'NEIL NODDED. The falls had been marked with the conventional straight marks. Ahead, roughly fifteen kilometers away, the words "Rhino Pinnacle" had been marked. Deviating roughly thirty degrees east from an imaginary line drawn between the falls and the pinnacle was a dike of black peridotite rock, and at the base of the dike Canton had indicated a stream with the crossed picks of a mineral deposit. Standing where he was O'Neil could see the Rhino Pinnacle, and the long,

low-sided hills where the peridotite must lie.

"What wilt thou do now, O Master?" Bobolongonga asked.

O'Neil started to answer—then stopped. A gunshot reverberated across the morning air. There was a three or four second interval—then other gunshots, too many to count. Rising and falling distantly he could hear the high-pitched cries of many natives and the boom of war drums. The battle seemed to be taking place a couple of kilometers further along.

"It is well, Master," Bobolongonga grinned. "It is well that those Nonge savages are wetting their assagai spears in the blood of that swine, Walski, and not in ours."

O'Neil had already started away at a half-trot, examining the clip in his magnum rifle as he went. He spoke over his shoulder,

"Maybe you didn't notice it before, but in this country white men stick together."

"I would let them kill that swine of the devil."

The shooting had become intermittent. There would be a high-pitched *whang* as a rifle went off, and always the continuous "Kee-kee-kee" of natives, and the steady rumble of an elephant-hide war drum.

O'Neil left the footpath and climbed a low hill, forcing his way through jungle. He was close, and it seemed that the natives were shouting all around. The elephant-hide drum boomed with a concussion that beat against his chest.

He drew up with a clearing visible below. The clearing was about three hundred paces across; the side closest O'Neil was overgrown with patchy, shoulder-high savannah grass. Near the center four heavy-trunked baobab trees with age-stunted tops grew around a water hole. Beneath them could be seen the little, peaked roof of an explorer's tent. No white men were visible.

They were safe for a few minutes at least. On the far side of the clearing the grass was too short to offer much concealment so there was little danger of the natives attacking from that direction. Instead, the natives were right below O'Neil, creeping through the high grass, armed with iron-tipped assagais and bows with little, black-headed arrows. O'Neil could see no more than a dozen men at any one time,

but he knew there were more for their movements were shown by the waving grass.

He waited a while, eyes narrowed against the sun which was breaking hot and yellow through mist. More and more natives revealed themselves, preparing for the final, concerted rush. The drum, from its place of concealment in the jungle, increased in tempo.

"Ready?" he asked Bobolongonga.

The huge black nodded, understanding what he should do without asking. The Lebel rifle was at his shoulder, his cheek against the stock, his black eyes watching O'Neil.

O'Neil lifted his magnum with the barrel over his hook. He pressed the trigger.

He fired again and again until the clip was dry. Bobolongonga emptied the Lebel a second later. From the baobabs other guns opened up making it a crossfire.

The natives were bewildered at the unexpected attack. The drum still beat with undiminished tempo, but the warriors were hunting concealment, crawling through the savannah grass.

O'Neil slapped home a second clip of cartridges and kept firing. He could see Walski rising to one knee, trying to see who his deliverers were.

"This way, Walski!" O'Neil barked at him. "Now!"

Walski ducked out of sight for a moment. Then he came up, running in a hunched-over gallop through the tall grass. The man was elephantine in size, but there was a certain grace about him, too. Behind him came Gino and two others—frightened natives of the Shari tribe, both carrying heavy French army rifles.

Walski plowed into the edge of the jungle, his eyes sweeping the tangle above him trying to locate O'Neil.

"Here we are!"

"Yah, so!" he said, wheezing through his nostrils. "So you save Walski's hide. White men must help white men. So would I do for you."

IV

O'NEIL DIDN'T BOTHER TO call him a liar. He sat down with the magnum across his knees and did a one-handed job of rolling a cigarette. He

looked up at Walski who had fought undergrowth the last few feet of distance and was standing with legs wide, wiping perspiration from his face.

"How'd you find your way here, Walski?"

"I find my way like you. By map. I offer money. Hard cash money, and Canton Johnny draw me map. Like yours."

"You're a liar."

Walski's pale eyes narrowed. He stood, opening and closing his massive hands. Gino came a trifle closer behind him, a rifle in the crook of his arm.

"Sometime I kill man who call me liar. But you save my hide from native, and so—"

"Who was it you had under the netting of your canoe? That white man who was down with fever?"

Walski's head jerked back with momentary surprise. He decided to laugh, slapping the legs of his filthy pants, "All right. You are hard man to fool. And why should I not tell? You burn map—that was smart. Never could I get map that was burned. Only with torture could I get it from your brain, and your gun was maybe waiting for me." He thumped his chest and chortled, "Ho!—but he is smart man, this Walski. What does he do. He goes to Canton's room, and gags him so he cannot scream, and he has him lowered from verandah. So quiet, yah. Then, so gendarmes will not miss him and raise what Americans call big stink, I leave lighted candle behind. Candle sitting in nice, dry heap thatch."

"You thought I'd die in the fire," added O'Neil.

"No. I am adventurer, like you. Soldier of fortunes. Typical tropical tramp, like Americans say. But not killer."

O'Neil jerked his shoulders in a hard laugh. "No. Not you! You'd knock off your own godmother and sell the gold in her bridgework to buy beer to put in your own fat gut. You'd fill me right this minute—*me*, the fellow who just saved your hide, only there's plenty here for everyone and we need all the guns we have. And that's why I trust you, Walski. Because it's to your own advantage to keep me in one piece."

"And maybe too that's why you save my fat hide?" grinned Walski.

"Maybe."

"Ho!" Walski roared and stamped his feet, "I like you. You would spit in eye of devil."

"What happened to Canton?"

"Alas!—the trip, the fever. It was too much for him. We buried him below the portage."

"Or else you speeded things up a little and knocked him over the head rather than carry him."

"Even you do not believe *that* of Walski."

O'Neil shrugged. It was true that dragging the poor, fever-ridden devil off on that nightmare trip along the jungle river was brutal enough without adding outright murder to it.

He ground out the cigarette and asked, "What did Canton tell you?"

"We split fifty fifty, yah?"

"Sure, fifty-fifty."

"Then I tell. He say we must climb trail above waterfall, then far away can be seen crag like rhino horn. On right thirty degrees, and maybe fifteen kilos off is ridge of black rock. What is it called—"

"Peredotite."

"Yah. Below peredotite rock is stream, and in hole ten feet deep he find diamonds. Blue, placer diamonds. So beautiful." Walski closed his eyes and breathed as though inhaling sweet fragrance. "Like money is beautiful, yah." He opened his eyes. "Was this like map, O'Neil?"

"Exactly."

"And natives—those madman Nonges. Did he tell you about Nonges? Did he tell you how he get big, square holes in ears?"

O'Neil shook his head.

"He hated you, O'Neil. Like Mohammed hate pork, he hate you. I think maybe-so he hate you so much he want you should have big, square hole in ears too. And feet!—you perhaps saw Canton Johnny's feet? It is funny joke if man comes for diamonds and dies hanging by ears over fire, yah."

Bobolongonga had gone somewhere. He returned, crashing through thorn, carrying a young native in his arms. He was wounded and Bobolongonga had heard his half-conscious cries.

He tramped a flat place on the ground and very gently laid the native on it.

HE WAS a Nonge and very young. Perhaps in the middle teens. O'Neil had already noticed they were not a negroid race. Their complexions and the bone structures seemed to make them akin to the Fulbe or Tuareg tribes who frequented both the Sudan and the desert to the north.

This young native in particular was handsome, his skin was brown with a peachlike softness, nose thin and high bridged. He was dressed in dyed, bark-cloth fabric—a sort of robe tied loosely around the throat, and cinched with a belt around the waist. A bullet had struck somewhere beneath the left shoulder blade, and apparently had gone through cleanly.

They stood over the young Nonge for a while, then with an abrupt movement Walski stepped forward. He was holding his rifle by the barrel, its steel-shod butt hanging down. He was ready to drive it to the native's skull.

O'Neil was not in position to stop him, but Bobolongonga spun and caught him with a backhand blow.

The blow lacked sting but it was sweepingly powerful. It caught Walski in the neck, driving him back. His heel caught in tendrils, spilling him to the ground. The rifle did a flip-flop, slapping the earth. Walski caught himself on back-flung hands, and pushed himself forward to a kneeling position, his face twisted from fury. He was reaching for the Mauser pistol in its belt holster . . .

"Walski!" barked O'Neil.

The voice made him stop. He remained as he was, kneeling and toadlike, his pale eyes on O'Neil.

O'Neil said, "Don't forget, *you're* the one who doesn't murder wounded men."

"Yah." Walski took a deep breath and lumbered to his feet. "But he is native, and native is not man. Native I hang up by thumbs, yah, and skin back with whip, and then I let die hanging in hot sun." He looked at Bobolongonga, "Thus do I, Walski, deal with native who strike me."

"Not on this safari," said O'Neil.

Walski cleared his throat and spat at the earth. He did not answer but there was no surrender in him.

O'Neil dropped to one knee beside the young Nonge, lifting the bark-cloth robe to examine the wound.

The bullet had caused shock more than anything else. It had gone straight through without expanding, and there seemed to be no broken bones. He asked Bobolongonga to bring bandage and merthiolate from the uniform can.

"Merthiolate for native!" Walski chortled. "For native I give handful of salt. Or maybe for open wound handful of maggots from dead carrion—"

"Shut up," growled O'Neil.

He lifted the breast of the bark-cloth robe, and a sudden tenseness was visible in his posture. He lowered the robe, but not quickly enough to prevent Walski from seeing that it hid the soft breast of a girl.

"Ho!" cried Walski dropping to one knee beside O'Neil, his beefy face thrust close. "So, that is why you stop me from knocking out brains with rifle butt. She is girl. Beautiful young girl. So young, so soft, yah. You think maybe she should be *your* woman, but you forget agreement. Already you forget we say everything fifty-fifty."

"I told you once to keep your rotten mouth closed."

"I take orders from no man!" And he roared, repeating, "*No man!*"

O'Neil started to rise. Walski waited until he was half way up, and with superior weight rammed him off balance.

The girl was just behind O'Neil. He tried to avoid her, but it was impossible. He tripped, falling over her.

Walski crouched forward, grinning, showing teeth turned reddish-brown from his betel-nut habit.

He said, "So maybe now you say for me to keep mouth closed!"

Bobolongonga had backed to the surrounding circle of thorns, his Lebel ready. Gino also had a rifle. He was back of Walski, very still, eyes shifting to O'Neil on the ground, and over to Bobolongonga. Walski's other natives were placed as though by prearrangement, one on each side of Gino. They could be counted on to use their rifles to back their *bwana* if it ever came to shooting.

O'NEIL backed away a little before getting to his feet. His mouth was twisted in a savage, off-center smile as he said, "Well, Walski, our truce didn't last long, did it?"

"Yah, but we still need all guns. So I let you live. Only do not forget once more. I, Walski, take order from no man. Not even Armless O'Neil. So!" He looked at the girl. "She is mine—if I choose. And I choose."

He lowered himself heavily to one knee. His face had a sensual quality very pronounced at that moment.

He reached with massive hands to pluck the bark-cloth robe, when O'Neil spoke, a deadly-even tone carrying his words,

"Don't touch her."

In response Walski's massive right hand closed on the girl's robe and flicked it off like a handkerchief. She whimpered and thrust herself toward O'Neil. A strip of cheap trade cotton crossed her breasts and the robe still clung to a thong about her waist.

Walski crawled after her, his lower lip hanging loose. O'Neil moved slightly, placing himself out of line with Gino's rifle. Then, with a smashing sidearm movement, he swung the hook. It connected with Walski's close-roached skull.

Walski had time for only a reflex movement, and that movement was toward the Mauser pistol. He reeled back, rising, the Mauser dangling in his fingers. It fell in the ferns that grew thick and black along the ground. He caught his balance and did not go down, looking for O'Neil with baffled eyes. He weaved his head from side to side, at last locating O'Neil . . .

O'Neil stood beside the girl in an attitude that seemed almost casual. The Walther pistol was still in its holster, but his hand was not far away. Bobolongonga stood with his massive shoulders pressed in the thorns, the Lebel waist high so a slight twist of his wrist would bring it to bear on any one he wished. Nobody else moved.

Walski reconsidered, his little eyes shifting around to appraise the situation. "Yah. Why should we fight, O'Neil? Over one woman, and she about to die? I could kill you, O'Neil, but we need all guns for blue diamonds."

Walski sat with his back pressed against a cedrelas trunk and caressed the blood-oozing welt O'Neil's hook had left on his scalp.

O'Neil examined the girl's wound at greater leisure, found merthiolate and

bandage inside the uniform can, and dressed it. When he was finished she had opened her eyes and was looking dazedly at him.

"It's all right," he said in English. She made no sign of understanding, so he repeated it in the North-Bantu dialect. When that had no effect he jerked his head to Bobolongonga who came over, bringing his Lebel with him.

"*Marhaba!*" said the big black in the universal Arab greeting, and to O'Neil's surprise she understood.

Her lips formed the word, "Bismullah"—*in the name of God.*

Bobolongonga went on, speaking slowly, pronouncing the words of a south Sahara variety of Arabian. O'Neil could catch occasional groups of words, due to their similarity to the Taureg dialect.

"She's Arabian?" he asked when Bobolongonga was through. The big black bowed affirmatively.

"Her name is Langa, and she is of the Nonge tribe." Then he quickly added, "These Nonges—they are not the forgotten of Allah as you have supposed. Behold, they are of the faith of Islam, and they will drink the wine of honey and pomegranate juice at the feast of the Prophet in Paradise while you infidel eaters of pork lie screaming in everlasting torture beyond the Gate of Rumah—as it is written in the holy Q'ran."

It was no surprise for O'Neil that these Nonge tribesmen were backwash followers of Mohammed. There were many such in this no-man's-land of Africa where Bantu mingled with the races of Arabia.

O'Neil asked, "What is she doing, a girl, mixed up in that battle?"

"It is the custom in some tribes that the betrothed woman follows her lover into battle."

"But her lover didn't wait for her when the going got tough. Ask her what kind of a lover she has that he runs away and leaves her wounded."

"Ho!" chuckled Walski.

Bobolongonga repeated and received an answer.

"Her lover was killed."

"Ho-ho!" Walski bellowed laughter until his wattles shook.

"Let her sleep," O'Neil growled to Bobolongonga.

V

THE WAR DRUM STILL BEAT, but it lacked the former wild rhythm. The clearing lay deserted under the torrid sun of morning. Walski sat for a while, smoking native tobacco and bangh rolled together in a cigarette. Inactivity was making him nervous. He stood up suddenly and said, "Would you have us wait here all day? Because of a woman? I came to find diamond, not the big, square holes burned in ears. Not to—"

"Go ahead!" barked O'Neil, meeting his fierce eyes. "Start out. How long do you think you'd last along that footpath without being jumped by a hundred howling natives?"

"Walski's eyes roved the valley and the hills beyond. He sat down abruptly. "Yah!" he said, picking up the Mauser which had lain in the ferns ever since his struggle with O'Neil. "Yah, we wait."

The sun was hot with midday. The girl slept, resting more easily as the bullet shock left her. She woke up as the shadows lengthened into evening.

"Can you walk?" O'Neil asked her in the Tuareg dialect.

Langa's eyes were very wide and dark, and he could see the rapid beat of her heart, rocking the tiny, dried calabash she wore on a thong around her neck.

She seemed frightened. O'Neil smiled, trying to take the hardness from his face, and repeated the question. She started to sit up, but loss of blood had weakened her. O'Neil gently laid her back on the ground.

He ordered the two Shari natives to build a tepoi of nogi vine woven over bamboo poles. It was finished when the sun dropped over the horizon, turning the jungle mists a flaming reddish-violet.

They set out, O'Neil in the lead, using his machete as a brush knife. They picked up Walski's supplies from the grove of baobab trees and hurried on as darkness settled, following an antelope trail through head-high savannah grass.

The war drum had long since stopped and there was no sound save for the rustle of feet in dry leaves, the little squeaks of the tepoi, the wheezing of Walski's breath.

At midnight O'Neil called a halt and rested beneath a clump of glossy-leaved coffee trees. A big, yellow moon was up,

exaggerating the size of the hills which rose on either side. Straight ahead was the crag shaped like a rhino horn. They had traveled about ten kilometers since sundown.

"You know where is peridotite rock?" Walski asked, plodding up to stand over O'Neil.

"I know where it was marked on Canton's map."

His tone made Walski jerk. "You think perhaps that damned American lie to us?"

"He didn't *love* either one of us!"

"Gott!" Walski stood straight, doubling his fists. "But blue diamonds come from Nonge Hills. This I, Walski, know. And so I will find them. Lie or not, this time I will find blue diamonds!"

After a half-hour rest O'Neil led them down a side trail toward a ridge that rose in deep jungle to the east. They crossed a stream that ran across stones in the darkness of bowering trees, and paused on a grassy bank near the far shore. Dawn was graying out some of the eastern stars.

Bobolongonga stretched the brown silk tent, and Langa, still lying on the tepoi, was placed inside. O'Neil slept in front of the door. When he awoke the sun was warm and the two Shari porters were roasting stick-bread over a tiny campfire.

He glanced inside the tent. The girl was awake, looking at him.

"You feel better?" he asked.

She smiled a little, but her eyes were very dark and serious.

When O'Neil turned he saw Walski with hands on hips, facing him. "She will escape, that girl, and lead the warriors to us."

Without answering, O'Neil found a can of bully-beef and opened it. He sat cross-legged, spearing out pieces of the meat with his machete. Walski had followed and was still standing over him. "How would you keep this girl from escaping and leading them to us?"

"What would you do?" O'Neil asked, pausing with the machete a few inches from his mouth. "I suppose you still want to brain her with the butt of your rifle!"

Walski did not answer right away. He looked thoughtfully off at nothing with his pale eyes, and at last a slight smile touched his lips.

"No. You were right in stopping me

yesterday. This girl, she is much more valuable—alive. It is for that reason, too, she should not escape."

O'Neil kept watching him, knowing he had something more on his mind.

Walski said, "You notice around her neck is little, tiny calibash? Listen when calibash move, and something rattle inside. What is inside little calibash, O'Neil?"

"How do I know what's in it?"

"Then perhaps Walski will look and find out."

"Keep your hands off that girl!"

O'Neil snapped his wrist, spinning the piece of bully-beef off his machete point.

"Yah!" said Walski. "*Today* I will keep hands off girl."

It ended there. Walski was in good spirits. He even insisted on sharing a small tin of honey-jellied cachews with O'Neil.

"Sometimes Walski lose temper and do bad thing," he grinned. "But afterward he is sorry. Yah. At heart Walski is good man."

A LITTLE DIGGING showed the country to be underlain with peridotite, that heavy black rock associated with diamonds throughout the world. Walski, who knew something of geology, chortled happily as he examined pieces of the rock. In the afternoon, Walski and O'Neil went downstream together, searching for the prospect holes that had been marked on Canton Johnny's map. They searched that day and the next without finding them. By the second night Walski's high spirits had vanished, leaving him more surly and obstinate than ever. On the third night he sat crosslegged on the ground, staring at the tiny calibash which hung around Langa's neck.

"Perhaps tonight I will see what is inside little calibash," Walski said.

When O'Neil did not answer he started forward. "Yah, I shall look."

The girl seemed to understand what was on his mind. She shrank back, clutching the little dried shell.

"No!" she cried in the Nonge dialect.

"Leave her alone!" said O'Neil.

Walski hesitated, crouching on one knee. "I think perhaps you should ask her where to find blue diamond."

"I already have."

"And she did not answer?"

"She didn't know."

"Perhaps there are ways," said Walski, smiling heavily. "Little ways . . ."

"Like what?" O'Neil barked.

"Like maybe by bending arms—so. Or maybe with hot iron—"

"But—don't—try—it!" said O'Neil, drawing the words out with a metallic tone. Walski hesitated.

"You would maybe put bullet in guts?"

"No. I'd put a bullet right between your eyes."

"Ho!" laughed Walski, jerking his massive head. "Of course Walski only make joke. Who would use hot iron on beautiful girl?"

Walski spent the evening hunched near the campfire, smoking one bangh cigarette after another. O'Neil did not once catch him looking at the girl, but he knew she was always in the corner of his eyes.

Unexpectedly Walski stood up. He took a long step, his hand darted down, and before Langa could move from his way he seized the calibash and tore it from her neck. He crushed the calibash between thumb and forefinger. A blue pebble rolled out and he caught it in his palm. It gleamed with sharp refraction in the firelight.

"Yah!" he grunted, thrusting it towards O'Neil. "It is as I thought. She wears blue diamond around neck, and yet she says she does not know where they are dug from ground."

The thong had cut deeply into the soft, brown skin of Langa's neck. She bent forward, clutching her neck, temporarily stunned by pain. Walski thrust the diamond in his pants pocket; he bent and seized her wrist, twisting her savagely to her knees.

"Now where is diamond?" he bellowed furiously.

O'Neil was there with a single, long stride. He hooked Walski from behind, dragging him backward. Walski tried to turn, still holding the girl's wrist. His free hand raked up for the Mauser pistol.

O'Neil freed his hook and was ready to swing it like a club. Bobolongonga rose, and charged. One of the Shari natives thrust out the stock of a rifle, tripping him, sending him face forward to the ground. Gino was to one side with a rifle in his hands.

O'Neil saw the big whip-boss, but he had no chance to escape. The rifle barrel was already swinging towards his skull. It connected, and everything turned to swirling darkness before his eyes.

VI

O'NEIL REGAINED CONSCIOUSNESS slowly. He was like a man getting his bearings after a long bout with the fever. There seemed to be a long period of half-waking, half delirium, his head torn by pain. Then quite suddenly his brain cleared, and he was able to look around.

He tried to move, but he was helpless. His arms were tied with vine, and the vines had been drawn over a tree branch, lifting him until his feet were not quite able to touch the ground.

He did not know how long he had been there, hung in that manner, but judging by the dead feeling in his one hand it had been more than an hour. There was warm sunlight just cutting aslant through jungle mists.

He chinned himself slowly, trying to reach the wrist bindings with his teeth, but the vine, shrunken and hard, would have resisted the teeth of a leopard. A dawn breeze rustled through the jungle, swinging him slowly back and forth, with his toes just brushing the grass.

He turned his head painfully. He could see their camping spot with the tents still standing. No one was around. Walski had evidently gone away and left him hanging there, intending to return.

The sun grew hot. O'Neil noticed that the back of his shirt had been torn away. He knew then that Walski had left him to die slowly, torturously, to be baked to death in the tropical sun.

A couple of ngila monkeys looking like ancient men with their pinched, gray-whiskered faces, hopped among branches just above, looking at the strange sight of a hanging man.

The vines shrank as hot sun dried them. They tightened, shutting off circulation, and they became shorter, lifting his feet above the grass blades. In another half-hour the sun would commence to burn, and then, sometime during the interminable hours of afternoon, he would die.

A storm came up, shutting off the sun's

rays. Rain came in a sudden torrent, drenching his naked body.

Rain was only a momentary reprieve. The clouds would soon pass, leaving the sun to shine hotter than ever through air cleared of dust particles.

The rain diminished slowly. It cooled him, and took some of the fever from his brain. He was tortured by thoughts of Langa, the native girl. It might have been better if she had died back in the clearing after all.

He felt circulation prickling back through his hand. He wondered why, and then saw that moisture had softened the vine so that it stretched slowly. His toes touched earth, and farther, centimeter by centimeter until he could rest one whole foot solidly.

The earth beneath him sent hope and strength through his body. The sun came through, shining on the slanting wires of rain.

He knew he must work fast before the vine shrank again. He swung the hook, catching the vine, pulling himself up and making a few inches of slack above his wrist. His teeth had effect on the knot now, for it was soft and temporarily loose. After a few seconds of struggle it came free.

He was fighting to free his hook when a slap-slap of feet sounded from along the muddy footpath.

He thought of Walski's loose tennis shoes—then he recognized the steps to be Bobolongonga's.

The huge black man staggered into the clearing and looked around. He called O'Neil's name.

"I'm here!" O'Neil said.

Bobolongonga saw him and cut him down with a sweep of his machete. The man was battered, covered with blood and mire.

"I saw them strike thee last night, Master, but I could do nothing. Those Shari natives, cursed of the devil—they struck me with their rifle butts. I crawled away on my belly into the jungle and Walski had them looking for me almost until dawn. I lay in the mire, not knowing whether I lived or died. Then I saw them start down the forest trail, looking for the girl—"

"She escaped?"

"While they were searching for me, she

escaped and ran to return to her people."

"Thank God," breathed O'Neil.

"In the name of Allah!" responded Bobolongonga, signing toward Mecca. "And honored be the name of his Prophet that I alone know where thy elephant gun fell during the struggle."

O'Neil followed Bobolongonga, beating his arms to make circulation return. The magnum lay in deep ferns at one side of the camp. The uniform can was there, too, with several clips of cartridges fortunately untouched.

It made O'Neil feel better to have the rifle in his hands. He rocked the bolt far enough open to make sure a loaded cartridge was in the chamber.

"Which way did they go?"

Bobolongonga pointed to the west.

They walked swiftly along the footpath which made a zig-zag canyon through jungle. They came to a level area, half a kilometer in diameter, covered by ten-foot-high cane grass. O'Neil paused a few seconds and swept it with narrowed eyes, looking for the telltale tremble which would indicate lurking men. As he stood there a volley of gunfire reached his ears.

He judged it to be two kilometers distant. He ran, following one of the antelope trails that cut through the cane grass.

After the one volley, all shooting had stopped, but an elephant-hide drum was booming with a measured, ominous sound.

He reached a grassy park, dotted with ant mounds and clumps of lacy green bamboo growing from them. A girl's warning scream stopped him when he was a half-dozen steps into the open.

It was Langa's voice. He could see someone now, far across the park.

He turned, and saw why she had warned him. Bobolongonga's sweeping right arm drove him back at the same instant. A Nonge native had flung an assagai from short range.

The assagai hissed away in the grass. The native whipped a bow from his shoulder, fixed a tiny, poisoned arrow. He bent the bow. At the same instant O'Neil angled the barrel of his magnum and pulled the trigger.

The heavy, 220 grain-slug struck the Nonge warrior, driving him backward and the arrow flew hissing out of sight toward the sky.

OTHER warriors were to right and left, but none at such point-blank range. Their deadly little arrows flew past as O'Neil and Bobolongonga found protection of a slight depression and followed it to the jungle.

"She is well, O master, from the sound of her voice," Bobolongonga said, knowing that O'Neil was trying to locate the girl.

"But for how long?" he muttered, knowing that the vengeance of her people would fall for the warning she had just given.

A tall, hawk-faced man in a headdress of ram's horns strode across the park, shouting to the warriors, directing them in a search of the bordering jungle, but none of them came close. After an hour, with the direct heat of midday setting in, they gave up, formed two ragged lines, and marched away along the footpath.

"They have captured that Christian swine, Walski?" asked Bobolongonga.

O'NEIL had been watching, but he was not sure. They followed at a safe distance. The footpath slowly widened, and he knew that a village was not far away.

He stopped at the edge of the jungle and looked across the hummocky ground of a cassava patch. Beyond was a wandering bamboo stockade, and the mushroom-thatch roofs of an extensive native village.

"We should leave this madman's valley, O master," said Bobolongonga. "Dost thou remember the big, square holes they burned through the ears of that Canton Johnny?"

O'Neil turned savagely on the black man. "What do you want me to do—sneak away and abandon the girl who just saved our hides?"

"No, but I would keep thee in one piece, master, so I could collect my back wages and return a man of wealth to my two wives in Katanga."

O'Neil found tobacco in his pocket, but he had neither papers no matches so he chewed the strong native leaf, watching the village as it rose and fell in the heat distortions caused by afternoon sun.

Bobolongonga went on, "If we approach by daylight they will surely slaughter us like two sheep. But perhaps by night it will be too late. What is the wisdom of white men?"

O'Neil jerked his shoulders in a hard

laugh, "We get slaughtered like two sheep."

He walked into the sunlight, cutting across the uneven ground to approach the stockade in the partial protection of some gnarled old baobab trees whose low branches dripped vines and moss. Inside the stockade a drum had started to boom in slow rhythm.

At first there was only the one—then others joined it, their sounds ranging from the deep note of elephant hide to the high rat-tat of taut monkey skin. Native voices followed the drums, rising and falling, chanting the syllables *ke-ya-ya* over and over.

Bobolongonga rolled his eyes and muttered about the drums of death. O'Neil's face was the old, hard Buddha mask. He looked at the sun. About two and a half hours of afternoon still remained.

He hooked one of the hanging vines and swung to the gnarled lower limb of a baobab. Heavy foliage hid him as he climbed slowly from one limb to the next, easing his weight to prevent the tremble of leaves from giving him away.

At a height of twenty-five or thirty feet he crouched on a limb and looked on the scene inside the stockade.

Tom-tom players, weaving brown men, were bent over their drums near the entrance of an extremely large hut. At least a hundred natives stood along lines of cobblestones laid across the ground. The area inside the cobbles was evidently some sort of taboo. Faggots, laid in an intricate criss-cross manner had been built to the height of a man's head, and to one side was a torture post.

The tom-toms beat on in their peculiar, rocking rhythm. Many minutes passed. O'Neil became tired and seated himself on the limb with the trunk of the baobab at his back. Finally the draped door of the large hut opened and a man walked out.

At least O'Neil supposed him to be a man. It was impossible to be sure for he was covered from shoulder to feet by a robe of raffia dyed many colors. He wore a headdress using feathers, cowrie shells, and a set of antelope horns. His face was covered by a black hood.

Slowly, with measured movements, he commenced to dance, and the spectators, crowding the edge of the cobbles, followed

in a swaying unity, chanting more loudly the same syllables—"ke-ya-ya."

O'Neil had to smile grimly, recalling what Bobolongonga had said about these Nonges being followers of Mohammed. Like all tribes of the northern jungle fringe their religion seemed to incorporate the most savage features of Islam and the fetish cults.

Two young girls, probably temple virgins, emerged and performed a ritual dance of slow movement, afterward seating themselves one on each side of the doorway, looking straight ahead with glazed, unblinking eyes.

The tom-toms increased slightly as a third girl went through the familiar opening movements of the sorcerer's dance.

O'Neil had seen the dance performed by a variety of tribes from the upper Volta to Ubangi-Shari and, if it followed the usual lines, it would take until dark.

The sun was sinking, and with it O'Neil's hopes rose. There was a chance he could save Langa if they chose to torture her, but he would need darkness to protect him.

It was early twilight when the temple virgin danced herself into the peculiar, catalytic trance typical of the sorcerer's ceremony. She sat very still, palms resting on the ground, her eyes rolled back in her skull until only their whites were visible.

VII

THERE WAS A HUSH ACROSS the village—a tense expectancy. More tom-toms were thumping, their sound advancing from around the big hut. Two tall natives were first, bearing torches of pitchy thorn wood. A half-dozen warriors with assagais followed; after them were Gino, Langa and Walski with a guard of a dozen more warriors to prod them along.

No sign of the two Shari natives. It was O'Neil's guess they had made a run for it as soon as the shooting started.

The torches were placed atop posts on each side of the hut doorway, and a third was carried over to light a pile of faggots.

The wood was dry and resinous, and it rolled with quick, intense flame, then sank to a heap of coals.

"Langa!" the black-hooded priest shouted in his parrot voice.

The girl came forward with two assagai-bearing natives following.

Fright, showing in her face, made her seem younger and more beautiful than ever. Her skin looked soft and tawny by firelight. Her eyes seemed hypnotized by the black-masked face of the priest.

The priest commenced speaking, pronouncing rapidly the words of the Nonge dialect.

"The woman who helps the men with white skin makes herself lower than the swine of the Prophet's table" seemed to be the gist of his long accusation.

When he was finished, Langa stood with head lowered from disgrace. O'Neil spoke to Bobolongonga who had climbed to the limb beside him.

"Why the disgrace? Because she warned us back in that clearing?"

"That, Master, and because she did not kill herself rather than be taken prisoner."

"What will they do?"

"She will be tied near the fire, and salt will be forced between her teeth, and when she is suffering the torture of thirst they will place her over a cool stream of water to die."

O'Neil cursed them. He remembered the big, square holes that had been burned in Canton Johnny's ears, and the shifty, madman's look in his eyes.

"They'll do it to her, like they did to Canton—"

"No, Master. Not the ears, for she is a woman, and therefore she must die disgracefully and not like a warrior. Perhaps she will be tossed on the points of assagais after the thirst has begun. But that Walski!" Bobolongonga lifted a massive finger. "Him they will hang by his thick ears over that stream. Is not your heart stabbed with pity for that poor white brother of yours?"

"The hell with him," growled O'Neil.

Two warriors in feather headdresses and knee-bangles of cowrie shells seized Langa. They waited a moment before dragging her away while the priest asked whether she had a word to say in her own defense.

She started to talk, but Walski hurled himself forward, dragging two warriors with his massive strength.

"She lies if she says she escaped to warn you of me!" He shouted in their dialect, his voice carrying far above the boom of

tom-toms. "*She* is the traitor as you have said, O noble one! It is she who tried to lead the hook-armed devil to your blue stones. Me, Walski, I am your friend. I come only to warn you and give this traitor-woman back to you. Else why would I be coming toward your village when you captured me?"

"*He* is the enemy who would steal the blue stones!" she cried.

The priest motioned her to silence. He stood with his featureless black mask turned toward Walski. "Speak on!" he said.

Walski was encouraged. "She is the traitor who killed her own lover that she could go to the hook-armed man. Behold!—I tell you this because I hate all white men."

There was no way of telling from the eyeless black mask how the priest received Walski's plea. He turned and motioned for Langa to be tied to the stake close to the intense heat of the coals.

Bobolongonga rumbled in O'Neil's ear, "You just sit here and watch?"

"I don't want to risk not paying thee back thy wages, O faithful one," O'Neil said grimly.

"And I say to thee, to hell with those back wages." Bobolongonga stood without holding, brandishing a massive fist in the air. "Behold!—I will quit thy service forever. Bobolongonga will not be servant to a coward."

O'Neil stood on the limb to test some of the ropelike vines dropping from the higher branches. They were strong enough to bear three times his weight. It would be an easy matter to swing inside the stockade and alight beside the girl.

He decided to weaken a section of the stockade. Three of the bamboo posts would be enough. He lowered himself to the ground with Bobolongonga following.

The stockade posts were half eaten from fungus rot where they were anchored in earth. Their tops were bound with wrappings of wire-tough reeds. O'Neil chose a place directly behind the fire and cut the reed bindings with Bobolongonga's machete. The posts still stood as before, but he knew that any sudden pressure would send them smashing down.

"What is your plan, Master?" the black man asked.

"Surprise," said O'Neil. "You take the gun and give me the machete. I'll swing down from above and cut her free. They'll make a rush for me probably, before the job is finished, so it's up to you to open fire from above. Get those warriors over to her right. They're the ones who will cause most of the trouble. I'll get her around the fire and its glare should hide me for a while. With luck I should make it to the stockade wall."

"I will go inside with thee, Master."

"You'll stay out here with that gun."

BOBOLONGONGA climbed to the bottom limb and crouched with the magnum ready, an extra clip of cartridges clenched in his teeth. O'Neil climbed a trifle higher, taking a vine with him, stripping off its restraining leaves and tendrils as he went.

The two feather-bedecked warriors were finishing their job of binding Langa's arms to the post.

He waited, machete blade slid inside the straps of his hook arm, his hand clutching the stiff loop made by the vine.

He was outside the cover of leaves, and the firelight fell on him. He waited for the warriors to finish and turn their backs.

Something made him glance at Walski. The man had spied him. He was hunched forward a trifle, his little, pale eyes glittering in the midst of his vast face.

O'Neil could guess what was going on in his brain. He was trying to guess his chance of being included in O'Neil's rescue.

Walski must have guessed what O'Neil intended, for he swept up his arm, pointing to the tree,

"See now, the traitor-woman's white lover has come to rescue her. Behold, is not this Walski a true friend of the Nonge?"

Despite Walski's warning, the element of surprise had not entirely vanished. O'Neil fell forward from the limb, dropping swiftly, holding the vine. It swung him in a swift arc. He felt a blast of heat in passing over the fire. He released his grip and struck the ground at Langa's feet.

He whipped out his machete and with two strokes cut the grass ropes binding her.

She was free, and not one warrior had made a move. One of them shouted and lifted his assagai. He charged forward to drive it into O'Neil's chest.

The air was split by the magnum's concussion. Its bullet drove the native backward and he lay sprawled and still on the ground.

O'Neil held Langa by the wrist. She seemed to be struggling against him. He flung her behind the fire and followed an instant later. He paused, crouching on one knee, trying to locate the three loosened pickets.

Three of the assagai-carrying warriors had circled, cutting off his retreat in that direction.

The magnum roared again, smashing one of the warriors down. O'Neil was safe for the moment, crouched between the fire and a heap of unburned wood.

To divert their attention he seized a piece of burning wood and hurled it to the big hut's thatch roof.

The thatch, dried by the fierce heat of afternoon, burned as though saturated by petrol. Within seconds the roofs of nearby huts caught from heat and flying coals. In the general terror that followed, Walski and Gino tore themselves from their captors.

O'Neil could have reached the stockade, but the girl pulled away and started to run back to the village.

The rifle was silent, and Bobolongonga was on the ground, tearing out the loosened pickets.

O'Neil lifted the girl in his arms. He turned in time to see Walski and Gino disappear through the stockade. He followed them, trying to stop at the last second. Walski had seized a club and was swinging it at O'Neil's head.

"You would let Walski die from torture by those savages!" he roared. "Now we will see who dies. With girl I will let you die."

O'Neil went outside, face foremost, trying to ride out the force of the blow. Walski swung his club once more. It was a knotted, rough branch of baobab wood. O'Neil rose, fending it off with his hook, and drove forward, carrying Walski so that he backedpedaled and slammed into the stockade.

Walski dropped the club and wrapped

his massive arms around O'Neil, locking his hands beneath the small of his back. His arms drew in slowly, powerfully, while his chest expanded.

O'Neil was bent backward, the breath wrung from his lungs. Never had he felt such strength. It was like the strength of a great ape. The hands tightened still more. In a second, he knew, there would come a sharp twist and his spinal column would crack, leaving him writhing and helpless.

O'Neil ripped his hook arm between their bodies. Its point found the soft flesh beneath Walski's jaw. Walski screamed, relaxing his grip for a fraction of a second. O'Neil continued with a whip of his shoulders, bending double.

Walski was helpless, carried like a huge carp on a fisherman's hook. O'Neil swung him over his shoulder, smashing his huge body to earth. The hook came loose and Walski staggered to his feet.

"No. No," he was muttering thickly. "White men must stick together. It is law of tropics, O'Neil. White men . . ."

O'Neil clubbed him with a backhand blow, driving him down again. Walski still was not out. He staggered up and tried to retreat, but O'Neil was too close. He found the stockade opening and fell inside it. He got up and ran with a heavy gallop, taking a dozen steps before realizing the death he was running to meet.

He turned. A warrior was standing not five steps away, assagai poised. He hurled it, driving the heavy metal head through the bones of Walski's chest, impaling him like a pig on a roasting spit.

Walski reeled forward, tripping over the empty toes of his tennis shoes. He fell face foremost in the torture fire, splintering the assagai shaft. He clawed coals with his fingers—and lay still.

O'Neil turned in time to see Bobolongonga lift Gino, the whip man, high overhead and hurl him over the stockade wall where he lay half-conscious as a dozen assagai-brandishing warriors charged down on him.

O'NEIL traveled the jungle trail until the village fire was a dying glow against the northern horizon. He stopped, giving Bobolongonga and himself a rest, for they had carried Langa most of the distance.

In a half-hour dawn commenced silhouetting the hilltops, and they went on. He did not make any kind of camp until they had passed the waterfall, leaving the Nonge Hills behind.

O'Neil sat, looking at Langa's face as she slept. She seemed to feel his gaze, and opened her eyes. She looked up at O'Neil and spoke,

"The blue stones—you did not get them after all."

"Some day," said O'Neil, "I'll go back and find those diggings."

She shook her head. "Even the Nonges do not know. There are a thousand stones, and they have been passed down from family to family as long as the most ancient of men can remember."

"How about Canton? He came out with a pocketful."

"Other white man captured and brought to village. They tortured him until his memory was gone, and then the chief set him free to return as warning to his brothers. Then he fool them and stole many sacred blue stones. But now he is dead and the stones are lost forever."

O'Neil had Canton's diamonds in his pocket at that moment, but he let it go. Langa moved closer, laying her brown fingers lightly on O'Neil's arm.

"I can never go back. Where will you take me?"

O'Neil didn't know. He sat quite still, watching the girl fall once more to sleep. Her fingers still lay lightly, trustingly on his arm.

"I'll take her to St. Peter's," he growled. "The good Sisters of Charity will know what to do about her. They'll raise her the way she ought to be raised."

"But she is not a child. She is a woman," rumbled Bobolongonga. "And she will not be sent to the good Sisters of Charity."

"No?" O'Neil barked.

"No, master!" Bobolongonga stood, huge of frame, massive of muscle, and struck chest with forearm. "No, she will not. And I will tell thee why. You will take her as thy mate, O Armless One, or else will I choke the life from thee, and take my back wages from thy pocket, and myself return wealthy as a *bondele* banker unto my wives in Katanga."

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, etc., required by the Act of Congress of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Acts of March 3, 1933, and July 2, 1946 of ACTION STORIES, published quarterly at New York, N. Y. for Oct. 1, 1947.

State of New York, County of New York, ss.:

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Malcolm Reiss, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Editor of the ACTION STORIES and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily, weekly, semiweekly or triweekly newspaper, the circulation) etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Acts of March 3, 1933, and July 2, 1946 (section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations), printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Fiction House, Inc., 670 Fifth Ave., New York 19, N. Y.; Editor, Malcolm Reiss, 670 Fifth Ave., New York 19, N. Y.; Managing editor, none; Business manager, T. T. Scott, 670 Fifth Ave., New York 19, N. Y.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one percent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.) Fiction House, Inc., 670 Fifth Ave., New York 19, N. Y.; J. G. Scott, 670 Fifth Ave., New York 19, N. Y.

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5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is (This information is required from daily, weekly, semi-weekly, and triweekly newspapers only.)

(Signed) MALCOLM REISS,
Editor.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 24th day of September, 1947.

GEORGE G. SCHWENKE,
Notary Public.

(My commission expires March 30, 1948.)



*He broke through twice
to the south after that.*

GHOST RIDER OF HANG-TREE BASIN

By Rollin Brown

SOME SEVEN HOURS OF riding brought Matt Cruze up into the shelter of pine timber along the Jemez Rim. Here among the pines he paused, loosened cinch and reset his saddle, and then packed the bowl of his pipe with a deliberate care. He was a big man—big-boned and flat-muscled with a lank bulk and weight to him. With the pipe going he settled his broad shoulders back against the rough bark of a pine and began a patient searching of the lower ridges.

The hard years and the way he had lived had taught this man patience as well as too much knowledge of violence. He watched for fifteen or twenty minutes before he saw the other rider's dust again. That dust was an ash-gray thread a mile or more away to the north where the rider had at last left his cover and climbed up to the rim. Cruze could finally decide that

the other rider had not been trailing him at long distance, but had only been circling him carefully while he worked his way around ahead of Cruze. It was the maneuver of a man who trusted nobody.

But there was a warning here at once plain to Matt Cruze as he swung on his horse again and rode on up into the timber.

From the crest he could look off across the upland now to the massive, rocky heads of the Soldier Peaks, still another half-day's ride away. The land between pitched and fell and lifted again in innumerable, timbered ridges, all this strip deeply gashed by canyon drainage of the Rebel and its blue-shadowed upper forks. Southward, shifted in the saddle, Cruze could trace the river's canyon flattening into valley and the high desert beyond where the stage road climbed its roundabout way into this country.



They hunted him
across a land already
scorched with gunflame
and slaked with blood. And
he ran and hid from them
like a rabbit—until he was ready.
Then Matt Cruze walked into town
—and his crashing guns chanted the
end of evil in that place.

It was the ears of the buckskin under him, pricked up in sudden interest, that drew his sharp and immediate attention back to the nearby timber. Across the end of a clearing, three or four hundred yards away, a horseman raced into his view and was gone again as swiftly, too far away for sound of hooves over the forest floor to reach him. Cruze watched the next timbered rise, saw nothing there, and wheeled the buckskin into the thickets with new caution prodding him.

Presently he cut the tracks of the rider seen in the timber, hoofprints slashed deep into the forest mold, and within another hundred yards came on a second set of tracks. These halted him. He turned and followed the trail back and found where the two riders had waited together, not long ago, with an open view of the rim to the north before them. Their horses had fretted, trampling the ground here; and Cruze considered what the sign told him with no liking for it. When he turned the buckskin away, he was in a hurry to leave this spot.

He'd made about a mile, angling westward among the ridges, when the sound of a shot came ripping across through the timber to him. He spurred the buckskin up a slope ahead, crossed through a stand of young jackpine and reached high ground. Again the gun tore at distant silence, and now a second rifle joined it. North and off ahead of him, Cruze could see the dot-like shape of a horse and rider racing furiously across an open swale. An edge of timber chopped off his view of that; then another rider became visible, crossing the swale above and cutting for the ridge top where his gun would be of use once more.

IT WAS a desperate thing he was witnessing over there. Cruze heard the rifles start anew and then stop. Now he understood the wary hesitancy of that lone rider who'd crossed the rim ahead of him. That was the hunted man—the man the other two had been watching for—and Cruze wondered suddenly if they had it right. He wondered if word hadn't somehow leaked and got ahead of him and if he, Matt Cruze, wasn't the man the two actually wanted. That was possible.

He had no friend in this country on whom he could rely, no acquaintance—and

whenever he walked into the town at the bend and word got around, Cruze knew that every man's hand would be raised against him, openly or otherwise. That was what he expected; that was the kind of a job this was. The same forces that had been against John Blaise in here would be set against him. Leaving Ransom Springs this morning, Cruze had understood all that. Those were things he'd coolly taken into account, but he had counted on more time.

Off there in the distance a puff of dust showed over timber—ahead and off to the right of the hunted man. The second horseman had topped slope above the swale and disappeared, and now a curious thing occurred. Nearer, bearing toward him, Cruze saw the hunted rider appear once more, racing along a lower edge of timber as hard as a horse could run. It was the way a frantic rabbit sometimes outmaneuvers a hound. The pursued man rounded a low point and struck southwestward down some long ravine into which Cruze could not see.

But his dust gave the rider away. Once more the guns started hammering, reaching for him with a vicious, echoed barking across those yonder draws.

Cruze was running the buckskin off the slope of his ridge by this time, finding the forest deep and unbroken before him as crossed the next broad dip of land. The guns were again silent. But as he started up the next rise the timber thinned and a shaly outcropping of rock turned him aside. He worked on through heavy brush, climbed back and forth and topped the head of rock, and realized then just how treacherous this terrain was. The long ravine into which the hunted man had disappeared dropped to shelf-walled depths below, curving on in deep shadow. One glance told Cruze a mounted man stood no chance of escape down there. He ran on along the crest into other timber, stopped.

Before he saw the rider he heard the labored breathing of that man's horse and the plunging run of the animal's hooves. The rider came up through timber leaned far over saddle, clinging with both hands. He quartered across toward the rocks above and came abreast of Cruze before he saw him. The rider hauled at the reins

and tried to whirl his horse away, and lost his hold on the saddle with no strength left to pull himself back. A spur raked up across the animal's flank.

He spilled sideways out of the saddle with the saddlebags he'd been clutching flopping off under him, and rolled twice over in the dust. The rider dragged himself up on the ground with arms braced apart, staring wildly at Cruze, and began to cough. If he'd had a gun he'd lost it. There was blood in his mouth and on his hands, and a great dark patch of it on his chest. His face was pinched and white and too young for this, and dark curly hair clung in sweat-grimy ringlets to his brow.

There was a dazed, stricken look in his eyes, but he seemed to know who his pursuers were and to realize as he looked at him that Cruz was not one of them. He opened his mouth three or four times before he got words out. "Here!" he said with an awful urgency in his voice. "Here, take it—" and collapsed.

He had fallen forward by the time Cruz reached him. Down through the timber Cruze heard a faint, thin crashing now. He bent his broad shoulders and dragged the youth's body back into shelter of the rocks, and sat down in this cover with his six-gun drawn. Off the other way, he could still hear the riderless horse running, and whoever was down in the timber heard that noise too. The man below crossed slantwise along the slope, near but visible at no time; then those sounds were lost.

Cruze looked down at the dead youth's face. He muttered, "Hardly twenty yet," with a kind of tight, suppressed fury. He knew he didn't have very long before the rider who'd crossed below caught up with the loose horse and started trailing the animal back. His six-gun was no match for a couple of rifles among these rocks, and Cruze needed no one to tell him that. He made a rapid search of the youth's pockets without finding any clue to his identity. But there was a surprising heft and weight to the saddlebags when he picked them up.

Before he unbuckled a flap, Cruze knew there was money in those bags—a lot of money. He rammed a hand down inside and felt it. That changed the whole situa-

tion suddenly, and he cursed softly to himself. The money probably meant this youth had had his hand in some recent robbery, and the hunt and shooting Cruze had witnessed had the law behind it. But it could have happened another way. And if some other explanation was the right one, Cruze knew what was going to happen if he let the two riflemen close in on him. In that case, he already knew too much.

He had to move and he had to make up his mind fast with the certain knowledge that if he guessed wrong about this there'd be no way to back out. But it was the body of the boy lying back there in the rocks with his dusty, curly hair stuck to his brow that decided him. Cruze bent his head with a thin, tight bitterness pulling at his mouth, and murmured, "Okay, kid. I'll play it your way till I learn some more."

HE CLIMBED on his horse hurriedly with the bags tossed over saddle, and wheeled the buckskin around half a dozen times on the slope to wipe out his boot-prints. He headed across for the top rock the way he had come and climbed to its crest, taking one long look back. There, just emerging from the timber, was the horseman who'd crossed the lower slope. The man ran into the open, sighting Cruze, and for a moment stopped. Then the head of rock intervened. Cruze raced down into the thickets that had bothered his climb from this side, and started searching for an opening off to the south.

He hadn't gone far when he heard two quick shots from up on the rock—the one man signaling the other now. But they still weren't sure what had happened, Cruze thought. The sun was dipping down toward the Soldier Peaks with about two hours of daylight left. Cruze found the opening he was looking for, veered off to the south with a long slant view four or five miles ahead. Away to the south he could see an open upland meadow, the roofs of a ranch house and barns plain. He wondered if the shooting could have been heard that far, and almost immediately had his answer.

A boil of dust came up from timber, crossing one of the in-between ridges, and that meant riders. One of two things was going to happen now: either those com-

ing riders would join the two riflemen or by their presence force the two to turn and give it up. When that happened Cruze thought he would know more, but right now he dared take no chance of meeting this party. That sent him angling to the west again, and he had his hunch that the rifleman might have been following along the crest.

The sound of a bullet slicing pine bark, throwing chips, and the full-throated voice of the rifle struck his ears at once. He whirled, striking into deeper cover with his six-gun whipped out. Again the noise of the rifle slammed down at him from the ridge. Cruze dipped into a farther gully, found brief shelter there. The buckskin was far from fresh, but running strong under him. A horse with a lot of bottom, plenty of heart. He left the gully, afraid it would lead him into some shelf-walled trap like he'd seen on the other side of the crest. Off ahead somewhere was the canyon with its spread-out upper forks.

He'd had no plain view of the rifleman who'd fired on him or the other at any time. That meant neither had had a good look at him. All that he needed now was time—two hours of time till dusk fell. No sign of close pursuit behind. He grew hopeful that the party of riders he'd sighted had brought an abrupt end to the hunt after those last shots. He searched higher timber for a clearing that would give him a look back and found dust following, half a mile away. A quarter hour later other dust showed across to his left, running along even with him, creeping ahead. He heard a distant signal shot.

Cruze knew after that that this was going to be bad. The riflemen had met the party from the south, paused just long enough to organize the pursuit. The sun had dipped an imperceptible distance down toward the peaks—too much daylight was left. The dust off to the side kept pushing in against him. Cruze wheeled back due west, hoping to lose himself in the timber and double back. But now the timber thinned, and the land broke away in front of him into eroded, broken country.

He plunged off into it and after a mile began to hear a sullen murmur lifted to his ears. The noise remained distant, a toneless, steady mutter that he realized was the noise of water, booming and echoed up

hollowly from canyon depths. Still he could not see the canyon, but here struck a broad, hoof-packed trail. Through side brush he glimpsed a rider coming up that trail; he started across and saw it was all open going up to the next broken ridge. He wheeled down trail instead and ran head-on at the rider around the close bend.

He caught a flash of red hair, a startled face tilted up. He'd counted on reaching that rider fast, disarming him or slashing past. Word hadn't yet got ahead, but this wasn't a man. Cruze grabbed for the girl's horse, caught the bit and whirled the animal around in the trail. He said to the girl, "Get out of here—get out fast—and you haven't seen me! Can you remember that?"

WHAT she saw was a big man with a grim, tight face, dust all over him. He gave her mount a cut with the ends of his reins. The animal jumped and started running down trail with her. Cruze spurred across open ground for the end of broken ridge. Again the noise of a gun. He'd been sighted now in close gun-range; no longer any chance to double back. He could feel the buckskin tiring under him, beginning to give out. The pretty red-headed girl brought Matt Cruze no luck.

He broke through twice to the south after that; each time he was turned back. It seemed to Cruze that even more riders had joined the hunt by this time. Too much daylight was left. By sundown they'd pushed him over against the canyon bluffs. He had no difficulty seeing the river now. It was right down below him under the bluffs that fell away in crumbling, broken-edged cliffs to jagged slides of talus.

The caprock ended here and beyond, slanting off to the desert, was the valley John Blaise had often described to him. Hang-Tree Basin. He could see the trace of the stage road there, following the near side of the river under him toward an upper wooden bridge. Above the bridge the canyon split, and around bend to the west was the town of Hang-Tree, with a sprinkling of windows already alight.

The river noise pounded up out of the other main fork that cut back into the upland. This was the country into which, years past, the renegade Jemez had led his

raiding band of Apaches time and again to escape blue-coated troopers, hiding in the upper fastness among the maze of canyon-heads and high-timbered meadows till he was ready to raid once more. Cruze, looking down from the bluffs on which Jemez's sentries had often stood, knew there was no way in the world to get a horse down to the valley below through the cliffs.

But he had momentary cover in an edge ravine. He dropped from the buckskin with the rope from his saddle and weighted bags over one arm. He hitched reins over horn and with a slap sent the buckskin running back through brush. He had another look over the edge, taking his time, jumped and landed on sloping rock ten feet below. He scrambled down through rubble, caught the forty-foot length of lariat around a stub of rock, swung out with the two ends dangling and reached a lower shelf. The rope came down around him when he gave one end a tug.

He followed the rocky shelf for a distance, crouched in under the cliff edge here. There'd been a brief volley of gunshots up above; only silence now through the river noise. They knew he was down here, but they didn't know where. Cruze used what was left of daylight to study the rocks under him, and buried the saddlebags in a crevice of the shelf by knocking down loose stones above. A drift of pebbles came sliding over the overhang after that. He waited motionless; then heard a farther shouting and the man above him moved off that way.

They'd lighted a fire up on the edge of the bluffs by the time it got dark, and every so often somebody would throw a burning brand down among the cliffs. Once they thought they saw him and three or four guns blasted at the spot. Cruze used the double rope again to slide down a rocky slot; he worked around to the right, struck another ledge and moved on to broader footing. In the starlight he could make out no more than hazy outline below and form no estimate of distance, with only memory of what he'd seen from above to guide him. He tied the end of rope fast now. He took a turn of the rope around one leg and held it so between his boots as he went over, knowing if he'd

figured this wrong or made any miscalculation in the dark he'd never be able to overhand his way back up forty feet of slick half-inch lariat.

He started to swing and turn there in the darkness, hanging over space, and tried to touch the cliff face with his body and steady himself. There was nothing within reach. Then he slammed into a lower edge of rock that hurt him, and started to twirl the other way. It seemed to him he must have gone down twice the length of that rope before he felt the end of it slid up between his boots, slip loose around his leg and the end flap against his face. He spread his legs, feeling with his boots, and touched nothing. He spent a frantic three or four seconds dangling there, looking down with the end of rope beginning to slip through his clenched hands—and let go.

He hit the slant of broken talus rock below instantly, stumbled and caught himself and sat down, breathing hard with sweat breaking out all over him. From force of habit he got the pipe out and set it between his teeth, needing a smoke bad but not daring to light up. There was a fair chance he could find himself another horse and get out of the country if he moved fast. But Cruze hadn't come here for that.

II

THE MATCH AT THE ROADSIDE flared into a small pool of light, instantly cupped under the hands that held it. But in the reflected glow Cruze was able to gain an impression of the man's face bent above as he searched the dust. It was a rawboned, youngish face with the nose a little off-center and the lips pressed together with stubborn purpose. The man said now, "Don't see no tracks. He's still up in the rocks, I reckon."

Horses stamped there in the close darkness. The other man, waiting in saddle, said, "Stage is late an' ain't come past yet. But he couldn't no way have got past Ed Wilkins' guard at the bridge, not unless he swum. It's just a crazy notion anyhow—her notion."

"I know," the stubborn voice replied. "But he might have gone down the road the other way." The match burned out.

Their horses moved on presently. Cruze was careful after that to leave no boot-prints in the dust, pushing through brush alongside the road. The river noise grew in volume before him till it drowned out any other sound and was only a steady, rushing roar. The fire still burned atop the bluffs, and he supposed there'd be guards up there all night or until some other news reached them. In any event, it was going to take time for riders to come down from there, working back across the upland to that broad trail he'd crossed which, he judged, must drop to some passable ford in the canyon two or three miles above.

The bridge formed a dim, half-seen framework ahead of him with the water churning under it when he stopped. The lights of the town up beyond at the bend of the westward fork were nearer—not more than half a mile away. It took him a while to locate the guard on the bridge, unable to hear any sound the man made; and about that time a farther winking of lights on the road behind caught Cruze's attention.

Those lights disappeared, traveled into view once more and followed the road under the bluffs, moving nearer all the time. Cruze stood under a low bank of built-up earth that formed the approach to the bridge when the coming stage drew to a stop. He watched the guard from the bridge step up on a wheel to carry on a brief shouted conversation with the driver on the box. Light from the running lamps spread forward onto the bridge.

CRUZE angled back, climbed to the road and in the darkness there felt for a handhold on the canvas-covered luggage boot. He hauled himself up, caught a good grip on the metal top rail and dug toes into the boot. He was hanging on, flat against the boot, when the stage pulled ahead. He could have reached out and plucked the hat from the guard's head as the coach rolled onto the bridge planks.

The stage swayed and rocked, hitting the road beyond with a tired team anxious for the feedracks and yard corrals close ahead. The river noise diminished to an understone, replaced by the racket of wheels and hooves. The window light of some outlying cabin passed. Cruze heard

the driver muttering to his horses now. The road bent sharply to the left; the shapes of town roofs took form against the night. More window lights. The coach dipped down and up across a small gully. Brake shoes scraped on wheels.

Cruze let go, legs moving as his boots touched ground. He ran along for four or five steps, digging into the dust, wheeled to the right and moved in close against a wall. The stage turned to the right ahead of him into the town's street, stopped. Cruze heard the sound of voices around corner. He took a look over the wall at his side, scaled it. There were sheds here, idle wagons and corrals against an alley in the rear. He saw a lighted open door before him, turned to it and looked into what was plainly a stage office fronting on the street.

Cruze stepped into the office, crowding his luck, and began to brush dust from his clothing. The talk of the passengers getting from the stage outside, standing about and waiting for their luggage to be pulled from the boot, reached his ears clearly. What caused him to turn just then, Cruze did not know. Over the back of a roll-top desk in that near corner of the room a woman's brown eyes studied him with a grave curiosity.

Here eyes, her smooth brow and brown hair that she wore in a chignon net were all that he could see of her at first. Neither said anything for a moment. Then her head bent, a drawer of the desk scraped open and was closed again, and she rose from behind the desk, coming around toward him. She was a tall girl with a slim grace to her, in all her motions. He noticed the full line of her mouth, the curve of shadow at her throat, and met her lifted glance with a keen appreciation.

In one hand she held what looked like a sheaf of invoices, in the other a whisk broom from the desk drawer. It was the broom she held out to him. "This ought to help," she said, and walked on to the street door of the stage office.

Cruze saw her standing with the stage driver, both studying the invoices in the light from a hurricane lantern hung outside, when he stepped from the office into the street. The driver turned and looked at him; the girl did not glance up. A Mexican hostler hauled the last piece of

luggage from the boot and went around to hoist himself up on the box. The half dozen passengers of the stage were moving across street toward a frame, two-story hotel by this time, and Cruze lengthened his step to catch up.

In the middle of the street he glanced back, saw the hostler turning the tired team toward the alley and noticed the name over the office where the hurricane lantern hung:

HENRY FARLAND
STAGELINE

The girl and driver had gone inside. He walked up steps to the hotel's veranda, mixing with these other men. The girl back there knew he wasn't one of the passengers. But nobody here knew him by name.

He signed the hotel register, said he had no luggage and laid out a couple of silver dollars for his room. White-covered tables of the hotel dining room showed beyond an archway at one end of the lobby through which several of the stage's passengers had already disappeared. Cruze watched an angular, square-shouldered man come from the dining room now, pausing there under the archway to light his cigar.

THE MAN had the look of a prosperous cowman. Polished boots showed under the cuffs of his trousers; he wore a town suit. But his face was rugged, lined and burned by weather, and his nose looked like the beak of a hawk. His mouth was tight and thin, clamped up like a steel trap. Through the smoke of his cigar as he came on, the man looked Cruze over from heels to head with a sharp, measuring scrutiny.

The clerk behind the lobby desk leaned forward, and said with an evident respect, "But who is it, Mr. McDavitt? Who is it that Mike Rennes and the sheriff have run into a hole up there on the bluffs? That's what everybody's asking me."

The man called McDavitt stopped. "I wouldn't know," he answered, and for some reason there was a thin edge of trouble in his voice. "I wouldn't be sure the sheriff and Mike Rennes had anybody cornered up there in the rocks by

this time. I don't know yet what it's all about."

He took another look at Cruze's dusty, scarred boots and went on out to the veranda.

Cruze located his room on the upper floor, and left the door open a crack behind him so he could see the head of the stairs. He walked across to the window, hoisted the lower sash and pulled a chair over beside it, not lighting the room's lamp. He could look across slantwise at the stage office, down street the other way two hundred yards to where the rise of the bend threw up its steep barrier. Down that way was a saloon with a light in front, not doing much business; nearer, a general store was still open. There was more that Cruze couldn't see on the near side of the street blow him.

McDavitt quartered across street now, passed the store building's pale, grimy windows and entered a small, square-faced structure that had MC DAVITT CATTLE CO. lettered dimly on its front.

The town was entirely quiet. Cruze watched and waited with no doubt at all that time would show him where he stood. This was the same thing John Blaise had faced before him—sooner or later it would come. Meanwhile the stage driver left the office across the street. Presently the light in the stage office was blown out and the girl over there stepped into view, locking the office door behind her.

Hooves raised a quick thudding on the road. Three riders swept into sight past the stageyard corner, pulling in their horses. A feminine voice called, "Hello, Judith," to the girl from the stage office and was answered. As the three came abreast the hotel Cruze had another look at the rider met on the high trail before sundown, her red hair pulled loose by the wind and her pretty, petulant face turned to the hotel lights as they passed. One of the riders beside her was the man who not long ago had been searching the road dust under the bluffs by matchlight.

It was all forming a pattern—with different names, different words, different faces than any he had known before—but at once familiar to Cruze as the life he had led. There was bitterness in that; and he watched the girl from the stage office come on across street to the hotel through

the riders' settling dust with a new dislike for himself. What he was, he was; and that must have been plain to her when she first looked at him.

Behind him, after a while, he heard light steps start up the hotel stairs, and now a farther rapid running of horses off in the night. He sat listening to the steps on the stairway and the other at the same time, realizing not much time was left. The running grew swiftly louder; he heard those hooves strike into the small gully that cut down behind the stageyard with an instant of gravelly clatter and under him, right after that, the street was full of dust. Somebody shouted through it with a lusty voice, "Got his horse—got both of 'em! Look here at this other saddle." Cruze knew what the other saddle looked like, where a desperate youth with a pair of weighted saddlebags had clung and bled all over it till he finally fell.

He was aware that shadow had crossed the open crack of his door. But he no longer dared shift his attention from the street and what was happening there. After a moment the girl's voice said, "May I come in?"

He answered over his shoulder, watching McDavitt step from the cattle company office up street now. He got up from his chair as she entered and stood so that she could see him against the frame of the window. He had no idea what had brought her, and so remained silent.

"Who was it?" she asked finally. "Who was it that was killed today up on the rim?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. I'd never seen him before."

The silence returned and he could feel the nearness of her in the room and smell a faint perfume from her hair. He wondered what this meant to her. "Judith?" he said presently. "What's the rest of it?"

"Judith Farland," she told him.

Still he didn't know what had brought her. He watched two of the riders cross the street toward McDavitt. "One of those two the sheriff?" he asked.

"Yes. Sheriff Wilkins and the big man beside him is Mike Rennes." Her words came swiftly, intently. "They'll have left a guard at the bridge. But the road up to Soldier Peaks pass is open and there's a back way out of the hotel here—if you

leave right away. I know why you've come. But it's no use. There's nothing you can do."

He leaned against the frame of the window. "That's something I'll have to decide for myself," he answered. The big man she'd identified as Rennes came striding back across the street to the riders. He repeated her name softly, "Judith. It's a friendly warning—thank you. But you'd better go now. I'll have to play this out in my own way."

He stood at the window and waited till she came in sight on the street below, turning leftward from his view. A rider swung to saddle and spurred past the hotel, swerving into the road where hooves stopped abruptly. Boots shuffled on walk boards below. There was a mutter of voices, and Cruze knew that in the last two or three moments the hotel had become closely guarded and the out-going road blocked. Then he turned to the stairs.

THE INSTANT he stepped out on the veranda below a dozen pairs of eyes were fixed on him. Cruze walked down three steps to the street level, paused deliberately there—and began his slantwise march across to the McDavitt office. Hands fingered a dozen guns among the shadows; any indecision on his part, any change of direction would start them blazing. To his right he could see the side of the street that had been cut off from his view above. The man called Mike Rennes waited there, big and broad-chested, with his legs spread apart. There was a small stone building behind Rennes, a square lighted window with SHERIFF'S OFFICE lettered on the glass. Horses stood at the hitch rails; riders stood and waited, motionless.

Cruze reached the opposite curb, stepped up on wooden walk planks there. It was like a sigh behind him, soft as the stirring of night breeze. Rennes quartered into the street behind him; all along street riders started moving. Over back of the hotel a distant voice shouted, "Come on—we got him!" Cruze raised a boot to the stoop of the McDavitt office. One hand—his left—pushed at the half-open door before him.

The light from a round-wicked table lamp struck immediately full into his face. The room he entered was a bare place

that once had served some better purpose. Shelves, empty now, lined one side wall; the big table under the lamp was old and battered and idle riders, waiting here, had carved a succession of brands and initials into its soft pine surface. There was a rusted iron stove against the far end wall, a doorway that opened to some kind of lean-to in the rear beside that.

McDavitt sat stiff in a chair at the end of the table, his steel-trap mouth tight as a scar across his face. At his side the legs of another chair grated on the floor-boards and the sheriff, Ed Wilkins, got to his feet. The sheriff was a pale-featured man with a thin, drooping blond mustache and a paunch. Too old for his job and too soft, Cruze thought. Mike Rennes came in from the street behind Cruze with following riders jamming into the open doorway.

RENNES was as big as Cruze with bunched shoulders and a solid, wide-boned face. Rennes' eyes had a thrust to them, an opaque, steady stare that missed nothing and gave nothing back. He moved with a sort of lazy indifference, very sure of himself. Cruze half turned with his back to the wall, so he could see these three men in the room at once.

"What does it take," Cruze said to McDavitt, "to call this hound pack off my heels? Whose boots do they lick?"

It was Mike Rennes who answered in a deep-toned, husky voice. "Careful," he said. "You're in a spot, stranger. A man was killed today up on the rim."

Cruze kept his back to the wall. "What man?" he asked.

A rider from the doorway put in, "He knows all about it. Don't let him pull that. We heard the shots and we seen enough from the tracks."

"What man?" Cruze repeated. "Give him a name."

Mike Rennes' lips puckered, his pale stare fixed on Cruze. "We don't know who was killed—not yet," Rennes said. "The horse under that rider comes from another section. A hird livery stable animal, perhaps. But what happened to the rider is plain enough when you look at the saddle. You did a lot of running after those shots were fired."

"What would you have done?" Cruze

said. "Stopped and got a bullet while you tried to explain? This suits me better."

The sheriff was keeping out of it, looking from one to the other. McDavitt said now, "What's your name?"

"Matt Cruze. You've never seen me before."

"I know that," the cowman snapped. "Where you from?"

"From Ransom Springs this morning." Cruze considered his next words with care, and dropped them carefully into this room "I own the old John Blaise place."

"What's that?"

McDavitt sat up straight with a kind of suppressed fury in him. The sheriff's weak jaw dropped and he mumbled something to himself. Mike Rennes' broad face turned stiff, his opaque eyes unreadable.

Rennes said, "That changes things a bit. Suppose you tell us about it."

"Sure," Cruze said. "John Blaise was a friend of mine, left me that hundred-sixty acres of land in his will. So I'm here to claim it."

"Who are you working for?"

"For myself."

Rennes' glance strayed along the table to McDavitt, and turned back. "Want a job?" Mike Rennes said.

"Who would I be working for?" Cruze asked.

"For me." McDavitt banged the table with a fist. "For Ray McDavitt, and don't forget it. I range all that rim country."

Cruze watched him for a moment. "That mean you're offering me a cut in on the valley grass, McDavitt?"

The cowman jumped to his feet with a sudden savage motion. "You brassy-faced gunslinger!" he yelled at Cruze. "You can't ride into this country and pull that sort of holdup."

"Don't get me wrong," Cruze said. "There's nothing I want from you. That includes your job, McDavitt."

He could feel the pressure in this room like a tangible thing. It came at him from the punchers massed in the doorway, those still outside and the men in the room. They formed a solid front against him, a wall of pent-up violence and hostility. But there was also conflict between them, between the cowman with his steel-trap mouth who controlled the rimland and big Mike Rennes before him. On the surface of

things Mike Rennes worked for McDavitt, but under that the two fought each other for power.

Cruze still didn't know who the youthful rider killed on the rim today was. But at least two men in the room or among the punchers packed in the doorway knew all about it—the two hunters. They weren't sure how much Cruze knew, and were afraid he'd talk too much. But if a bullet silenced him at this point, the money Cruze had had time to cache would be lost to them entirely. That was the situation, and Rennes was trying to cover up. The identity of the dead rider was somehow very important.

The sheriff started across the room toward Cruze, and Rennes said, "No need to get hasty, sheriff."

Sheriff Wilkins sputtered, "But look here . . ." His voice trailed off. He was used to taking orders.

Cruze knew how this was going to turn out now. He could walk out of this room any time he wanted. The thin edge of worry and trouble Cruze had first noticed in McDavitt came back on the cowman's face, his steel-trap mouth clamped tight. There was a stony hardness in Mike Rennes' opaque eyes.

"Through with me, are you?" Cruze asked.

"For the moment you're free to go," Rennes decided. He turned to one of the punchers in the doorway. "Go find that buckskin for him, Hank."

The puncher moved sullenly. The crowd in the doorway pulled back in a dragging, taut silence. Cruze followed the puncher out. The silence changed to a muttering behind him. Back there in the McDavitt office, Mike Rennes' heavy voice said, "Shut up! I'm giving the orders."

The puncher led the way across street to the buckskin tied at a rail. Cruze stepped into saddle. The puncher's face made a pale blur in the night.

"Nothing but a bluff," the man growled at him. "You won't last long."

III

CRUZE WAS DOWN ALONG THE road, nearing the bridge with the toneless river roar out of the other fork in his ears, before he stopped and began

a slow searching off to his right. It was the buckskin under him that picked up the trail finally, and settled into a steady jog along it. Cruze breathed the night, moving through scattered timber and unable to hear much except the river noise, and presently the smell of lifted dust drifted to his nostrils. The wind was at his back. He pulled into cover, expecting riders to pass. But no one moved along the trail.

After about five minutes he rode on. The roar from out of the upland fork fell back. The bluffs showed up to the north against the stars, and to his right were the opposite hills. The valley began to widen and flatten out before him to the south and the high desert that way. The fresh, moist orders of meadowland rose about him, and Cruze thought of all the things John Blaise had told him, one time or another, about this valley. It had well earned the name of Hang-Tree.

Eight thousand acres or thereabouts of grassland, the soil deep and loamy, granted long ago and held by a family named Serrano during those bygone years of Jemez's vicious raids. They'd been an unlucky family, the Serranos; Jemez had stolen their horses and cattle and womenfolk, burned stacks and barns and plundered. But those days were past. The last of the Serranos had left the land ten or twelve years ago, leasing it to others who fought among themselves. It was all one story of violence and fighting, and that was not finished yet. Both cows and sheep had grazed the valley's grass—and still did.

But what John Blaise had always seen was water on the land. Blaise had worked here as a young man, years before Cruze had met him. The valley had taken hold of him. Blaise, when he spoke of it, saw good barns, neat-painted ranch houses and green lush fields extending down through the valley and out beyond into the high desert as far as river water would flow in the irrigation ditches he planned.

"And what's in that for you?" Cruze had asked him once.

"For me?" Blaise said. "Not much, the way you mean. But I'd be able to ride down valley then and see the homes where maybe a hundred and more families lived, all prosperous and doing well. There'd be a school, maybe a church up around the bend. I'd look back at the rim an' say,

'Well, Jemez, you did your worst and so have a lot of others—but here's what's come of it.' There'd be enough satisfaction in that for me, I guess. Water is all that's needed."

The last time Cruze had seen John Blaise had been in Alamosa—spring a year ago. They were two men as different as night and day. Cruze, at the time, had just left the Table Mountain country where the long dispute between range interests and nesters had been finished. Trouble was his living, fighting his business. A quiet man, big, deceptive in appearance, the gun in his holster was for hire once more to the highest bidder.

Blaise had got a little backing—not much—from the bank that had finally acquired title to the old Serrano property. They talked for a long while that night, each sensing in the friendship of the other something that he needed himself. Blaise had said, "Well, I've bought a hundred-sixty acres up in the head of the valley. Not worth much, an old homestead claim on the edge of the Serrano grant. But that hundred-sixty's important if water is to be ditched into the valley at flow level. Any ditch would have to cross that ground, y'see."

"I see," Cruze said.

"If anything was to happen to me," Blaise continued, "I'm leaving that hundred-sixty to you, Matt. Like I say, maybe it ain't worth much as it stands. But it means a lot."

Cruze hadn't known at the time what John Blaise was up against in here. But he knew now. On one hand was the McDavitt cow outfit, reaching down from the rimland after all that grass. On the other side were sheep. Both took what they wanted by force, turning together to fight off any newcomer. That hundred-sixty acres Blaise held was the key; and both sides certainly had fought the irrigation project from the moment they learned of it.

More than a year had passed since that night in Alamosa. There was no record of John Blaise's death; simply he'd disappeared. So to that extent Cruze's presence here was a bluff. But he knew Blaise had never given up and quit. This valley and the thing he'd been working for meant too much to him. John Blaise was dead.

Cruze decided that he must have over-shot his mark in the dark and turned the buckskin back, working in closer to the hills. Presently in a flat draw against the hills he located the cabin he was searching for in the starlight—a small log building with a sod roof. He circled the place, remembering that earlier dust, and dismounted in the dooryard.

The door of the cabin pushed back when he put his weight against it. He struck a match inside and on a shelf above a home-made table, thick with dust, he found a lamp. It didn't appear to Cruze that Blaise or anybody else had been living in the cabin for some months. He was holding the glass lamp chimney in one hand, touching match to wick, when a voice Cruze had heard once before to-night spoke to him from behind.

"Don't do nothin' sudden," the man said. "I don't want no trouble. But I reckon Jake Lebec will want to talk with you."

C R U Z E put the chimney back on the lighted lamp and turned. Jake Lebec owned sheep, he knew. But this was the rawboned, youngish man with a nose a little off-center and a stubborn mouth who'd been searching road dust under the bluffs for tracks and later had ridden into town with the red-haired girl.

"Put the gun down," Cruze told him. "What gave you the idea you'd find me here?"

"We seen you leave town," the man said. "Rose figured out the rest of it." "Rose?"

"Rose Trevis. She's Jake Lebec's step-daughter. You met with her this afternoon up on the rim trail."

"I remember," Cruze said. "Put up the gun, I told you. There's nothing Jake Lebec wants to see me about."

The young man's jaw got stubborn. He was wearing hard-worn clothes and boots that turned over at the heels. He backed up into the doorway now, so his voice would carry outside. "Joe, come here!" he called, not shifting his glance from Cruze.

"I'm Orrie Lebec," he explained. "There ain't only one reason you got outa town like you did tonight or would come here. Blaise must have sold the place to you before—"

"Before what?" Cruze asked sharply.

Orrie Lebec shook his head, and the girl came into view in the doorway behind him with another rider. Her red hair was tumbled about her shoulders, and she shook it back idly. She was dressed like a man in hip overalls and a checked shirt, which by contrast only increased her femininity. She held her head tipped a little to one side, her lips parted, while she studied Cruze critically in the lamplight.

"You're big," she said to him. "Good-looking, too. I hope you and Jake can make some kind of a deal together. Who was it that was shot today up on the rim?"

Orrie Lebec's face darkened, and Cruze noticed that. "I don't know," Cruze said.

White teeth showed when she smiled. "You know more than you're telling, mister. Come on, let's go."

Cruze leaned against the edge of the table, and said, "There's no use in that, ma'am. It would be a ride for nothing. I'm hungry and I'm tired."

"I'll cook something for you," she promised. "You can't stay here. You're not on McDavitt's side and you're not on Jake's yet, and where does that leave you? Don't be a fool!"

Cruze bowed his head. "I hope you won't regret it, ma'am."

"My name is Rose," she told him. Again the smile.

Cruze watched the scowl deepen on Orrie's stubborn face, and thought how a woman could twist the knife in a man with only a word and a smile. Orrie had put his gun back in holster, but stood close while Cruze blew out the lamp. Rose had followed the other rider away after the horses.

"A pretty girl," Cruze remarked.

Orrie Lebec said, "Too pretty, maybe. When my pa married her mother we was both kids in our 'teens. We ain't no blood kin." It showed the direction of Orrie's thoughts.

The trail into which Rose Trevis led the way took up immediately into the side hills, and Cruze could see her checked shirt plainly in the starlight ahead. She rode and handled her horse like a man. Among the top hills they struck a broader trail that forked in from the right and evidently led back to the town around the

bend. The climbing ceased and their pace quickened to the southward at a trot for a couple of miles. Window lights showed ahead through the pines. Off to the side dogs started barking and this noise was answered from a distance and after that a murmured, babbling sound stirred faintly through the night. There were sheep bedded close by, and another flock beyond where the dogs had barked. The girl stopped.

"Joe!" she called to the rider who brought up the rear. "There ought to be somebody here on the trail. You stay."

Orrie crowded up beside Cruze. They crossed close-cropped meadow toward the lighted windows. A door opened there as they stopped, spreading a fan of yellow across the rough puncheon boards of a porch, and several men stepped out through that light. Cruze looped the buckskin's reins over a hitch rail. No one spoke from the porch. They walked across into the fan of light, climbed low steps and Rose led the way inside.

The room they entered had hewn beams overhead and log walls. A stone fireplace in which a small blaze burned took up the near end of the room. Cruze heard the shuffle of boots as the men who'd stepped outside at their approach followed them in. But his attention was immediately held by the bearded, rough-faced man sitting there in a chair by the fireplace.

The man had a blanket draped across crippled legs. His arms were big and solid, the shoulders lumped and powerful, as he shifted his weight around in the chair. Beard and his hair were a shaggy iron-gray, but the brows coal black, and his nose was a little off-center like Orrie Lebec's. It was a tough, craggy face. The voice came out of him in a rumble as he poked a thumb toward Cruze, but demanded of Rose, "Who's this?"

"His name is Cruze—Matt Cruze," she said, and her voice lingered a little on the *Matt*. "He's got some kind of a claim on the John Blaise place."

Jake Lebec stared at Cruze. "That right?" he asked.

Cruze nodded.

A sort of slow, deep sigh heaved from the burly old man. "What's your price? What do you want, Cruze?"

"Nothing from you," Cruze said.

THE BOOTS of the three or four men in the room scraped the flooring, reminding Cruze they were there. The old man hoisted himself up in his chair with sudden violence.

"So you're another Mike Rennes, are you?" he yelled at Cruze. "You've got ideas about that valley, have you? Well, you can't stand alone. Look at me—these legs were just as strong under me once as yours. A bullet did that. It struck my horse and he fell among rocks with me. One leg was broken, both caught. For two nights and the day between, till my own men found me, I lay like that. I had sheep in the valley then."

Cruze remained silent.

"All that land," the old man said with a fever burning in his eyes. "All that grass—and I asked for no more than my share of it. I'd have dealt with Ray McDavitt and let his cows graze to the river with my sheep on this side. We'd forced Henry Farland out before that. Farland had a lease on the valley grass, but couldn't hold it. McDavitt and me run him off with no more than enough saved to later buy his little stage outfit in town. Now Henry Farland is dead, and his daughter runs the stageline better than he ever did.

"We had the grass between us, McDavitt and I did," the tough-faced old man continued. "I'd married Rose's mother." He turned and looked at the girl. "She owned more sheep in the back-country—we got another ranch back there. But then Mike Rennes come. He worked for me at first—and then he got to lookin' at the valley. And what he saw was Mike Rennes' name wrote on it. But he couldn't stand alone. So Rennes tied up with McDavitt in the end. That's the situation. I need help and I can offer you a better deal than McDavitt can."

The girl watched Cruze with a half smile on her lips. "You and Jake could get along well together, Matt. I think you'd like it here," she urged.

Cruze pulled a deep breath into his lungs. "Rennes seems to be running McDavitt's outfit now," he said.

"That's about it," Jake Lebec answered. "If I had good legs under me I could handle this fight myself. If my own son was worth his salt, he could tend to it for me—and I wouldn't need the like of you,

Cruze." He raised an embittered glance toward Orrie, then lifted his head all the way. "What was that?"

It had sounded to Cruze like a gunshot back along the trail. A horse came racing across the near strip of meadow. In that moment Cruze was remembering the seething turbulence he had left behind in the town tonight, knowing then as he still did that more would come of it. Outside the rider Joe started yelling. Instantly a gun cut loose from the porch. One shot outside—the second traveled into the room, smashing window glass. Cruze felt the faint breath of that bullet and noise filled the place.

Glass fragments tinkled on the floor, powder smoke blossomed inside. Cruze had whirled, gun drawn. Two men nearest the door had it open and were out on the porch now. Boots ran away across the puncheons before them. There was a crash as somebody hit the end porch rail, a brief struggling, while the guns from the doorway started hammering. Then a horse was mounted and hooves raced away, around corner from the porch.

The shooting outside paused, but did not cease entirely. Cruze was at the door. He reached and grabbed Orrie Lebec by the shoulder, wheeling him around. "Get back inside, Orrie," he said. "The old man's been hit—hit bad." He passed Orrie, running as he crossed the puncheons.

In that small space of time sounds in the night had changed and there was a farther running, hooves crowded on hooves, laced with the racket of guns. Over that way sheep were stampeding, crashing through the brush wall of a pen with riders among them. A multitudinous bleating grew in the night, dogs yapped furiously while those yonder guns boomed. A flinty tumult raised from the ground where the sheep ran, and now it was all one discordant uproar of sound. Cruze reached the buckskin and swung on.

He was immediately part of a tight little group of four or five men in saddles. Joe was saying, "How could I help it? They'd passed me, spread out in the timber, before I heard a thing—" Wind gathered force against his face. The running of their horses drowned out part of that other noise. But it was still plain, moving across ahead of them. They gained slowly.

The streaked flashes of guns were suddenly visible to one side; then rolling billows of dust clouded up, thick as fog, choking. There were scattered sheep here. Somebody yelled, "Stick together—we ain't got a chance otherwise"

But the damage had been done; there was no chance of stopping this thing now. They crossed through the smother of dust and it thinned. Dead ahead fresh shooting started and veered away to the left. They ran on into that. Cruze fired till the gun in his hand was empty. Targets disappeared into more dust. He hooked reins over saddlehorn and reloaded blindly, still part of the group—one of Jake Lebec's fighting men for the moment in a way neither of them had foreseen.

IV

JOE brought Cruze word from the house in the dawn. The valley was taking form and shape below in the coming morning, mist on the deep meadows, a streak of lighter sky reflected on water where the river turned some shallow bend.

"Jake's gone," Joe told him. "God knows how he ever lasted so long, a bullet in his chest like that. Rose says for you to come in. You can't help no more with the sheep."

Cruze rode back to the house with him. They crossed ground that the run had followed, finding more dead sheep, and Cruze noticed a down horse in a gully. The animal, still saddled and bridled, lay on its side—a mount some McDavitt rider had straddled. He left Joe forking hay to their horses at the corral and entered the ranch house kitchen. Rose was busy there at the stove with an apron about her slim waist.

"You'll stay now, of course," she said to him "You couldn't go after this, Matt. I'm leaving everything up to you."

He stopped beside the table. "What about Orrie?" Cruze asked. "I figured he'd own a share of the sheep now."

She bent over a skillet on the stove for a moment; then came across to him. She tilted her head on one side, and challenged him with her pretty eyes. "Yes, Orrie owns a share," she said. "But Orrie isn't very important, is he? I wouldn't think a man like you would have much

trouble handling Orrie. Or if you'd rather, I will."

Cruze looked past her and saw Orrie Lebec standing in an inner doorway of the kitchen, and thought Rose knew he was there. He said slowly, "One flock wasn't touched last night. But four or five hundred head of sheep were lost from the other two. That's a heavy loss. It will happen again if you keep the sheep here. This whole thing is boiling to a head. How far back-country is the other ranch Jake mentioned?"

"Ten miles," Orrie said. He came on into the kitchen with a white look on his face, not glancing at Rose. "The sheep stay here—that's what Jake wanted."

"Jake didn't know how bad it was before he died," Cruze said. "What's that you've got in your hand, Orrie?"

"A spur," Orrie muttered. "A spur the murderer on the porch outside lost last night when he rammed into the end railing in the dark. It caught and pulled off his boot."

"Let me see it, Orrie."

The spur was a silver-inlaid affair with a crooked shank and guard, and a well-worn instep strap that had parted at the buckle. Cruze studied it "Who wears a spur like this?"

"One of McDavitt's punchers—any one," Orrie said bitterly. "It was you that man was after—you his shot missed an' hit Jake. You was standin' almost in line from the window. He shot once to hold Joe off and too fast the second time."

"I'll keep the spur, Orrie."

"I don't care what you do with it, but get out of here," Orrie yelled at him. "Eat your breakfast and be gone. You got no business here; you're only bad luck. Get away from this ranch an' don't come back. Nobody's takin' orders from you!"

Cruze shook his head. "You'll have to move the sheep or this will happen again. The fact that Jake is dead only makes that more certain. You can't expect any mercy; this is a dog eat dog game. Jake understood that thoroughly. Don't let the way you feel about me blind you, Orrie."

Cruze saw it coming before Orrie hit him and tried to back away. The table was behind him. Orrie rushed blindly, and he had to do the best he could. He slammed one fist into Orrie's middle, hoping that

would do the job. But it didn't. He ducked and caught a wild swing, and brought a shoulder up. His right cracked against Orrie's jaw and staggered him. He saw Orrie's loose fingers clawing for gun then.

Cruze reached it first, yanked weapon from holster and slid it back across the table. He lifted Orrie on his toes with a powerful heave, one elbow caught behind, and heard him groan; and when Orrie's muscles went slack, staggered with him and sat him down on one of the benches at the table. Joe stood in the outside doorway, watching this, and it had to be settled now.

"Joe," Cruze said, "ride out and find the boss herder. Tell him to have the flocks on the move toward the back ranch before noon. Got that straight?"

Joe glanced at Rose, back to Cruze and nodded wordlessly. They heard him leave the stoop and walk back toward the corral in the silence. Cruze had handled this in the only way left open. But that did not help. The old lines of dissatisfaction deepened and he felt an utter weariness, and wondered if there'd ever be an end to such things for him.

The flocks were on the move before noontime. In the sundown now Cruze could still see dust drifting up through the timber, back four or five miles into the hills. He had not seen Orrie since morning; Rose had remained somewhere within the house during the day. Cruze got out his pipe, tamped tobacco into bowl and lighted it. He carefully timed his entry into the town.

Deep shadow lay in the canyon and lights were aglow at the bend when he put the buckskin down the last steep pitch of the trail, and came into the far end of the short street. He moved along to an empty hitch rail by the hotel, tied the buckskin and walked over to the lighted stage office.

"Evening, Judith," he said.

JUDITH FARLAND glanced up from the corner desk with a startled expression on her smooth face. She rose quickly as he came on across the little office, shaking her head. "You shouldn't be here, don't

8—Action—Spring

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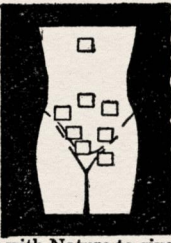
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you know that?" she said. "Wasn't last night enough? Do you have to come back and ask for more of the same?"

"Something like that. Tell me, Judith, how well did you know John Blaise? It didn't occur to me till later, but that was the reason you wanted to warn me, wasn't it?"

"Your name was there on the hotel register," she said. "I'd heard him speak of you, and I know then why you must have come. But it's still no use, Matt."

"Perhaps not. I'm not sure. For how long has John Blaise been dead, Judith?"

She turned her head away. "I don't know—I mean he could just have left and gone away, couldn't he? Someone—I believe it was Mike Rennes—claimed later to have seen him out at Ransom Springs."

"You don't believe that, nor do I," he said.

Her lips moved slowly. "No. But either way, there's nothing you can do for him."

"I'll have to try," he said, fixing the sight of her standing there in his mind because he wanted to remember her just like that. Then he turned away, settling the broad hat on his head again. The Mexican hostler stood in the other doorway from the yard now. Cruze nodded to the man and went on out.

There were lights in the stone-fronted sheriff's office, but on one inside. He walked on to the abrupt end of the street and crossed over to the saloon there, pushing at the swinging doors, and went in. He crossed to the bar with its stacked pyramids of bottles and glasses and long mirror, and ordered his drink. Cruze pulled the silver-mounted spur from pocket of his jumper and placed it on the bar.

"Ever see this or its mate before?" he asked the bartender.

"Can't say I have. Find it on the street?" the barkeep asked.

"No," Cruze said.

There were three punchers playing stud at a back table, and the game stopped abruptly. Cruze held up the spur. "Belong to any of you?"

"No," said a beefy-faced rider.

After a moment the beefy-faced man got up from the table and left the saloon. Cruze stood with an elbow on the bar, dangling the spur by its broken strap. Two

other men came in from the street, dust on their boots. Cruze had seen both before. He looked from one to the other, back to the spur in his hand.

"Either of you lose it?" he asked.

The two stopped. "No."

They hesitated for a moment, staring at Cruze, and came to silent agreement. They turned away from the bar and went out. The two punchers left at the back table rose hurriedly after that and quit the saloon. Cruze finished his drink. Enough time had passed for word to have got around, he decided. He nodded to the barkeep and walked out again to the street.

Several men stood waiting together in front of the saloon now. There was settling dust in the street, horses that hadn't been there before at the rail by the store. Cruze saw Sheriff Ed Wilkins traveling up the near side of the street, trotting along with quick, hurried steps. At about twenty yards the sheriff wheeled from walk planks toward the front of the McDavitt office. Cruze called to him sharply, "Wilkins!"

Wilkins came to a halt on the stoop, glanced back and then quickly went in. Cruze followed him, noticing that the men in front of the saloon had moved along this way. Wilkins had had time to cross the room, putting Mike Rennes between him and the door, when Cruze entered. The three punchers who'd been in the saloon game were here, along with the two others he remembered. Rennes' big shoulders settled forward; he watched Cruze with a kind of glistening satisfaction in his opaque eyes.

The men were the same, the bare room no different. The same stale smell of sweat and old tobacco smoke was in the place—and only McDavitt was missing. But that meant a good deal. It meant that since last night Mike Rennes had gained power and control from inside over the McDavitt outfit. Rennes was running things now. These riders and the sheriff were behind him.

Rennes said softly, "You had your chance to ride last night, Cruze."

"And you expected me to take it?" Cruze asked.

"That would have been wise," Rennes murmured.

Cruze still held the spur by its broken

strap. He tossed it across to the sheriff. "And there, Wilkins, is your chance," he said. "Probably your last to prove you are in any way fit to wear that star on your suspender strap."

"Don't know what you're talkin' about," Wilkins mumbled.

"Sure you do. Jake Lebec's been killed. You know all about that raid last night and have made no move. Now there is the spur Lebec's killer wore and left behind in his hurry to get away. There it is for you to decide what you'll do, sheriff."

"Never seen it before."

"We're more interested," Rennes said, "in another shooting up on the rim yesterday. Some saddlebags that rider was carrying, Cruze. We're going to learn what you did with those bags. You're going to tell us."

"Think so?" Cruze asked.

Rennes reached and took a wad of Cruze's jumper in one big hand. "You made your play last night, Cruze. Since then a good deal has changed. You've gone too far and reached the end of your string. You'll talk right now—" Rennes yanked with his one hand, slashed at Cruze with his other fist.

THE WALL was behind Rennes. Cruze sheltered chin again his chest, took that blow on the side of his head. He shoved with bent legs and his chest, and drove knotted knuckles into Rennes' ribs. Rennes let go of his jumper and chopped low. One man was as big as the other. Rennes packed more weight in thick, bulging shoulders, but Cruze had rawhide sinew in him as well as size. They stood briefly toe to toe, faces almost together, and beat at each other with power-hammer blows that struck with dull, solid sounds.

It took the punchers that long to get into it. Now the beefy-faced man who'd been in the saloon raised the chair under him and crashed it apart on the floor. He stood up with a leg of the chair for a club and jumped at Cruze. Another rider moved faster, gun pulled from holster. He came in alongside the big table behind Cruze like a cat, on the toes of his boots. The gun rose in his hand and the barrel slashed down.

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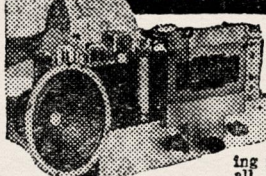


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It hit Cruze slantwise across the temple. His knees bent and Rennes' next blow lifted him and threw him backward at once, and his hands were down. Boots raised a sudden, scuffling racket on the floorboards, coming at him from both sides. His shoulders struck the edge of the big plank table, bounced from it. Cruze went down on his side, halfway under the table, his hands grabbing for something to hold onto. The beefy-faced puncher leaned over and struck at his body with the club. Another man yelled, "Get his gun—grab it!"

Those words reached Cruze through a savage, pain-thick fog and he rolled, got his holster under him. A boot caught him in the ribs. He turned over again on his face, under the table now, and pulled his gun. He raised himself up on hands and knees with his back against the table planks. Rennes dropped down, looking for him. Cruze fired at Rennes, knew he missed, and heaved up with all the strength in him against the table's top.

The table tilted and toppled over between him and Rennes. The lamp on the table crashed to the floor. There was another shot then, a brief flare of flame, and after that solid darkness. Cruze started crawling. The room was full of sound. The beefy-faced puncher shouted, "Don't anybody shoot—hold it!" Cruze reached the back wall, crawling. He stood up there, and felt blindly along the wall for the door to the lean-to, and collided with somebody in the darkness. Cruze struck with his gun and heard the other man stumble against the cold stove there.

There was an instant clattering racket as the stove-pipe to the ceiling came down. That started shooting inside the room, and through the noise of this Sheriff Ed Wilkins' thin voice screamed. It had been Wilkins standing there against the back wall. The door to the lean-to was right beyond. Cruze tramped over the sheriff and felt that open space in the wall, jumping for it. He turned his gun back on the room then. He shot four times and stumbled over the end of somebody's cot as he ran on across the lean-to which was used as a sleeping room. Nobody wanted to come in here after him, and that gave him time to find a latched screen door.

He knew at best he had only a moment.

He didn't think Wilkins had been hurt, but he'd heard somebody fall heavily in the room and thought another of his shots had hit. He could hear Rennes shouting orders and ran across a cluttered yard to a back fence. His hand when he put it on the fence was slippery and that made him realize he'd been hit. A gun started streaking behind as he clambered over. He fell down a three or four foot bank as he landed on the other side. He got to his feet, staggering.

He tried to climb up the farther bank of the gully with no time left and fell once more. After that all he could do was lie still. Four or five men came over the fence after him. There was rubbish in the gully; he heard their boots kicking among old cans and crates. They climbed the far side of the gully, started searching along it both ways. Cruze crawled again. Horses were moving in the street, and he heard hooves start away. Two or three men came back along bank of the gully and halted, listening. Cruze lay flat beside a heap of rubbish, face down. Somebody jumped into the gully, passed him. They went on.

Cruze followed the gully. Hooves quit the street and moved across before him into the road. That told him this was the same gully the road crossed as it entered town. His horse was still tied on the street—no way to get hold of the buckskin now. He reached the gravelly crossing, took his chances and, bent low, followed the gully across road. That brought him around behind the stageyard and the horses in corral there.

He left the deepening gully for an alley thick with dust, crawled under the bars of a gate. Dim light from the street filtered across this gloom. Against the side of a corral shed something moved. He threw the muzzle of his gun around fast, and then Judith Farland's voice reached him softly.

"Matt!" she said. "Matt, is that you?"

V

HE FOLLOWED HER ALONG—side the shed, past two empty stages and wagons drawn into the yard. The horses raised a low stamping from the corral. The Mexican hostler slipped from shadow and joined them, and Judith

whispered to the man in rapid Spanish. She led Cruze on across a space of open ground, through a gate in a picket fence and into the thick darkness of a vine-covered back porch. She opened a door into a kitchen and closed it after he was inside.

"They'll search the stageyard probably," she said. "I don't think they'll come here. Are you hurt?"

"No, not much," he answered.

She left him standing in the kitchen and moved through the house in the dark. Returning, she guided him on into a small sitting room where a lamp had been lighted and a blanket covered the window and its curtains. She turned to him in the lamplight. The bruise on his temple was a swelling lump and blood dripped from his left sleeve. She stared at that.

"Take off your jumper," she said, and went away again.

She came back with a tin basin and what was needed to tend the wound. He pulled out of the jumper and tore his shirt sleeve back. The bullet had cut a three- or four-inch furrow through flesh below the elbow, not deep. He'd shot his way out of a hole tonight, been lucky. The end was a little nearer; that was all. But now there'd be a steady hunt for him till this was finished.

He knew he couldn't stay here long. He watched the girl's bent head as she swabbed the cut with disinfectant and ripped a clean sheet into strips to bandage it. He noticed the dress she wore, the smooth and graceful line of her throat, the way lamplight looked in her dark and lustrous hair.

He said, "How long ago was it, Judith, that John Blaise disappeared?"

She shook her bent head. "There's nothing you can do. I've told you that. Doesn't tonight prove it to you?"

"No. You must have some idea what happened, Judith. I want to know what it is. There isn't much time."

She raised her face. "They have a sort of raft that's used for a ferry up on the river. That's the way McDavitt and his riders go back and forth to the ranch on the rim. Five or six months ago the cable parted and the raft was swept away. It has been repaired and they still use the same



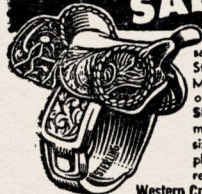
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look for the bulls-eye

crossing. But John Blaise was never seen here again after that day."

"Where did the cable break—out in stream or close to bank?"

"I don't know. They spliced it and built a new raft. John Blaise is gone, nothing has changed. Nothing ever will change here. Four years ago my own father tried his hand at it with a lease on the Serrano land. Before that there were others, fighting among themselves. Before them, the Serranos and Jamez in the hills. It's no use, Matt. Go away before it is too late. There's a horse for you in the corral."

He was silent for a while. "More has happened than you realize, Judith," he said finally. "Jake Lebec is no longer in this. McDavitt himself doesn't count—not in the same way he did. Mike Rennes has got control of the whole thing—Rennes and the sheriff. But there are some big cracks underneath. They can be opened wider."

"And then what?"

He got up and moved about the room. "Look at me, Judith," he said. "I don't need to repeat my history to you. I've fought too many fights for other men, for hire. But John Blaise had another kind of idea. Somehow in the end he made me see it; after a time that idea took root. Once in his life a man needs to fight for something he believes in. That's why I'm here."

"The bank that now owns title to the Serrano land put a little money behind John Blaise," he continued. "Not much. They're cautious people, these bankers, and they know what they're up against in here. In the past McDavitt has always fought and taken what he wanted of the valley, grass, and Jake Lebec got the rest. Together they've beat off any newcomer. Now Mike Rennes has pushed himself up into McDavitt's boots, ready to grab all he can. This old sheriff will back the winner; that's how he's managed to keep himself in office. That's how it's always worked."

Cruze shook his head. "But if things were settled, the bank stands ready and willing to ditch that water out and go ahead with the rest of it, selling the land off as it's developed. That would mean what Blaise always saw in that valley. It

would mean the end of all this other—and it's that close. I need that horse from corral. But I'm in this to the finish. This is a fight worth the winning, Judith—or the losing if that must be."

ORRIE LEBEC stood on the steep slope above and knew Cruze was still down there in the town. Orrie had picked up the thread of Cruze's dust on the ridge trail at sundown and followed him here. He'd lost sight of Cruze for a while in the dusk; then from the hill above saw him leave the buckskin on the street. Up above the level of the town's roofs, close enough to see everything that happened on the street, he had had a grandstand view of the fight in the McDavitt office.

Orrie wasn't trying to figure out reasons for that or what had brought it on. Orrie was thinking of Jake Lebec—a hard man, tough and violent and hardest of all on his own son, but that made no difference. Jake was dead now; tomorrow they'd be burying him. All day long Orrie had lived over his humiliation at Cruze's hands in front of the girl he loved, remembering how easily Cruze had handled him and had his own orders obeyed. The worst was the way Rose had looked at him, the things he'd heard her say.

Half-mad with grief and his own inability to stand up against Cruze, Orrie had decided what he had to do. He'd been hopeful as long as the fight below lasted that some other's bullet would do the job for him. But he knew now, watching the hunt spread through the town, that it hadn't turned out that way.

Orrie left his cover and climbed back up slope to his horse, and drifted along the hillside. After a time he dropped to the flats of the bend and circled the town at a distance, halting presently off in the night to the rear of the stageyard. This was pure chance and the best place he could think of to wait. A good deal of time passed before he heard a horse being led toward him through the near timber.

He couldn't see much. He heard the Mexican hostler's low voice, and then the horse was mounted and moved off toward the river. But the Mexican hostler remained where he was for several moments, and Orrie wanted no trouble with him. By the time the hostler had turned back to

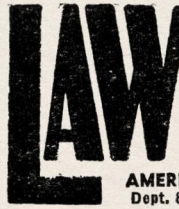
the stageyard, Orrie could no longer hear the ridden horse. He cut off to the road, but realized Cruze wouldn't be following it. The nearer he got to the river and all that noise pouring out of the upland fork, the less chance he had of locating Cruze.

To Orrie it seemed that he'd simply failed again, and was as useless as old Jake had ever said he was. But he had an intimate knowledge of this country and its trails and when he'd finally convinced himself that Cruze had not headed off around bend, he crossed to the other side of the road. The bridge would be blocked and he didn't think Cruze would try that. Finally Orrie got down in the dark and struck a match which was dangerous, but here were the tracks.

After that Orrie took his time. The trail climbed steeply up around the fork; the river noise became a pounding tumult off to the side, below him. His mount clattered and slipped on rocky footing, and then struck the easier going up above. Cruze couldn't turn or leave this trail and Orrie planned how it was going to happen now, and the only danger was that he'd ride too fast and run on Cruze too soon. Nothing less than a gunshot at close quarters could be heard above the river's booming.


Finally the canyon began to broaden out ahead. The trail cut down around a sloping ridge to the water's edge, and Orrie began to hurry. But Cruze hadn't had time to cross. In the dark there along the riverbank a match flared. Orrie saw him plainly, and now he had a new cool grip on himself. He got off his horse, tied the animal and walked toward the spot where he'd seen the flare. Cruze struck another match, and Orrie realized then what had brought Cruze up this trail to-night.

By matchlight he was examining the cable fastenings on bank. A brief shiver went through Orrie, standing with his gun in hand, remembering something else. He had a perfect view of Cruze, the light from the match on his chest and face. Orrie raised his gun and held it on the other man. He walked a little nearer with the noise of the river echoing back up the canyon, covering any sound. Orrie clenched his teeth together. He raised his left hand and held the gun steady with both. The



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match burned out and Cruze struck another—and with a sob of helpless rage Orrie realized he couldn't do it like this.

He could dimly see Cruze moving away, down to the log landing where the raft on its cable came to bank. The raft was on the other side and Cruze started hauling on the rope which pulled it across. Orrie walked down to the landing behind him. He came up close to Cruze and could have struck with his gun now and knocked him off the landing. Instead Orrie yelled, "Turn around and draw, you!"

That was the way he had to do it; he'd forgotten how fast this man could move. Cruze whirled and lashed around with an arm. That arm hit Orrie and threw his shot high. One heel caught and Orrie tumbled backward. In that instant there was nothing under him—only black water as he fell.

Orrie gasped as he went under, and took a gulp of water. He could swim a little and he was only eight or ten feet from bank. But the water was deep. He floundered and thrashed and felt the current beginning to tug gently at him. Cruze stepped on bank and shouted to him, searching for something to reach him with. There was nothing at hand. Cruze started to wade in and the bank rocks gave way suddenly under him. Cruze began to swim toward the man in the water.

Orrie was moving off farther now, drifting along faster, still beating at the water. Cruze reached him with no difficulty. He'd gone into the river with his gun at hip and Cruze jammed it down hard into holster, afraid he'd lose it. Orrie clawed and grabbed at him. Cruze wedged Orrie's head in an elbow, rolled and fought toward bank with a strong backstroke. The weight of his boots dragged at him, and the gun. The bank was still not far distant. In the dark he could not see the increasing speed of their drift, but he could feel the current pulling with new strength. Alone he could still have accomplished it easily and he thought of that—and kept on slicing at the water, hanging onto Orrie.

He was breathing heavily, gasping for air. Orrie had ceased to struggle and that helped, but by this time Cruze realized the current was sucking them out into

mid-stream. He turned and went with it, hoping that the next bend before they went into the rushing torrent below would throw them against the opposite bank. A mane of water rose and tossed them. He still had hold of Orrie, straining every effort just to keep them afloat. Cruze had one glimpse of stars above between black walls that were rushing past.

The water threw them, tore at them with an awful force. They rolled in a smother of foam, and shot downward into churning fury. The water picked them up again; Cruze tried to pull one last sweet gulp of air into lungs. The noise was a deafening, pounding roar about him of which he had no consciousness now. His one hand touched smooth rock in a slow whirl below. He clawed at it and was torn past. The water pulled them on into new black, tumbling chaos—and he still clutched a handful of the other man's clothing. That was useless; neither of them had any chance in this. He realized they were traveling with the speed of an express train with the water bucking, slamming, pitching them wildly from side to side among massive boulders. This went on and on. Cruze lost all count of time, all feeling. He only fought now instinctively for a gasp of air before he finally went under and stayed there.

It still seemed to him he was in the midst of that. But now his knees grated on something and he tried to hook his toes into gravel and was pulled on. He waited for the next violent rush of water; the side of his body came against some solid object, slowly, and was held there. He breathed air again with lungs bursting and found slippery footing. He crawled and dragged the other man up over a clutter of broken driftwood and collapsed.

VI

IT WAS AS COLD and miserable a dawn as Cruze had ever looked on. Gray, shadowless light seeped into the river's canyon. His clothing was stuck to him, gritty with sand. He was shaking with cold; the wound in his arm had stiffened and pained. Cruze had worked over the man he'd pulled from the river for a long while in the night, till he had him breathing steadily. But until he saw him

now, Cruze hadn't been sure who the man was. With matches soaked there'd been no way to strike a light or get a fire going.

Orrie sat huddled against a drift log in the chill half-light, his eyes open and fixed on Cruze, his face streaked with mud and the color of putty. They watched each other while the light grew stronger. Cruze stamped about trying to warm himself. He still had the gun he'd jammed hard into holster—still at his hip. He squatted down beside Orrie presently, and raised his voice against the river's noise.

"All right," Cruze said. "Suppose you tell me what you were doing up there at the crossing last night."

Orrie shook his head from side to side numbly. His lips were white and pinched. "Followed you," he answered.

Cruze watched his face. "So you followed me. That means you saw what I was looking for up there by matchlight—that have anything to do with it? I want to know."

Orrie's eyes shifted away. He shook his head again.

"Come on," Cruze said. "I want to know. The end of that old cable shows it was chopped off close against the anchor stump that once held it. The new cable's been spliced and fastened to a tree above. What do you know about it? You have any hand in that, Orrie?"

Orrie's face got even whiter under tan and the wash of mud on him. "No. No, but I seen it," he mumbled.

Cruze leaned closer. "You seen what, Orrie?"

"I was over on the far side, comin' down trail from the topland," Orrie said. "Five-six months ago. Rennes had been workin' on the landing with an axe. When I was about halfway down trail, I noticed the raft had started across. About that time Rennes grabbed up his axe, jumped up bank and swung three or four times on the cable. The raft was out in mid-stream by then with the man on it pullin' himself an' mount across—"

Cruze didn't need to ask who the man on the raft had been. This was about what he'd figured had happened. He said, "Get on with it!"

"From above I seen the raft smash to

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pieces on them first rocks," Orrie continued. "I know I'd seen too much and turned back up trail in a hurry. But Rennes had already noticed me. It's some distance around the other way into the valley. Time I started down, Rennes was waitin' for me over there." Orrie's face twitched. "He knocked me from saddle an' give me a whippin' with the barrel of his gun, and promised what would happen if I ever did any talkin'."

"So you never did?"

"Jake had flocks in the valley at the time. He was as much against Blaise as any man," Orrie explained. "No, I never said anything. But Rennes afterward never missed a chance to show me who he was and what would happen if I forgot. When I couldn't stand it no longer, I went after him one day in town with a gun. But Rennes got it from me easy and the same thing happened again. After that Jake never had no use for me and made it plain. I guess you noticed that the other night."

Cruze nodded silently.

"That didn't matter so much. It's mostly Rose." Orrie hoisted himself up against the log at his back, and looked at Cruze steadily. "I don't remember much after that first rush of black water. I know you saved my life. You went in after me after I'd meant to kill you. I don't know why you bothered. But, mister, you can't have Rose."

Cruze stared at him. "You're pretty bad mixed up in your thinking, Orrie. I told Jake I wanted nothing from him and that goes for you. It includes Rose—not that I wasn't able to see how pretty she is. But those sheep have got to stay back in the hills."

"I don't understand you or what you're after," Orrie muttered. "But that's where the sheep always belonged. It was another point between Jake an' me. He lost more sheep fightin' in the valley than the grass was ever worth to him. I don't know why I crossed you about that yesterday morning."

"I know why you crossed me, Orrie," Cruze said. "Because of Rose. I did what I had to do, but think about that a minute. From the time Rose first talked to me in Blaise's cabin everything she said to me or did was aimed around at you. She

made sure you were watching or would overhear. Orrie, a woman just don't go to so much trouble to hurt a man she cares nothing about. Think it over. It ought to show you where you stand. . . . Now have you any idea how we can get out of this spot?"

"Yeah, I've looked down from above. I think we can climb up through the rocks on this side."

EARLY SUNLIGHT touched the Soldier Peaks, lighting those far rocky heads with a ruddy glow, while they climbed up through the rocks from one shelf of the canyon wall to the next. This was treacherous going where the grip of one man's hand on the other's meant the difference between safety on the next ledge above or disaster down below. Both were weak, still numb with cold. Cruze boosted Orrie up a rocky face to an edge above.

"Last night," Cruze said. "Why did you have to come out on the landing after me? You had a better chance than that."

Orrie flattened out on the ledge above and now reached down a hand. Cruze's boots scraped at the rock; he hung out over space and Orrie hauled him up. "Couldn't do it that way," Orrie panted. "Don't know why."

Cruze rested on the ledge. "About that spur," he said. "Rennes was behind that raid, and there are good reasons why he might have tried that shot at me through the window. That's the way I believe it happened. Think that over, too."

Orrie muttered, "I been thinkin'. There's a rifle in scabbard on my horse. I took time to tie him so my horse is still there at the crossin'."

Morning sunlight hit the westerly rim of the canyon where they now climbed up to the trail. Early smokes lifted from pipes and chimneys of the town and formed a gray, drifting layer that reached across the bend. Sunlight struck the bridge there in the distance, streaked up the other fork. The stage that left for Ransom Springs at half-past five each morning threw up its small billows of dust from the road. Orrie turned away.

"Wait a minute," Cruze said. "It's my fight, Orrie. If Mike Rennes wins it or if I have my way, there'll be no more range in the valley for sheep."

You owe me nothing. Keep out of it is my advice to you. There's also Rose to consider—"

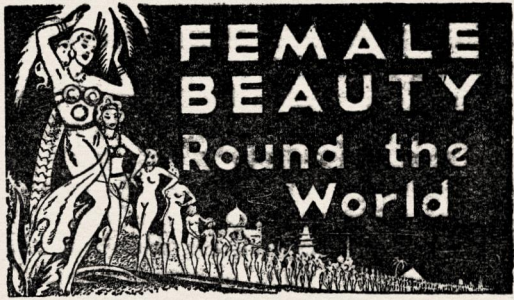
"I been thinkin' about Rose," Orrie said. "And also about myself an' old Jake. . . ." His mouth got the stubborn look and he went on along the trail toward the crossing.

Cruze watched two guards stop the stage in the distance at the bridge. He cleaned his gun as best he could with a twig and a piece of half-dry rag torn from his shirt, and wondered how thin Mike Rennes had his men spread out this morning. He left the rocks then, following the steep trail down. In a way he could see it now as John Blaise always had—the river leaving the upland canyon in a last boiling fury, caught there above the bridge and turned into a man-made channel, tamed and flowing on to water all that land. Tamed from the killer it was into something useful and good, and the land that had known so much bloody conflict tamed, too.

He picked his way from one scattered clump of timber to the next across the bend, crossed the ruts of the road to the pass and angled around to come into the town from the west. Shadow from the curve of the bend still lay across this ground. When he turned and looked back, he could see the dust of a horseman coming down the steep canyonside trail he had left. Cruze paused for a time, waiting to see which way Orrie would go—now that he'd had time to think it over. But that thin dust disappeared, the scattered pines across the fork blocked it off and in the end he could not tell.

He walked into town at the far end of the street, cut between two buildings here and moved along to the back of the hotel with the steep hillside at his right. A clatter came from the hotel's kitchen in the rear. Cruze let himself in there through a screen door. Busy with his pans and skillets at the big hotel range, a gnarled old Negro turned his curly head, and mumbled, "Git out heah! Doan feed nobody at de back dooh."

Cruze put a coin from his damp pocket down on a table and filled a coffee cup from the pot on the range. "Not dressed for the dining room this morning," he



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explained. "Know if McDavitt stayed at the hotel last night?"

The Negro reached for the coin. "Sho. McDavitt he been livin' at de hotel lately. End room down de hall above. Dem's de back stairs yo' see outside." He turned back to the stove, dropped the skillet he lifted. "Hey!" he said, the whites of his eyes rolling. "Ain't yo' de man dey wantin' bad?"

CRUZE went back through the screen door, climbed the flight of rickety outside stairs to the floor above. The door at the end of the upper hall was opened by a lank puncher he had never seen before. McDavitt looked past the puncher from inside the room, surprise on his face for an instant. Lines of strain were cut deeply into that face; his eyes had a sunken, hollow look. Then the old steel-trap mouth tightened up.

"Let him in, Jim," he told the puncher. He watched Cruze come into the room. "Yesterday nothing could have forced me to deal with you," McDavitt said. "But things have changed since then. What is your proposition, Cruze?"

"No proposition," Cruze said. "I just want to get this thing straight beyond mistake. You took Mike Rennes in on your side some while ago when you needed help. Now Mike Rennes has got control of your own outfit, McDavitt. You pay the wages, but he's picked the crew. The sheriff is his man if things swing that way. Night before last Rennes felt strong enough to raid the Lebec ranch. He's finally ready to tell you what to do and step into your boots, McDavitt. That's about it."

McDavitt stared at him, not saying anything. Cruze walked over to the bureau in the room and studied the photograph of a young man there. It wasn't a very good photograph, but he could see the resemblance between father and son.

"Your boy," he said to McDavitt, no question in his voice.

"My son Will," McDavitt stated.

"Been away some while—off on business maybe?"

"That doesn't concern you," McDavitt snapped.

"A fine-looking lad." Cruze kept looking at the photograph, and his mouth got

stiff and tight like McDavitt's. "I'm wondering if you didn't ship some cattle from Ransom Springs a while back," Cruze said. "Did your boy go east with that stock, McDavitt?"

McDavitt growled, "Yes. What about it?"

"I think your boy, Will, was headed home with some money you needed bad a couple of days ago," Cruze said. "He'd got into Ransom Springs before expected. But he was cautious. He knew how far Rennes' ambition reached. He hired a livery stable horse there and cut across the short way from the rim."

Cruze looked down from window into the street. Across at the stage office Rose Trevis slipped from her pony and went inside, and he watched for a silent moment, hoping he'd see Judith. He heard a man run past along the walk planks below.

McDavitt muttered hoarsely, "Go on with what you're saying—"

Cruze whirled around. "Your money is in a pair of saddlebags where I buried the bags under a heap of rubble upon the bluffs. Your son is dead, McDavitt."

McDavitt took a slow backward step, coming against the footrail of his hotel bed. The lines got deeper in his face, color drained away under the skin. The puncher standing across room pulled his gun uncertainly. Cruze's glance was contemptuous on him.

"Don't be a fool!" he said. "Would I be telling you this if I'd had a hand in it?"

McDavitt raised his head. "Tell me the rest of it."

"You've feared just this ever since you heard a rider had been killed on the rim," Cruze said. "There must have been a leak somewhere. Mike Rennes and another rider were waiting for him up on the rim that day. I can show you where Will's body lies, because I dragged him into that shelter as he died. It's right across a bare ridge of rock from where the hunt after me started. No doubt Mike Rennes could have used the money."

There was no sound in the room now, no sound from the street below. No reason to linger here longer, watching this hard old cowman with the steel-trap mouth going to pieces before his eyes with the lone puncher McDavitt still seemingly

trusted standing by. Cruze walked across the room.

"I know the ridge you mean," the puncher said.

Cruze nodded and went on out into the hall. He walked down the main staircase to the lobby below—as once before he had come down those stairs—and stepped out on the front veranda. He knew word had reached Rennes by this time. The looks of the street told him that. A rider swerved in from the road at a gallop, caught sight of Cruze on the veranda and pulled up his horse sharply.

"Go tell Mike Rennes I want to see him," Cruze called over to the rider. "Tell him I'm waiting!"

The rider started his horse on at a run, stopped in front of the McDavitt office up street. Men who had been in the hotel dining room crowded into the lobby suddenly; Cruze heard the vague shuffle of their boots through the doorway behind him. He did not turn. He could see the stone front of the sheriff's building on this side of the street from the veranda, Wikins' face and the heads of two or three others thrust into view from the doorway. No one had appeared from the McDavitt office since the rider went in.

But Rennes would come. Mike Rennes had perhaps eight or ten men on the McDavitt payroll who were willing and ready to take his orders. Some of those men had been in that vicious, black fight in the office room last night; all had taken part in the hunt for Cruze. Now Cruze stood on the hotel veranda, putting down his challenge along the street. Mike Rennes had to come to keep the respect of those riders behind him. If he didn't, sooner or later one of his own men would rise to challenge Rennes. Top dog had to stay on top.

HAZE of the rider's settling dust still lingered in the street, caught now in the first slant streaks of sunlight over the bend into the town. In the little stage office across street, Rose Trevis reached the window and raised her hands against the glass. Judith stood by the corner desk, and tried twice before words finally came, and she said, "Rose, is it—was that Matt Cruze's voice?"

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"Yes," Rose answered from the window. "Yes, it's Matt. He's standing over on the hotel veranda—alone. Now he's coming down the steps. Judith, come here. He—he's magnificent!" She couldn't pull her eyes from the window long. She gasped, "But what—what is Orrie doing there in the street?"

She turned and ran toward the street door and Judith, moving swiftly, caught her inside the doorway. "No, Rose! There's nothing either of us can do now."

"But Orrie—Orrie's no gun-fighter. He'll get himself killed." Rose buried her face against Judith. "Oh, I've always been so mean to him," she sobbed. "I don't know why because—because I love Orrie."

"Anybody except Orrie would have known that long ago," Judith said.

Orrie had stepped from saddle and pulled his rifle from scabbard. He ducked under a hitch rail by the hotel and put his boots on the walk planks there. Cruze had started angling out across dust of the street now. Orrie's legs felt wooden under him; the rifle in his hands no longer seemed real. His heart beat with an awful throbbing in his throat, threatening to choke him. This wasn't his fight, like Cruze had said. He knew it was, thinking of old Jake, but his step faltered. All he had to do was turn and get off the street in a hurry. There was still time for that. He didn't want to die.

Life had never seemed so precious to Orrie suddenly. He walked on on his wooden legs with the rifle in his hands. Four or five men stood out in front of the sheriff's office, all armed. Orrie came up even with the end corner of the hotel building. There was a vacant lot between him and the sheriff's office on this side. Across from him he saw a puncher wheel into view from back of the general store, moving up toward the edge of the street on that side with quick steps, fingers hooked in air over holster. It was the beefy-faced rider who'd been in last night's battle.

Rennes, coming from the McDavitt office, was out in the middle of the street by this time, walking toward Matt Cruze. About twenty yards of street dust separated them. Mike Rennes' big shoulders hunched forward a little. He took each step carefully, weight balanced on his

toes. He looked like a heavyweight boxer, the same lithe, powerful grace in him. His right hand lifted a few inches, even with the butt of gun at his hip. . . . Fifteen yards now, that distance closing. There was an unbearable tension on the street . . . Twelve yards . . . ten. . . . This was an old gun-fighter's trick to break the other's nerve. Both of these men knew all the tricks.

RENNES stopped, boots planted apart in the dust. "Too bad," he murmured, "that we couldn't somehow have got together on this deal, Cruze."

"I don't think so," Cruze said. "I have a few scruples left. Draw anytime you're ready!"

Cruze came on with the same unhurried stride. Another two paces . . . three. The slant sunlight was behind Rennes. That had given Rennes advantage from the start. But now Cruze could see his opaque eyes, the tiny bright flames glowing there. He was fighting more than one man on this street, and that knowledge had been with Cruze all the way. He had to beat this man before him and knock him down and end it before these other guns started. He knew Orrie was behind him, and that puncher coming up fast alongside the store building to his left.

But all his attention was fixed on Rennes, concentrated on the man before him and nothing else. He watched Rennes' eyes, not his lifted hand, in those last few steps.

The puncher reached the curb by the store building, to the side and slightly behind Cruze. Ed Wilkins stood slack in the doorway of the sheriff's office, certain as to what the outcome of this would be, and in some unpredictable way Wilkins served as leader of the several men beside him. This was not respect for the sheriff, but the star on Wilkins' suspender strap still represented authority of a sort.

Mike Rennes went for his gun then with a driving thrust of hand that pulled weapon, threw it up with a single sweeping motion. Cruze's muzzle cleared holster. There was no perceptible space between those shots; they hit the street at once with a solid roar of sound. Rennes' eyes changed. Rennes started a staggering backward step while the noise still

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slammed at eardrums. Cruze fired again and some massive vitality in the man kept Rennes on his feet, and the thing Cruze had known he must accomplish slipped from his grasp.

The beefy-faced puncher at the curb went for his gun, throwing it into line. Cruze heard that shot. Two men in front of the sheriff's office were drawing. Cruze whirled. The noise of Orrie's rifle tore along street now. This was all coming at once, built up during past days and long before that over the disputed valley, bursting on the street in these instants with a wild raging fury. Cruze saw the beefy-faced puncher spilling to his knees before he fired. Two more guns opened from the sheriff's office. Cruze fanned hammer. The sound of Orrie's rifle reached his ears once more. Orrie was in this to the finish, backing him all the way.

A man went down beside the sheriff, clutching at the rough stone front of the building. Still Sheriff Ed Wilkins made no move. Wilkins was knocked aside by another rider seeking shelter of the doorway. But all Wilkins saw was Mike Rennes' sagging legs bending, letting him fall just now. Rennes sprawled on hands and knees in the dust with his gun under him. All along Sheriff Ed Wilkins had bet on Rennes against this newcomer or McDavitt or anybody else—and now both had lost.

Echoes still lingered in the back hills, volleyed back and forth. But the street was suddenly silent. The rifle started shaking in Orrie's hands since it was all over now.

"Wilkins," Cruze called across to the sheriff, "be gone from this town before evening. There'll be some others who'd best travel along with you."

Sheriff Wilkins nodded, still staring at Rennes down in the street. This town that had seen so many disputes fought out but never settled along its short street swarmed once more with movement. The excited shouts of townsmen lifted across back lots. Men crowded from the hotel lobby to the veranda, hurried down steps

to the street. But Rose Travis was ahead of them, running up street now toward Orrie.

MATT CRUZE entered the little stage office from the street an hour later. There was no one inside. He crossed to the rear doorway and stepped out into the stageyard, thinking that this was the way he'd come to form his first acquaintance with the town. The buckskin was missing from the rail across street where the animal had stood tied all night, and he saw Judith holding the horse by a halter rope at the corral's water trough now. She heard him as he approached and raised dark eyes to his.

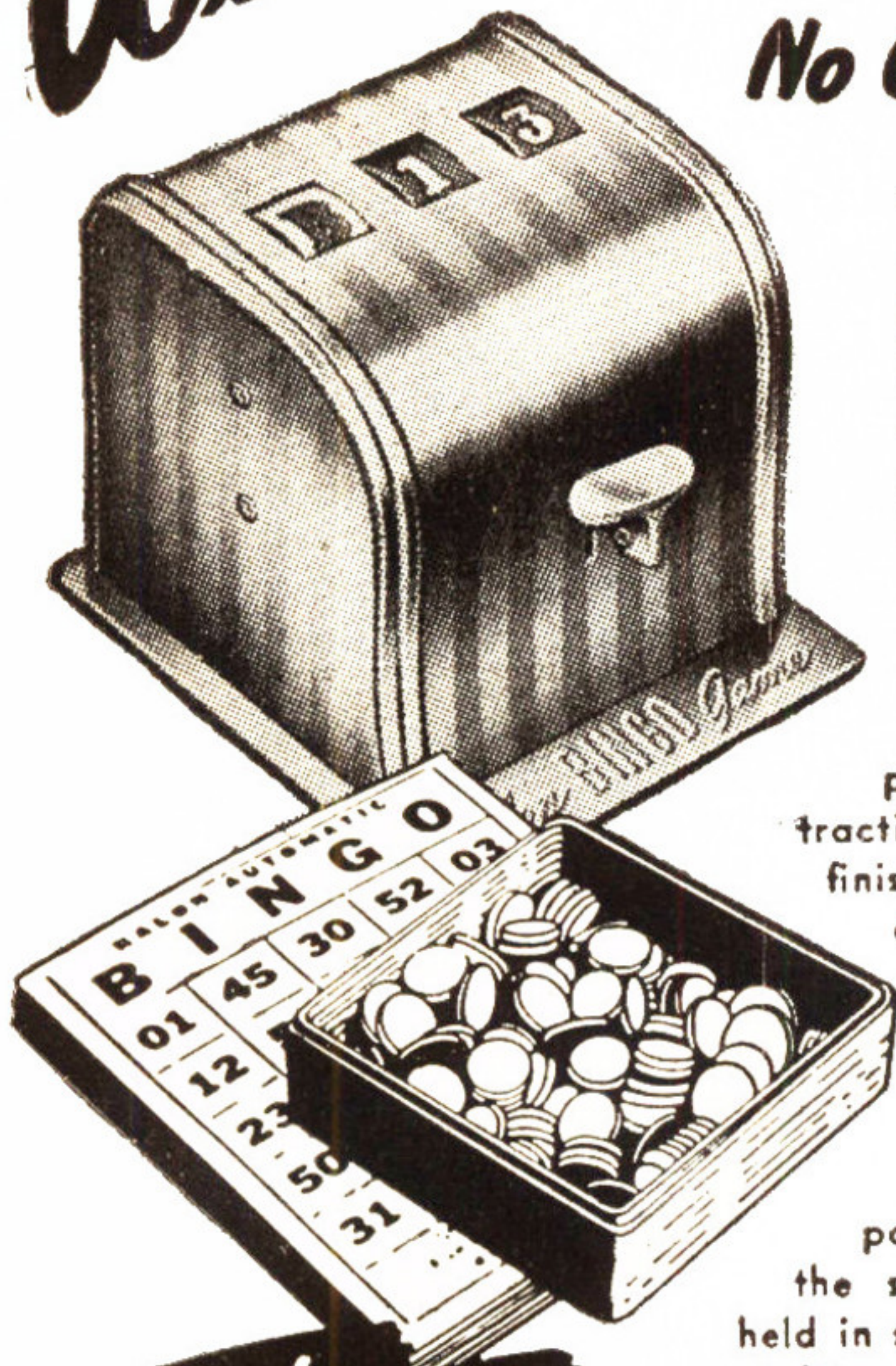
"So now you're ready to go and have come for your horse, is that it, Matt?" she said to him.

A breeze was stirring around the bend, carrying with it the smell of the valley grassland and the high desert out beyond and the dust of trails that led away Cruze knew not where. It had been like this before. He stayed till the end as she knew, but when a job was finished and done he was through with it and those trails called. She'd read that much of his character correctly.

"Now that all the excitement is over you're ready to drift again," she continued when he made no reply. "It doesn't matter to you that what has happened now means only the start of another bigger job. You've found nothing here to keep you, is that it, Matt?" She turned away from him quickly.

He reached and took hold of her shoulders. "No," he said. "No, I've found you, Judith—that's been my hope." He'd been schooled by misfortune to take its blows as they fell and expect little else, and this had not prepared him for the way she came into his arms then, suddenly, with her face lifted. He bent his head and held her so with the old loneliness gone from him for the first time in years, and added presently, "Water will look fine in that valley. I can see it now myself like John Blaise always did."

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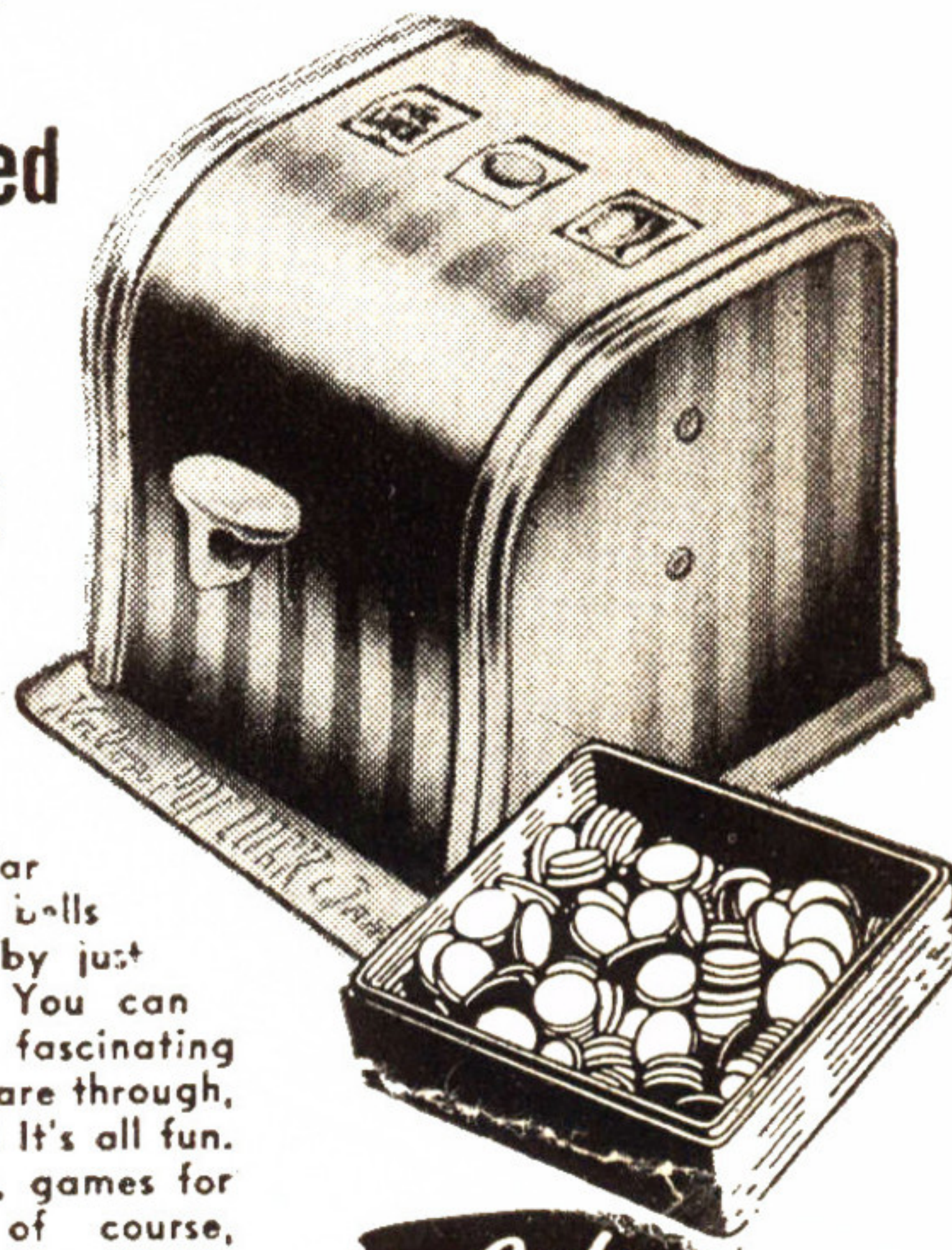
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