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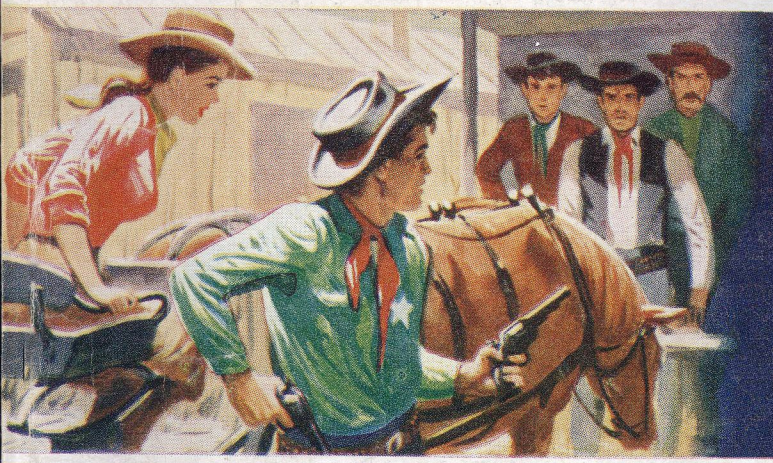
TRIPLE WESTERN

THREE NOVELS IN ONE MAGAZINE

WANTED MEN CAN'T MARRY

THE OUTLAW COLONEL

by Walker A. Tompkins



HE LOVED A BADMAN'S WIFE

LAWMAN

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GO AWAY, BOY, SHE'S A MORMON

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CLUE No. 1: THE "HOOSIER" STATE.

You will see there are a SINK, a DIAL, the SOLE of a shoe and various letters of the alphabet. There are two plus and two minus signs. It is necessary to add and subtract, the names and letters as shown by the plus and minus signs. First, write down SINK. Then, add DIAL to it. Next, add ONEA. All this equals SINKDIALONEA. Now, you must subtract the letters in SOLE and K. When this is done you are left with INDIANA. Indiana is the Hoosier State, so the result checks with Clue No. 1.

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THREE WESTERN ACTION NOVELS

TRIPLE WESTERN

VOL. 15, NO. 3 A THRILLING PUBLICATION SPRING, 1955

JIM HENDRYX, JR., Editor

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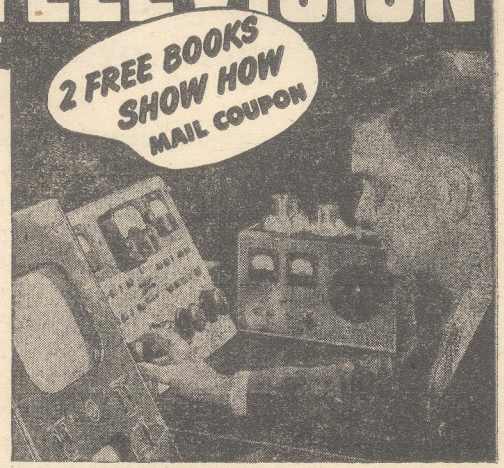

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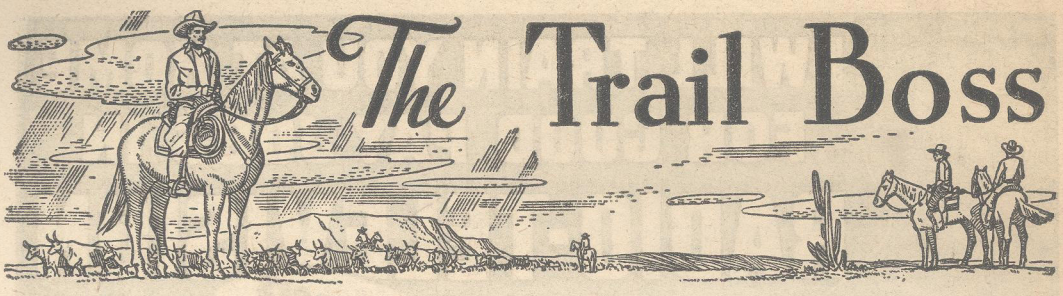


The Trail Boss

EDDIE FOY, COWTOWN COMEDIAN

By Alfred Farmer

IT WAS the spring of 1878 and Eddie Foy was working his way west. The funny man who was to be hailed as the most famous comedian on the big-time circuit was making one-night stands in dance halls, saloons, and honky-tonk joints where he performed his songs and dances before the rough and ready mobs that came to drink and gamble and watch the show.

At the same time Dodge City was making its biggest splash as the wickedest city, a rip-roaring, wide-open cattle town where gunfighting, liquor, gambling, and vice set the pace. An Eastern editor called it "the beautiful, bibulous Babylon of the West."

Dodge's most famous citizens were Sheriff Bat Masterson, Marshal Wyatt Earp, gunfighting gamblers Doc Holliday and Ben Thompson, and man-killer Clay Allison, each of whom shot his way into the pages of history with a smoking sixgun in one hand, a deck of cards or a bottle of whiskey in the other, and a go-to-hell attitude that set these men just a shade above the rest of the crowd that made up the population of this Kansas hot spot.

The story is told of the drunken cowboy who boarded the train in Kansas and flopped on a seat.

"Where to?" asked the conductor.

"Going to hell," was the cowboy's answer.

"Gimme two dollars and git off at Dodge City."

This was the Dodge City that Eddie Foy pulled into in the summer of '78. As the train passed the huge mound of buffalo bones piled up along the tracks, Foy's eyes bulged. He nudged his partner and gasped, "I knew there was a lot of men killed here, but I thought they at least took time to bury 'em."

Foy's reception in "Springer's Place," a combination gambling hall and saloon, wasn't exactly cordial. In fact it was downright hostile as the brash New Yorker strutted about the stage, cracking jokes about the cowboys and creating the impression of a smart-Alec Easterner showing up the prairie rubes.

The next morning Foy was greeted by a reception of the town's toughs who had decided to get back at the wise-guy actor from the big town. The reception started by dunking Eddie in a horse trough, and then the proceedings got real lively when some of the more offended cowboys threw a rope over a limb and slipped the noose around the unhappy comedian's neck. At this point Sheriff Masterson rode up and "rescued" Eddie, who started breathing again when he decided the boys were just having some good, clean, Western fun.

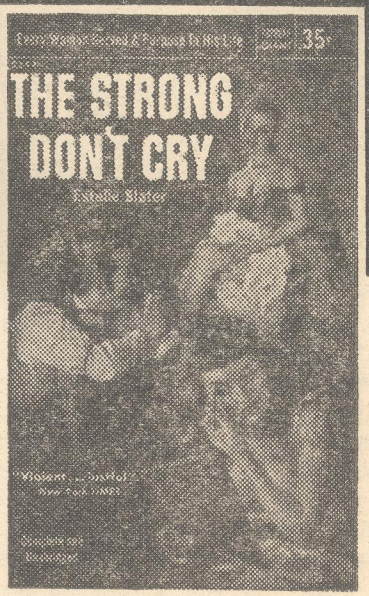
In the following days Foy completely won over the cowboys. His good nature and easy acceptance of the ever-present pranks of the rough hewn plainsmen soon made him the favorite of the Dodge City night-life set. The cattle capital claimed him as its favorite and the cowboys flocked to the show houses where Foy was the attraction. Dodge City was the turning point in Foy's career and from here his star began to ascend till it reached the heights of nationwide acclaim.

While Eddie was later to be the toast of Broadway, it's doubtful if the Big City ever gave him as many exciting moments as did

(Continued on page 8)

"WHEN I MARRIED HIM I WAS DRAGGED TO HIS DEPTHS..."

My husband had
big-shot ambitions.
But deep-inside he was only a
cheap, small-time gambler."



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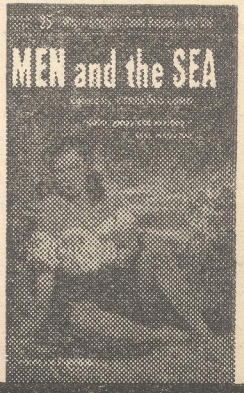

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the Queen of the Cowtowns. For example there was the time when Ben Thompson, the Texas badman, who sported a pair of well-notched six shooters, barged into Foy's dressing room with a load of whiskey under his belt and his ever-ready Colt in shooting position.

"Duck your head, funny man," growled the gunman, "I'm shooting out that light right behind where your head is now."

Foy sat paralyzed, too frightened to move as the well-loaded gunman continued to point a weaving pistol at the comedian's head. Just at that moment, Bat Masterson, who if he wasn't already Eddie's best friend, was now, broke in and talked the sixgun sharpshooter into going somewhere else for his target practise. Foy went on stage for the next act minus make-up, his fingers trembling too much to put on grease paint.

On another occasion Eddie was on stage before a packed house that included Wyatt Earp, the gunfighting marshal, who wasn't exactly popular with some of the rougher elements in town. Some of this element, standing outside in the street, decided this was a good time to ride Dodge of a pesky marshal and began blazing away through a window.

Before the sound of the first shot had died the entire audience had flattened out on the floor while Foy was still doing his dance. Eddie, either a little slow to catch on to this Western custom or else scared stiff, suddenly got the idea with lead whistling all about and hit the floor with a thud where he hugged the boards until told the fracas was all over. In the meantime, Earp had dashed outside, shot one of the gunmen, and had come back to catch the rest of the show.

Foy was even honored by being asked to join a gang of the Dodge City boys who were going off to Colorado to do battle with the Denver and Rio Grande bunch. It happened when the Santa Fe and D & RG were quarreling over the right of way for tracks to Leadville, Colorado, then a booming mining town, and each railroad was recruiting a private army to settle the issue. Dodge City, being a Santa Fe town, was sending off twenty of its best gun slingers who were to be paid three dollars a day for doing or dying for the old Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe.

Doc Holliday, the leader of the army of the Santa Fe, put the question to Eddie.

"I don't even know how to shoot a gun," protested Foy, "I'm an actor, not a gun fighter."

"Nothing to it," answered Doc, "You can use my shotgun. All you have to do is point 'er in the right direction and let 'er go."

In spite of the honor accorded him, Foy begged off. If the Dodge City gun fighters were disappointed in not having the popular comedian in their ranks when they marched off to the wars, they were doubly disappointed when the two railroads got together and settled the problem amicably, writing finis to what looked like the beginning of a first rate scrap.

Another time Foy was pressed into service as a deputy and rode off with a posse in pursuit of some liquored-up Indians who had topped off their celebrating by separating a local farmer from the top of his head. The Redskins were found sleeping off the effects in the sun and were captured without a shot being fired, thus preserving Eddie's record of non-violence in a violent town.

The one time Foy was the object of a man with a pistol, his opponent was a wise choice. It seems that Eddie and another Eastern actor were making eyes at the same girl. The actor, not thriving on competition, went gunning for Eddie in the accepted Western style. Cornering Foy in his room, the would-be gun fighter started blasting away, the shots scattering about the room and missing Eddie by a considerable margin. When it was all over, Foy's terse comment was, "I'm glad that girl didn't have any cowboy sweethearts."

After two seasons at Dodge City Foy went to San Francisco and kept climbing the ladder that finally reached the New York stage and his place as the foremost laugh-maker in America.

At the age of seventy he was still active enough to star in a motion picture when the industry was just getting started.

After Foy had come to be acclaimed as America's most celebrated comedian, Dodge City still claimed him as its own.

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The OUTLAW

COLONEL

CHAPTER I

Trouble in Tucson

TOM SALTASH became the sensation of Tucson within hours after the arrival of his four Conestoga loads of freight at the Territorial capitol. They were the first wagons to get through from Texas since the Apaches had blockaded Arizona.

Saltash's bearded crew had outspanned at dusk yesterday, hard by the ancient adobe walls where Guillermo Tellez had cut his gate. By midnight half the beleaguered populace had come out to view the arrow- and bullet-riddled wagons by torchlight. This morning they had returned in the hope of seeing the young buckskin-clad wagon boss who had run the Indian gantlet.

Now this sweltering July day of 1867 was burning itself out. The frenzied bartering was over. Saltash's twelve tons of bolt calico and crated

Tom Saltash was caught between an Apache horde and a posse— and the Border colonel was too cowardly to help him!

A Novel by WALKER A. TOMPKINS

hardware, sacked sugar and barreled whisky—precious staples from an outside world as inaccessible as Mars of late weeks—had been exchanged for Yankee gold and Tubac silver.

Saltash had driven hard bargains. He had lost six of the ten wagons he had started with from El Paso thirty-seven days ago. Those hazards, safely behind him, justified sky-high prices.

The caravan's epic saga took on embroidery with each retelling. The famous old trail scout Jubilo Kooney had guided Saltash. Indian ambuscades had decimated his crew. The thirty-odd tons of original merchandise belonged to speculators; they risked costly goods while Saltash and his men risked their scalps. It was a fair gamble. The sixty thousand in specie which Saltash now carried in his *alforja* pouch, collected from Tucson merchants who had bid frantically with each other to stock their empty shelves, belonged half to Saltash, half to his backers. There still remained the hazard of getting back to Texas, but that did not worry him.

He and his trail scout, old Jubilo Kooney, would return by horseback, unimpeded by plodding ten-mile-a-day ox teams. His drovers had spent the night at sundry fandango houses, debauching themselves with women and liquor; they were the hardy few who had gutted it out to trail's end, and deserved their fling.

Now all that remained for Saltash to do was to dispose of the oxen and the wagons for whatever they would bring. Bidders were scarce for livestock or wagons, what with the Apaches having closed the Taos and Santa Fé routes. It did not matter; let the bulls wind up on the chopping blocks of Tucson's *carnicerías;* let some blacksmith park the wagons somewhere and hope the time would come when Arizona was open to white settlement again. The Army would be forced to a tougher policy eventually. . .

Soldiers were scarce in Arizona in '67. One of them was weaving his way through the dusty confusion surrounding the four Texas wagons now: a blue-coated trooper with a sergeant's Vs on his sleeve and the numerals of the Seventeenth Cavalry Regiment astride the crossed sabers insignia he wore on his dusty campaign hat.

His voice, edged with derision, lifted above the cacophony of Indian and Mexican and Yankee tongues: "I'm looking for the Texan who bossed this freight caravan. Where is this great one who had luck enough to make it past the Chiricahuas and the Dragoons and live to tell it? Where is this Tom Saltash of El Paso?"

He spoke half in jest, half in awe, this hard-bitten cavalryman.

A sisal-hatted peon gestured through the fogging dust to indicate a tall and bearded man in fringed buckskins and Texas sombrero who sat the saddle of his deep-chested sorrel gelding as if it were a leather throne.

SEEING Tom Saltash for the first time, the cavalry sergeant lost his Yankee antagonism for the Texas breed which he always held in contempt as a bunch of show-off blowhards. He saw a solidly-built man with a ramrod carriage that bespoke a military background like the sergeant's own; a strikingly handsome man of indeterminate age, anywhere from twenty to forty, a man who hid his years behind a jaw that had not known a razor in months.

A mane of hair as black as a *zopilote's* wings curled down from the Texas hat, obscuring the fringed leather collar of his jacket. The Texan was viewing the roundabout confusion through dust-reddened eyes that were as blue as the turquoise jewelry the Indians hawked on Tucson's streets. They were eyes to command anyone's respect, even a Yankee wearing Union blue.

Coming to a halt alongside Saltash's stirrup, the non-com said deferentially, "You ramrodded these wagons from Texas, sir?"

Saltash looked down at the weary-faced soldier and was reminded of what a short

span of time separated him from the bloody days of the Lost Cause when any trooper in blue was a fair target for his saber or rifle.

"I did, Sergeant. Tom Saltash is the name."

The trooper scanned the broken shafts of Apache arrows still studding the high box of the nearest Conestoga. His military eye appraised the holes which riddled the canvas hood as having been put there by Indian fusillades, and a shudder coursed through him.

"I'm Sargeant Kirk Daley, sir, of the Seventeenth Regiment garrisoned out at Fort Despair. This side of the Piñalino Range. My detail's in Tucson to pick up our new commanding officer and escort him back to the post. I—that is, we need your advice, sir."

Dry humor sparkled in Saltash's eyes. "I *heard* that the Army built a post at Fort Despair," he admitted, "to suppress the Coyotero tribe if they put on war paint. Never saw any soldiers, though."

Daley caught the veiled sarcasm in the Texan's remark and his professional pride was offended. "It's orders from higher up that keep the Seventeenth from takin' the field, sir. President Johnson, or the General Staff, or whoever runs the policy of the Army of the West, they blow hot and cold about fightin' Indians. This summer, we got orders not to attack a redskin unless in defense of the garrison—"

Saltash's attitude changed toward Daley, remembering his own frustrations as a sergeant under Jeb Stuart. Daley was a man to be pitied, a cog in a wheel, a pawn ground under heel by army discipline.

"I know, Sarge," Saltash said gently. "When I left Texas the twenty-third of June I wasn't counting on getting any help from the U. S. Cavalry. Until such time as Washington gives you the go-ahead to fight instead of to hole up, your regiment is hamstrung."

Daley appeared more at ease. Here was a man who talked his language. Remembering his errand, he went on, "My commanding officer—Colonel Lind—asked me to fetch you, sir. I been trying to auger him into delayin' our trip back to the fort until we have a larger escort. I—I'm counting on your experience with the Indians swaying the colonel around to my way of thinkin', sir."

Saltash reined his sorrel around, lips taking on harsh lines under his dark mustache. "If your C.O. wants advice on Indian matters, why didn't he look me up himself? Or is he the blustering type who wants inferiors crawling to him, saluting with both hands?"

Daley's eyes flashed. "Lind's never had any active field duty before, sir. He's a West Pointer who had a desk job during the late War, and got his colonelcy at Jefferson Barracks. But when our commandant got ambushed last spring on the San Pedro during a patrol skirmish—well, the big boys in Washington assigned this Colonel Lind to take command of our regiment at Fort Despair."

Saltash took a crooked black cheroot from his pocket, handed Daley another, and fished a block of California matches from his saddle pocket. Lighting up put a seal to their friendship.

"Right now I'm not doin' much," the Texan said, acrid smoke purling from his nostrils. "I've got to look up my trail scout at whatever honkytonk he's in and get him started toward being sober enough to hit the trail back to 'Paso. Suppose you tell your Colonel Lind to make the rounds of the mescal shops and he'll find me, sooner or later."

Saltash was threading his way out of the mob which blocked the Tellez breach in the mud wall. Sergeant Daley, trotting to keep pace with the big gelding, decided the time had come to play his ace.

"I savvy how you feel, Mister Saltash," the non-com said contritely, "but a word from you—might make the colonel decide to wait for a bigger escort. There's only six of us, you see and—well, sir, the colonel's got a woman with him. Miss Estaline. His daughter, sir. I'd kind of hate to see her yellow hair hangin' from a Mescalero buck's coup stick—"

SALTASH reined in. "Colonel Lind's taking a girl—out to Fort Despair? Young or old?"

"Twenty, I'd say, sir. A company of dragoons en route from Colorado to the Gila country over west brought them as far as Tucson. Me and my platoon were ordered over from Despair to provide the colonel and his daughter safe passage back to the post. We came through the Santa Catalinas a week ago today, sir. We saw plenty of Injun sign coming through Piñon Pass. Maybe it's only a rumor, Mr. Saltash, but Red Shirt's Coyoteros may be on the warpath."

The handsome Texan's face hardened under the black beard. As if musing to himself, he said, "Chief Alhecama. . . His bucks jumped us at dawn seven days ago, at our camp on the Cienega. We lost a wagon and four men to Red Shirt. It is no rumor, Sergeant."

Daley mopped his face with his yellow neck scarf. "If the colonel heard that from your lips, sir, it might help. The Territorial governor, Merriman, has been wining and dining him and filling his ears full of talk that the Coyoteros are friendly. But I got a hunch Colonel Lind's a mite worried, else he wouldn't have stopped to send for you—if you understand me, Mr. Saltash."

Saltash grinned bleakly. "Lead the way," he said. "I'll give your colonel some news Governor Merriman can't deny."

They worked their way down the baked adobe thoroughfare that was called Callejón del Herrero, through teeming throngs of Mexican children and blanketed Pima squaws, settlers in linsey-woolsey who had been driven to Tucson by Indian depredations at Tubac and Tucumcari. Nearing the Plaza de Armas they halted to let a column of the Territorial Governor's personal police, the red-and-gold dandies known as Merriman's Brigadiers, prance by to martial music.

Daley led the way to a whitewashed Spanish *posada* fronting the plaza, and bade the Texan wait while he went through the gate, hat in hand, to approach the bemedaled cavalry officer in full regimentals who was taking his siesta on the arcaded gallery.

A girl was with this Colonel Lind. She peered out at the parading Brigadiers with wide amber eyes that held a trace of nervousness. She was wearing a demure pink frock that matched the folded parasol in her lap, Saltash noted. And because she was the first American woman with spun-gold hair he had seen in weeks, his eyes lingered over the seductive modeling of her bosom, the ivory column of her throat.

Lind and his orderly seemed engaged in an argument, one-sided, of course, as befitted the disparity in their ranks. The sure knowledge that Fort Despair's command replacement was an effete Easterner flirting with suicide caused Saltash to dismount now.

He slipped his pleated reins through the hitch-ring in the gatepost and strode toward the *posada* steps, a man whose six-foot frame loomed higher out of saddle than in it. He walked with the rolling gait of the cowpuncher he had been before the Civil War made him a soldier; his present rôle as a buckskin-garbed freighter was a temporary thing, born of post-war necessity.

Stepping up on the shadowed gallery, Saltash removed his chocolate-brown sombrero and bowed to Estaline Lind. He saw the gleam of her white teeth as her lips parted in surprise, as if she had not expected gallantry from an unshaven man in greasy leather clothing, fresh off a long and arduous trail.

Then Saltash turned to the girl's father, and his blue eyes became blue stones. Fort Despair's new commandant was young-looking to have sired this girl. His thin-lipped, willful mouth made a compressed line above a blond beard. His face was bony, and hinted of Nordic or Teutonic extraction.

Colonel Lind's blue eyes windowed arrogance. His hair was flamboyantly long, reminding Saltash of the Yankee Army's renowned "boy general," named Custer, whom he had seen at the humiliation of Appomattox two years ago.

"How dare you question my judgment?" Lind demanded

The Custer tradition was aped in other ways by this chicken colonel. His shoulders carried flashy gilt epaulets, more suitable for a dress parade in some peacetime garrison than out here on the Arizona frontier. The breast of his tailored blue tunic was ablaze with the rainbow colors of Union Army decorations, and recalling what Sergeant Daley had said about this soldier's lack of active service, Saltash wondered what influence this desk officer had had with the War Department to have harvested so many honors which better men had paid for with blood and torture.

"Colonel, sir," Sergeant Daley was saying, "this is the gentleman from Texas who piloted those supply wagons across Apache territory. He had a bad brush with Red Shirt's band only a week ago. Mr. Saltash, sir, this is Marcellus Lind, Colonel of the United States Cavalry."

COLONEL LIND's eyes were studying the Texas wagoner with ill-veiled contempt. Saltash could see the man's patrician nostrils curl in revolt at the smell of sweat and campfire smoke and buckskin which emanated from him.

"It was unnecessary for you to call on me, Mr. Saltash," Lind said. "My mind is made up. My orders call for me to proceed to my new command with a minimum of delay. Sergeant, you will notify the platoon that we leave Tucson at dusk."

Before Saltash could speak, Lind and the red-faced sergeant had exchanged

salutes and Daley was on his way to wherever his detail was quartered. Then, without pausing, Lind went on, "My reasons for ordering a night march are for my daughter's comfort, to avoid the heat of Arizona daytime travel, and not, Mr. Saltash, from my anxiety concerning Indian action."

Saltash dropped a hand to the wide elkhide belt at his midriff. The belt sagged from the weight of the heavy Spiller & Burr .36 pistol in the Confederate holster there. On the opposite thigh was a large bowie knife in a buffalo skin scabbard. The one had known its share of human targets, both Yankee and redskin, during the years since the C.S.A. had issued that weapon to Saltash. The blade had run red as recently as the skirmish with the Coyoteros at the Cienega camp only seven nights ago.

"Colonel Lind," Saltash said quietly, "I would consider you ten times a fool to undertake such a journey with the handful of troopers you have as escort. You'll have to cross Alhecama's domain—"

Lind's mustache bristled. He came to his feet, a man who matched this Texan inch for inch, but without the freighter's lean fitness.

"How dare you address—what gives you the authority to question my judgment? A cheap ex-Rebel in buckskin, who has come to Tucson to profit by the desperation of a community drained dry of its resources—"

Quickly rising from the wicker chair behind the colonel, Estaline's low cry of protest came as she grabbed his arm: "Daddy! Please—you sent for this gentleman—"

Saltash said, "Let me ask you something, Colonel. Have you ever heard an Indian warwhoop in the night? Do you know what Red Shirt and his braves would do to your daughter here if she fell captive to them? Have you the remotest idea what risks your detail faces between here and Fort Despair?"

Lind drew himself up proudly, a gloved hand dropping to the dress saber he wore. "Young man, the Army has ordered me to take command of the regiment at Fort Despair. The garrison has been without leadership for going on five months now. I refuse to waste time in this flyblown garbage heap of Governor Merriman's. My duty lies—"

Lind broke off at something he saw in the Texan's face.

"Listen," Saltash said flatly. "I've just bulled my way through Apache country. With stout wagons instead of a rickety ambulance. With bullwhackers who could shoot a running buffalo at a thousand yards—or a redskin on pony back. All the same I lost sixty percent of my crew. Colonel Lind—I would put your chances of getting through to your post—especially if Chief Red Shirt learns you have a beautiful white woman traveling with you—at less than one in twenty. You need a company, not a platoon—"

Lind did an about face. Looking at his daughter, he said in a choked voice, "Come, dear. I cannot stomach any more of this insolent Rebel's preposterous talk."

Estaline Lind's eyes held a shamed anguish as her father propelled her into the *posada*. Her look was an apology and a tacit admission of her subservience to her martinet father.

Returning to his horse, Saltash had a mental picture of that girl's lovely golden hair fluttering from the shaft of a Coyotero's bloody war lance. Then she was crowded from his mind, for running toward him across the Plaza de Armas was old Clout Durfree, his segunda wagon driver.

There was a wild desperation in the oldster's eyes as he skidded to a halt alongside Saltash, babbling out his story:

"Tom—Tom, I been scourin' the pueblo for you. Old Jubilo Kooney's fixin' to get himself lynched, sure as the devil would fry a hoss-thief. Over at the Southern Cross Saloon. He's already caused more rukus than a Missouri cyclone. I figure you're the only man he'll listen to—if we get there before the mob's killed him."

CHAPTER II

Gunplay and Disaster

THERE had been plenty of Secessionist sentiment in Tucson during the war years, coming into full flower when the Union Army drained the Territory of troops and thus allowed the Apache hostiles to take the warpath at will. This cantina in the Spanish quarter known as the Southern Cross had been the rallying hall for men of Rebel sentiments and it was natural enough that old Jubilo Kooney should have singled it out for his trade.

Reaching the arcaded front of the deadfall, hearing the shattering tinkle of breaking glass and the raucous bedlam of a small-scale riot going on inside, Tom Saltash knew a moment's indecision as he dismounted. He was carrying sixty thousand in gold and silver in his cantlebags and Tucson was a town where a man could get his throat cut for the price of a shot of redeye.

The sorrel had carried Clout Durfree over from the Plaza de Armas and as Saltash sized up the pandemonium his trail scout was causing inside the Southern Cross, he knew he would have to depend on Durfree to guard his horse.

"You hang onto the sorrel," Saltash ordered, sniffing the old bullwhacker's breath and deciding he was at least half sober. "I'm carrying our receipts in those pouches and I'll larrup the hide off your bones if you take your eyes off my horse for a second."

Durfree winced as an especially loud crash sounded inside the saloon. "The rukus started over a woman," Durfree said. "She didn't mind old Jube spendin' his pay on her, but a fancy-pants dude come in claimin' he had this Jezebel staked out for his own private property. You watch your back, boss."

Saltash loosened his heavy pistol in leather and shouldered his way through the stained-glass batwings. The Southern Cross was clotted with the off-scourings of Tucson riffraff, and at the moment of Saltash's entrance, this mob was jammed into a horseshoe ringing the arena of trouble. Old hell-on-wheels Jubilo Kooney dominated this scene—a rusty-bearded, egg-bald little gnome of a man whose diminutive size, like a stick of dynamite, gave no hint of his potential danger.

At this moment Kooney was standing spraddle-legged atop the mahogany bar counter, his protruding ears veiny as autumn leaves and scarlet now with temper. Here was a man standing off a mob through the sheer ferocity of his bantam-rooster personality. The atmosphere was charged with tension and if some hoodlum hauled out a gun, all hell could explode here.

The ornate backbar mirror behind Kooney was shattered by missiles which had probably missed the old buckskinner. Two heavy-set men with bleeding heads lay unconscious in the reasty sawdust below Kooney, victim of the bung-starter he kept swinging like a scythe to keep the crowd at bay. There was a wicked-looking skinning knife in Kooney's other hand.

Kooney was crowding seventy but his voice was as strident as a rutting bull's: "She'll take more buckos than I see here to grab a she-male away from Jube Kooney, yessiree. Gents, I'm a ring-tailed wolf whose fangs can't be drawed. I got enough Taos lightnin' in me to set fire to a mounting. I'm a hydrophoby lobo from Texas and this is my day to howl. Where's that squallin' tenderfoot who sicked these slumberin' gents on me, claimin' I ought to let him sashay off with my Lulu Babe?"

Saltash elbowed his way to the forefront of the crowd to see the *causus belli* cringing between a pair of bartenders behind the counter to Kooney's left, doubtless hauled there for safekeeping by the old gaffer before he had taken his elevated defensive position. Lulu Babe, Saltash decided, had been well named.

Kooney, despite his uncouth ways and his lack of affinity for soap and water over extended periods of time, liked his women young and luscious. This Lulu Babe was no exception.

She was a black-haired *mestizo* beauty of around seventeen or so, the curvaceous type who would turn fat and ugly before she was thirty. But at the moment she was in the bloom of youth and enclosed in her low-cut scarlet gown, skin-tight at bosom and hips, was enough to make a saint forget his vows of celibacy. A dancehall girl, maybe, but to a man of Kooney's temperament, a woman of honor, to be fought for to the death.

A black-coated man who was squatting behind an overturned poker table near the curved end of the bar took advantage of the moment's hush following the little scout's challenge and said without conviction, "Lulu Babe's engaged to marry Luke Merriman, stranger. If that ain't enough to cool you down, then mebbe you ought to know who Luke Merriman is. He cuts a wide swath around this town—"

TOM SALTASH stepped out on the floor now, sensing the temper of this crowd, knowing that old Jubilo would not be alive this minute if he had been packing a shooting iron. That was Saltash's doing; he had insisted on his crew leaving their weapons behind last night, before they started to paint Tucson red.

"I don't give a rootin' tootin' damn if Señor Merriman has got a gold-plated snout and the arms of the King of England tattooed on his backside," Jubilo Kooney announced. "He come bargin' into this third-rate grogshop with the two gentlemen you see reclinin' on the floor and tried to kidnap my Lulu Babe. I am a patient and law-abiding man, gentlemen, but I'm honin' to get another look at this Luke Merriman jasper. Where's he at?"

Kooney caught sight of Tom Saltash then, just as his trail boss was stepping over the two unconscious characters who had fallen first victims to the scout's righteous indignation. The sight of friendly reinforcements did nothing to smooth the little oldster's ruffled feathers. He made a threatening gesture with the lethal bungstarter as Saltash cocked a spurred boot on the deserted rail, close enough to touch Jube's leggin-moccasins.

"Get to hell out of here, Tom!" Kooney bawled. "I can kill my own snakes. This here is private and personal business you're rammin' a horn into. My proprietary rights in a luscious morsel of Tucson womanhood has been challenged, by God, and the honor of Texas is at stake. Get out of my line of fire, damn it!"

The denizens of the Southern Cross barroom had identified the bearded young buckskin man now, and their tension gave way to a grinning anticipation. Soused to the back molars with forty-rod, Jubilo Kooney might make quite a fight of it before his boss got him subdued.

"You're coming with me, Jube," Saltash said quietly. "If you've got any of your wages left, turn them over to the management to pay for this damage you've caused. Come on. I'm not in a mood to argue with you."

Kooney's beady little eyes vanished behind pippin-red cheeks. He wore his hair in twin braids down the back and his rust-red whiskers in similar braids down his chest.

"I ain't a-leavin' this tavern," he insisted, "until I've talked Lulu Babe into comin' back to El Paso with us. Now you just skedaddle and leave the details to me, boss."

Saltash shrugged and turned to face the crowd, as if to say "What can you do with a dwarf who's as drunk as this one is?" But his implied surrender was deceptive. Spinning about, Saltash lashed out a heavy arm to sweep his scout's banty-legs off the slick-polished bar and let Kooney's rump hit the mahogany like a rubber ball.

Squalling like a banshee in a bonfire, the gnomelike scout found himself somersaulting in mid-air to land on the stirring bodies of Luke Merriman's assistants. Saltash had the knife and the bung-

starter tossed behind the bar before Kooney had disengaged his whiskers from the sawdust. In the next instant Saltash had grabbed the scout's braided pigtails in both hands and was lifting him bodily off the floor.

A roar of sound welled up as the crowd closed in. Whatever fight Kooney might have conjured up under the stimulus of his humiliating treatment was dissipated by a smart blow of Saltash's edged hand against his neck-nape, momentarily stunning the oldster.

"Now," Saltash panted, relieved at so easy an outcome of this explosive situation, "how much does Mr. Kooney owe the house?"

An apron-clad individual with an air of authority about him presented himself and received Kooney's poke in restitution for damages. Lulu Babe had vanished somewhere, no longer interested in her amorous customer, now that Kooney was financially insolvent.

Saltash, getting a firm grip on Kooney's pigtails and the seat of his buckskin breeches, began propelling the cause of the riot doorward. They were through the batwings and facing a curious throng which blocked the way to where Clout Durfree stood guard over the sorrel when Saltash heard a cry behind him.

Saltash wheeled to face the source of that cry, letting go his grip on Jubilo Kooney. He was in time to see a wild-eyed young man clawing through the batwings, a shiny-barreled six-shooter in one fist. This man wore pleated linens, a fustian tailcoat and a beaver hat, but he was no gambler. This, Saltash sensed in a flash of intuition, was the young man of importance here in Tucson who was betrothed to wed the glamorous Lulu Babe. Luke Merriman.

HAD he met Luke Merriman under any other circumstances, Saltash would have written him off for a spineless fop, a tinhorn sport, a weakling beneath his notice. But Luke Merriman at the moment was a berserk suitor made bold by jealousy. And the .45 in his hand was at full cock, the muzzle lifting now for a point-blank aim at little Jubilo Kooney's back.

Tom Saltash swung into the face of that gun, an outthrust arm batting the muzzle aside even as it spat its nozzling orange-purple jet of flame. The bullet meant for Kooney's spine slammed into the plank flooring, and the momentum of Saltash's rush bowled Luke Merriman off his feet, knocked him back against the saloon wall. His knees buckled and Merriman slid to a sitting position.

Off balance by his rush, Saltash fell on hands and knees facing Merriman. He heard the young sport scream like a woman and saw his thumb ear the smoking Colt's hammer back to full cock, the barrel swinging around and up to level on Saltash's head.

The Texas buckskinner's hand made its blurring sweep for his Spiller & Burr. It seemed a miraculous thing to him, when he thought it over later, that he had made his draw and beat Merriman to the shot, since a whit more pressure of the tinhorn's trigger finger would have blasted his skull open.

He felt the Confederate revolver buck and roar in his hand, and he came to his feet swathed in lifting gunsmoke, staring down at the red ruin of Luke Merriman's face. The thought flashed across his mind at that moment that he had killed a citizen of substance in this alien town and that the consequences of that killing might have nothing to do with its justification.

He swung around, smoking gun in hand, to see that Jubilo Kooney had not moved in his tracks, but still stood facing the morbidly interested sidewalk crowd. He could not comprehend that less than five clock-ticks of time had elapsed since he had propelled the little buckskin man out of this place.

Men inside the Southern Cross were trying to get the doors pushed open against the corpse which blocked the threshold as Saltash grabbed old Kooney by the arm and hurried him down the steps. An aisle parted in the stunned

throng and as Saltash reached Clout Durfree and his horse he heard the manager of the Southern Cross shouting into the jelled silence of the street:

"Get that Texan! *He's murdered the Governor's son!*"

Saltash was vaguely aware of boosting the little trail scout into saddle. He seized Durfree's arm and said in a hoarse whisper, "Get Jube back to camp and wait for me. Ride herd on them pouches, but *get out of here pronto!*"

Durfree swung into stirrups behind the dazed and drunken Kooney. The big gelding reared and snorted, panicked by the drifting scent of gunsmoke, and was gone in the dusk-blued confusion on the street.

Gun tipped upward, Saltash backed off from the saloon, the menace of him holding the sidewalk throng in check. He called out in a bleak voice, "The man I shot was a stranger to me. I have these witnesses here to testify it was either him or me. I shot Merriman in self defense—"

The boss of the Southern Cross got to his feet, turning from his examination of the dead man on his doorstep. Leveling an accusative finger at the Texan, the barkeep shouted again, "Don't let Saltash get away. He'll get his chance to tell the governor what happened here. I won't have my place locked up for—"

The blow came from behind, without warning. A gun barrel made its meaty, sodden contact with Saltash's head, and he felt himself making a long dive into an abyss ablaze with fireworks. Then he hit bottom somewhere, and lassitude engulfed him in black waves, soundless and without pain or sensation.

CHAPTER III

You Hang Tomorrow!

TOM SALTASH awoke in half-darkness. His skull ached like a shell of hot metal frying his brains and nausea churned his stomach. For awhile he couldn't remember who he was.

He was in a jail of some kind. At any rate the outer wall of this cell, barely long enough to accommodate a rawhide-springed cot, was fabricated of thick strap-iron latticework fitted with a door lock massive enough to have come from the original Bastille.

His wrists were shackled with steel cuffs and a fifty-pound cannonball was chained to his right ankle, dangling over the edge of the cot. This definitely established him as a desperate character Tucson had no idea of losing.

When his brain cleared enough to allow him to do some thinking, Tom Saltash calculated from the angle of the bar of sunshine shafting through a grilled window overhead that this was the middle of the afternoon of another day.

"Damn Kooney! Damn that honky-tonk slut of a Lulu Babe! If it hadn't been for them I'd be long gone on the way back to Texas by this time of day—"

Saltash reared to a sitting position on the unblanketed cot, waited until his head stopped threatening to burst, and took stock of his possessions. The pockets of his buckskins were empty; the Spiller & Burr .36 and his hunting knife were missing from their belt scabbards.

He lifted the iron ball off the floor with an effort that left him spent and gasping, rolled it onto the cot, and climbed up on the wooden frame to have a look out the window.

A plaza of some sort shimmered in the heat out there. The whitewashed façade and bell tower of a Spanish church some fifty feet away from the jail building dazzled Saltash's vision, half blinding him.

Serape-clad Mexicans, bearded buckskinners, terra-cotta Papago Indians moved in a slow tide of traffic past the jail and church. An ox-drawn *carreta* loaded with gourds of some kind rattled past. This appeared to be the heart of Tucson, somnolent in the waning July heat.

The handcuffs were chafing Saltash's wrists and the beginnings of claustropho-

bia were pressing in on him. A man used to wide-open spaces, it was time he was let out.

Swelling his vocal cords in a strident Rebel yell, Saltash heard startled voices in a room somewhere close by. A key grated in a big iron door facing his cell and a tall American in a flat-crowned Mormon hat, peppermint-striped shirt and baggy-kneed black pants entered the bullpen. A bandoleer of cartridges, shotgun shells, crisscrossed the man's broad chest; the handle of a Remington six-shooter protruded from his belt like the curved grip of a plow, and there was a ball-pointed silver star pinned to the man's gallus strap.

"How about unboltin' some of this hardware?" the Texan demanded, meeting the lawman's yellow-flecked blue eyes. "And unlock the door of this cage. I crave fresh air."

The man's gash-like mouth bent in a smile that reminded Tom Saltash of a split in a rock.

"You'll get fresh air, my Texas friend, in due time. About six foot of it, under your boot soles."

Saltash felt a chill coast down his backbone. Was this man to be his executioner?

"Mind tellin' me who you are and what I'm locked up for?"

The lawman shrugged. "Oatie Kane is the brand. I'm the marshal of the town, a major in the governor's Guard Brigade, and sheriff of Pima County."

Saltash blinked. Kane spoke with a strong Hoosier accent, oddly foreign to Arizona and the Mexican Border. "You're also something else you forgot to mention," the Texan said curtly. "A damyankee scalawag, what we call carpetbaggers in Texas. What charge am I booked on, Marshal?"

Kane's eyes flashed with an evil amusement. "Murder. If it was an ordinary honkytonk shooting scrape, you'd have a chance to buy your way out with a fine, even if you are an unreconstructed Rebel. But it so happens your victim was the only begotten son of the *alcalde* of this pueblo, His Honor the Governor, Elias Quincy Merriman. Which makes your crime subject to the supreme penalty under the law. The law, in this case, being whatever the governor chooses to make it."

Saltash eased himself to a sitting position on the cot. He had heard of Governor Merriman of Tucson: a tyrannical man who wielded what amounted to supreme command over the lives of the populace, an administrator of the hybrid brand of martial law which prevailed in Arizona Territory since the Indian outbreaks following the end of the Civil War.

"Now wait," Saltash said, all cockiness gone from him now. "I'm an American citizen, and Arizona is part of the U.S.A. Even if I polished off the apple of the governor's eyes yesterday, I have a right to a trial by jury, a right to haul in witnesses to prove I shot Luke Merriman in self-defense—"

Oatie Kane shook his head. "You've already been tried and found guilty as hell, son. *In absentia,* they call it. The governor's got fifty witnesses to prove that you gunned his boy down in cold blood."

IT WAS stifling hot in this ill-ventilated cell, but a film of icy moisture dewed the Texan's face now. This was serious, serious as hell. He might as well be trapped in the heart of Africa, for all the good his citizenship did him. The handful of Texans he had brought to Tucson could not help him. They were probably too drunk even to know he was in jail.

"My trail scout, Kooney," Saltash said. "Is he—"

The Tucson marshal laughed. "For what comfort it'll give you, that banty-legged little heller made a clean getaway on your horse last night. He had sense enough to know he'd get his neck stretched along with you, Saltash, if he tarried around Tucson."

Saltash grinned. His peppery little trail partner was safe, anyway. Whatever happened, he would see to it that the specie got back to El Paso.

"All this talk about me hanging," Sal-

tash said. "When do I face the local *alcalde* and hear the bad news?"

Marshal Kane turned to leave. From the bullpen door he paused to eye his buckskin-clad prisoner through the bars.

"You don't," he said. "Like I told you, your case is cut and dried, with the governor himself calling the dances. Don't run off, now," Kane added facetiously, "while I bring you some grub. You might as well spend your last night on earth with a comfortable belly."

The iron door clanged. Saltash felt the first reaction begin to set in, plucking raw-rubbed nerves. From Kane's hints, it appeared that he had a date with a hangman sometime tomorrow. Knowing something of Governor Merriman's sadistic reputation, he had little cause to hope that Kane was bluffing.

He tried to force his thoughts into other channels. A mental picture of Estaline Lind, the pompous colonel's daughter, came to him. By now the Fort Despair detachment would be well on its way out of Tucson, heading for the domain of the Coyotero Apaches and the scalp-hunting braves led by Chief Alhecama, known throughout the Territory as Red Shirt.

Kane returned in twenty minutes with a tray containing cold tortillas, a tin cup of tepid chicory coffee, cornbread and a serving of some kind of oily stew, also cold. Shoving the tray through a slot under the door, Kane stood back and teetered on the balls of his feet, waiting for the Texan to start cursing his fate, if not his menu.

"You've got a visitor in my office," Kane said when Tom Saltash went to work on his food. "One of your bullwhackers. Whatever word you want to leave your kinfolk, you better tell him."

Saltash's pulses speeded. He stopped wolfing down his food, keeping his eye on the bullpen door. He heard muttered voices outside, and then recognized Clout Durfree's petulant tones, "Hell, you've searched me three times. You've taken everything that's loose except my bootlaces and my false teeth."

A moment later the old wagoner stepped into the bullpen. His eyes glittered with moisture as he gripped his trail boss's hands, Saltash leaning from the cot to hold his manacled hands against the iron latticework.

"Clout, old man, it looks like I've got my tail caught between a rock and a tight place," Saltash said huskily.

"You hang tomorrow, boss!" Durfree admitted huskily. "Sometime durin' the night. It won't be a public hangin', I understand. Tucson wouldn't stand for that, you bein' somethin' of a hero in their eyes for salivatin' the gov'ner's spoiled brat of a son. To say nothin' of runnin' the Injun gantlet to fetch them supplies."

Saltash eased back on his cot. The cannonball shackled to his leg kept him from standing up.

"You're a cheerful cuss," Saltash said, swallowing back the desperation in him. "Hell, ain't there any way out of this jackpot? How about Jubilo? He get away OK?"

DURFREE turned to glance at the bullpen door. The marshal was conversing with someone in the outer office. Turning to press his whisker-thicketed face against the cell door, Durfree said, "Ol' Kooney's got a bee buzzin' in his bonnet, son. He sent you somethin'. The way that star-packer went over me with a fine-tooth comb, I'm lucky I got it to pass along."

As he spoke, Durfree was fumbling under his chin whiskers, up in the angle between his turkey neck and jutting chin. A moment later he was wedging something through the interstices in the iron webbing of the cell door.

It was a hank of silk fishing line. Closing his fingers around the mysterious gift, Saltash stared back at Durfree with blank incomprehension.

"You tie one end o' that ball o' twine to a window bar," the wagoner whispered, "and let the rest of it drop outside. But wait till she's dark, so's nobody'll spot it."

Before Durkee could give further explanations, Marshal Oatie Kane appeared in the doorway, his harsh voice lashing at the bullwhacker, "Time's up, feller. Come on."

Clout Durfee turned away from the prisoner. At the doorway, he called back, "Well, *hasta la vista*, boss. I—I'll pass along the news of your hangin' to your kinfolk in Texas."

The door clanged shut and Tom Saltash was free to unkink his fingers and stare down at the fishing line Durfree had smuggled to him. It didn't make sense, tying this silken string to a window bar. The only thing that could yank out those thick iron rods was a bull chain and a few span of oxen.

But old Jubilo Kooney hadn't deserted him. That news alone filled the well-springs of lost hope in the Texan. He knew the fertile imagination the old scout possessed. Kooney couldn't read or write, he was a drunkard and a skirt-chaser, but he was fiercely loyal and a man to tie to in a pinch.

Saltash had met old Jubilo last spring in El Paso, and hired him to lead his wagons westward when he learned that Kooney knew the Arizona malpais like the palm of his hand. In '61 Kooney had been a wagon scout between Tucson and Santa Fé. No one knew where he hailed from originally, but he had come east and volunteered as a sharpshooter in the Confederate Army. Most of his war years had been spent in a Yankee prisoner-of-war camp, a subject of acute embarrassment to the puckish little rascal.

After Appomattox, the old coot had started for Arizona. But a dancehall courtesan named Flatfoot Bess had caught his eye in El Paso, detaining him for a period of months. Apparently the courtship was not progressing satisfactorily, for Jubilo Kooney had jumped at the chance to hire on as Saltash's wagon guide to Tucson.

On the trek westward, Kooney had repeatedly announced his intentions of remaining in Arizona to fight Indians. But a couple of nights ago, the old timer had

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The Little Big Horn

by Clarence E. Flynn

The winding little river tells no story.
The years long since have stilled the tragic song.
The silent graves resound no plea for glory.
They have forgotten; it has been so long.

The name of Custer—death came by to greet it.
His deeds are written where old mem'ries are.
The hills no longer echo and repeat it.
The winds no longer carry it afar.

Yet after all these years, despite the lateness,
A thrill from that lost yesterday returns.
There lingers in this place a sense of greatness,
Even the random passer-by discerns.

Although the silences are unreplying
To questionings about that yesterday,
This thrill is the memorial undying,
The tribute even time cannot decay.

---

informed Saltash that he had left his heart in Flatfoot Bess's keeping and would return to Texas with him.

That was all Saltash knew about the old Romeo in buckskins. That, and what Durfree had hinted: that Kooney hadn't kept going last night when he had the chance, even though he must have known the law was after him for his part in Luke Merriman's death.

Durfree's parting words just now echoed like a promise in the Texan's ears: "*Hasta la vista*, boss." That was border patois for "see you later." It did not have the finality of *adiós*. It was a pledge that Durfree and Saltash would meet again.

CHAPTER IV

The Owl Hoots

NIGHT crept across the Santa Cruz River to envelop Tucson. Kane did not return to pick up the dirty dishes or inquire into his prisoner's welfare. Saltash waited until the cell was pitch-dark and then took the ball of fishing line out from under the mouldy straw-tick mattress where he had secreted it.

Having not the slightest notion what coup he might be helping bring about, the Texan knotted the silk securely to one of his window bars and dropped the rest of the skein into the weeds alongside the masonry wall. Then he stretched out and tried to fathom what in hell old Kooney was up to.

He kept track of the dragging hours by chiming clocks around the plaza. The moon, full and round as a new-minted Mexican dollar, lifted over the tile roofs of Tucson shortly after midnight, gilding the nearby Spanish church with silver.

Curiosity got the better of Saltash and he climbed erect on the cot and reached out to feel the knotted fishing line on the window bar. Then excitement was a bursting rocket in him. Sometime since nightfall, that string had been picked up in the weeds outside the jail wall, and was now stretched taut as a fiddle gut, at a sharp upward angle from the jail bar!

Reaching out with thumb and forefinger, Saltash plotted the angle the string made. Sighting along its invisible length, he realized that it led to an arched bell port in the church campanile across the way. A filament as fine as a spiderweb, as durable as a telegraph wire now connected his window with that bell tower opening fifty feet above the street level.

He guessed, now, that the string had been used to identify his particular cell from the row of identical windows along the jail's wall. Old Kooney, or perhaps Durfree, had stretched the string over to the church. What purpose could be back of their actions, Saltash could not fathom.

He lay back on the cot, trying to concentrate. He heard the clock of the Old Pueblo strike one, one-thirty, two. Another hour and a half and the eastern horizon would begin to show the first pale streakings of dawn. And sometime during that interval, if the marshal's threats and Durfree's information were correct, he would be escorted out of here to a waiting gallows platform.

However all-powerful Governor Merriman might be in this settlement, he wanted to avenge his son's death unbeknownst to the populace. Under cover of darkness, probably behind high secret walls.

And then an owl's plaintive hooting arrested the Texan out of a half-doze. He came to his feet, gripping the window bars, peering out into the moon-drenched night. That owl hoot had come from Jubilo Kooney's throat. Saltash had heard the signal too many times when his scout was making a night patrol away from a wagon camp in Indian country.

He could not reply in kind, but instinct told Saltash to reach out and give the taut fish cord a couple of jerks, to signify that he had received Kooney's signal.

Another owl cry floated through the

still of the night. And then Saltash felt the fish line vibrating, a quivering impulse so minute that he might have imagined it.

Moonlight glinted on something slanting through space, down from the domed bell tower of the Franciscan chapel. Blued metal, riding that invisible fishline straight toward Saltash's prison window.

Metal made its whispering music on the taut silk, and an instant later the streaking object slammed hard against Tom Saltash's outreaching hand. It was a Colt Dragoon .45, its brass trigger guard looped around the fish line, its three-pound weight sufficient to slide it the necessary distance despite the slight sag in the string.

Trembling, feverish in his haste, Saltash snapped the silk cord and pulled the sixgun over the window sill. He was drenched with perspiration when he lay down on his stomach, his hand thrilling to the solid contours of the checked walnut grip, his thumb resting on the knurled prong of Kooney's old cap-and-ball hogleg.

CLOCK gongs were striking three times when Saltash heard the measured thud of booted feet entering the jail's plaza. Peering from the window, he caught sight of a squad of twelve riflemen marching in a column of twos out of sight around the corner of the jail. Marching at their head was a pot-bellied figure in a top hat and bannering talma cape.

Saltash recognized the gold-trimmed uniforms of that detail that had come to escort him to the gallows, and the caped man who led them. Governor Merriman and his personal police, the Guard Brigadiers of Old Tucson.

Taut in every sinew, Saltash waited, belly down on his cell cot. He heard an outer door open, boots approach the bullpen door, then the grate of the key. Lamplight spilled its yellow glare into the cellblock, and through half-opened lids Saltash recognized Marshal Oatie Kane's burly figure.

"Your time's come," Kane spoke, setting his lantern aside and unlocking the cell door. "The Governor himself is going to escort you over to the gallows behind the Territorial House. Any beggin' for mercy you got in your system, you'll have the Governor's ear, Saltash."

The Texan made no sign that he was awake. He felt the marshal's heavy hands feeling the leg shackle, heard a key twist in the lock and knew he was free of the cannonball.

Then Kane's hand was shaking his shoulder. The marshal's shadow fell across Saltash as he made mumbling sounds like a sleeper coming awake, and reared to his knees.

"The Governor—" Kane started to speak, and then his voice trailed off as he felt the muzzle of a six-shooter reaming into his flabby belly, his ears catching the unmistakable double click of a heavy .45 coming to full cock.

"Unlock the cuffs, Marshal," Saltash whispered. "Don't make me blow your guts out."

Kane was stupefied, frozen in his tracks. He fell back a step as the bearded young Texan climbed off the cot.

"You—you can't make it," Kane wheezed. "The Governor's brigadiers are waitin' out there—"

Saltash lifted both arms above his head and brought Kooney's Dragoon barrel down on the marshal's crown with a grisly impact. The breath gusted from Kane's lungs and he settled to the stone floor of the cell like an inanimate thing.

Setting the gun aside, Saltash plumbed the marshal's pockets and came up with the tiny key he sensed would fit his fetters. Putting the key in his teeth, he maneuvered his bracelets around until he could insert one key. The notched manacles sprung open and his left hand was free.

Ridding himself of the right-hand cuff, Saltash bent to lock the irons around the wrists of the insensible lawman, dropping the key into a brimming cuspidor. Then, helping himself to the Remington .44 jutting from Kane's belt, Saltash picked up Kooney's cap-and-ball and made his

way out of the bullpen.

Passing through what he took to be Kane's office, Saltash had a view through the open door of Governor Merriman and his gaudily-uniformed Brigadiers, waiting in a ramrod line some fifty feet from the jail building. The moon put a bar of shadow alongside the front of the jail and Saltash stepped into that sheltering darkness, edging his way to the corner of the jail.

The church was the nearest shelter, to reach it he would have to bolt across fifty feet of open ground in the full moonlight. He was pausing there, steeling himself for the leap which would make him a target for the *alcade's* rifle-toters, when Jubilo Kooney's strident yell sounded from a black alleyway next to the Franciscan church:

"Thisaway, boss!! I'm a-covern' ye!"

HEAD DOWN, a cocked revolver in either hand, the fugitive Texan broke out of the jail's shadows and sprinted in a beeline for Kooney's location in the alley.

The old scout's yell had alerted the platoon of the governor's guards, for Saltash had only covered half the distance across the open compound when pandemonium broke loose from the ranks of ceremonial guard and the night collapsed to a thunder of gunnery.

Bracketed by whistling lead, Saltash heard the answering boom of Kooney's smooth-bore Sharps, saw the buffalo gun's licking bore-flame from the alley's black gut. The Brigadier gunfire ceased, and before it resumed to send lead caroming off the corner of the Spanish church, Saltash had gained sanctuary of the alley.

He saw Jubilo Kooney there, a gnome-like figure astraddle his fast Texas mustang, and alongside his stirrup the big sorrel was waiting, his specie still intact in the cantlebags.

Vaulting into saddle, one ear on the frenzied shouts from the jail plaza behind them, Saltash dug in the spurs as Kooney led the way down the alley, venting a triumphant Rebel yell.

Leaving the alley in a bannering screen of dust, the little buckskinner reined west on a deserted street with Guillermo Tellez's aperture in the Old Wall directly ahead.

Then the pueblo's confining buildings were behind them and they were pounding stirrup by stirrup into the open. Kooney was warbling exultantly, "Ol' Jube's a man who pays his debts, boss. Durfree's got a couple extra broncs and a packmule stashed five miles north. We follow the Santa Cruz to where Rita Crick cuts off and there Durfree'll be."

Still unable to comprehend the fact of his jailbreak, Saltash found himself wondering why Kooney was leading him due east, toward Pantuno Wash, the way they had brought the wagons in. Then he realized this was strategy on Kooney's part.

The governor of Arizona would have a Brigadier posse on their trail within a matter of minutes. Knowing their escaped prisoner intended to return to El Paso, they would strike off in that direction, hoping to cut the fugitives' sign at daylight.

Instead, old Kooney would double back north to pick up spare mounts and the supplies for their Texas journey.

Five miles out they reined up to give their mounts a breather. Saltash leaned from stirrups to grip Kooney's gnarled hand.

"Consider your debt paid in full, pard," he grinned.

Old Jubilo spat into the dust. He appeared downright melancholy. "You know," he remarked, "that high-falutin' gov'ner is sure to slap a bounty on both our pelts, collectable anywhere inside the borders of Arizona. That's goin' to make it a mite inconvenient when I go to fetch Lulu Babe back to Texas."

Saltash stared at the irrepressible old codger in mock amazement. "Are you forgetting the gal you left in Jaurez, Jube?"

Kooney raised startled brows. Outwardly, chewing at one of his chin pigtails, he appeared to be pondering Saltash's rebuke. But both men were keen-

ing the night breeze for whatever intelligence it had to telegraph them, and both heard the muted drumroll of hoofs which told them that pursuers were already on the way.

"Gawd, in all the rukus I plumb forgot about Flatfoot Bess," Kooney admitted. "Reckon I'll just have to let Lulu Babe pine away her heart for me. Hell," the old scout added disgustedly, "she was probably just leadin' me anyhow. Maybe she *was* Luke Merriman's gal. She'll look like hell in mournin' duds, though. Let's rattle our hocks, boss. She's a-comin' on to daylight."

CHAPTER V

Wagon Tracks

THEY WERE a pair of specks on the limitless expanse of the desert, two riders trailing three mounts and trying to raise as little dust as possible. Stretching off ahead the malpais shimmered in the punishing heat, the aberration of the atmosphere appearing to make the towering green stalks of the giant saguaro weave in a macabre dance, waving spine-bristled arms.

Only the direst extremity would have forced Saltash and Kooney to undertake a daylight passage of this burning waste. Night traveling was the only way to cover ground during an Arizona summer without putting undue strain on animals and men.

But at their backs was the telltale column of dust which warned them that the Tucson posse had picked up the spoor, only delayed a few hours by Kooney's trickery outside the pueblo. This was their second day out and the fact that the pursuers' dust clung doggedly behind them was proof that Governor Merriman had given his Brigadier guards strict orders not to return from their manhunt empty-handed.

Nor was the peril at their rear the only reason why the two buckskin men continued their flight. To the east loomed the red sandstone heights of Santa Catalina range, the heartland of the Coyotero tribe of Apaches. Somewhere in the tangled canyons and rincons of that mountain lift was the stronghold of Alhecama, chief of the Coyoteros, the dreaded Red Shirt who had laid waste every settlement in his path.

This very terrain they were now crossing might well be under the surveillance of eagle-eyed Coyotero scouts.

"The Gov'nor must of posted a hell of a big bounty on us to be keepin' them fancy-pants Brigadiers sniffin' our back track this far into Injun country," old Kooney observed, unscrewing the cap of his canteen and allowing a tiny trickle of their precious water supply to run down his gullet. "I figured Merriman's posse would of give up by now."

Tom Saltash dismounted to pick up a lava pebble. He put it under his tongue, sucking it to start the saliva. The nearest waterhole, according to Kooney, was half a day's ride away. They had to conserve the water carried in the plump canvas bags on the pack mule for their mounts, even if it meant going dry themselves. Out in this desert, a man's horse came first.

"If our broncs go lame and the worst comes to worst," the Texan drawled facetiously, "maybe this sixty thousand in gold and silver can buy off those Tucsonians."

Kooney grunted skeptically. "Not when they can gun us down and divvy up that dinero you're packin', boss," he pointed out. "Worst comes to worst, we got to stuff that specie down a badger hole an' forget it."

They pushed on, fighting off the torpor of the heat. Both were glad that old Clout Durfree had elected not to join them on this trek; sunstroke would have claimed the old wagoner long before now. Besides, Durfree's part in their jailbreak was not known to Marshal Kane, except on guesswork, whereas Saltash and Kooney were topping the Territory's wanted list now,

and would be as long as Governor Merriman held the reins of office in Tucson.

They spent hours working their way up flinty ledges to top the long Calaveras Rim. From its lofty rimrock, they could see the foot of the dust column ten miles behind them, and old Kooney saw fit to augment his own telescopic vision with the battered old field glasses he had taken off the corpse of a Union officer on the bloody field of Gettysburg.

After a lengthy study through the binoculars, Kooney passed them to Saltash. Bringing the lenses into focus on the base of the dust column, the Texan whistled his amazement.

"Must be twenty riders in the main body, and they've got flankers out and a man riding point," he commented.

Kooney spat disgustedly. "The lead bull," he said, "is old Fletch Amberson, I'd bet my last blue chip on that. Passes himself off as the best scout in Arizona, since I been away. I wondered how come them Brigadiers picked up our sign so quick."

Saltash grinned, returning the glasses to the buckskin man. Even with their aid, the manhunters had been indistinguishable dots, scarcely seeming to move.

"Don't tell me you can recognize their leader at ten-eleven miles, Jube."

Kooney hung the glasses over his Brazos-horned pommel and picked up his reins. "You won't believe this," he said, "but that Marshal Kane is ridin' with the Gov'nor's boys. I seen the writin' on his tin star. You must not of konked his noggin as hard as you should of, back in that jail."

THEY left the Calaveras rim behind them, the westering sun at their backs and the day's heat beginning to diminish. Both knew the Tucson posse would be forced to camp below the Rim tonight. They also knew their own horses were in no shape to take advantage of that by traveling in the cool of the night.

Kooney was dozing in saddle when Saltash spotted the fresh wagon tracks threading through the sage and cactus. Hoofmarks told him the wagon was heading in the same direction as they, and had been made within the past twenty-four hours, so clean were the impressions in the sandy soil.

He reined up and the noise of his sorrel blowing its lips roused the diminutive Kooney. Without a word from Saltash, the scout gave his opinion of what the wagon tracks revealed to him.

"Four-mule team, luggin' a wagon too light to be a prairie schooner. They must have reached this mesa through the Lost Canyon break in the Rim, if they were comin' from the west."

Before Saltash could speak the thought that was in his mind concerning the identity of the wagon, a muted sound of gunnery reached their ears, coming from beyond the next low hogback which shut off their view of the further mountains.

Of one accord the buckskin men spurred into a lope, each hauling his saddle gun from its boot. The packmule and two spare saddlers whinnied their protests as the trail ropes went taut.

"That'll be Colonel Lind's ambulance wagon," Saltash yelled as they headed up the hogback's slope. "This is about how far they'd have got."

Kooney blew his quid of tobacco through his lips and called above the drumming hoofbeats, "And he's catched himself some trouble, reckon. Mind we don't skyline ourselves agin the sun, boss."

Twenty yards below the crest of the rise both men dismounted and charged on up the slope, toting their buffalo rifles. As they reached the summit and began zigzagging through the boulders there they caught the dreaded sound of Indian warwhoops harking through the heat of day's end. *Hee-yi-yi-yi-yiiii!* It was like the blood-curdling yammer of a coyote pack closing in on a crippled stag.

Saltash saw the Fort Despair contingent first, as he broke through a thorny hedge of tornillo scrub.

Down in the brush-choked ravine between this hogback and a further hill, a blue-painted army ambulance wagon lay

on its side, blazing like a bonfire. Arrows rolled in antelope grease and gunpowder, set aflame with flint and steel, had fired the military vehicle from a distance, and within the past ten minutes, for the ambulance's hood was not yet entirely consumed.

On the crest of the further hogback, a half-dozen copper-skinned Coyotero braves seated on unshod Apache ponies were limned against the skyline, pouring a hail of lead in the general direction of the burning wagon.

One of their number wore two eagle quills in his black topknot to indicate his chieftain's rank, and setting him apart from the other paint-daubed bucks was the ragged-tailed badge of his fame, a miner's red woolen shirt.

Chief Alhecama of the Coyoteros. The ferocious Red Shirt who had already earned himself a notorious spot in the annals of Arizona for his depredations this spring.

Saltash felt Kooney's hand on his shoulder, pulling him back into the sheltering thicket. Both men were searching the environs of the wagon, searching for a sign of life among the white defenders but seeing nothing.

Dead cavalry ponies lay scattered here and there in the rocks. The mules hitched to the overturned wagon lay in their traces, probably the first victims of Red Shirt's ambush. Saltash caught sight of a blur of blue color and identified it as a dead cavalryman, draped over a rock like laundry spread out to dry. The corpse bristled with feather-tufted arrows.

"Tail-end of a siege," Kooney remarked, absently paring tobacco off a black plug. "This is that Fort Despair detail you were tellin' me about yesterday, reckon."

SALTASH felt sick. He had been through enough brushes with whooping Apaches to know what Colonel Lind's escort must have gone through today. Trapped in this ravine, they hadn't had a chance. The Indians had probably fired the ambulance to smoke out any surviving defenders, wanting to close in and count coup on their victims before dark.

"The colonel had a girl with him," Saltash said huskily. "And an escort of six troopers, according to Sergeant Daley. They must all be dead, the way those Coyoteros are exposing themselves up there."

Kooney tucked his tobacco between his toothless gums, wiped his knife on his buckskins and sheathed it.

"Doubt it," he observed. "Them Injuns would be scramblin' down there to lift hair if they knew they'd massacred the lot. Must be one Yankee gun unaccounted for yet."

Hope leaped in Saltash. Alhecama's braves were parading their ponies back and forth along the skyline, obviously in an attempt to draw fire from the besieged party. The blazing ambulance had set fire to the roundabout brush now, the red flames licking greedily through the buckbrush and greasewood. But still there was no sign of life from the Fort Despair party.

Saltash wriggled his legs back into the brush and thrust his Sharps barrel across a slab of rock, drawing a tentative bead on the red-shirted scourge across the intervening gulf of space, trying to plot the range.

Before he could squeeze off a shot Kooney reached out to yank the rifle back.

"Tryin' to get rid of your hair, boss?" the little scout demanded. "This ain't our tea party."

"But if you think anyone's still alive down there—we can't let them be smoked out into the open—"

Kooney chuckled callously. "Why not? It's none of our never-mind, boss. We got worries of our own, behind us, remember? Let that fancy-pants Yankee colonel stew in his own grease."

Anger stirred in Saltash. "There's a girl down there—"

Kooney shrugged and let go his grip on Saltash's saddle gun.

"*'Stá bueno,* if that's the burr under your saddle. But don't let me catch you ribbin' me about women ever again, boss.

Not if you want to show your hand agin' them Coyotero varmints yonderward. I'd as soon ram my snout into a hornet's nest."

A crackle of Indian gunfire vollied across the ravine, the Coyotero's whoops striking a chill in Saltash's veins.

"We'll do it thisaway," Kooney was saying. "I'll scrooch down in them rocks yonderward and pick me off a buck, then I'll scrabble back aways and give 'em another dose of lead pizenin'. Got to make Red Shirt think there's sizable reinforcements stashed up on this ridge, instead of two love-sick idiots."

At that instant, a Springfield made its crashing report somewhere down in the smouldering brush. That single shot stirred the Indian riders into wild activity, withdrawing back to the ridge.

The massacre was not complete, then. Saltash found himself praying that Estaline Lind had triggered that .45-70.

Kooney was wriggling his way off along the ridge crown. A few moments later Saltash saw the scout's rifle nosing out from a split in a boulder, heard its earriving explosion.

Across the five-hundred-yard gulf of space, Saltash saw a paint-smeared Coyotero warrior drop his feathered lance and topple limply from pony back. At the moment Saltash's rifle sights were notched on Red Shirt and he squeezed trigger with infinite pains not to joggle his aim.

An exultant shout welled from the Texan's lips as he saw the Apache chief lurch violently to the impact of a buffalo slug and slide out of sight in the thick brush over there. If he had bagged Red Shirt, he had more than paid his debt to Arizona, had more than exonerated himself, purged the outlaw stain with which the Territorial governor had tainted him.

Kooney's rifle was blasting from a different location now, along the ridge to Saltash's right. But there were no targets in view. The Coyotero bucks, having seen their vaunted chief spilled from his pony, had cut over the ridge and vanished, leaving only the muffled echoes of their whoops behind.

From the nearby rocks came Kooney's drawling voice, "You go down and look around, boss. I'll be coverin' ye."

SALTASH gained his feet and started scrambling down into the ravine toward the blazing wagon. He yelled back, "I tallied old Red Shirt, anyhow—"

"You winged the red varmint, I figure," Kooney contradicted. "You notice his pony cut over the hill. Might be Red Shirt was draggin' on the reins."

Reaching the foot of the ravine in a miniature avalanche of dislodged earth and rubble, Saltash lifted his buckskin-clad arm against the blistering heat of the wagon and shouted "Halloo, Fort Despair! Hold your fire. I'm comin' in right now."

He squatted down in the brush, waiting for some sign. Nothing reached his ears but the subdued crackle of the flames.

"It's Tom Saltash!" the Texan yelled, his cry re-echoing up and down the rocky fissure. "Sound off, whoever fired that last shot! The Indians have high-tailed it —you're safe to show yourself!"

Over beyond the wagon, a pile of trunks —Estaline's baggage, no doubt—had been piled up as a barricade. A mesquite bush was quivering over there and as Saltash stared, he saw a bareheaded figure clad in Yankee blue rise into view.

"Come on in, Mr. Saltash!" a familiar voice reached the Texan. "Ten minutes later and you'd of been too late."

Tom Saltash plunged over a row of slaughtered cavalry horses to see for the first time the row of dead soldiers lying side by side on a dry gravel creekbed. He circled the zone of super-heated air emanating from the burning wagon and headed toward the soldier standing behind the trunks.

He recognized Sergeant Kirk Daley then, and a moment later he was reaching out to grip the platoon leader's hand. A turban of bloody bandage girdled Daley's head and his left arm hung limp at his side, blood soaking the sleeve of his army shirt.

"Five dead ones back there," Saltash

panted. "Is—is Miss Lind—"

Daley passed a trembling hand over his face, unable to realize that the day-long nightmare was over.

"The colonel and the girl are safe," he whispered. "Over in the rocks yonder. "The 'Paches . . . jumped us at daylight . . . picked off my squad . . . one by one. It was bloody hell, sir. I—"

Daley's voice trailed down to a whisper and Saltash had to reach to support the trooper as he fainted. Vaulting the piled-up trunks, Saltash had his quick inspection of the non-com. An Apache arrow had skewered his right arm and someone, perhaps Daley himself, had pulled it on through the wound. A skilled hand had bandaged the trooper's head wound; a fringe of lace edging the windings of cloth identified the bandage as a piece ripped from a woman's petticoat.

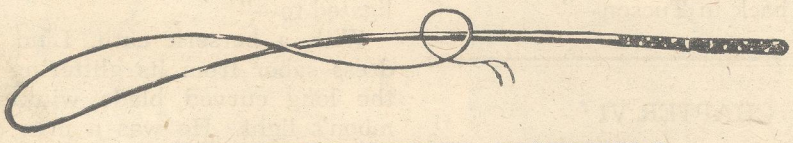
Saltash made his way toward the nearby jumble of rocks where Daley had indicated he would find Lind and his daughter. As he approached a cavernlike aperture in the rocks he caught sight of Fort Despair's commander emerging from the clotted shadows, his face bone-pale, one hand clutching a ludicrous weapon—his dress saber.

Estaline followed her father into the open, and Saltash's eyes went from Colonel Lind to this girl to see how much she had suffered through this day's siege. She was wearing a divided riding skirt and a man's shirt, her shoulder-long hair done up in braided coronets for this desert journey. And she'd held up quite well.

Her eyes, meeting his, lighted up with an emotion which stirred the Texan greatly.

"You're all right, Miss?" Saltash demanded, ignoring the trembling field-grade officer who stood spread-eagled in the rubble, surveying the scene of horror outside.

"Yes—Mr. Saltash—thanks to you," Estaline whispered, extending her hand to him. "Dad—insisted on keeping me under cover—we were expecting the Indians to

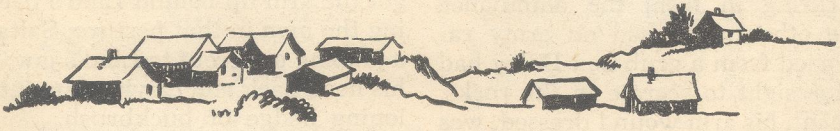


SPARE THE WHIP!

CONTRARY to popular opinion, the whip of the American stage driver was almost never used to strike the horses, at least by reinsmen who knew their business. A horse that needed the whip to make him go would be a poor risk in a six-horse team. Actually the whip was used in driving to signal the wheel horses, usually by a mere touch, when negotiating a difficult turn.

The main function of the whip had nothing to do with driving. It was like a monarch's scepter, signifying to awed pilgrims that its bearer was a reinsman, a monarch of the road. As a result the drivers cherished their whips, never winding the lash around the stock or letting anyone else handle it. Though he might be adept in cracking the twelve-foot lash to impress the passengers, the driver rarely started his team in such fashion lest he make the horses too nervous to stand.

—Robert Stephens



close in for hand-to-hand fighting. Is Sergeant Daley—"

"Daley's just passed out—from loss of blood. Do you have a first-aid kit?"

The Texan turned to see Colonel Lind fumbling with the buttons of a field medical pouch attached to his Sam Browne belt. Some of the horror had left the officer's eyes now. His first words to the man who had saved him torture and his daughter an even worse fate were not words of gratitude:

"All right, Saltash. I presume you're going to gloat. Go ahead and say it—I told you so back in Tucson—"

CHAPTER VI

Kooney's Rebellion

KOONEY was off someplace on the north ridge, standing guard against a possible return of the Apaches in force. Hanging from his belt was the topknot of the warrior he had bagged. If Red Shirt had been a fatality, his braves had removed the corpse of their chieftain.

Down on a shelf of rock away from the smoke drifting in from the ambulance ruins, the others munched on army rations salvaged from a grub box Daley had had the foresight to secrete in the rocks. The sergeant, his arm wound dressed, was eating with slight appetite. It was two hours past dark; a full moon bathed the ravine's pit in a spectral argentine light.

"More water, Saltash," Colonel Lind spoke up, reaching for the canteen the Texan was holding. "The red devils riddled our water barrel at the outset of the fighting. Estaline and I have been slowly perishing of thirst all day."

Saltash shook his head. "It may be a long time before we reach a waterhole, Colonel. What we have must be rationed, share and share alike. You've had your four ounces. That's all until we break out our breakfast rations tomorrow."

The medals on Lind's tunic made their chiming sound as the officer came to his feet.

"Damn you, I am in command here. Hand me that canteen. That is an order, Mr. Saltash."

Saltash stood up, aware of Estaline's blanched face staring up at him. The girl had seemed to be in a daze ever since Saltash had helped her and her father out of the boulder nest.

"This water," Saltash said, curbing his temper with an effort, "may mean life or death for all of us. It is not army property to begin with, and I am a civilian, not obligated to—"

With a berserk oath, Lind lifted his dress saber from its glittering scabbard, the long curved blade winking in the moon's light. He was a man crazed by thirst and the ordeal he had been through this day, his first taste of Indian attack since coming to the Arizona frontier. With that razor-honed saber in his hand, he was as dangerous as a rabid animal.

Lind lifted his arm for a chopping blow at the buckskin-clad Texan. The canteen dropped to the stone shelf as Saltash plunged in under that whistling blade, locking a hand on Lind's down-thrusting wrist.

The officer bawled with pain as Saltash got the arm up behind Lind's back. Holding the man in that posture, Saltash drove a jabbing uppercut to Lind's jaw, snapping his head back and driving him into a cushioning hedge of buckbrush.

Saltash stooped to pick up Lind's saber, lifted a knee and broke the tempered blade in a savage outburst of anger too violent to be controlled. Hurling the broken badge of power into the brush, Saltash blew on his skinned knuckles and looked down at the colonel's daughter, who had not moved during the brief scuffle.

"I'm sorry I had to do that, ma'am," the Texan panted. "You understand what conserving water means, surely—"

The girl ran a hand over her braided golden tresses, her voice sounding numb and spiritless, "You—had to do it, Mr. Saltash. My father—isn't accountable for

his actions at the present time."

Colonel Lind was groaning feebly, a dribble of blood seeping from his spade beard. Saltash, seeing the Army .45 in the flapped holster of the officer's Sam Browne belt, reached down and took possession of the weapon. When Lind's head cleared he might be in a dangerous frame of mind.

"You'd best get some sleep, ma'am," Saltash told the girl. "I imagine Kooney will want to hit the saddle before daylight. It isn't safe to stick around here any longer than we have to. The Coyoteros might be back with reinforcements." Saltash didn't think it wise to add that a posse was chasing him.

The girl nodded, shifting herself over to pick up her father's hands in her own. Saltash moved off down the ravine, past the burned hulk of the wagon on which he and Kooney had shoveled sand to extinguish the live embers before a full-fledged bush fire put them to rout.

He paused a moment, staring down at the cairn of rocks which covered the bodies of the five troopers from Fort Despair. There had been no way of burying the dead, but these rocks would at least keep off predatory animals.

NIGHT was three hours old and as yet Saltash had had no chance to talk things over with Kooney. He knew the old scout would be in favor of pushing on, abandoning this Yankee colonel and Daley and the girl for the sake of putting more distance between them and the Tucson posse.

But Saltash had made up his mind. For Estaline's sake, if nothing else, they would have to detour to Fort Despair before continuing their flight across Arizona's boundaries. Old Jubilo would be fighting mad about it, he knew; the old man hated anything in Yankee uniform with a virulence Saltash could not begin to understand. Three years in a Yankee prison had done that.

Further down the ravine, their four horses and the pack mule were on picket, brought over the hogback by old Jube after darkness had set in. That solved the mount problem for Lind and the girl and Sergeant Daley. They could put one of the dead cavalry horse's McClellans on the mule and apportion the pack among the other saddlers. After all, three days should put them across the Santa Catalinas and safely to the stockade at Fort Despair.

Sergeant Daley loomed alongside the big Texan. He said hoarsely, "I'd of given my eye teeth to have manhandled the colonel like you done, sir. It will be something to tell the boys in the barracks when we get to the post."

Saltash turned to face the beefy noncom. There was something he had been curious about ever since he had gone into the rocks where Colonel Lind and his daughter had been cowering.

"How come your commandant wasn't out on the firing line when Kooney and I showed up, Sergeant? Red Shirt was about to lead his bucks in for the kill."

Daley laughed bitterly. "The colonel dug into his hole five ticks after the first warwhoop sounded this mornin', Mr. Saltash. The sonofabitch didn't fire a shot all day. With his escort droppin' on all sides. He—he claimed he had to protect his daughter."

Saltash said bleakly, "If Miss Estaline is going to be a frontier army girl, maybe she ought to learn what a shooting iron is for herself."

The sergeant's homely face puckered into a grin.

"Don't sell the girl short, sir. She was right alongside me behind that pile of trunks, most of the day. She's proud, Mr. Saltash, but she's a thoroughbred. If she acted beat out tonight, it's shame. Shame for havin' her father show the white feather in his first dose of fire baptism."

For some reason, Daley's words in Estaline's defense put a glad song in his heart.

"It was me who finally made her take to the rocks where the colonel was holed up," Daley went on. "All day, Lind kept blusterin'. Tryin' to cover up for countermandin' my order not to make camp in

the bottom of a canyon like this. We should have camped up on the rim."

Daley's arm was in a sling now, his arrow-poisoned elbow splinted by Saltash. Judging from the arrows and bullet holes in Estaline's baggage, Daley had been under a heavy Indian fire during the day.

"I pity what happens to Fort Despair's garrison when Lind takes over command," Daley was saying. "He's—*Saltash! Watch it!*"

Daley was frantically clawing a revolver out of holster as the moccasin-footed figure of old Jubilo Kooney materialized, as if out of thin air, alongside the trooper's elbow.

"I—I thought you were an Indian," Daley apologized sheepishly. "You got to be careful, sneakin' up on a man like that."

Kooney peered up contemptuously at the rawboned trooper and sprayed Daley's boots with tobacco juice.

"Wouldn't put it past a damyankee bluenose, not bein' able to tell a white man from a redskin," he snorted. Then, turning to Saltash, the old scout said succinctly. "We better be saddlin' and ridin', I guess, boss. They—" Kooney gestured with his Sharps butt in the direction of the Calaveras Rim— "are camped this side of the cliff."

SALTASH'S JAW dropped. No mention had been made in the hearing of the army trio that they themselves were being posse-hounded; there was nothing to be gained by exposing the fact that he and Kooney were outlaw-branded.

"You mean — they're night riding, Jube?"

Kooney shook his head. "Camped less'n three miles away. Seen their fire just now from the ridge. I figure we'll keep movin' and let the Injuns take care o' the Tucson bunch."

Saltash turned to Daley, who had been unable to make any sense out of the scout's guarded report.

"Go tell Miss Estaline and the colonel that we're shoving off in twenty minutes," he said. "Kooney thinks the Indians may be back here before daylight."

After Daley had left, Kooney reached out to grab a fistful of Saltash's buckskin shirt.

"Them damyankees aren't comin' with us, boss. Come mornin', they'll be in safe hands. The governor's brigade will see 'em on through to Despair."

Saltash was sorely tempted to acknowledge the truth of Kooney's deductions. Colonel Lind had been wined and dined at the governor's mansion in Tucson and the governor's posse would be ample protection against further Indian attack.

"I—I can't do it, Jube," Saltash heard himself saying. "I can't have that woman on my conscience. I doubt if that posse would give up their hunt for us, to escort Lind safely to Despair. The governor has undoubtedly ordered them to keep on our trail come hell or high water."

Kooney's shrug was eloquent of a mind made up. He turned on his heel and went padding off up the creekbed toward the horses, as silently as a phantom, walking in the toed-out Indian style he had picked up as a squaw man in earlier years.

Saltash, reading the storm signals in Kooney's abrupt refusal to argue, followed the little buckskinner to where their horses waited on picket.

"We're hittin' different trails, boss," Kooney said quietly, slapping a kak on his buckskin stallion. "You're makin' calf-eyes at that damyankee's daughter. I'm honin' to git back to Flatfoot Bess's lovin' arms. I reckon that about sizes it up."

Saltash remained speechless, knowing Kooney wasn't bluffing here, knowing he couldn't out-argue the little dwarf now.

Jabbing his buffalo rifle into its boot, Kooney mounted.

"I'll do what I can to draw that posse off your trail," the scout said. "You pick up the old emigrant road and foller it through Piñon Pass. See you in 'Paso—if you're lucky."

Saltash said, "Jube, you can't break off like this. You know I'm a stranger to this country. I'm depending on you to—"

Kooney picked up his reins. "Like I

say, you steer for Piñon Pass and it'll lead you to the fort. Adiós, boss. Where my scalp is concerned, I'm finicky. Lind ain't worth it to me."

The little scout was gone then, tooling his buckskin off up the ravine. Within twenty yards the spiny *mogotes* had closed in to hide the spunky little scout. For Saltash, it was like being lost at sea on a ship without a rudder.

CHAPTER VII

Rude Awakening

SICK in spirit, Saltash got the horses saddled and went back to the massacre scene to wrestle a McClellan off one of the dead ponies, for use on the pack-mule. He could not condemn Kooney's loyalty. After all, the little trail scout, no longer being employed by him, was in no way beholden to Saltash.

The army trio was waiting alongside the ambulance wreckage.

"How about my daughter's luggage?" Lind demanded surlily. "We can't just abandon—"

"Oh, hush, Dad!" Estaline cut in exasperatedly. "I should never have brought those useless dresses and knicknacks out west in the first place. Do you expect Mr. Saltash to carry them on his back like a porter?"

Saltash said, "We'll ride for what's left of the night. My scout will be out ahead of us, on guard. I figure we should make it to Fort Despair within three days—if we're lucky."

Dawn found them out on the broad expanse of scab-rock desert plateau which sloped eastward to the feet of the Calientes. The night's travel from the massacre site, slow as it had been, had gained for Saltash another precious ten-mile lead on the Tucson posse. He kept remembering Kooney's prediction—that the Coyoteros, if they came back for scalps, would be apt to attack the larger body of horsemen rather than hunt for Lind's party.

At mid-morning they reached a water hole surrounded by a grove of paloverdes. Unfamiliar with this Arizona terrain, the presence of verdure meant water in Saltash's judgment. Finding it meant the difference between death and survival. This water had taken them five miles north of the Fort Despair trail.

"We'll make a two-hour camp here," Saltash informed Colonel Lind. "Then we'll try to make the foothills by dark."

The Fort Despair commandant, dismounting stiffly and in a fashion which betrayed his lack of familiarity with horses, drew himself up and announced in a flat voice, "You seem to be laboring under the misapprehension that you are in command here, Mr. Saltash. As for this livestock being your property, let me remind you that I have authority to commandeer them for military use in the field."

Saltash's eyes clouded dangerously.

"Meaning what, Colonel?"

Lind shrugged. "Meaning that my daughter—er—is in need of rest. We will camp here until the cool of the evening."

Remembering the scant ten-mile lead he had over the governor's manhunt party, knowing what an easy trail they had left behind for the Brigade's civilian scout to pick up, Saltash shook his head.

"Your rank means nothing to me, Colonel. Two hours."

Whatever Lind was going to say was interrupted by the casual appearance of a little man with braided whiskers and disreputable buckskins, picking his way out of the nearby paloverdes.

"I'd say an hour's all the time we can spare," Jubilo Kooney announced, gesturing off to the southwest. "Dust on the horizon. Injuns." He dragged a dirty-nailed finger across his throat. "Less'n you want to wear a wig on dress parades, Colonel, you better keep pushin' like Saltash says."

The peppery-tempered little scout did not meet the Texan's eye. There was no need for explanations here. Kooney, against his better judgment, had rejoined them for whatever lay ahead.

THEY were on their way by high noon, following a swale between rock-capped ridges where they would be out of sight of Indian sentries or the trailing riders from Tucson.

Kooney was out of sight somewhere ahead, scouting the route. The presence of the little gaffer had lifted an intolerable burden of responsibility from Tom Saltash.

Estaline, riding Clout Durfree's leggy roan, chose to keep close by Saltash's stirrup. Trailing them were Sergeant Daley and the colonel, the latter's dignity sorely tried by having been assigned the lowly packmule.

The girl seemed in need of talk and Saltash encouraged it. Artfully, she kept the talk centered on him.

"I understand you made quite a killing from your trading in Tucson. Is that money I hear jingling all the time?"

Saltash grinned. "That's a cattle ranch you hear, ma'am."

"What?"

"I'm not cut out for bullwhacking," Saltash said. "I made this trip to Arizona to get a stake. Ex-soldiers are in a bad way in Texas, with the carpetbaggers in control. I made thirty thousand in Tucson. More than I could have earned riding range in twenty years. Already got a ranch picked out, on the Brazos."

The girl's eyes held a warmth of admiration and interest. "A cowboy," she mused. "And a self-sufficient cowboy. It was a bold thing you did, Mr. Saltash. You earned that money."

"The name," he said, "is Tom. I don't like bein' mistered."

She laughed. "I had you figured for a man old enough to be my father. I've known nothing but Army upbringing, you know. I've been taught to address my elders circumspectfully."

Tom Saltash winced. "Old enough to—Lord, I got to shave first chance I get. Why, Miss Lind, I'm only twenty-nine."

She stared at him in amazement, trying to visualize him without his curly black beard.

"Oh—how ungracious of me—to comment on such a personal thing as how old you were."

Her embarrassment gave way to laughter, in which Saltash joined. It was good to hear her laugh; it told him that yesterday's hellish experience had not unhinged this attractive girl's sanity as it well might have.

"From here on, then," she said, "you're Tom and I'm Estaline. When you say 'ma'am' it makes *me* feel like a crone. I'm only nineteen—Tom."

He drew her out with subtle questions, partly to get her mind off herself, partly because of a thoroughly aroused interest Saltash felt in getting better acquainted with this girl who had stuck by Daley's side through the thick of yesterday's siege, reloading his guns and bandaging his wounds.

Her mother had died at birth and life for Estaline Lind had been a succession of army camps and stations, the latest and most Western having been Jefferson Barracks near St. Louis.

"This is Dad's first real command," she said. "He's only forty-two—considerably older than his idol, General Custer, but still pretty young to be assigned such a vital post as Fort Despair, don't you think?"

Saltash's reply was non-committal. Allowing for some prejudiced exaggeration on Sergeant Daley's part, the cowardice Marcellus Lind had shown in yesterday's skirmish with Red Shirt's scouting party did not bode well for Fort Despair. An outpost was no better than its command and Lind was too much the petty martinet, the strutting gamecock, to win the respect and cooperation or even the loyalty of the men he might have to lead into battle. Assuming the Army would some day allow its men to fight.

The Texan found himself looking ahead to Fort Despair, and the resumption of his journey to Texas. Somehow, the prospect of taking over the cow-spread of his dreams, over in Baylor County on the Brazos, had suddenly lost its savor. He knew then that his destiny and this girl's were inextricably welded into one.

AT SUNDOWN they made camp in a sheltered rincon which old Jubilo Kooney had selected in advance of their arrival. There was firewood here, and a good defensive position in case of Indian attack. Most important of all, above the rincon was a rocky pinnacle made to order for a lookout post.

Estaline and the colonel had stood this gruelling day's travel surprisingly well; of the two, the girl was much the better rider. It was Kirk Daley who worried Saltash. The non-com's arrow-wounded arm was infected and he was running a high temperature. At supper he ate nothing and his conversation had a tendency to wander. It would be touch-and-go, getting Daley to the infirmary at Fort Despair in time to avoid having the post surgeon amputate that arm.

Saltash erected a pup tent, salvaged from the supplies aboard the ambulance, for Estaline's use. Fifty feet away, Lind spread his bedroll in aloof seclusion, his exalted rank forbidding any fraternization with Sergeant Daley. The latter had drifted off into a troubled sleep when Kooney and Saltash made their way out of the rincon.

The two of them agreed on a guard-mount schedule. Kooney would climb to the rock pinnacle to keep a lookout until midnight. Then he would wake up Saltash to spell him for the shift ending at dawn.

Spreading his bedroll, Saltash shucked his boots and turned in, marveling at the way old Jubilo glided off into the brush and made his climb to the lookout rock without a whisper of sound. Maybe he had had some Indian blood.

For the first time since their flight from Tucson had begun, Saltash felt the tension easing from his frame. Kooney had reported seeing no dust to the west, and was of the opinion that the governor's manhunt party, discovering the Indian fight scene in the nameless ravine, must have been frightened into calling off the chase. The main peril facing them now was Red Shirt and his cruising warriors; it was inevitable that they would be back in greater numbers.

Sleep was upon the exhausted Texan before he was aware of it. Some alien sound roused him after what seemed to him to have been but a few minutes' slumber, but when he sat bolt upright in his blankets it was to find the Arizona landscape blazing under the light of a sun that was two hours high.

Silhouetted against the yellow glare of that sun was a crouched figure alongside his bedding. Blinded by the light, groggy with the residue of sleep, Saltash grumbled testily, "You didn't wake me at midnight, Jube. How do you expect to ride all day without any sleep nights?"

Then Saltash's eyes drew into focus and he realized that the man holding the six-gun leveled at his chest was not Kooney. It was Oatie Kane, the marshal of Tucson, and he was grinning with satanical pleasure as he held Saltash's own gun in his fist.

"You led us a merry chase, Saltash," the lawman grinned, fingering the scabbed cut on his brow where the Texan had clubbed him the other night in the Tucson *juzgado*. "But she's worth it. The governor's got five thousand in gold waiting for the man who fetches you back to hang for murdering his son."

CHAPTER VIII

Smoke Signals

SALTASH climbed out of his blankets, shaking his head dazedly, aware that Kane was rising with him. This was an hallucination, brought on by exposure to the sun; this could not be happening. Kane's posse could not possibly have approached this camp across the open desert without Jubilo Kooney's giving the alarm.

Now Kane's massive handcuffs were snapping over Saltash's wrists, and the bite of those metal jaws over skin and sinew was reality enough.

Then Saltash had the answer to the posse's coup. A few yards away, little Ju-

bilo Kooney was standing between two burly members of the governor's Brigade. His arms were trussed at his back with rawhide and his buckskins glistened with wetness, as if he had been drenched with water for some reason. Then Saltash noticed the blood-leaking bruise on Kooney's bald pate.

Their eyes met and the little scout's meek voice reached Saltash: "I slipped on the rocks comin' down to fetch you at midnight, boss. Must of knocked myself cold as a well-digger's feet. She was daylight when one of these wooden soldiers dumped a canteen o' *agua* on my noggin. I let you down, Tom."

Saltash stared down at his fettered hands and knew this was finish. Old Kooney, as agile as a bighorn goat when it came to scaling rocks, had met with probably the first mishap of his career. For them both, it meant hangrope.

"Está nada, Jube," Saltash said heavily. "We can just be glad it was the governor's bunch instead of redskins. Otherwise the colonel and his daughter would have been lost too."

Saltash looked dazedly around. Some distance from the mouth of the rincon, the possemen's lather-drenched horses were bunched, ground-hitched, heads down. Obviously the marshal had kept his riders moving all night; they had only recently reached this camp.

A group of fifteen or so Brigadiers were emerging from the rincon, chattering excitedly, the sun bright on their rifles and the gold braided frogs of their parade uniforms. With them was a lanky civilian scout with a ragged yellow beard depending to his belt buckle, who appeared to be their leader.

Remembering Kooney's jealous comments of the day before yesterday, Saltash reckoned that the scout in the greasy buckskins was the man responsible for the Tucsonians having tracked them down; none of the governor's guards seemed fitted for a desert manhunt. Vanity was so strong within these mercenaries that despite the mounting heat of the day, they retained their flamboyant uniform coats, bristling with imitation war medals.

Out-glittering them, however, was Colonel Marcellus Lind. Fort Despair's new commandant was accompanying the governor's men out of the rincon, Estaline and Sergeant Daley following, the non-com accepting the girl's supporting arm. Out of the depths of his personal despair, Tom Saltash felt relief at seeing Daley able to be about.

The group walked out to where the marshal was riding herd over Tom Saltash. The Texan's eyes were on Estaline alone, seeing the shocked wonderment cross her face as she stared at the iron bracelets on his wrists.

Releasing her grip on Daley, the girl strode past her father and came to a halt in front of Marshal Kane. Planting arms akimbo on slim hips, the colonel's daughter demanded angrily:

"What do you mean, Major Kane—putting Tom Saltash in irons? He and Mr. Kooney there saved our lives. They were escorting us to Fort Despair. What is the meaning of this outrageous treatment?"

It was obvious to Saltash that Estaline had made Kane's acquaintance during her brief stay in Tucson. Doffing his black Mormon-style hat, Kane said diffidently, "I ain't doubtin' that Saltash and his runty-built pard chased off them Indians, Miss Lind. But it so happens this posse of mine was trailin' that pair. They're wanted outlaws, ma'am. I have personal orders from the governor of the territory to apprehend them at all costs."

ESTALINE'S jaw dropped. Her eyes held a shocked incredulity as she turned to stare at Saltash. For the Texan, this was the most abysmally miserable moment of his life, knowing the disillusionment he would see next in Estaline's face.

"Tom Saltash—an outlaw? Why, that's preposterous. He was the toast of Tucson, the day our detail left the pueblo."

Kane shrugged. He massaged the half-healed bruise on his skull, framing his words carefully.

"Be that as it may, Miss Lind—the same day you folks left Tucson, Saltash murdered a man. That man was the governor's own son. It was a brawl about a honkytonk harlot, and Saltash shot Luke Merriman between the eyes—"

Saltash burst out angrily, "Don't misrepresent the facts, Marshal. A woman had nothing to do—"

Kane went on, holding the girl's complete attention, "See this mark on my head? Saltash bashed me with a gun somebody smuggled into his jail cell, just when I was fixin' to take him out to face the governor. Him and Kooney made a getaway. That's why me and my men are this far from Tucson. You don't think I'd bring nineteen men out into the thick of Coyotero country without good reason, do you?"

Estaline's eyes avoided Saltash now. Reading her disillusionment, old Jubilo Kooney spoke softly: "Miss Estaline, Tom and me are on the dodge, like the marshal says. But the woman in the case was a floozy I was flirtin' with, in no way connected with Tom. I—"

Saltash saw the girl's hands ball into fists. She turned away, tears bright in her eyes. "It is no concern of mine," she said, and fled behind the close-ranked Brigadiers.

Colonel Lind, rubbing the bruise Saltash's knuckles had left on his jaw, met the Texan's eyes and said to the man who had saved him from an Apache scalping knife, "A common outlaw, eh? I only regret I won't be on hand for your hanging, Saltash."

Fletch Amberson, the marshal's tracker, leered at his rival Jubilo Kooney and drawled, "Well, Major Kane, there's no use stallin' around. We better light a shuck back to the governor and collect our reward dinero on Saltash's and Kooney's pelts, hey?"

Kane put his black hat back on and sighed heavily.

"Reckon you're right, Fletch. No use roostin' in Indian country longer than necessary. Men, fix to ride in ten minutes. We got what we come for. We got a long trail ahead of us yet."

Colonel Lind wheeled on the marshal and said savagely, "Wait a moment, Kane. What about me and my daughter—and the wounded sergeant?"

Kane blinked. "What about 'em, sir? You know you're welcome to ride back to Tucson with us, sir."

Lind's jaw corners swelled. "I have need for your men's protection that is more important than your getting back to Tucson with your outlaws, Kane. Tucson? I have no intention of returning to that filthy pesthole, Major Kane. I am carrying orders from the War Department to assume command at Fort Despair. I am already two days overdue at my post."

Kane rubbed his stubbled jaw. "Fort Despair is only fifty miles 'tother side of this mountain range, Colonel. Your horses are in good shape. There is a well-defined trail all the way, my scout informs me. Nobody's holding you up, sir."

Lind snapped stiffly to attention, his eyes boring into Kane's. The marshal of Tucson's nearest claim to military rank was the honorary major's commission he held in the roster of Governor Merriman's personal police battalion. It was plain that he held Lind's superior authority in some awe.

"You stupid idiot," Lind raged. "You're not cutting me adrift on the desert without protection, not while I am in territory under the jurisdiction of the Fort Despair command. What I am trying to convey to you, Major Kane, is that these Brigadiers of yours are to be placed at my disposal at once. For escort duty as far as Fort Despair."

Kane backed off, torn between anger at having his command of the posse questioned, and his innate respect for a field grade officer of the United States Cavalry. It was true that out here on the field, where martial law prevailed, the ranking officer of the nearest army post was an unquestioned monarch. Yet the prospect of penetrating deeper into Indian country was not appealing to Kane.

"I'm under the governor's direct orders," Kane said lamely, "to overtake and

capture Tom Saltash and his partner here and return them posthaste to Tucson. Between you and the governor, Colonel, I reckon the governor's orders take precedence."

LIND FLUNG back his Custerian locks and reached out both hands to grip the lapels of the marshal's coat.

"Major Kane," Lind bit out, "Governor Merriman was my host at Tucson, as you well remember. The governor knows that Tucson would be wiped off the map if the United States Army withdrew its forces from the Territory. If you defy my orders, if you refuse to escort me and my party the remaining distance to my station, I will personally see to it that you are stripped of your rank and dealt with as an insubordinate."

Sweatbeads twinkled on Kane's stolid face. He licked his lips, his glance shuttling from Lind to his waiting Brigadiers.

Then he said, "I can't very well countermand a colonel's orders, sir. Very well. I reckon the governor won't object to our giving you and your daughter safe passage through the Indian country to Despair."

Within the hour, the cavalcade was heading into the broad mouth of Piñon Pass, the break in the Caliente mountains which pointed toward Fort Despair in the valley beyond, shut off from the east by the Piñalino Range.

Colonel Lind, astride Tom Saltash's big sorrel in lieu of the packmule, rode like a four-star general at the front of the column. Strung out behind him were the members of Kane's posse in a column of twos, with Saltash and Kooney boxed in by their guards.

Between the head of the column and the colonel, four riders rode abreast—Sergeant Daley, slumped in saddle, out of his head with the pain of his gangrenous arm; Estaline next to him, as solicitous as a military nurse over a sinking patient; Fletch Amberson, the Tucson scout, rode at Estaline's right stirrup, with the deposed Marshal Kane on the outside.

Amberson had come forth with the suggestion that he be permitted to outride the column; in the scout's eyes, the lifting mountain slopes on either side of Piñon Pass were fraught with Indian danger and a lookout should precede the cavalcade to give a warning in case hostiles were sighted.

This suggestion, not having come from Lind, did not meet with the colonel's approval. Estaline's martinet father was getting his first taste of the heady wine of absolute power. These Brigadiers, the cream of the Territorial constabulary, were subservient to his slightest whim. As a result, Lind had overruled Amberson, choosing to spearhead this advance into the rocky pass in person.

For Tom Saltash, this side-journey to Fort Despair was an intolerable delay. Knowing his chances of justice in Tucson were nil, he was eager to face the wrath of the man whose son he had shot down on a saloon porch.

The prospect of the gallows did not occupy the major portion of the Texan's thoughts. His mind was divided between a nostalgic yearning for the Brazos cattle ranch which would never be his, and a nagging wonderment as to what was going on in Estaline's mind concerning him.

Did the girl feel contempt for him, swallowing Kane's story that he was a wanted killer—or worse yet, that a cheap dancehall jezebel had been the motive for his crime? It became imperative to Saltash that he somehow contrive a few moments' time with the girl, perhaps after they had reached trail's end at Fort Despair, to avow his hopeless love for her before it was too late, to let her know his version of Luke Merriman's killing.

At his side, old Jubilo Kooney kept up a running tirade of Confederate invective.

"Look at them spangled uniforms these misbegotten damyankees are sportin', Tom!" Kooney grumbled. "The Injuns could spot 'em fifty mile off. Marchin' into the jaws o' Piñon Pass like rats followin' the Pied Piper. Hell, when the showdown comes Red Shirt's bucks will pick off these tinhorn soldiers like settin' pigeons."

Saltash made no comment. They were in the heart of Alhecama's domain now, but Colonel Lind was surely aware of that. A guard numbering less than twenty-five guns would be easy pickings for the warriors the Coyotero chief could assemble for an attack.

TOWARD mid-afternoon, when the long dusty column was nearing the summit of the Pass with their first view of Fort Despair's valley soon to become visible, Tom Saltash spotted the white puffs of smoke lifting into the enamel-blue sky from a copper-red lava peak on the north shoulder of the Pass.

From his experiences with the Apaches en route from El Paso during the past month, Saltash recognized those ragged white blossoms for what they were: Indian smoke signals. Lind's column had been sighted by one of Red Shirt's sentinels.

At his stirrup, old Kooney drawled offhandedly, "Look south yonderward, boss. Another smoke signal. The redskins have got us boxed in. I wonder if Fletch Amberson has savvy enough to read what that smoke's sayin'?"

Up ahead, the Brigade's bugler blasted his trumpet and the column came to a halt. Colonel Lind came trotting back, demanding an explanation for the unauthorized bugle call. Saltash saw Marshal Kane and his civilian scout, Amberson, spur forward to join the commanding officer.

A heated conference went on for a few minutes, and then Kane waved his arm to the Brigadier column and shouted, "Fetch the prisoners forward, Lieutenant Shane."

A few moments later Tom Saltash and Jubilo Kooney had joined the conference. Lind, Saltash noticed, was white-lipped and grim, either because his authority had been questioned or because his attention had been called to the Indian sign on the high horizons north and south of them, Saltash could not determine which.

"Kooney," Marshal Kane said, "my scout Amberson says those smoke signals are of Indian origin. He wanted your confirmation."

Kooney spat disgustedly into the dust.

"Hell, yes—o' course redskins are manipulatin' a blanket over a pile of smoulderin' green brush to send up them smokes. What did Amberson think it was—some tenderfoot drop a seegar butt in the weeds?"

Fletch Amberson flushed angrily. "I kin savvy Cochise talk and Mescalero signals," the civilian said defensively, "but them smokes must be Coyotero. They don't make sense to me."

Colonel Lind glared at little Kooney and said brusquely, "Can you interpret those signals, fellow?"

Kooney shifted his weight in saddle, obviously pleased at being the center of attraction.

"That smoke to north yonder," he said, "says the palefaces in the Pass here number the fingers on a Injun's two hands. The other signal south yonder is bringin' a war party out of the mountings, painted for a big kill."

Kooney's words brought about a frozen silence. Finally Colonel Lind picked up his reins and curvetted his horse out of the group.

"We will ride at the double," he said, "and be out of the Pass and into the valley this side of Fort Despair before the red devils can mass for an assault on our column. Instruct the bugler to that effect, Major Kane."

Kane shook his head adamantly. Turning to Saltash, the Tucson marshal asked his prisoner. "You've had recent experience at Apache fighting, Saltash. What would you do in this case?"

Tom Saltash sized up the roundabout terrain.

"I would dig in on the crest of that ridge yonder and prepare for a siege," the Texan said quietly. "As soon as it got dark I would dispatch a courier to Fort Despair to bring aid. That way, help would come from the cavalry before the Indians could smoke us out."

Kane and Amberson nodded. Jubilo Kooney commented sagely, "Them's my

sentiments. Red Shirt's already got braves ambushed on the far side of the Pass to cut us off, I reckon. They wouldn't be tippin' off their hand with smoke signals if they weren't damned sure they had us bottled up."

Kane turned to face Colonel Lind. "I agree with Saltash," he said. "There's no use making a run for it, sir. Our horses are gaunted as it is. On elevated ground, we'd have a chance."

Colonel Marcellus Lind swung his horse around facing the summit of the Pass ahead of them.

"We will withdraw from this Pass at top speed," he said. "I have already fought through one siege and I do not propose to let the redskins catch me sitting tight again. Bugler, sound the order for double-time march."

THE COLUMN broke into a ragged trot, dust clouding up to obscure the westering sun at their backs, blotting out the sinister smoke-puffs rising from the high peaks.

Within the hour, they had topped the summit of Piñon Pass and ahead of them was the broad, purple-shadowed floor of the valley stretching out to meet the rugged Piñalinos. In clear atmosphere and with a good glass, a man would be able to pick out the bastioned stockade of Fort Despair from this seven-thousand foot elevation.

On the down grade, the horses had easier going. The old ruts of the emigrant trail were clearly defined here, but the Catalina's walls were closing in, narrowing into a canyon, increasing the danger of ambuscade.

Closely bunched four abreast, the governor's Brigadiers rode with rifles out of scabbard, surveying the dusk-clad mountain slopes on either side with apprehension.

Kooney remarked resignedly, "I hope they cut these piggin' strings and let me have a gun. Only good thing about this she-bang is that my scalp won't be worth liftin'. Boss, what I wouldn't give for a glimpse of Flatfoot Bess about now. Damn that Lulu Babe—"

They were entering the blue-shadowed gut of a narrowing defile when the first shots erupted from the north slope and three gaudy-uniformed Brigadiers spilled lifeless from saddle.

Then the rocky slopes were shattered by a cacophony of Coyotero warwhoops and the first sleet of arrows came arching in to tell Tom Saltash that Lind had led his column into a death trap from which there could be no hope of escape.

"Kane," Saltash yelled above the furor, "unlock these cuffs! We'll need every gun we can muster!"

CHAPTER IX

Hell in Piñon Pass

AN iron-tipped arrow impaled itself in the withers of Saltash's horse and the animal's tortured bucking hurled the Texan violently out of stirrups. Through the boiling dust he saw Oatie Kane's mount go down, riddled with lead, and Saltash was beside the Tucson marshal on the instant, shaking his fettered wrists in the lawman's face and shouting for release.

Hell was out of its halter on all sides. Dead and dying Brigadiers were being trampled by bolting horses. Somewhere in that mêlée Saltash knew Estaline Lind was trapped and that this moment his full concern was for her.

Moving like an automaton, Kane fumbled in a pocket for keys and unlocked Saltash's irons. Off through the dust, Saltash had kaleidoscopic glimpses of many things: Colonel Marcellus Lind, out of stirrups, cringing with his back to a rock wall that shielded him from the Indian assault; Sergeant Daley triggering shots up the slope, half out of his head with delirium but with enough presence of mind to use his good arm.

Through a welter of plunging, empty-saddled horses, Saltash fought his way

along the confused column to where he saw Estaline trying to extricate one leg half-pinioned to the ground by the weight of her downed pony. Saltash was at her side then, tugging with superhuman strength at cantle and horn until the girl got free. Her face was a chalk-white oval before him as he encircled her waist with an arm and made for the shelter of a rock-ribbed defile on the north side of the emigrant road.

Inside that fissure Saltash crowded the girl against the granite wall and shouted with teeth close to her ear, "Keep right here and you'll be all right. I'll tell your father—"

She reached out to seize his fringed sleeves as he was turning to head back into the open pass. Her voice was barely audible above the screams of dying men and animals, the Coyotero whoops and the steady thunder of guns. "Tom—what are our chances here?"

He spoke grimly, knowing this was no time for false hopes. "Better than half the column is already lost. If we can hold out till dark we might have a chance at defense. But I wouldn't stake much on seeing tomorrow's sunrise, Estaline."

Her lips were seeking his and the urgency of his own wants made him forget the pandemonium surrounding them. He felt the passionate ardor in her arms, pulling his head down to hers, and her cry was like sweet music to him. "Tom, whatever happens—I want you to know I'm sorry for freezing up on you this morning when the marshal said you were an outlaw."

Saltash broke away from her then, saying something which was lost on her ears. She saw his buckskin-clad shape move back into the eddying dust and knew full well she might not see him alive again.

The surviving remnants of the Tucson posse had taken cover against the rocks on the south side of the road now, some of the Brigadiers returning a wasted fire at the yipping, unseen Indian targets higher up.

Saltash saw old Kooney doing a wild jig out among the fallen horses and realized the old scout's arms were still trussed behind his back.

From the saddle of a dead Brigade horse Saltash found a sheathed bayonet and he used that to sever his partner's bonds. The instant he was free, the little four-footer pounced on a Brigadier's rifle, whipped it to shoulder and triggered a slug at a scarlet-shirted Indian half-seen through the brush.

"The big chief," Kooney bawled. "That red shirt must be bullet proof. You didn't kill him 'tother day. And I missed—"

Saltash felt the air-whip of a bullet cross his cheek and he flung himself down at the edge of the rock wall. The ambuscade was less than three minutes old but defeat was imminent.

Out of that panicked situation, Tom Saltash rose as the leader to organize a defense with what manpower had escaped the initial slaughter. When a break came in the Apache fire, it was the Texan's strident yell that gave the demoralized possemen a leader to rally behind:

"Everybody into the gulch on the north side of the road! Kane! Colonel—it's our only chance to last out till dark."

COLONEL LIND came staggering across the road, gibbering senselessly. In response to Saltash's shouted directions the officer crossed the road to fling himself out of sight in the defile Saltash had chosen as the spot for their last stand.

Others followed Lind. Marshal Kane, the governor's gaudy-uniformed guards, all of them tasting Indian attack for the first time. But no man tarried to obey Saltash's desperate orders: "Pick up all the guns and shell belts you can carry —canteens—grub sacks—"

Sergeant Kirk Daley, eyes glazed with fever, came reeling past. His shoulders sagged under the straps of waterbags and canteens plucked from fallen mounts. In this moment Saltash would have pawned his own chances of escape to have had a few more men like the non-com from the Seventeenth Regiment. Dying by inches, Daley's military training was rul-

ing his actions.

Only the sheltering dust kept Saltash from being a target for Indian fire as he made his rounds of the slaughtered horses, grabbing a sixgun here, a booted rifle there. He and Jubilo Kooney made repeated trips to the rocky inclosure where the survivors were cringing, dumping what supplies they could salvage, knowing the Indians would close in as darkness fell and make it impossible to show themselves in the open again once the moon rose.

Of the livestock, only two horses were unscathed, not counting the few which had bolted up and down the Pass. One of the surviving horses had a dead man slumped over its saddle, moccasined feet caught in oxbow stirrups. Dragging the corpse to the ground, Saltash recognized it as Fletch Amberson, the Tucson scout. Two feathered shafts jutted from Amberson's chest.

He and Kooney got the horses to the safety of the rocky draw. Now that the dust had settled, Saltash could assess their situation. Rapidly counting noses, he was appalled to find that only eight of the nineteen Brigadiers were still alive, several of them groveling from the agony of their wounds.

The bloody track of a ricochet was on Marshal Kane's cheek. His eyes, beholding his erstwhile prisoner, held the vacuity of a man in a trance.

Saltash made his way on up the draw beyond the huddled men, Kooney at his heels. Twenty yards up, the rocky pocket pinched in, making a blind alley of their defensive position.

"You're the king pin here, boss," old Kooney remarked, scanning the ribbon of sky overhead, a sixgun poised in one hand as if he expected to see a paint-daubed Coyotero peering down upon their hideout. "What's the good word?"

Saltash dragged a shaking hand over his brow, startled to see crimson on his arm. He hadn't felt the Apache bullet which had grazed the egg of muscle next to his right shoulder.

"Come dark," Saltash panted, "we'll try to send a man down the Pass to fetch help from the fort. I doubt if the redskins try to storm this pocket before dawn tomorrow."

Kooney's jaws masticated his tobacco cud. "Funny how the good Lord protects the unworthy, boss. That Lind bastard ain't got a scratch on him. Last time I seen him he was bawlin' like an infant."

Saltash headed back down the fissure to size up the survivors. He would have liked to have leaned on Sergeant Daley, but that soldier was sitting Turk-fashion on the ground, head dipped, a man Saltash knew was dying from the infection already rife in his bloodstream. Daley had accounted himself like a hero during that brief action out there.

He spotted Colonel Lind, crowded back against the wall with his elbows on knees, face buried in his hands. Estaline was busy herself carrying the precious water canteens to the safety of the pocket's rear.

Outside in the Pass, a brooding silence had fallen, a silence that hid the furtive movements of the Indian hordes. With so many scalps for the gathering, Saltash knew the road would be visited during the night by Coyotero bucks.

"I want four men," Saltash spoke briskly, "to climb up on the rim above us and keep Red Shirt's braves from trying to creep up on us. Marshal Kane, pick four of your men."

Kane snapped out of his daze with a visible effort. He got to his feet and walked over to where his Brigadiers were huddled, facing the restricted view of the road where the dead were scattered about.

BY THE time darkness had closed in, Saltash had his four guards posted at the upper end of the pocket. He unsaddled the two horses and weighted their reins with rocks, well back in the defile, not knowing exactly why he placed so much importance on the surviving horses.

Knowing the Coyoteros would be drawing in, if they had not already done so, Saltash and Kooney made their way back

to the road to check on the dead, on the off chance that they might have overlooked a wounded man. When they returned to the inky pocket of the defile they carried a pair of grub packs from the carcass of one of Kane's pack mules.

Calling Estaline's name in the darkness, Saltash said, "Break out rations for everyone, Estaline. I figure we've got enough food and water for a two-day siege. If we haven't gotten help from Fort Despair by then we won't need rations."

He heard the girl's acknowledgement and felt thanksgiving for the courage Lind's daughter was showing under this ordeal.

After a whispered council-of-war with Kooney, Saltash put the little scout in charge of guarding the mouth of the opening, although Kooney agreed with him that the Apaches would not be apt to attempt storming their defense en masse. It was contrary to the Indian character to run unnecessary risks when a waiting game would be wiser.

Having done what he could here, Saltash made his way up the defile and scrambled past the Brigades on lookout duty to make his way out onto the open face of the Piñon Pass slope.

The curdled darkness out there, dimly seen under the light of the first stars, hid menace. Saltash could hear the furtive rustling of brush and knew Red Shirt had his painted warriors deployed up there to prevent any chance at a break-away of their quarry.

The wild grasses, tinder dry at this season, grew brisket-high to a steer along this slope, giving cover enough for an Indian to get close enough to the defile to fire down at the survivors. With the coming of night, a stiff breeze was sweeping through the break in the mountain range, rustling those grasses and making it impossible to hear a savage's approach.

An idea came to Saltash. From this point on the east side of the Pass, Fort Despair must be in a direct line of view. It was a good thirty miles across the valley to the Army outpost, a night's ride for a messenger—though the chances of getting a rider through the Indian cordon, even at night, were slim indeed.

Saltash began uprooting tufts of dried ignota weed and buffalo grass. Tying the grass into a bundle, he crawled into an eroded gully to get out of sight of spying Indian eyes and touched a match to the bundle.

The sudden bloom of firelight coming from the crack in the ground brought a clamor of gutteral Indian voices, further up the slope. A rifle cracked and a bullet whistled overhead.

Bracing himself against the adobe walls, Saltash flung the blazing bundle as far as he could up the slope. He saw the wind catch the trailing sparks, saw the fiery missive describe an arc like a comet and land in the brush fifty feet away.

An angry crackling and a spreading red glow rewarded Saltash, warning him to get back to cover before the firelight became general and made him a target. The wind was driving the flames up the slope on a spreading front, forcing Apaches into retreat.

Making it back into the defile, Saltash heard one of his Brigadier guards speak cautiously: "Aimin' to burn the Indian bastards out, eh, Saltash?"

Saltash made no comment. Wriggling his way back down to where the survivors were huddled, he was greeted by Colonel Lind's petulant inquiry. "The Indians are trying to smoke us out, is that it?"

The Texan picked up a canteen and drank sparingly. As an afterthought he said to Estaline, crouched over in the shadows, "Better have Marshal Kane ride herd on the water supply, Estaline."

Then he said to the assembled men, in a voice loud enough to carry down to where old Kooney was guarding the roadside entrance, "I set that fire. For two reasons—three reasons. It will have some advantage in driving the Apaches back on the north wall of the Pass. The flames will also be seen at Fort Despair and might bring a patrol out to investigate. But the main thing is, that fire will create a diversion while one of us tries to get through and go for help.

THE GLOW of the fire was penetrating into this fissure now and Saltash made a quick count of the survivors. Three Brigadiers, the marshal, Colonel Lind, Daley and old Kooney. Estaline didn't count. With himself, that made eight prospects for the hazardous attempt to break through the Indian lines and head for the fort. Seven, really. Daley was on his way out.

"I'm asking for a volunteer," Saltash said, "to make it to Despair and bring back help. It will be useless to attempt a break-through on horseback. A good man should be able to make it to the fort by tomorrow noon, assuming he doesn't meet a patrol coming out to check on this fire in the Pass."

No volunteer spoke up. Finally Colonel Lind said hoarsely, "How about yourself, Saltash? You've made yourself the leader here. A good commander doesn't hesitate to do what he would ask his underlings to do."

Out of the darkness Kirk Daley spoke thickly: "Colonel Lind carries the rank in this shebang, Saltash. I don't hear him volunteerin' to be no messenger, the yellow-bellied scut."

Saltash took off his sombrero and thumbed six rifle cartridges from a bandolier he had donned, dropping the shells into the hat. To them he added a metallic cartridge chambered for a Colt.

"We'll do this the right way," Saltash said. "I'm passing around some ballots. Each of you will draw one cartridge out of this hat. The man who gets the short one is chosen to try and make it to the fort, leaving immediately, before the moon rises."

Colonel Lind said swiftly, "Does that include the men you have posted up on the rim, Saltash? They're no better—"

"They're risking their scalps right now, and will for the duration of the night," Saltash snapped, holding out his hat to the colonel. "If the man who draws the short bullet refuses—whoever he may be—I'll shoot him down and go myself."

The colonel reached a shaking hand into the hat and drew out a cartridge. Holding it out into the light, he cried in a frenzy of relief. "A rifle shell. I'm not the one!"

One by one, Saltash made the rounds, including a trip to the mouth of the defile to let Kooney select a ballot. He took the remaining cartridge himself. It was a rifle cartridge. He returned it to a loop in his bandolier, knowing a vague relief that destiny had not singled him out to leave this trap. To have done so would have been to abandon this group without a leader.

"All right," Saltash called out. "Who picked the revolver slug?"

There was a long silence, broken only by the sawing of fast breaths and the dull crackle of the flames sweeping up the north slope of Piñon Pass outside. Then Marshal Kane cleared his throat. "Reckon I'm elected, Saltash," Kane said, coming stiffly to his feet.

Saltash felt a momentary elation. The thought did not enter his mind that he was sending the man who had chased him across the desert to drag back to a hangman, on a trek which was more suicidal than not. But Kane was a dependable man for this job.

From the collection of canteens, Saltash chose a full one and handed it to Kane. The marshal had accepted his rôle as messenger without visible signs of fear.

The two of them made their way down the defile to where Kooney crouched on guard. Several acres of the north slope were now ablaze, as the wind carried the flames through the dead grass and brush, but the Pass road itself was in thick shadow.

"All right," Saltash said, gripping the marshal's hand. "You know what depends on your getting through to the fort, Marshal." He added drily. "If you make it back in time, I'll still be here. If the 'Paches have got me, you can always lug my carcass back to show the governor and collect my bounty."

Kane's answer made Saltash ashamed of his bitter thrust. Squeezing his erstwhile prisoner's hand, Kane said humbly.

"If I make it through to the fort, son, I'll guarantee you I won't haul you back to Tucson. You're a man to ride the river with, Saltash. Try to remember I was merely obeying orders."

Kane was gone then, crouched low as he began picking his way through the shapeless mounds of dead horses and dead men out on the road. Back in the defile, Kooney and Saltash waited tensely, thankful for the complete darkness out there.

LESS THAN a minute later a gunshot shattered the stillness from somewhere on the south wall of the Pass. Hardly had the echoes of that report fled across the badlands than Oatie Kane's shrieking voice came back to them:

"I'm hit—Gawd help me, I'm hit. I can't see. Don't leave me to croak out here—"

A shoulder brushed Saltash from the rear and before he could reach out to detain the man, Sergeant Kirk Daley had plunged out into the open road.

"I'll fetch the marshal back, Saltash!" the wounded non-com panted. "I'm not good for nothin' else. Can't let him be scalped alive—"

Saltash started forward, nausea stabbing him as he heard Kane's moans, the sound of his body threshing the dirt not fifty feet away. Daley was a shadow moving against shadows, calling softly to Kane.

"Boss, come back here!" Kooney growled. "Let the Sargeant drag him back—"

Crawling on hands and knees, Saltash made his way through the stiff-legged carcasses of slain animals. His hand, the flat of his palm, pressed down on a grisly flabbiness and he withdrew it in horror, recognizing the bearded head of a dead Brigadier.

Then he had Kirk Daley's moving shape dead ahead, silhouetted against the fire-glare. Daley was moving in on Kane, keening low sounds to reassure the fallen marshal.

An Apache gave vent to a soul-chilling screech off in the brush and Saltash heard the *twinnng* of a bowstring. Close on the heels of that sound was the solid *thunk* of an arrow hitting its target and simultaneously Saltash saw Daley drop.

Off ahead, Kane's moanings guided Saltash as he slithered up abreast of the fallen sergeant. Daley was breathing stertorously and, recognizing the pressure of Saltash's hand on his shoulder, spoke with blood gargling in his windpipe, "I only hope that damn colonel pays for leadin' us into this mess, Saltash—"

The Texan saw that the Apache shaft had skewered the non-com's lungs. It was fantastic that Daley clung to life.

"I'll lug Kane in," he whispered, "and be back for you, kid. You're the best man in the lot—"

He left Daley groveling in the thick silver dust and twenty feet further on he came upon Oatis Kane. The Tucson marshal's face was drenched with blood and he was unconscious now.

Rolling smoke, a back-eddy of the brush fire up the north slope, plunged down to give Saltash a protective screen, shielding him from the Apaches hidden close at hand. He hoisted Kane over his shoulder and staggered back up the road. Passing Daley's sprawled shape, he nudged the soldier with a boot toe and knew the sergeant was dead.

Three minutes later, Kooney was helping him carry the wounded marshal into the shelter of the defile. Estaline and the Brigadiers crowded around as they laid the marshal down and Saltash struck a match to determine the extent of the man's hurt.

Estaline turned away from the sight with a gasp of horror. The Apache bullet had plowed a furrow across Kane's eye-sockets, damaging both eyes beyond repair and scooping a chunk out of the bridge of his nose.

"He'll recover," Saltash whispered as the match guttered out, "but he'll never see the light of day again. A pity the damned Indian didn't draw an inch to the left."

Old Kooney drew Saltash aside. "I'll git through to the fort, boss," the old scout whispered. "Should o' rigged the ballot

that way to begin with."

Saltash shook his head. "No. Come daylight we'll need you here, Jube." The Texan pulled in a heavy breath. "We'll give up trying to send a messenger out," he said. "We'll have to put our faith in somebody at the fort spotting our fire."

CHAPTER X

Deserter

BY DAWN the brush fire had burned itself out on the naked rocks which crowned the north shoulder of the Pass. As Saltash predicted, there had been no activity from the Indians while darkness held; the wily Alhecama, knowing he had overwhelming superiority in numbers, had chosen to keep his victims boxed in.

A pall of smoke had settled from rim to rim of Piñon Pass, turning the sun into a murky tarnished copper disk, cutting the torturing heat. But daylight revealed that Red Shirt's braves had not been idle during the night.

Despite Kooney's owl-keen night vision, skulking Coyoteros had visited the road with their scalping knives, lifting their grisly trophies from the dead, some of them within point-blank range of the scout's guns. Kirk Daley's corpse had been stripped and mutilated, as if his blue uniform picked him out for special desecration.

"I'm gettin' old, boss," Kooney said bitterly. "Didn't hear a whisper all night."

By mid-morning the smoke had thinned and the Apaches on the south slope poured a blind fire into the rocky draw. The criss-crossing ricochets found their mark on two of the sleeping Brigadiers who had been on lookout duty until dawn.

Estaline and the colonel did not rouse from their drugged sleep when the ten-minute spate of firing ran its course. They were safe from ricocheting lead, the colonel crammed into a fissure in the granite wall like a hunted thing.

Huddled here like trapped rats, without a target to shoot at, was beginning to unhinge the sanity of these men. The most pitiable figure of all was Marshal Kane, a blindfold of blood-soaked bandage girdling his head. In possession of all his senses but one, Kane realized he was doomed to a lifetime of darkness. That lifetime might be measured in hours, now. . . .

By noon the smoke-hazed sun was pouring its heat into the fissure and there was no escaping it. Estaline roused and went the rounds with a waterbag, the rationing under Saltash's strict supervision. Saltash believed that someone had been at the water containers during the night, for the supply was dangerously low already.

The afternoon hours dragged with only occasional sounds of Indian yelling and sporadic gunshots to keep the besieged party cringing in the rocks. The two new dead were hastily buried.

"Waiting us out," Saltash told Kooney. "I may change my mind about trying to get through to Despair. If they saw our smoke they've had time to get a company of bluecoats on the way out of the valley by now."

Kooney snorted contemptuously. "Them bluenose Yankee dog-soldiers won't budge from their stockade without a commandin' officer to signal the bugler," the scout grunted. "Lind ain't qualified for a valor medal so far, I'm noticin'."

As dusk closed in for the second time over the Pass, Saltash sought out the colonel. Lind had avoided even his daughter's company during the day, sensing Estaline's own withdrawal within herself.

"Colonel," Saltash said, "how many troops are garrisoned at Despair? Enough for them to spare a company to check on this smoke in the Pass, knowing you're overdue?"

Lind shrugged. "It is a four-company post," he said in a toneless voice. "But the War Department has issued orders not to molest the redskins without direct provocation—an attack on the post itself.

You surely know that."

Saltash nodded bitterly. "I know," he said. "That's why Fort Despair didn't have any troops in the field when my wagon train was crossing the Dragoons. What's wrong back in Washington? Don't they know Arizona is threatened with extinction if they don't fight fire with fire?"

The epaulets stirred on Lind's shoulders as he made a helpless gesture. "I cannot speak for my superiors," he said. "If we get through this disaster, I intend to file charges of some sort against you, Saltash."

"Against me? For what? Cowardice under fire? And me not even a soldier?"

Lind said bitterly, "You deliberately allowed Sergeant Daley to go to his death, knowing his mental condition at the time."

Saltash turned away, curbing an intemperate impulse to drive a boot into the officer's face.

"If we ever reach Fort Despair," he said curtly. "I'll have a few things to say regarding your own soldiering, Colonel. I imagine your own daughter will back me up."

NIGHT CLOSED in without the expected Indian assault materializing. For Kooney, the endless waiting was getting untenable, especially since he had gotten a glimpse of Chief Alhecama's red-shirted figure parading on a war pony at sunset time, too far up the south slope to waste a bullet on.

"I'm goin' plum besmirk, boss," Kooney raged. "I never told you the Coyoteros used to consider me a blood brother, did I?"

Saltash was startled. He was always discovering new facets to this extraordinary little man's character. He had guessed from random remarks that Kooney had lived with various Indian tribes before the war, but this latest disclosure was unexpected.

"Yep," Kooney admitted shamelessly. "Shared my blankets with a Coyotero squaw once, back in '48. Unfortunately Red Shirt took a likin' to her an' bein' the big chief, expelled me from the tribe. Gives me a funny feelin', though, knowin' I'm itchin' to draw a bead on a young buck who may have my blood in his veins."

As night drew on, Saltash made a second call for volunteers to attempt getting through to Despair. But there were none. The available men had Apache-blinded Marshal Kane before them as a horrible example.

Kooney was willing, even impatient to take the gamble, but Saltash would not permit it. Knowing panic might break out if he undertook the mission himself and left this group without a leader to rally them, he decided to give up the idea.

This second night under Indian siege, Kooney and the Texan alternated on lookout duty at the mouth of the defile. The four Brigadiers responsible for guarding the upper gulch against sneak attack were asleep when Saltash checked their posts and he realized they were too far gone to respond to threats.

An outbreak of Apache gunnery roused Saltash in the gray light of a new dawn. Again Red Shirt was satisfied to pour a carroming enfilade into the rocky trap, though unaware that during the past day the whites had buried two victims of that blind-shooting technique.

When the Indian attack tapered off, Saltash moved from group to group, hunting for fresh casualties. Marshal Kane was in a delirious coma, refusing nourishment, with Estaline dripping water from a canteen onto his lips. Three of the Tucson possemen were sleeping so soundly that the thunder of the guns did not disturb them.

Their army rations and what food they had salvaged from the marshal's supply were about gone. The ammunition supply was critical, although they had seen no targets for a counter-fire.

"I give us tomorrow, and then these specimens will go rushin' out into the open beggin' to be tomahawked," old Kooney predicted. "I'm gittin' light in the head myself, boss."

Saltash nodded, knowing he was going

on his nerve now too. He had given up hope of assistance from Fort Despair. The time for help from that quarter was a day overdue. Lacking a commandant, the garrison over there in the Piñalino foothills would sit tight, waiting for Colonel Lind's detail to show up.

Colonel Lind! Saltash looked around, peering into the fissure where the officer crouched. He was nowhere in sight now.

Saltash made the rounds of the limited defile, peering behind the two horses which were beginning to show the results of two days and nights without feed. But Colonel Lind's fancy uniform was nowhere to be seen.

"Estaline!" Saltash called to the girl. "Where's your father?"

One look at Estaline's face told Saltash something. He went to the girl, drawing her out of earshot of the others, even though Kooney was the only man alert enough to eavesdrop.

"Daddy's gone," Estaline confessed. "He left sometime during the night. He knew someone had to get to the fort for help."

Saltash's first reaction was one of incredulous shock that Colonel Lind, whom he had written off as a yelow-belly, had found the courage to quit this trap and make off on what, for a man of his soft upbringing, must have been a journey into certain hell.

Then, appraising Estaline's tone of voice, the way she could not meet his eyes, he knew she was lying.

Grimly, Saltash strode over to the hole where Lind had forted up, taking a quick count of the canteens piled there. Four of the containers were missing.

He looked up, wordlessly meeting Estaline's brimming eyes. The truth was in them. Colonel Lind's absence had been a surprise to the girl. She had not discovered her father was missing until shortly before he himself had.

Lind deserted, ran the thought through Saltash's brain. Left his own flesh and blood behind—and took better than half our water with him. The dirty son—

It could be no other way. Lind had stolen off under cover of darkness, passing the sleeping guards on his way out of the defile. The nerve-sapping tension of waiting for the end to come had given Lind a brand of false courage that was lower than his treachery under fire.

A SHOUT from old Jubilo Kooney snapped Tom Saltash out of his anger. The little buckskinner had, at last, gone berserk. He was out in the middle of the road now, dancing a crazy man's dance amid the bloated carcasses of the fly-blown horses and men.

"Red Shirt's pullin' out, boss!" Kooney shrieked deliriously. "The Injuns are vamoosin'!"

The scout's words roused the sleeping men. They brought Tom Saltash racing out of the defile, intent on dragging Kooney back into cover.

And then he caught sight of the Indians, a long, seemingly endless file of them sharp-etched against the skyline a thousand feet overhead. A row of moving dots on horseback, filing along the Catalina shoulder, vanishing from view to the southwest.

"It's a trick, you crazy fool!" Saltash yelled. "They're trying to draw us out for a rear guard party to cut down!"

It was the brassy melody of an army bugle that gave the lie to Saltash's words. He wheeled about, staring down the wide-open Pass, and saw them then: two full companies of U. S. Cavalry, the Stars and Stripes and their regimental guidon fluttering in the breeze. Fort Despair troopers on matched bays and blacks, moving up the emigrant road!

"They seen your smoke, Tom!" old Kooney was shrilling. "Took them damyankees a long time to bestir themselves, but Old Glory's on the way an' the Injuns have lit a shuck!"

Blind Oatie Kane was lurching out into the open now, begging for someone to tell him what was going on. At his side, Estaline Lind was sobbing out the glad news: "My father got through to the fort last night, Mr. Kane. Help's coming—"

Kane's bearded face twitched to a

change of expression. Turning around in the perpetual well of darkness which was to be his memento of this siege in Piñon Pass, the Tucson marshal cawed out, "Jenks—Grotemann! Slap irons on that Saltash hombre. Him and Kooney. We'll get 'em back to the Governor yet—"

But no one heard him among the Brigadiers, so far as Saltash could see. All eyes were peering down-canyon, to where the Fort Despair troopers were now less than half a mile away, advancing at a fox trot against the heavy climb.

Tom Saltash moved through the milling survivors and drew Estaline Lind aside. The girl choked out, "I—I know Dad didn't bring help, Tom. But I—I had to say that."

The Texan pulled the girl close and kissed her.

"I've got to talk fast, Estaline," he said. "When those cavalrymen get here Kane will put Jubilo and me under arrest. Circumstances alter things. The other night when it didn't look like we had a chance, Kane was for letting me go. But you heard what he said—"

Estaline nodded. "The horses," she breathed. "You and Mr. Kooney can leave before the soldiers arrive—"

Old Jubilo was already back in the defile, leading the saddle horses down to the road.

"Estaline," Saltash said, desperate with a sense of time fast running out on him, "after you get to Fort Despair—there's a good chance your father didn't make it. What'll you do then?"

She pressed palms to throbbing temples. "I—don't know, Tom. I'm—alone in the world."

Old Kooney led the horses over. "We better be burnin' hoss-hair, boss. That marshal's blind but he's dead sot on collectin' the rewards on our topknots!"

Saltash reached for the reins and stepped into saddle.

"Estaline," he said, "that cow spread on the Brazos— I ain't got much to offer. You and I ain't strangers, not after what we've shared. If I send for you—to come to Texas—"

The girl was at his stirrup now, all the love her heart could hold mirrored in her eyes, his for the taking.

"There will never be anyone else, Tom. But go now—and remember that I'll get to Texas if I have to crawl!"

Out on the Pass road, Jubilo Kooney was attending to something that had slipped Saltash's mind these past two days. He was lifting the Tucson specie pouch from the horse Saltash had been riding when the attack broke and was buckling them on his own mount.

"Stay at the fort for the time being," Saltash told Estaline. "*Hasta la vista* and —I love you—"

THE SURVIVORS of the siege were beginning to run down the road to meet the oncoming rescue troopers now. The sun flashed bright on sabers and gunmetal as the fort's detachment neared.

Reining in the opposite direction, Kooney and the Texan spurred their jaded mounts toward the western summit. The skyline above was empty of Apaches now. Ahead of the fugitives was a long trek to by-pass the Caliente Range to pick up the trail to Texas again.

Following them up the narrow canyon was Marshal Kane's hysterical shout. "Don't leave me, Miss Lind—don't leave me! Grotemann—have you got Saltash an' Kooney tied up? I'll make that Texas Reb pay for losin' my eyesight—"

Then a turn in the rocky road shut off their view and Saltash was following Kooney's lead toward the crest of the Piñon Pass divide. Reaching it, the old scout pulled up, fingering his braided whiskers.

"That traitor of a marshall will have dawg-soldiers on our trail, sure as hell's hot, boss," Kooney opined. "Reckon the thing to do is separate. I'll follow the north wall, you the south. Doubt if they got trackers with 'em anyhow, but we got to out-fox 'em with a choice o' trails."

Saltash nodded agreement to the buckskinner's tactics. "No use keeping to the road. I'll meet you at Agarita Springs by sundown tomorrow—if not during the day."

The dwarfish little scout gave a yank on his pigtail to indicate agreement with Saltash's choice of a rendezvous. Then Kooney thought of something and he reached behind his cantle to unsling the *alforja* pouches laden with sixty thousand dollars in gold and silver specie.

"You ride herd on this, boss," Kooney said, handing over the cantlebags. "It's yourn to worry about. Puts temptation out o' my way. I never had much use for dinero. Might git a notion to lighten my load an' stash it somewheres."

They parted with that, Kooney spurring his horse into the chaparral north of the road. For the first time since they had started their flight, Saltash became aware that his horse was faltering badly. By the time he had made it behind the screening chaparral he knew the animal was suffering from a bullet wound he had not noticed before.

The Texan dismounted when he came to a level ledge of rock with the intention of examining the mount. Then dismay struck him as he saw the horse's forelegs buckle, and the animal went down as if pole-axed.

He knew even before he had removed the money pouches that the animal was stone dead and that he was afoot. He was about to shout for Kooney when a shift in the wind brought to his ears the drumming thunder of hoofs pounding up the far side of the divide.

Marshal Kane already had a cavalry posse on their trail. A matter of minutes would see the pursuing riders topping the crest of the Pass. It was too late to call Jubilo Kooney back now, even if the scout's gaunted horse could carry double.

Something akin to panic invaded Tom Saltash as he slogged off up the slope, making for better cover. The sun was setting, but at this season twilight would hold until nine o'clock and give Kane's trailing soldiers several hours for a man-hunt. The tracks where he and Kooney had split up would be plain to read in the thick dust of the old emigrant road.

The weight of the specie was something he would have to get rid of. Fighting through a hedge of tornillos, he saw a jumble of glacial boulders before him and he knew they were a landmark he could remember later, a monument which would identify where he had hidden the fruits of his wagon jaunt to Tucson.

Saltash made his way into the boulders, casting about for a likely spot to cache the cantlebags. Then pure shock paralyzed him.

Sprawled face-down on a patch of blow-sand inside the perimeter of granite boulders lay the dead body of Colonel Marcellus Lind.

CHAPTER XI

Dead Man's Honor

THIS WAS how far Estaline's father had gotten after deserting the scene of the siege. The fact that Lind had gone in a westerly direction, over the summit, was damning proof that the deserting colonel had not been trying to reach Fort Despair.

Still looped around the dead man's shoulders were the four canteens he had stolen. A six-shooter was in Lind's right hand, the arm out-stretched.

The Apaches had been here, their moccasin tracks plain in the sand around Lind's body. The dead colonel's campaign hat lay off to one side, and his flowing hair, like General Custer's, had not known the desecration of an Indian's scalping blade.

That fact, so at odds with the Coyotero temperament, roused in Saltash now a numbing suspicion. Letting the moneybags slide off his shoulder, he stepped over the corpse and knelt down, lifting Lind's head by its long locks.

Blood and sand masked the colonel's face, but the powder burns made their black stain around the bullet hole punched between Lind's eyes.

Saltash stood up, wanting to retch. This was why the Indians had not lifted

a scalp. It was contrary to the redman's code to take a trophy from a suicide. That accounted for Lind's body not having been stripped and gelded in the Apache fashion.

Lind, at the finish, had run true to form. Perhaps he had heard noises in the surrounding brush which convinced him, rightly or wrongly, that the Coyoteros had his scent and were closing in, stalking him from all sides.

This was something Estaline need never know. He would have to cover this body with rocks, lest it be discovered by the Fort Despair troopers who would shortly be combing this ridge slope hunting Saltash.

A flash of sundown light on gunmetal, over on the brow of the Piñon Pass road, made Saltash shrink back out of sight. A dozen cavalrymen in blue and yellow were massing there, scanning the west slope of the Pass for dust sign. Army riders, dispatched by the Tucson marshal to overtake Kane's fugitive prisoners and drag them back to face the blind lawman.

Common sense told Saltash to keep moving, to burrow deeper in the brush and hope against hope that he could elude those manhunters until night gave him a covering screen for getaway. But some deeper instinct—a desire to shield Estaline from the heartbreak of knowing her father had destroyed himself—held Saltash rooted to this spot, within shouting distance of the cavalrymen who were now beginning a slow advance along the road, studying trail sign.

The idea came to Saltash out of nowhere. There was no time to reason anything out. Intuition told him what he must do here. With trembling haste he divested himself of his buckskin jacket and pants and Texas-starred cowboots.

There was no blood staining Marcellus Lind's uniform. He had fallen face down into the dirt and the thirsty sand had drunk up his lifeblood. When Saltash pulled on the medal-hung tunic and fastened the brass buttons and cinched in the Sam Browne belt, the army garment fitted him as if tailored.

He hauled on Lind's yellow-piped cavalry trousers. The taffy-brown army boots were a trifle tight-fitting, but that meant his own Justins would go on Lind's feet the easier.

When the grisly chore was finished Saltash donned Lind's campaign hat with its proud crossed-sabers insignia and drew the lanyard tight under his jaw. He set his own Texas sombrero on the dead man's head and then circled Lind's sprawled shape, sizing up his handiwork.

The money-filled *alforjas* were the only off-key note here. Saltash found a loose slab of rock, scooped a depression out of the sand and stowed the specie there, fitting the granite chunk over it and marking well the spot.

Then, the light of day's end glittering off his shoulder epaulets and the furbished medals jangling on his chest, Tom Saltash moved out of the rocks and worked his way along the ledge until he was abreast of the body of troopers massed down on the road immediately below.

THEY were arguing among themselves, trying to interpret the story which a pair of dividing horse tracks told them. One burly lieutenant was gesturing off to the northwest, where a faint gauze of dust marked Jubilo Kooney's passage along the shoulder of the mountain, a quarter-mile away.

The soldiers were remounting when one of their number caught sight of the bearded apparition skylined on the ledge fifty feet above the road level.

All eyes turned, and astonishment held them mute. Standing proudly erect, arms hanging at his sides, was a blue-clad man in the full regimentals of a field grade officer of the United States Cavalry.

"Colonel Lind!" shouted one of the riders. "Is—is that you, Colonel?"

Saltash nodded, lifting a hand to beckon the troopers to come to him. Of one accord the Fort Despair riders slid from saddles and began scrambling up through the rocks and brush.

"I am Colonel Lind," Saltash said in

the dead-beat voice of a man who was nearing the limit of the endurance. "I—left the siege area last night in the hopes that I could double up around the Apaches and make my way to the post."

The big red-faced lieutenant snapped an arm up in grooved salute. "Thank God, sir!" he exclaimed. "Your daughter—told us of the courageous thing you tried to do. We were all convinced the red devils got you. It was a wise thing, sir, coming in this direction instead of heading directly toward the fort."

Saltash smiled feebly, knowing his gaunt, bearded face looked old enough in this red light—to quote Estaline's own words a few days ago—to be her father.

"Your assistance was a bit tardy in coming," Saltash said, assuming the róle of the leader of these men.

The lieutenant looked flustered. "If it seemed so, sir—you see, we spotted yesterday's brush fire here in the Pass. Captain Deering—our executive officer pending your replacement—sent scouts out to investigate. We saw a sizable force of hostiles and deduced it was your overdue detail, sir. We returned to bring half the garrison with us—two full companies, sir."

Saltash shrugged. "Very well. How does it happen that you are on this side of the summit? You didn't know I was hiding out all day—"

The officer grinned. "The two outlaws who were in the siege with you—"

"Saltash and Kooney. Yes?"

"Well, Colonel Lind, they chose their opportunity to make their escape as soon as the Indians sighted our approach and withdrew. The Tucson officer with you, Major Kane, I believe his name is—the blind one—he ordered us to apprehend the fugitives, sir. He said the governor—"

"I know," Saltash cut in. "I have news for you. What is your name, Lieutenant?"

"Costain, sir. Uh—let me be the first to welcome you to your new command."

Saltash turned and pointed off to where Jubilo Kooney's dust lingered against the blue-gray slope of the piñon-clad mountain.

"Yonder is one of your fugitives," he said. "I saw Saltash and his companion ride past. That was my first hint that the Indians had withdrawn."

Lieutenant Costain nodded eagerly. "They split up directly below us, sir. You must have seen the other outlaw coming up this slope where you've been hiding—"

The Texan masquerading as a Union officer nodded, his face bleak.

"It was Tom Saltash," he said. "Come this way. Marshal Kane will want verification that at least one of his prisoners did not escape."

SCOWLING curiously, the Fort Despair soldiers followed Saltash into the nearby jumble of boulders. A moment later they were forming a loose ring around the buckskin-clad, long-haired corpse sprawled face down in the sand.

"When Saltash saw me," the outlaw colonel said heavily, "he went for his gun. You see it in his hand. I—I was forced to kill him. I understand from Marshal Kane that Saltash was wanted back in Tucson for murdering the governor's son."

Lieutenant Costain broke the silence with an awe-struck whisper. "According to your—your daughter, Colonel, it was Tom Saltash here who fired the brush which led to our rescue party setting out from the fort."

Saltash's eyes narrowed, his pulses quickening. "My daughter—defended this outlaw?"

Costain's cheeks reddened. "Sir—begging your pardon—but Miss Lind seemed insistent on our not riding in pursuit of Saltash and the other one. She said Saltash had saved them all—that he deserved his chance at a getaway."

A grin touched the colonel's lips. "My daughter," he said vaguely, "saw in this man a glamorous, romantic figure. She is at that age of hero-worship, I'm afraid."

Costain rubbed his hands briskly. "We will take this body back to show Kane. No, I had forgotten the man is sightless. But his Brigadiers can make identification—"

Saltash had not foreseen this and he thought fast now.

"No," he bit out. "We will bury this renegade where he fell. You see, there's my daughter's infatuation for the man—and I have never taken a human life before, outside of military action. I trust you understand, Mr. Costain."

The lieutenant nodded and wheeled to face his men. "Private Gill, you have an entrenching shovel on your pack, I believe. You and Private Peacock will see to burying this man. Of course, Colonel Lind, I quite understand your reticence in the matter. I apologize for being so obtuse."

Saltash stood by while two strapping troopers brought shovels and began scooping a grave alongside the dead man. He had to stall for time here. He knew that when he returned to the scene of the siege, it would be fatal to let one of Kane's possemen discover his imposture.

"About Saltash's partner, sir," Lieutenant Costain said. "It will be dark shortly. But we might overtake—"

Saltash, his eyes fixed on Lind's corpse as it was unceremoniously being rolled into the shallow grave, shook his head. "No. Let Kooney go. The scout was responsible for saving our lives as much as Saltash was. Kane has no valid charge against Kooney in any case. I suggest we tell Kane that Kooney just—vanished."

"Yes sir. As you wish, sir." Costain was obviously relieved at the cancellation of his manhunt orders. A desperado could easily fort up and pick off pursuing riders from ambush.

The privates shoveled dirt over Lind's body and there was no further pretext for remaining here. . . .

Night was closing in when Costain's manhunt detail returned to the bivouac where the two companies, under the command of a Captain Deering, had elected to spend the night out of deference to the physical condition of the survivors.

Riding in, with a lanky corporal leading the horse which he had provided his commanding officer, Tom Saltash saw a campfire blazing in the center of the road. He saw Estaline's trim figure there, surrounded by admiring soldiers, and the surviving Brigadiers hunkered down alongside their blind leader.

"I would prefer—to greet my daughter in private, gentlemen," Saltash said, "on the outskirts of the camp. Lieutenant Costain, you will notify Miss Lind that I am safe. You will also send your commanding officer to me, and take care of notifying Marshal Kane that Tom Saltash is beyond capture now."

Fifty yards from the fire which would betray his hoax to Kane's Brigadiers, Saltash dismounted and made his way over to an open area alongside the road. Costain's troopers hurried on down to the bivouac site, bubbling with eagerness to convey their sensational news of Colonel Lind's miraculous escape.

Out of some instinct for propriety, the soldiers allowed Estaline to make her way up the road alone. Saltash felt his heart slugging his ribs as the girl came running toward him, knowing his uniform disguised his true identity at this distance, wondering how she would react to his imposture.

"Dad—oh, Daddy—I never expected to see you again—"

Saltash reached for her outstretched hands, and remained mute as he saw her eyes grow round with disbelief, searching his face, his black beard and hair, such a contrast to her father's Nordic coloring.

And then she was in his arms, and he knew that she understood why the man she loved stood before her in her father's dishonored uniform.

CHAPTER XII

Boots and Saddles

ESTALINE clung to him. "Oh, Tom—the soldiers said Daddy had shot you down—"

Saltash nestled Estaline's golden head

against the hard angle of his jaw. "Your father—got over the summit, Estaline. He wasn't scalped or mutilated. The—the Apaches knew he was the white chief. They honored his rank. He was decently buried."

Dry-eyed, knowing truths which they would never openly discuss, the girl held him closer. "You didn't have to come back—impersonating him—except for my sake," she whispered. "You did it to keep dad's honor untarnished—the pride of the service—"

An officer wearing a captain's twin bars on his shoulder plates moved up to interrupt them now. Hat in hand, his eyes showed their gladness at witnessing what he took to be the reunion of a father and his daughter. His greeting was humble:

"My compliments, Colonel Lind, and my congratulations. I am Captain Deering, sir, adjutant at the fort. I am at your service."

Holding Estaline in the crook of his arm, Saltash returned the captain's salute.

"My apologies, Captain Deering, but I am hardly able to exchange the amenities right now. I would appreciate it if I could be left undisturbed with my daughter for the time being."

The officer turned away. "Of course, sir. I will see that accommodations are provided for your comfort. It was our plan to return to the fort tomorrow—unless you wish to ride tonight—"

"Captain Deering," Saltash said, "my first order as your new commander will be to arrange for Marshal Kane and his few surviving Brigadiers to leave for Tucson immediately with such escort as you deem advisable."

Deering blinked. "Tonight, sir? The post surgeon wanted to place Major Kane in the observation ward at the infirmary—"

The outlaw colonel shook his head. "I deem it advisable to get the civilian personnel on their way back to the settlements at once. They can hole up by day and travel by night."

Captain Deering saluted. "Yes, sir. I will muster up an escort detail for the Tucson journey at once, sir."

Within the hour, Estaline and Saltash were enjoying a supper by lantern-light in the privacy of the defile which had been the scene of the party's agonizing siege. Except for a mess sergeant's delivery of their food, and another detail bringing a couple of pup-tents and bedding, Captain Deering was keeping his commander's privacy inviolate.

A bulky object in the pocket of Lind's dress tunic took Saltash's attention and he drew it out to see that it was an envelope gobbed with red sealing wax. On it was a legend: SEALED ORDERS. OPEN ONLY ON ARRIVAL AT DESIGNATED STATION.

"Your father's first orders as a commander of troops," Saltash said, handing it to the girl. "I suggest you have the honor of reading them before we destroy them."

Her face lovely in the lantern glow reflecting from the rock walls hemming them in, Estaline Lind broke the seals and took out the single sheet of paper the envelope contained.

"Tom," she said, "what is to be the ending of this masquerade? You know you cannot stay on at the fort as commanding officer. Some gesture or Confederate idiom will give you away."

Saltash chuckled. It was a fantastic, incredible situation to be in—a Texas-born Confederate Army veteran, a man who was an outlaw here in Arizona Territory, wearing the uniform and borrowing the prerogatives of a full colonel of Union Cavalry.

"I haven't figured it out," he said. "Getting rid of Marshal Kane and those Brigadiers was the worst hurdle I faced tonight. They're safely on their way back to Tucson, thank God—with the word for Governor Merriam that the manhunt for Tom Saltash is permanently closed. And our Texas ranch is a long way from Tucson."

SALTASH saw the girl's eyes shuttling over her father's secret orders. Without comment, she handed them to him.

Saltash read:

Special Orders, U.S. Cavalry.
To: Commanding Officers, Forts Grant, Despair, Bowie, Huachuca, and Apache, Territory of Arizona.
From: Headquarters Commanding General, Department of the Southwest.
You are hereby notified that effective July 18, 1867, previous existing orders concerning a standby policy with regard to meeting hostile acts of Indian tribes in Arizona Territory are canceled. In the interests of protecting the lives and property of American citizens residing in Arizona Territory, all U.S. Army troops in the department will proceed to take punitive measures against hostile encroachments wherever deemed necessary within the jurisdiction of your respective commands.

When he had finished, Saltash folded the order and restored it to his pocket.

"This," he told Estaline, "is the biggest thing that the Government has done for the Frontier in twenty years. It means from here on, the Army is going to fight Indians instead of pussyfooting around while innocent settlers are slaughtered. A pity it couldn't have been done six months ago. My Texicans would have reached Tucson alive, if the Army had been active in the field."

Estaline stared at Saltash, her secret thoughts unvoiced. Death—the true nature of which Estaline would never know—had saved her father from ultimate disgrace and dishonor. As a martinet on garrison duty, he might have upheld the cavalry's traditions at Fort Despair. But with a new policy of offense now instituted throughout the Territory, Marcellus Lind would have found himself obligated to lead his troops in bloody campaigns against the rampaging Apaches. In such a rôle he would have surely failed.

"Whenever and however I drop out of sight at Fort Despair," Saltash said, "I've got to make certain Captain Deering knows of this new government policy against the Indians, of course."

Saltash's eyes clouded over, as memories crowded him hard—memories of his wagon train under Apache attack, of men who were his friends dying with Apache arrows in their guts, losing their hair to adorn the lodgepoles of some painted savage fighter.

"I'd give my eye teeth," Saltash mused, "if I could use this uniform and the power that goes with it on just one campaign. But that's impos—"

He broke off as a sudden babble of sound shattered the night stillness out in the Pass. Guards picketed outside the bivouac area were giving a warning of some kind of trouble.

"Indians must be back," Saltash cried, extinguishing the lantern. "Wait here, Estaline. I may get my chance to command Yankee troops whether I like it or not—"

But no Apache was back of the camp's sudden disorder. Out on the road, Saltash caught sight of two out-guards leading a rider in from the summit road. In the moonlight, Saltash made out the pigtail whiskers of the little buckskin-clad gnome who had been captured by Costain's sentries.

For some reason, Jubilo Kooney had come back. Mistaken for an Indian on the prowl, he was now being brought in at gun's point to face the commanding officer.

"All right, Mr. Kooney!" Saltash called out, walking out to halt the scout's captors. "What are you doing here?"

Kooney did not appear to be in the least startled by this sight of his partner decked out in a colonel's regimentals. Sliding off his saddle, he clicked his moccasined heels together and gave a burlesque exaggeration of a salute which threatened to knock him off balance.

"Colonel Lind, suh, I thought mebbe your command could find use fer a crackerjack trail scout."

Officers and enlisted men, summoned from the campfire by the interruption at the edge of camp, were crowding around now. Saltash, stifling an inordinate desire to burst out laughing, turned to the adjutant and barked, "This is Saltash's partner, Captain. His return here makes for an awkward situation. If Marshal Kane was still here I would be tempted to turn Kooney over to his custody. As it is, I will have a few words with the man in private."

THE GATHERING broke up as the impostor in the colonel's uniform escorted the little scout into the rocky draw. When he got his lantern relighted, Saltash motioned for Kooney to sit down. Kooney did so, sharing a boulder with Estaline, who hugged the odoriferous runt with unconcealed affection.

"Why in thunder did you pull a sandy like this, Jube?" Saltash demanded.

Contritely, Kooney held up the field glasses he was wearing from a thong around his neck.

"Seen you wasn't raisin' any dust," he commented, "right after we separated. Later I seen them dawg-soldiers fetchin' you back—or at least I figgered they'd dabbed their loop on you, seein' as how I seen you afoot an' knowed your bronc must of played out on you."

Saltash was deeply moved. Jubilo, not knowing what he would find back here, had risked his mangy old hide to come to his partner's assistance.

"I scouted around," Kooney went on. "Seen your dead hoss. Then I—" he cast a glance at Estaline—"well, I found out this man in buckskins in this fresh grave wasn't you, Tom. Knowed you always had a hankerin' to be a commissioned officer, so—well, damn it to hell, beggin' your pardon Estaline, I'm reportin' fer duty, Colonel, suh."

Saltash could think of nothing to say. Kooney was putting a humorous aspect to his presence here, but the situation might prove an embarrassing one on the morrow. Fort Despair's new commandant could hardly fraternize with a dead outlaw's trail partner without causing barracksroom gossip.

"She's a pity," Kooney went on, masticating his tobacco, "with all these troops right here on the mounting, that army red tape ties 'em down. Red Shirt's 'Paches are sittin' ducks waitin' to be plucked, over in Sacatone Canyon not five miles around the corner from the Pass."

Saltash stiffened. "How's that?" he demanded.

"Scouted 'em comin' back," Kooney said. "Red Shirt's bucks are throwin' a victory spree. Know damn' well the bluecoats won't follow 'em. They got *tiswin* by the barrel, I reckon. Drink an' dance all night. Tomorrow they couldn't fight their way out of a tow-sack. An' you a full chicken colonel with two companies o' soldiers who are itchin' fer action. It's a shame."

Tom Saltash came to his feet, his eyes meeting Estaline's, both with the same thing on their minds. The Texan's hand came up to feel the secret orders which would mean a turning point in Arizona's bloody history.

Striding out of the defile, Saltash headed for the dying council fire. Most of the troops had already hit the blankets. Captain Deering, Lieutenant Costain and the other officers were hunkered around the fire, no doubt discussing their new commander.

"Captain Deering!" Saltash barked. "Instruct the bugler to sound boots and saddles. The Seventeenth is going into action."

Recognizing the tall, dynamic figure approaching them out of the murk, the officers leaped to their feet, saluting.

"Action, sir?" Deering gasped. "Tonight?"

Saltash nodded. "Gentlemen," he said, "I have just opened my secret orders. The Army has at last lifted the lid so far as restrictions against Indian fighting are concerned. And I have just received an intelligence report from Scout Kooney which makes an immediate attack imperative."

Aware of the drama of this moment, the officers of Fort Despair waited for their colonel to go on.

"Gentlemen," Saltash said quietly, "tonight we are going to raid Chief Alhecama's stronghold outside of Piñon Pass. Any redskin who doesn't lay down his arms will die. Fort Despair was activated for the purpose of whipping the Coyotero tribe into line. By this time tomorrow, with God's blessing, our reason for being assigned to Territorial duty will have been consummated. Captain, summon a

bugler—"

Moments later, the drowsing camp was roused by the soul-stirring notes of boots and saddles.

The Seventeenth Regiment was reborn as a fighting force.

CHAPTER XIII

Taps for a Hero

THROUGHOUT the night the troops had moved in single file around the lithic shoulder of Piñon Pass, a night military maneuver without precedent in the proud annals of the Seventeenth Cavalry Regiment.

With the exception of four privates who had been detailed to take the colonel's daughter back to Fort Despair, and the twenty-man detail en route to Tucson with a blinded lawman and the remnants of his Brigadier posse, the regiment was at full two-company strength for this unexpected strike into the heart of Coyotero tribal domain.

At their head, leading his horse as were the others, marched the tall, darkly handsome man these soldiers knew as Marcellus Lind, Colonel of U.S. Cavalry. In the speech he had made to the assembled cavalrymen back at the Piñon Pass camp, this new commanding officer had killed any cynicism his men might have nursed in secret that this Colonel Lind was a glory-hunter.

The glamor of this night stalk, the boldness of its execution, had seized the imaginations of the last officer and man, keying them up for action to come. Morale which had sagged under the tedium of months of garrison duty, routine-bound days and weeks while their function as fighting men was throttled by army regulations, was now at an all-time peak.

Their new commander was giving the credit to a dirty, unshaven, pint-sized scout in filthy buckskins, Jubilo Kooney, who only yesterday had been the consort of an outlaw now dead. Jubilo Kooney knew the secret trails of the Santa Catalinas as these men knew the streets and sidewalks of their home towns.

In the colonel's words, Kooney was an Arizonian who dressed like an Indian, thought like an Indian. By his own admission, he had lived like an Indian—in the dreaded Red Shirt's own tribe. He knew the Coyotero jargon, the way a Coyotero thought and lived and acted.

At this point in his talk to his assembled officers and men, Tom Saltash had seen doubt crop up, wonderment if a squaw man could be trusted to lead cavalrymen against his own Indian "blood-brothers." Old Kooney, sitting his horse alongside Saltash, had perceived that undercurrent of suspicion and put it to rout by making a classic speech of his own.

"If you're thinkin' mebbe I'm a-fixin' to lead you boys into a trap," Kooney had said, "mebbe I'd ought to admit that Chief Alhecama stole my squaw back in '59 an' kicked my rump to hell an' gone out o' the tribe. Red Shirt hates my guts, gentlemen. He'd like nothin' better than to have my scalp on his coup stick."

With which Kooney had tugged off his shapeless hat to reveal a pate as devoid of hair as a goose egg. Whoops of laughter had rocked the rank and file of waiting troops—and from that moment on Saltash knew old Jube had been accepted to lead this night march to Sacatone Canyon.

Now dawn was near at hand, and in the gray half-light the men of the Seventeenth, high above the desert flats, could see the deep gorge where the Sacatone River brawled over its rapids. Jubilo Kooney had gone on ahead, on foot, knowing from his past residence with the Coyoteros exactly where Red Shirt would keep a sentinel post.

Daylight's first gleam was gilding the Catalina peaks when the old scout came back to where Tom Saltash and Captain Deering waited at the head of the long column. He was wiping a bowie blade on his fringed buckskin pantleg and a fresh claret smudge showed on the leather there. Dangling from Kooney's belt was

something else—a pair of gory patches shaggy with raven-black hair, in one of which an eagle quill still hung.

"Gate's wide open," Kooney reported. "Guards never knowed what hit 'em. Now lookee here, Colonel Lind, suh. Reason the Coyoteros made their stronghold in Sacatone is because they's plenty o' mescal for brewin' *tiswin,* plenty o' game, plenty o' firewood. This here canyon is a blind box at the far end, where the river goes underground."

Kooney pointed along the west rim of the gorge. "They's two-three side draws the Injuns kin use for getaways," the scout explained. "What you want to do is send a squad, say thirty-forty men, around to cover them outlets. The main party drops down to the river an' walks right in. Red Shirt's camp is around that elbow bend yonder. They won't know we're inside the walls until we show up right in their back yard."

SALTASH had a hasty consultation with Costain and sent that officer with forty men down the Catalina slope with orders to block the getaway defiles leading from the box canyon. When forty minutes had elapsed by their watches, Saltash was to lead the regiment's main striking force into the Sacatone proper.

The descent into the canyon was easy for horses and men, with Kooney picking out game traces and switchbacks. The dull roar of the Sacatone River, draining the western watershed of this mountain range, made a thunder to cover up the noise of clanking bits and creaking saddle leather.

Here at the entrance to Alhecama's stronghold, a single warrior could keep an army at bay. But Kooney, under cover of darkness, had taken care of the Apache guards for them.

Waiting out the forty minutes required for Costain's men to deploy themselves at the side exits of the canyon seemed more like forty years to the troopers, impatient for action. They spent the time watering their horses at the edge of the brawling mountain torrent, checking their Springfields and sidearms, honing their sabers for the man-to-man combat to come.

Dominating this scene was Tom Saltash. The inherent modesty of the man did not seem to fit the garish display of war medals festooning his chest, but the troopers of the Seventeenth knew that colonels had their eccentricities and perhaps the showing of his honor ribbons was Colonel Lind's.

Each trooper knew he was making history today. If they succeeded in bottling up and knocking out Red Shirt's dreaded Apache legions, the news could cause rejoicing throughout Arizona. It would strike fear into the hearts of the Piñalinos and Mescaleros and Chiricahua Apaches. It would bring about the release of the Territory from its long reign of red terror.

At length Saltash's watch showed the forty minutes was up. Spurring out to the head of his attacking column, the black-bearded colonel raised an arm to signal the charge. There would be no bugle calls to warn and rouse the celebrating Coyoteros out of their drunken victory debauch.

Following the riverbank trail, Saltash led the Seventeenth at a full gallop into the throat of Sacatone Canyon, old Jubilo Kooney hammering at his stirrup, giving vent to an incongruous Rebel yell as the vanguard of the regiment swept around the elbow-bend of the gorge and came in sight of Red Shirt's camp.

Warriors were still dancing the victory dance out there beside the river, to the accompaniment of medicine men's clacking turkey-bone rattles and the thump of buffalo-hide tom-toms.

The surprise was complete, devastatingly complete. Chief Alhecama had not surfeited his belly with *tiswin* liquor and barbecued meat during the night. It was Red Shirt's raucous shout which rallied his feast-deadened braves at first sight of Saltash's bluecoats sweeping around the canyon bend not a hundred yards from the camp.

For Alhecama, high chief of the Coyo-

teros, this penetration of his stronghold by paleface Long Knives was an impossible thing. He had banked on the Great White Father's orders to keep his soldiers at Fort Despair. Even so, it was incredible that troops in such overwhelming force could have breached the canyon's entrance without his sentinels giving the alarm.

Now it was fight or die, and Red Shirt's savages were not so drunk or sleepy as to be unaware of the debacle that threatened the tribe.

Tom Saltash's regiment opened the firing as their horses bore down on the scattered rows of Apache lodges. But that fire was soon to be returned as howling, paint-daubed braves snatched up muskets and war-bows.

At his side, Saltash heard Jubilo Kooney's soprano shriek: "Save Red Shirt fer me, Tom! That red bastard stole my squaw right here in this very camp in '59. I'll have his topknot fer that, damn his soul!"

THE SEVENTEENTH was overrunning the camp now, and the pitched battle was turning into a confused mêlee of hand-to-hand fighting. With knife and tomahawk and guns stolen from massacred whites, Red Shirt's tribesmen were battling with all the ferocity of cornered wolves.

Riderless Indian ponies, released from their brush corral by the juggernaut of white troops, added to the senseless confusion as they bolted here and there between the cliffs and the river.

Hordes of tawny-skinned Apaches, reading disaster in the way their ranks were thinning under the Long Knives' fire, were plunging into the swift Sacatone, swimming or wading for the west bank, making for the getaway defiles.

Tom Saltash's guns were empty. His horse was down and he was dueling with a hideously painted witch doctor, using his rifle butt to parry the shaman's lethal-pointed war lance.

He broke the Springfield's stock over the medicine man's horned-masked skull and frantically set about reloading his side arms. All about him, bluecoats and breech-clouted warriors were milling in frenzied confusion.

Somewhere in the cacophony resounding from the sheer rock walls, old Jubilo Kooney's repeated Confederate yells could be heard. Kooney was fighting his blood-brothers with a relish that had been pent up since his expulsion from this tribe nine years before.

And then Saltash caught sight of the Coyotero chief, the red-shirted figure of Alhecama himself. Alhecama, termed by the Tucson newspaper as the Scourge of the Arizona settlements.

Red Shirt, unaware that paleface riflemen waited to cut off any retreat through this canyon's getaway defiles, was sprinting towards the river, bent on regrouping his shattered forces outside this cliff-locked trap.

Threading through the darting Indian ponies, mixed with empty-saddled US-branded war horses, Saltash headed for the river, at an angle to intercept the Apache chief. Jubilo Kooney had earmarked Red Shirt for his own personal meat, but to hell with Kooney. A man had to kill his own snakes.

Red Shirt was making for a ford where the swift-running waters of the Sacatone ran frothy white amid the green tide. The towering Indian who wore the tufted feathers of a supreme chief plunged off the bank in a geyser of sheeting water and started wading armpit-deep for the far bank.

Over there on the west side of the canyon, Coyotero warriors were falling back, having met Costain's ambushed fire. The pattern of defeat, final and crushing defeat, was apparent now, but the bulk of the Indians were not aware that escape had been cut off.

Impeded by Marcellus Lind's ill-fitting boots, Saltash plunged into the torrent of the river five yards behind Red Shirt. His only weapon was a bowie knife, for there had been no time to recharge his revolver back there.

In mid-stream, Chief Alhecama's foot-

ing slipped and he disappeared momentarily under the white water. When he emerged, he was facing the camp and found himself staring at a ghost in the bemedalled uniform of a Long Knife army chief.

THE ingrained superstition of the ages held Red Shirt paralyzed as he saw Tom Saltash slogging through hip deep water toward him. Red Shirt had seen this man lying dead of his own hand, last night in Piñon Pass. This suicide's spirit was after him now, his beard black instead of yellow.

Red Shirt's brawny arm dipped under water and came up with a scalping knife flashing silver in the morning sunrays. Saltash dove underwater then to avoid the Indian's stabbing thrust, and Red Shirt felt the white ghost's powerful arms go about his knees like an octopus's tentacles.

Red Shirt went under, the river's flood cutting off his frenzied whoop. Saltash drove his knife hard, saw the greenish water streak with crimson as the current carried them off the gravel bar and swept them into deep water.

Rolling over and over on smooth bottom, Tom Saltash wielded his knife in slow-motion, his arm impeded by the tight-fitting uniform and the water's turbulent pressure.

He left the blade plunged hilt-deep in Red Shirt's ribs, felt the Indian's struggles taper off, saw the air-bubbles break from the chief's jaws and start tugging upward into the current. Alhecama was a good Indian now.

His own lungs bursting for oxygen, Saltash struck out for the surface, aware that the river's rush was sweeping him downstream at terrifying speed.

Breaking surface in a smother of red-tinctured foam, Saltash's first sight was of old Jubilo Kooney hurtling past him on horseback, heading downstream. Ahead of him, at the end of this onrushing millrace of green water, loomed the awesome hole in the box end of Sacatone Canyon where the river went into its subterranean channel, not surfacing again until its junction with the San Pedro fifty miles southwest.

Fighting to stay afloat, Saltash unbuckled Lind's heavy Sam Browne belt, ripped off the medal-decked tunic and began swiming with desperate strokes.

He saw old Kooney plunge his horse into the stream, and a moment later he was grabbing for the scout's McClellan stirrup. A cross-current swept them into the shallows on the west bank fifty yards short of the rapids which vanished into the maw of the Sacatone's fearsome grotto.

Shivering with fatigue, Tom Saltash slogged through the willow and salt cedar brake and flung himself down on the ground. Kooney dismounted, a hurt look in his eyes as he said accusingly, "Dammit, Red Shirt was my meat. I aimed to wave his hair in my old squaw's face an' tell her the chief was balder'n I be—"

"Kooney, I'm sorry—"

"Aw, to hell with it. Listen—I'll mosey back an' explain things to Cap'n Deerin'. You straddle my bronc an' cut through that draw yonder after Costain's come back. Reckon you'd ought to pick up them moneybags wherever you cached 'em, on your way back to Fort Despair. Or are you goin' to fergit that Yankee gal?"

Saltash said, "Estaline's from Missouri, damn you, which makes her at least half-Rebel. We'll be waiting out on the plain south of Despair when you get back with the regiment. Now clear out before I belt you one."

The fighting was over when Kooney waded back to the Coyotero *rancheria.* Lieutenant Costain's force had rejoined the regiment, which was now engaged in riding herd on a throng of wailing squaws and papooses and old warriors. The bulk of Red Shirt's fighting force was smashed. The Seventeenth had suffered grievous losses, but for the history books this engagement would go down as an overwhelming victory for Arizona's defenders.

Captain Deering sought out Kooney. "The colonel—? I saw him and Chief

Alhecama grappling out in the river—"

Kooney nodded, toeing the dirt with a moccasin. He pointed down-canyon to where the angry river flowed like quicksilver into the underground fastnesses of the mountain.

"I seen 'em too, Cap'n, an' I lit out after 'em a-hossback. Neither one of 'em had a chance, caught in the river. They got sucked under, the both of 'em. But I can tell you this. The last thing the colonel done was stick his steel in Alhecama's brisket. I seen that much, before the river got 'em."

Tears started in the adjutant's eyes. "His first campaign—and his last," the old soldier choked out. He turned to where a company bugler stood, trumpet in hand. "Corporal Bevins, a salute for our lost commander. Blow taps, Corporal. Taps for a hero such as Arizona is not likely to see the likes of again."

THEY crossed the Rio Grande outside El Paso in the dusk of a summer evening, the sky aflame over the New Mexican *malpais* which these two men and the girl had crossed on their way back from Arizona Territory.

Entering the outskirts of Texas's westernmost settlement, old Jubilo Kooney said, "Yonder is the Santa Castalo mission where the padre'll see about hitchin' you two lovebirds. I was wonderin', Miss Estaline—"

"Yes, Jube," the girl at Tom Saltash's stirrup said.

Kooney gestured toward the old Ciudad of Juarez, on the Chihuahua side of the Rio Grande.

"You'll need a maid o' honor at this weddin', I'm figuerin'. Now Flatfoot Bess is waitin' for her Romeo to git back from Tucson, loaded with dinero. She—" Kooney broke off, fingering his rusty pigtail whiskers thoughtfully. "On second thought, Bess ain't exactly the sassiety type. Mebbe you two better—"

"Jube," Tom Saltash chuckled, "you've never shown me a tintype of this sweetheart of yours. A Spanish-type beauty would set off my bride just fine."

Kooney waggled his head sorrowfully from side to side. "Nope," he confessed candidly. "Bess would feel a mite awkward at a church weddin'. She weighs two hundred eighty-odd, or did last time I seen her. When we're together I look like a spot on her apron. She takes out after me, jealous if I pinch another barmaid. It's like a she-bear chasin' a little packrat."

At a side street leading to the Juarez bridge, Jubilo Kooney reined up. "Bess'll be gittin' fidgity," the incorrigible little man said with a Puckish grin. "We'll see you *mañana,* if we don't oversleep or somethin'. *Hasta luego*—"

"Hey—wait!" Saltash yelled after the scout's departing back. "Tell Bess if she can cook, Estaline and I've got a job for her on our Box S in Baylor County."

But Jubilo Kooney, his love-starved soul rebelling at any further delay this close to paradise, was streaking for Chihuahua as fast as his pony could travel.

Estaline Lind tossed her golden head and laughed until the tears came. "Do you suppose," she asked Saltash, "that's our last glimpse of that absurd little vagabond? I can't imagine life without that elf around."

Tom Saltash grinned, one hand resting on the pouch fat with specie he would be banking on the morrow. "Oh, he'll show up on the Brazos, you can depend on it," he promised his bride-to-be. "But I doubt if Flatfoot Bessie will be with him. She's as fickle as he is. Jube isn't the marryin' sort. But I am."

They turned into an alamo-lined street dancing with the warm August night's first fireflies, a street that curved like a finger beckoning them to the ancient Spanish church at its end. The bells in the twin-domed towers were pealing out the Angelus, like a melody to welcome them home.

A Novel by LAURAN PAINE

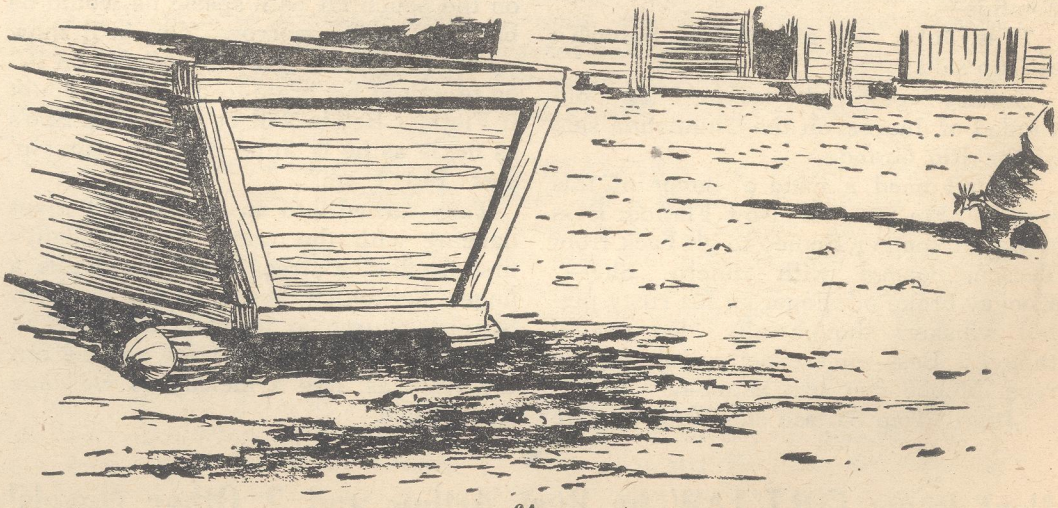
LAWMAN

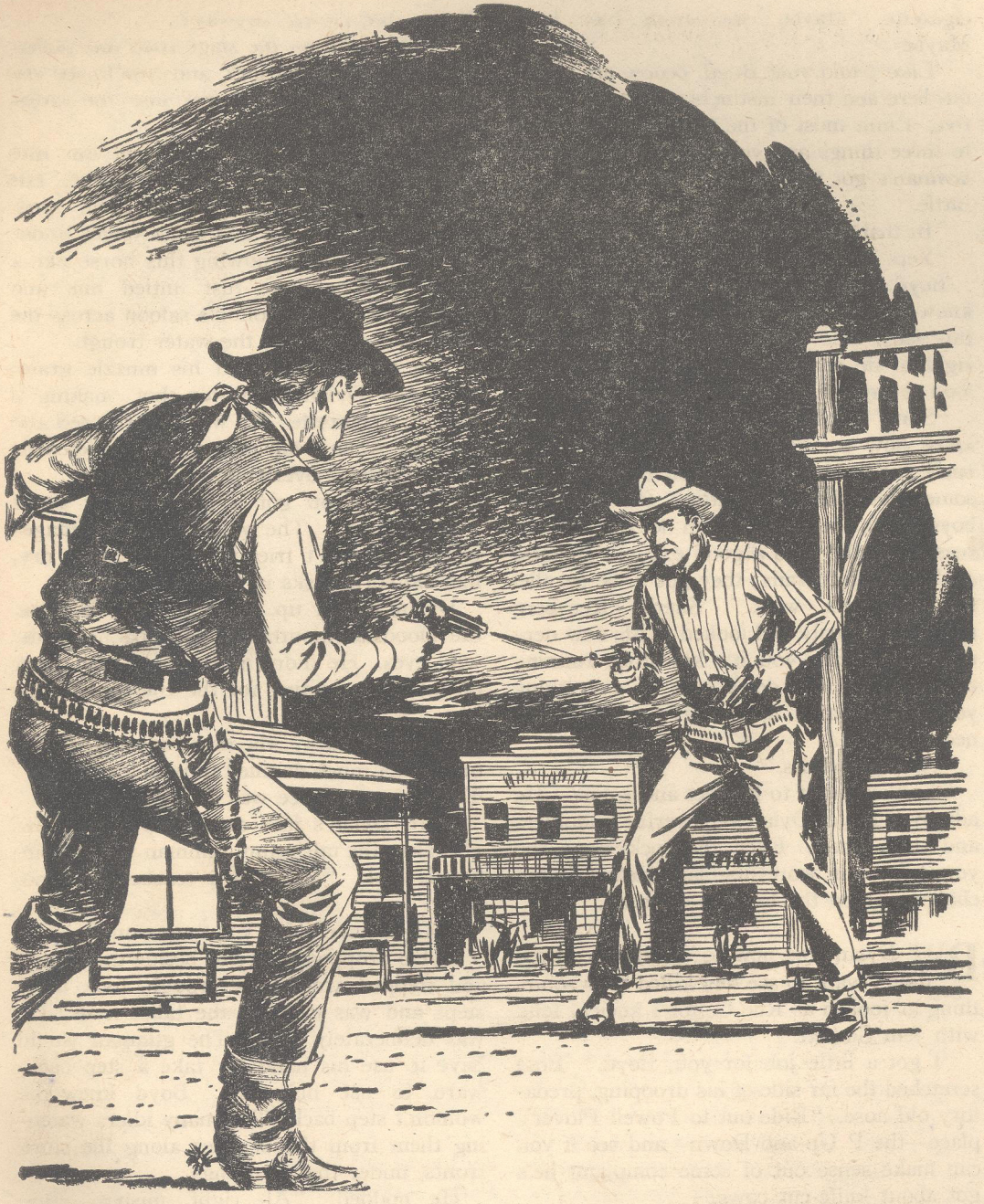
I

"WELL, that's what a Westerner is, Boyd. I don't give a damn what you've read. Two-gun men or ten-gun men, it's all tripe. You ever smell the sweat on an eager studhorse, or the spoor of a horsing mare? Well, don't let it shock you, boy, but that's the best way I can sum it up. Westerners got ideals, but they're damned basic ones. Remember that and you'll get by."

Boyd Dylan nodded shortly, eying Boss Rensberg closely. The sheriff was not a big man, nor burly, but an old gun on his shell-belt spoke volumes, and the look in his frank blue eyes meant he'd give no lip nor take any.

Dylan shrugged, spat into his glove and snuffed out his





Though she was the wife of another, and he a deputy sheriff sworn to uphold the law, he couldn't fight the pull of her lush beauty

cigarette. "Maybe I was wrong, then, Boss. Maybe—"

"Like I told you, Boyd, people are simple out here and their instincts are pretty primitive. Limit most of the trouble in the West to three things and you'll have everything a lawman's got to have. Women, horses and cattle."

"In that order?"

"Yep. In that order."

Boyd shrugged again. "All right. You know—I don't. It just seemed to me that this lady, this Mrs. Garret, had as much right to tie her rig in front of Colton's saloon as anybody else, that's all."

"Sure," Boss Rensberg said gently. "I know how you felt. It's just that her husband and Rue Colton are on the outs over some blotch-branded cattle. Rue sent his boys out to the street to run her off, for that reason, but he used a good excuse. Buggies can't tie to hitchrails; they got to be parallel to the plank walk." Sheriff Rensberg shrugged wearily and looked at his new deputy. "I'll grant you it's kid stuff, running off a woman, but don't take up everything you see in Santa Maria. It's not wise, or necessary."

"All right, Boss."

The sheriff got to his feet and smiled. He admired Boyd Dylan's powerful shoulders and thick chest. Even the cocky way the young lawman wore his black stetson, tilted challenging on the back of his head.

BUT Dylan was new to Oklahoma. Boss didn't want to see him killed over something as foolish as Rue Colton's ancient feud with Jem Garrett.

"I got a little job for you, Boyd." Boss scratched the far side of his drooping, predatory old nose. "Ride out to Powell Plover's place—the P Up-and-Down—and see if you can make sense out of some complaint he's got about knife-cut cows."

"About what?" Boyd asked.

"Well—" Boss was on the defensive right away. It sounded crazy to him, too. "All I know is what he sent word in about. Said he's got some damned cows that've been slashed with knives."

"That's a new one, Boss. Where is this P Up-And-Down, anyway?"

"Ride north on the stage road four miles, take the left-hand fork and you'll see the gate with the brand burnt into the crossbar."

Boyd Dylan nodded and went out into the arid, furnace-dry afternoon breeze. His chestnut horse nickered when he went around the hitch-rail and ran a finger under the cinch. Dylan, knowing this horse like a book, said nothing; just untied him and walked down past Colton's saloon across the road, and stopped at the water trough.

The chestunt dropped his muzzle gratefully and Dylan stood hip-shot, making a flake-dry cigarette. He was still relaxed and smoking when a tall man on the duckboards under Colton's overhang spoke to him.

"Deputy, you got a lot to learn about Santa Maria." The voice was not antagonistic. It wasn't friendly, either. Just dry, like old corn husks in the wind.

Dylan looked up, took in the two guns, the bloodless mouth and the opaque, wide, wild eyes. He didn't answer but just went on smoking, waiting for the chestnut to finish.

"A lot to learn," the man repeated. "And maybe not much damned time to learn it in." This time the voice was decidedly nasty.

Boyd Dylan's face turned upward again. He raked the tall, gaunt gunman with a cold, hostile look. "You got a teacher in mind, feller?"

"Might have. You want a lesson?"

Dylan dropped the reins beside the trough and stepped around the trough, took three steps and was close to the taller man. He was deliberately close. The gunman would have to use his hands or take a step backward to use his guns. Boyd knew he wouldn't step back. Too many idlers watching them from the benches along the store fronts, under the overhangs.

He nodded. "All right, mister. How about the first lesson?"

The gunman flushed and the wild eyes flashed down at Dylan. "Sure. Anything to oblige. Next time keep your damned nose out of Rue Colton's business."

"Are you Colton?"

"No, but I'm his—"

It ended there, abruptly and incoherently. Boyd Dylan's fist came up overhand, and exploded in the gaunt man's chest, knocking him backward, flailing for balance.

Dylan didn't wait. It wasn't his nature, nor frontier policy either. He went in with the ferocity of a maddened Comanche. The gunman tried to cover up under the vicious sledging, tasted the salt of his own blood, staggered, and took two thunderous smashes into the chest that felled him half-on, half-off the duckboards, face in the pungent moisture where a horse had stood.

Dylan went to his chestnut, fingered the cinch again without being conscious of it, swung up and rode northward out of Santa Maria without a backward glance.

Finding the P Up-And-Down was no chore, even for a disgruntled deputy sheriff with anger inside him like a small hot flame. The rancher, Powell Plover, met him before the unpainted old house under the giant sycamores with a friendly nod.

"You come out about them cows?"

Dylan swung down and looped the reins through a handy stud-ring in the tree trunk. "Yeah. Boss said something about knife-cut cows."

PLOVER was a balding man with kindly features and happy eyes. He was the type who went fishing when his troubles began to annoy him.

"Come on," he said. "They're over here in the corral. Damnedest thing I ever heard of. I've seen worked-over brands, docked ear marks and altered wattles and dewlaps, but I'll be go-to-hell if I ever saw anything like this before, and that's a fact."

Dylan leaned on the corral and looked through the gray old poles. It was a bewildering spectacle to him, too. A swollen, clotted incision was low on the left side of each cow. A lot of pine-tar slathered over each animal made the actual slashes look far worse than they were. He shook his head slowly, exasperatedly.

"Damned if I know, Mr. Plover. It couldn't be anything but a knife, I reckon. No weed or fence or rock splinter." Dylan turned to face the rancher. "What do you think it is?"

Plover pursed his lips thoughtfully. "Well— Hell, I got an idea, but it's crazy. Plumb crazy, and that's a fact."

Dylan looked wryly at the cows again. "Nothing could be crazier than knife-cutting a dozen Hereford cows in the guts."

"Well—no." Plover conceded. "Just the same I feel sort of foolish, thinking this."

"All right. I know how you feel, but hell, I'm lost in this mess."

"Listen," Plover said suddenly. "A lot of men've died for talking when they shouldn't have. All right. I'm just going to ask you one thing. Give me your word you won't breathe anything I tell you to another soul, then I'll tell you what I think."

"Even Boss Rensberg?" Dylan asked, scowling.

"Even the sheriff. Nobody, damn it."

"All right, Plover, but you're making it damned hard to help you."

"Help me hell!" Plover exploded. "I don't want any help. I should've kept my mouth shut. I thought that right after I'd sent you word. Well, I done a dumb thing in letting the law know and couldn't very well un-do it, so I'm in the middle." Plover nodded abruptly, still looking at the deputy. "I got your word. Remember that."

"I will. "

"Well—" Plover was uncomfortable and showed it. "I found some of Jem Garrett's cows cut up like this last winter and drove 'em home to him. Jem acted annoyed because I'd found 'em. It struck me funny. Shucks, a man'd naturally be indignant if somebody knife-slashed good cows like this, wouldn't he?"

Boyd Dylan nodded, listening.

"Jem wasn't sore, but I got the idea he didn't like me finding the critters and driving 'em home."

"What did you do about it?" Dylan asked.

"Nothing. Not a damned thing. Listen! I mind my own business and ride my own horses and brand my own calves. If Jem had something going on, it didn't concern me. I've never told a soul until this minute."

Boyd Dylan turned slowly and studied the cows again. The cuts seemed to be fleshed under the hide, making a sort of small, swollen pouch. He shook his head in

bewilderment and when he spoke it was more to himself than to Powell Plover.

"Well, hell, I don't know what to make of it. Critters were stabbed deep enough to kill 'em, yet they were cut." He looked at Plover. "Any ideas why it was done?"

Plover shook his head. "Nope. I've figured until I'm blue in the face. It don't make any kind of sense to me."

Dylan turned back toward his horse. The rancher followed him, apparently relieved to see the deputy leaving.

"All right, Plover," the deputy said, "You called me out here, tied my hands and hobbled me so's I can't do anything." He swung into saddle and looked down at the shorter man. "But I'll be damned if you can stop me from wondering about a few things."

"Like what?" Plover asked.

Dylan reined his horse around and spoke as he rode away, tipping his hat to the cowman. "Why Jem Garrett didn't care about his cows being slashed, and you did. Also, why in the devil it was done in the first place, and finally, just what exactly was smuggled into Oklahoma from across the Texas line that runs through your range, in those hide pouches cut into your critters."

Powell Plover was too dumbfounded to speak. He watched Dylan ride back toward the stage road with a pop-eyed expression, then turned and hustled back toward the corralled cows with a new interest showing in his features.

II

BOYD DYLAN, swinging along slowly, had almost reached the stage road leading to Santa Maria when a dusty to-buggy hove into sight. It slowed and stopped awaiting him.

He studied it closely as he rode toward it, and got a shock. The driver was the young woman—no more than a girl, she was—whom he had saved from humiliation at Rue Colton's hands that very morning. Susan Garrett. That's what Boss Rensberg had said her name was.

He reined up beside the buggy and looked down into her expressive, beautiful face, admiring her dress and the wholesome maturity of her body in it, as he doffed his hat.

"Ma'am," he said, matter-of-factly.

She looked at him quickly. "Deputy Dylan!" she exclaimed, and hurried on before he could speak again. "I'm awfully sorry I caused you trouble this morning. I wouldn't have done it for the world, honestly. I had no idea anyone would object to where I left my buggy. My husband had told me to be sure and tie up at Colton's rail, so I did." She dropped her shoulders in a gesture of resignation. "And what a riot *that* started!"

Her blue eyes would have melted a stone. Boyd Dylan's heart was not stone. It melted that much faster, but not before it fluttered oddly and painfully a few times as he looked at her. She was absolutely breath-taking.

"Please," she murmured, "I'm terribly sorry."

Dylan smiled. It transformed his otherwise hard, severe face into a wonderfully boyish one.

"Ma'am," he said, "you've got no need to be sorry, or to thank me, either. I'd of done what I did for anybody being embarrassed like you was. My duty, ma'am. But because it *was* you, that just made me do it that much faster." He thought of something, suddenly, that knocked the flattery and banter out of him. "Your husband *told* you to tie up there in front of Colton's?"

"Yes. That's exactly what he told me to do. In almost those same words, too."

Dylan was looking at her without altogether seeing her. Jem Garrett and Rue Colton were at gun points—everybody said—yet Garrett had deliberately told his wife to tie up where Colton's gunmen were certain to insult her! That to think of, and the strangeness of Garrett's slashed cows last winter, and now Plover's cattle. Dylan shook his head.

Sue Garrett's pretty nose wrinkled. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, ma'am." Boyd Dylan came back to the present. "Tell me something, will you?"

"Certainly. What?"

"What are your husband and Colton at loggerheads about?"

"Cattle. Rue bought some Mexican steers to resell to the Indian agency at Dull Knife.

They were turned loose on the range north of town that Jem and a man named Plover, our closest neighbor, use exclusively. They had no right to be there, but Rue left them there until he could get drivers to take them to the agency. There was a mixup when they rounded up. Rue said Jem had kept some of the cattle, and Jem said they were ours. The brands were similar and in the same place, and pretty badly burned over. There's been bad blood ever since."

Dylan nodded slowly. It was an old story on the ranges, and often enough had ended with more blood spilled than a hatful. He noticed the small beads of perspiration on Sue Garrett's upper lip, irrelevantly, as he spoke.

"Too bad. When did this happen?"

"Last winter."

It clicked into place without actually any basis at all. Plover had discovered slashed cows belonging to Garrett, and Rue Colton's critters had got mixed in with Garrett's. It had all happened last winter. Boyd reached up, scratched his nose idly, looking at the beautiful woman in the buggy, and wondering.

Sue Garrett smiled at him. It was a devastating smile where Dylan's reserve was concerned.

"Well, thank you again, Mr. Dylan," she said, "but I'm awfully sorry it happened."

He smiled and nodded, saying nothing. As she drove away he still just sat there in the blazing sun, watching the buggy whip up dust devils as it jounced along the ruts toward Garrett's J G Slash outfit.

When it was out of sight he faced front in the saddle again, and let his horse amble along in the heat haze. His head was dropped low as he swung toward Santa Maria. The things he'd seen, heard, and done this morning annoyed him. There was a key somewhere, but it eluded him.

Why had Garrett sent his beautiful wife where she would be deliberately insulted and humiliated by his arch enemy? Why had Garrett been annoyed when Plover had tried to help him with the knife-slashed cattle? What was being smuggled under the animal's hides, and just how much of Plover's yarn was the truth?

QUESTIONS were still buzzing in his mind when he swung off his horse before the sheriff's office in Santa Maria and entered to make his report. But also he meant to have some answers to his puzzlers from the sheriff. . . .

Boss Rensberg slouched far down in his chair, idly eying his imported deputy. Boyd Dylan's questions were not consistent, but Boss was no fool, either. He couldn't have been. Not and live as long as he had.

"Well, yes," he finally admitted slowly. "Once, when I was a deputy, there was a lot of smuggling hereabouts. Of course, in them days it was mostly guns and whatnot, like powder and ball." Boss shrugged, looking past Dylan's casual, drowsy-looking features, there in the coolness of the office. "Sometimes Mexicans would slip liquor or some other damned thing like stolen jewelry and gold out of Texas, but that stuff wasn't really contraband. Not then. If a man slipped stuff in and out Mexico, nobody gave a hang. Horses and cattle were different, of course, if they were going *to* Mexico."

Boss grinned. His voice was dry and humorous. "They got stopped, but to steal them down south and deliver 'em here"—he shrugged—"well, that was all right. The frontier always needed good stock. Besides, we looked on Mexico a little different, then."

"Yeah," Dylan said. "I reckon those days are gone. No more smuggling to worry about now."

"No," the sheriff agreed. "Just the three things I told you about. Women, horses and cattle."

Dylan got up, stretched, and yawned to hide his crooked, sardonic smile. As he headed for the door, Rensberg watched him curiously.

"Say," the sheriff said abruptly, "what was the matter with Plover? You never did say. Got off on all them damned questions—"

"Oh, he's got a few old cows that look like maybe they've been driven through some barbed wire."

Boss nodded and slapped at the tickling sweat that was cruising the stringy folds of his old neck. "I expected something like that."

Boyd Dylan walked out into the coolness of afternoon shadows and along the duckboards toward the blacksmith shop. He was in front of the sooty old doorway, wide and cool-looking, when a massive, bull-necked man stepped out to bar his way.

"Your name Boyd Dylan?"

The deputy nodded, feeling caution come up out of nowhere, inside of him. "Yes."

"I'm Jem Garrett." The man seemed to be considering what to say next, then decided. "Listen, Dylan, I expect I ought to thank you for helping my wife out today. Well, I do. And I'm going to pass along something else, to sort of even up the obligation. Get to hell out of Santa Maria. You bare-knuckled Slim Espada this morning. He's going to kill you for that."

Dylan heard the obvious anticipation in Garrett's voice and wondered how a girl as wonderful as Sue Garrett could ever have married a man like this. He nodded thoughtfully, returning the big man's unfriendliness without any effort at all.

"Thanks. I appreciate your warning. So his name's Espada. Good. I'll know who to look for, then."

And he started forward, directly toward the hulk of a man before him. There was just one thing for Jem Garrett to do, and he did it.

He got out of the way.

Dylan knew the rancher's glare was following him as he walked on down the street, but he didn't care. Resentment and anger he'd thought he had put behind him was bubbling again. Abruptly he altered his course, swung through the manure-stained old roadway, hearing the disturbed buzzing of thousands of flies, crossed the street to the other side of the road, and entered Rue Colton's saloon.

Trade was as listless as the shiny faces and sweat-soaked shirt of the few customers. Dylan spotted his man immediately and walked over to him without hesitation. Slim Espada turned slowly from the bar, watching the deputy approach. Suddenly the lawman stopped short.

He barked:

"Espada! You've got until sundown to be out of Santa Maria. That's an order!"

THE two-gun man stared, speechless and amazed. Then he dropped both hands. The two men were not far apart—not more than six feet. The droopy bystanders were galvanized into movement. For at such lethal range neither man could miss. Still, they both held their ground, for you never could tell. Even the annoyed bartender, eyes furious over the interruption to an otherwise dull, complacent day, glared. But he said nothing.

The man who finally spoke into the silence was a medium-sized individual, swarthy and soft-looking. His black eyes were incredulous, for this man, Rue Colton, was more than powerful in Santa Maria. He *was* the power here.

"Easy, lawman," he said in a modulated tone. "Don't make any mistakes. Are them Boss Rensberg's orders—or yours?"

"Mine," Boyd Dylan said. "And they'll stick." He was still looking at Espada. "Sundown, hombre, then I'll be hunting you."

No one made a movement or a sound when Dylan left the saloon. No one ever before had bucked the Colton combine, either, and the news traveled like summer fire in the grasslands through Santa Maria and the country roundabout.

Sue Garrett heard it from Jem when he came home, got a fresh horse and went straight back to town. She felt sick inside, frightened, and indignant too. That deputy sheriff was not only a lion, he was also a jackass. She saddled a horse and rode for Santa Maria herself. There was no plan in her mind except an insistent desire to tell a man what a complete idiot he was.

Boss Rensberg heard of Boyd's order to Colton's gunman with astonishment, then anger. He suffered Colton to operate, so long as no depredations were committed in his jurisdiction, but that was all. He belonged to an old school. Don't run from trouble, but certainly don't look for it, either. He refilled his shell-belt loops and went out looking for Boyd Dylan, but without success.

While Santa Maria buzzed with wild speculation, the deputy had ridden back to Powell Plover's P Up-And-Down Ranch. The

For a moment he held her, too astonished to speak

rancher's genial blue eyes welcomed him, if the man's lips didn't. Plover waited for the deputy to dismount, but Dylan didn't. From his horse's back he talked to the rancher.

"Listen, Plover, I want you to do something."

"Now, wait a minute. I told you this morning—"

"What makes you think it's got to do with those cows, or trouble?" Boyd asked mildly.

"Well," Plover shot right back with a head-wagging grin. "I know your kind, lawman. I've seen 'em before. By hell, you could be sitting quietly in church, and trouble'd hunt you and just naturally blow up around you. No, dammit all! Like I said

before, I mind my own business. I'm a cowman, not a gunfighter."

"All right. You don't have to be a gunman to do what I'm going to ask you to do."

"Well? What is it?"

Dylan grinned in spite of himself. Plover was so irate, his discomfort so militant. The deputy almost bowled the man over when he said, "Ride over to Garrett's and ask Sue Garrett to ride back here with you."

"What?"

"No, it's not what you're thinking, either. She *is* beautiful, though, isn't she? I just want her to tell me a couple of things I don't dare ask her around Jem."

"Not by a gut I won't," Plover said flatly, vehemently. "No, sir!" His voice changed then, became gentle, explanatory, a tone such as he would use when expostulating with recalcitrant little boys. "Listen, Lawman, you're going to stir up a hornet's nest around here. Sue's holding every damned heart in the Santa Maria country right in her hands, just like Jem's got everybody disliking and fearing him more than they do even that string-bean Mex gunman of Rue's. For hell's sake be careful! What happens to you is your own affair, but you let one word slip out about what I told you this morning, and Rue'll be after me in a second!" Plover groaned. "He'll know damned well where it came from, too, even if not a word is said about me. Rue's no fool. Not by a darned sight, and that's a fact."

"Well—all right then," Dylan said. "Tell me something. Is Jem Garrett pretty well fixed?

"I don't know." Plover's eyes wavered a little. "But he don't owe nobody, and he's always got money and good horses."

Dyan nodded. "Thanks. You'd better ride info town this afternoon. There's going to be fireworks."

"Fireworks? What kind?"

The deputy said matter-of-factly, "I ordered Slim Espada to be out of Santa Maria by sundown. I don't think he'll go." He swung his horse around without another word.

Plover watched the deputy sheriff ride out of his yard for the second time the same day. Fright and horror showed on the rancher's face. He was still rooted to the hot, dusty ground when Boyd Dylan rode out of sight, heading for the stage road back to town.

III

SQUINTING at the rider loping along a short distance ahead of him, Boyd Dylan was aware that something insistent in his memory was nagging at him. He lifted his horse into an ambling gallop and followed the rider until he was close enough to recognize the lithe figure of Sue Garrett. When he overtook her, she swung around with surprise and consternation on her lovely face.

"Carrying the mail, ma'am?" He grinned.

Sue looked at him and reined up her horse, but said nothing for awhile. Then abruptly she urged her mount through the brush toward three mighty cottonwoods at the right of the trail. Beneath them, she stopped her horse, looking back at Dylan. He followed her in silence.

"You're going to be killed, Mr. Deputy," she announced as he drew up alongside her, and into it she put all the calm irony she could, looking at Boyd Dylan levelly. "What's the matter with you? Wasn't beard-ing Colton's gunman this morning enough? Do you *have* to go deliberately out of your way to get killed?"

He was more interested in the curves of her lush body, silhouetted against the brassy sky, and in admiring the proud challenge of her jutting breasts, the compact firmness of her. He swung down beside her horse, loosening the cinch of his own mount for something to do with his hands. He couldn't look at her as he spoke.

"Ma'am," he said earnestly, "I've got an idea Santa Maria'd be better off without the Espada hombre. Without Colton, too, for that matter."

Sue's shock was reflected in the stilted way in which she spoke.

"Oh, you fool! That gunman, Espada, is bad enough. He'll kill you. But Rue Colton! Why, he's wealthy and influential. Not powerful just in Santa Maria, either, but in the whole Territory!" She was shaking her head in an aggrieved way as he came around

his horse toward her.

He held up a hand to help her dismount. The shade under the cottonwoods would be wonderful, after coming out of the blistering heat. She leaned forward and took his hand, to dismount. An electric shock passed through Dylan, and an almost irrespressible urge to close his fist over the small fingers and hold on.

"Mrs. Garrett"—he spoke with sour gravity, thinking of her massive, hulking husband and his unsavoriness—"I just asked a man to ride to your ranch and fetch you to me."

She glanced up at him in surprise. Hot color mounted to her cheeks.

"I want to ask you some questions," he said.

"This man you asked—Powell Plover, wasn't it?" she asked hesitantly.

"What makes you think that?"

Sue shrugged. "Oh, nothing. I just knew, that's all."

"Is Plover a friend of yours?"

"I like Powell. Jem doesn't. Not since last winter."

Boyd Dylan almost told her why, for somehow he felt certain she had no inkling of the reason for her husband's dislike of Plover. Almost he told her about how Plover had nosed in with the cut cows. But he didn't. He just nodded gently, wondering at himself, at the effect that the loveliness of this woman—another man's wife—was having on his heart.

"Well," he said, "it don't make any difference who he was, anyway, because he refused to go."

"That wouldn't surprise me."

"Why?"

Sue's eyes were bitter. "Men in the Santa Maria country don't cross Jem Garrett."

"Not even Colton?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. Why do you ask?"

"You're beautiful," Dylan said, and he said it mechanically, as he would state his age.

Sue, too startled to speak, just looked at him dumbfounded. But he didn't meet her eyes as he went on:

"I'm asking for two reasons, ma'am. In the first place, I don't believe your husband and Rue Colton are enemies at all. In the second place, I believe both Colton and your Jem are outlaws."

SUE'S face paled, and her eyes were suddenly terrified. Still she said nothing, regarding the deputy without blinking, standing erect and motionless.

"That's why I wanted to talk to you," Dylan said. "To say nothing of the pleasure it gives me just to look at you." She opened her lips to speak then, but his curt slash of the air with one hand stopped her. "Does Jem have enough income from his cattle to live and spend the way he does?"

Sue was shaken. "I—don't know what you mean."

"Yes, you do. Listen, Sue Garrett. There's trouble ahead. Real trouble. Is that why you were riding to town?"

"Yes, but not for the reason you think. Not to warn Jem. He already knew. He's the one who told me there was trouble afoot, when he came home and changed horses."

"Then why were you going?"

"Because—" It seemed almost to strangle her to say it. It had seemed so right to her before, but after what he'd said, it didn't seem proper, her real reason for going to town.

"Because?" Dylan prompted.

"Because I wanted to warn you. I owe you that much"—she spoke defensively—"after this morning."

"No, you don't owe me a thing. I told you I'd of done as much for anybody."

"Well, that's why I was going to town."

"I appreciate that, Sue. Now answer my question."

"About Jem?"

"Yes."

"He runs cattle. That's all I know."

"Is it? Well, what do you suspect, then?"

Her eyes were flying danger flags now. "Jem is my husband! I won't—"

"That," Dylan interrupted solemnly, "is the worst news I've ever heard in my whole damned life—ma'am."

"Stop it! Please go away! Leave us—leave Santa Maria alone. Forget Jem and Rue and the rest. Let old Boss Rensberg

run things the way they've always been run."

"You mean," the deputy asked ironically, "like they were run thirty-forty years ago? Sort of slipshod and easy-like?" He shook his head. "I can't, Sue. I just don't see things like that. Not in that light."

She stared fixedly into his face, then spun quickly back to her horse and fisted the reins. Boyd Dylan's hand closed around her shoulders and spun her to face him. Then, scarcely knowing what he was doing, he pulled her to him. She gave a shocked, startled cry and swung an open hand at his face. He ducked it automatically and pulled her closer—and the next moment, to his complete amazement, their lips were locked together in a kiss that he vaguely felt must somehow be unending.

"Good—Lord!" A small, frightened voice said that. Sue's.

Dylan said nothing. For a moment more he still held her, but at arm's length, too astonished to say a word of any kind. Then he let his arms drop.

"Men live and die in no more time than that, Sue," he said. "So falling in love in less than ten seconds doesn't seem so impossible, does it?"

She didn't answer. He could see again the stricken look in her eyes he had seen before.

"Why did you do that?" she asked, almost inaudibly.

Boyd Dylan's boyish smile flashed. It was such a ridiculous question. He thought of her angry strike at him.

"In self-defense," he murmured.

Both laughed then, not altogether happily, but in relief, anyway.

The first long shadows were warning of the coming close of day when, at Sue's insistence, Dylan mounted and rode on toward Santa Maria, leaving her there. He had to agree with her that it would be anything but an intelligent move for them to be seen riding even the open road together.

Night was fast approaching when he rode into town.

SANTA MARIA at sundown was an unreal clutch of blistered, dusty old buildings, trying to look prosperous and decent under the benevolent light of the failing sun. It almost succeeded, at that, for the harsh corners were softened in shadow and the smell of curling grass and parched earth, cooling, gave off their distinctive perfume.

Boyd Dylan rode into town from the south end, reversing his usual procedure. Nor did he, as usual, stable his horse at the livery barn. He tied up in a side street—alley would fit better—and started off down through Santa Maria in a slow walk.

He was attuned to what he knew was happening and what had happened. Santa Maria was as silent as a tomb. Even the piano in Colton's place was without its usual challengers. Boyd sensed hundreds of eyes following him. He knew, too, that Espada had word, by now, of his arrival.

He thought of many things, fleetingly, but always came back to Sue and what she had said, after that kiss, before he had left her and ridden on into town to keep rendezvous with a killer. Always, just behind his memory of Sue's beauty, was the threatening shadow of her husband's hard face. Dylan's resentment grew steadily.

It was still growing when Boss Rensberg walked out of his office, across the road, and hailed his deputy.

"Hey—Boyd! Come over here. Listen! Cut that out."

Boyd didn't look around. He knew the kind of men he was up against. Espada and Colton. Either would as soon ambush a man as eat. One slight error in vigil and Boyd Dylan would be a dead man.

But the sheriff persisted angrily, starting across the road toward his deputy, kicking up spirals of dust that furred his shapeless old pants legs.

"Boyd! I'm warning you! You made a fool play, boy. You got no right to be giving orders like that."

Dylan stopped in his tracks, only faintly conscious of Rensberg's garrulous ramblings. Slim Espada had just sauntered out of Rue Colton's place. Boss saw him, too, at the same instant, and checked both his progress and his words.

The tension was almost insufferable. Espada studied the deputy scornfully, walking casually toward the center of the road. They

were about a hundred feet apart when he stopped, faced Dylan squarely, and spoke.

"All right, lawman. It's sundown and I'm still here. Your move."

Dylan's eyes were wide. He made no move to face the gunman from the center of the road.

"You can still slope, hombre," he called.

Espada laughed drily, a sound like snails dropping off a wet wall and cracking the fragile shells when they landed. "No, I'm not running, lawman. Not the running kind." His head inclined in just a bare minimum of a nod. "You gave the order. You back it up."

Dylan studied the man's thin, terra-cotta-colored hands and braced himself. It would come any second now—and fast. Blindingly fast.

For this one single moment the initiative was his—and he took it!

IV

THE thunder of gunfire blew the silence apart. The echoes chased each other down the land. Of the two men, Espada was a shade faster but, oddly, his first shot had been ten inches wide of his mark. It was one of those things that happen freakishly to the best of gunmen, but in this case it was a fatal blunder.

Dylan felt the tug of Espada's next bullet. He was standing sideward and it plowed burningly across his rounded right shoulder. He, too, fired a second time, and that slug also took affect. Espada went down, reluctantly, his head hanging forward on his chest.

Boss Rensberg walked up slowly, silent and thin-lipped. He passed Dylan with scarcely a glance. The deputy was still standing, and that was enough for the sheriff. Boss stood wide-legged, staring at Slim Espada, then he bent over, took both guns from the lifeless fingers, straightened with an effort and looked around.

The duckboards were filling again with curious townsmen and riders from the range country. Boss turned his back on the dead man and walked back to Dylan. He saw the telltale scarlet high on the deputy's right shoulder as he came up.

"Bad?" he asked grimly.

Dylan shook his head. "No, I hardly feel it at all. Just a mite high to do much real damage. Is he dead?"

"Dead as he can get." Boss looked down at the big guns in his hands. "Here. You won 'em."

Boyd looked at the guns distastefully. "I don't collect scalps. Keep 'em."

"Well—all right. But listen, Boyd, you had no right to order him out of town, y'know."

Boyd looked boldly at the older law officer. "Boss," he said, "I don't know how to say it. Maybe things're different now from what they were when you first went into the law business. There's no way to overlook or compromise with outlaws any more. You fight 'em any old way they want it, and break 'em." A sardonic expression wreathed Boyd Dylan's face. "Oh, I know I've got no business telling you how to law. I expect the best thing for me to do is resign and ride on." Rensberg had made no attempt to speak before and now, as he got his mouth open, Dylan cut him off. "All right. I'll do that, but first I want to talk to Jem Garrett and Rue Colton."

He turned and strode back toward his horse. The silent watchers along his route stepped hastily aside, nodding respectfully as he went down the plank walk. His ringing spurs could have been a knell for the man he had just killed.

Jem Garrett and Rue Colton were still leaning against the wall on either side of the saloon's solitary front window. It had all happened so abruptly, so devastatingly, they were still stunned.

Colton turned his head and fisted his hands deep in his pants pockets, staring at nothing. "Damn! I still don't believe it."

Jem Garrett, more realistic and cynical, grunted, "Something went wrong. I seen Slim draw. It was like always, only this time his right-hand gun seemed to snag as the barrel was coming up." He shook his shaggy head. "Too bad."

There was nothing but lip service in the words, but they brought Rue Colton's mind

out of his shock.

"Jem, that deputy's got to be killed! Before this, I thought he was just another blowhard lawman. Now I figure different. He's dangerous!"

"Well," Garrett said drily, "I'm sure not in his class. Not when he come that close to outgunning Slim."

Colton's black eyes pin-pointed Garrett. "Listen, Jem. I can't hire another gunman fast enough to put him away before he smells something out. You'll *have* to do him in. There's a bonus of five-hundred for him dead, Jem. Do it any way you want, but do it."

Garrett grunted again, looking at Colton wryly. "I'll see if I can drygulch him tonight, but dammit, don't think I'm going up against him out in the open."

"I don't care *how* you do it. Just do it!" The color returned to Colton's face. "Now you'd better slope. We've been too careful about building up this enmity between us, for Santa Maria's benefit, to be seen together."

GARRETT nodded. "How about the divvy?"

Colton shook his head. "Not here. I just finished with it this morning, anyway. I'll ride out to your barn tonight, same time as always, and give you your share. You sure Plover don't suspect anything?"

"Naw. He's too dumb. Last winter he run into some cows of mine we used, like I told you then, and he didn't suspect nothing. I knew he didn't, because if he had the word would've got around."

Colton nodded. "Just the same, next time you pick the critters, do it in the daytime so's you don't make that mistake of getting any of his again."

Jem Garrett didn't answer. It rankled, to be reminded of having made an error. He turned toward the rear of the saloon and walked away. Colton watched him thoughtfully, and shrugged.

Boyd Dylan's shoulder ached a little, but the bullet groove wasn't deep. He got it dressed by the local doctor, then went to Colton's place and had a drink. In the thick silence that settled over the place while he was there he was told that Rue Colton wasn't in town—which he suspected was a lie and was—and left.

At the livery barn he got his horse and took it up to the blacksmith shop for new shoes all around.

The smith, a squatty, massive man whose tremendous muscles rolled mightily under his sweaty hide looked at the deputy speculatively. He led the horse to a cross-tie and made him fast.

"Halter-puller?" He asked.

"No. He's quiet."

"Yeah, he looks it." The smith bent and lifted the horse's left front hoof, eying the worn shoe critically. He was fiishing in a shoeing box for the pullers when his voice rumbled from deep within his brawny chest to ask:

"You get hit by that left-hand gun?"

"A nick on top of the shoulder."

"Lucky—damned lucky. I've seen him in action before. He's awful fast. Colton'll be lost without him, I'll bet on that."

Dylan fished around in a shirt pocket for his tobacco sack, leaned back and rolled one, thinking. At last he asked, "This Colton—he's a friend of yours?"

"No. I drink in his saloon and he has his horses shod here, and that's about it. He's too big a man for me to mess with."

"How about Jem Garrett? I bumped into him coming out of here this morning."

"Jem's just another piney-woods cowman, to me. I shod his sorrel horse this morning." The smith grunted and straightened up, shooting Boyd a glance and fishing for his knife and hoof-nippers. "He's got the best damned horses in the country, though. Has a regular weakness for fine horseflesh."

Dylan listened, making no answer. An ironic thought flashed into his mind. Jem Garrett was a judge more than of good horseflesh. He was a good judge of flesh, horse and otherwise.

The smith bent to his labors again, sweat glistening on his upper body like a sheen of oil.

"Jem's good pay, too." he went on, then hesitated. He straightened up suddenly and fished under his scarred apron. A thick padded hand came out holding up something

bright and thick. "Take a look at that. First triangle I've seen in years. They used to be pretty common around Santa Maria when I was a kid. There was a lot of gold hereabouts then. It's all gone now. Has been for twenty years or so." The smith's face screwed up confidentially. "You know what I think? I'll lay you odds Jem's got a hidden gold mine on his damned ranch!"

Boyd was electrified. The thing he was holding in his palm was a wedge of hand-smelted gold in conventional frontier triangle pattern. Small as it was, it was worth possibly fifty dollars. A thumb-nail gouged it easily. Pure, raw gold.

His heart was pounding when he handed the thing back in silence. The smith pocketed it and bent to his labors once more.

"He might have, at that," Dylan said. "He's always pretty well-moneyed, isn't he? I mean, he's got more than enough, for a man who runs a few Mexican cows, I'd say."

It was a shot in the dark, and a weak one, but it worked.

THE smith nodded. "Yeah, Jem's always ready to spend his money all right. He don't get that stuff from peddling a few old hides a year, I'll bet on that."

"Yeah," Boyd Dylan agreed vaguely.

It was torture, standing around making small talk until his horse was shod, but he did it. Then he led the animal back to the livery barn, saddled up and swung north out of town, his insides tight with anticipation.

He knew now what was being smuggled across the line into Oklahoma, in those cruel little pouches slit in the cow's hides. No one would stop a cattle drive looking for contraband. It was a clever way to smuggle gold. The deputy was cynical about it, too. It was far too clever a dodge for a man of Jem Garrett's caliber to think of it. It was more the sort of thing Rue Colton would think of.

He thought of Powell Plover's critters and frowned. Somehow, in some way a mistake had been made. Plover's cattle had been used. Except for that, the system might have gone on indefinitely without detection.

He thought of Sue Garrett then, as he rode slowly down the lane toward the P Up-And-Down. It made him writhe inside, too. He was after Jem Garrett and meant to take him. Sue wouldn't admire the man who humbled her husband. Or would she?

He was still wrestling with the problem when he rode into Plover's yard and saw the rancher saddling a horse.

"Evening," he greeted.

Plover regarded him stonily. "You done it, didn't you?"

"You mean Espada?"

"Yeah."

"Yes. He had his choice."

There was a brief, awkward silence, then Plover sagged a little, standing at the head of his saddled horse. "You didn't say nothing about me, about the cows, did you?"

"Nope. I told you I wouldn't. Why?"

"Well, I was just getting ready to ride into town and find you."

"What for? Scared?"

Plover's color came up. He nodded vigorously. "You're damned right I am. You're sitting on a powder keg and I'm right beside you. You're a gunman, I'm a cowman. I couldn't begin to get away from Colton's mob if you was to let it slip I told you about my cows."

"Is that what you were coming after me for?" It didn't figure to Boyd Dylan.

"No," Plover said tartly, jerking a thumb over his shoulder toward the unpainted little house. "Sue's in there. She wants you. I don't."

Dylan blinked owlishly, stunned. "Sue Garrett—in there?"

"Yes." Plover looked up at Dylan again. His eyes reflected all the fear and discomfort of an harassed man. "Listen, lawman—do me a favor. Take her away from here. Jem'll come a gunning as sure as God made green apples, and that's a fact. He'll miss her and start out looking. I'm his nearest neighbor. Get her out of here, will you?"

Dylan didn't answer. He swung down, looped the reins over a corral post and started for the house without another glance at Powell Plover.

V

PLOVER watched Boyd Dylan walk away and grimaced at the deputy's back. He turned to his own waiting horse, regarded it

distastefully, ashamed of the flight he had planned. Looking back toward the house where Dylan had disappeared through the sagging front door, he shrugged resignedly, then led the horse back into the barn and began listlessly to unsaddle him.

When he was hanging his gear back on the wall, the carbine butt caressed his cheek. It was cool and smooth—and reassuring. Plover pulled it from the saddle-boot, studied it thoughtfully, then went over to the shadows of the barn door and sat down on a nail keg. As he looked out into the failing light of day, over toward Jem Garrett's J G Slash, he cradled the little gun over his knees and stroked it uneasily.

At that same moment, inside his ranch house, Boyd Dylan was calling anxiously:

"Sue!"

Boyd saw her in the shadows. He knew, then, from the way she came toward him that the kiss had meant as much to her as it had to him.

"What are you doing over here at Plover's?" he asked her.

"I couldn't go back home," she said pleadingly. "I can't explain it to you—I can't! But I just couldn't go."

He reached for her, and she came to him willingly enough.

"Sue," he whispered, "I love you! Is that impossible? I mean I shouldn't, should I, because you're married?"

"I wanted you to love me, Lawman. I've wanted you to since much earlier. When you stood up for me at Colton's tie-rack. It wasn't just the kiss. It was before that. I'm shameless, too."

"Because you're married?"

"Yes, because of that. But—I'll go with you. I'll be whatever you want me to be. I can't help it, Lawman. I love you!"

Boyd Dylan's heart was making rhythmic thunder in his ears. The air in the Plover ranch house seemed stiflingly hot.

"No, "he said, "I don't want you any way at all. Just as my wife. Will you divorce him?"

"Yes. I've tried to before. Twice. The first time he beat me out of the idea. The second time—well, that was today. I made up my mind when he said he was going to kill me if I was home when he got back from watching you get killed. That's why I'm here."

"Waiting, Sue?"

"Waiting and praying. If you hadn't come back within an hour—with Powell after I'd sent him to get you—I was going to ride on, leave the Santa Maria." Her face was pressed so close to his chest that her voice came to him muted, muffled, but wonderfully understandable. "I had one brief memory to take with me—your kiss. But it would have been more than enough to have made all the suffering I've known worth while. It's a finer treasure than anything in the two years of memories I have of being married to Jem."

He could feel her tightening against him and knew the tears, just below the surface now, would be assuaging to taut, raw nerves.

"Well, honey," he murmured, "if anyone rides on now it'll be both of us." He felt mean about asking the next question that came into his mind then, but he asked it anyway. "Is Rue Colton your husband's pardner in this gold-smugling business?"

She looked up, reaching for his neck with both arms. "I don't know, darling. Honestly. Jem's awfully secretive. All I know is that he makes a lot of cattle drives. Buys them sometimes in Texas, and brings them home. Other times he drives our cattle to Texas and returns with them or others. He's always been careful not to let me know what he's doing, and I've hated him too much to care."

Dylan relaxed to the pressure of her arms. Their lips came together again, and he breathed in the sweetness of her breath. The kiss lasted until her passionate breathing became ragged, then he pulled back a little. But only to succumb again and meet her moist, silky full lips once more. There was an almost tangible sense of ecstasy stirring within him.

"Sue," he told her then, "I was afraid, before. Even now, I don't exactly know what to tell you. I'm a lawman, honey, and your husband's an outlaw. I've got a job to do. Will you wait for me here, until I get back?"

"Where are you going?"

"To the J G Slash. I want to look at Jem's cows. Sort of nose around, kind of."

SHE looked up at him with the old stricken, frightened look. "Jem—is he still in Santa Maria?"

Without knowing, or caring, but to allay her fears, Dylan nodded. "I reckon so. Anyway, you stay here. I'll fix it with Plover. When I come back we'll ride on."

"Yes," she said fervently. "I'll wait right here, lawman, if it takes a hundred years. I love you so!" The confession was spoken wildly, passionately, but naturally.

He bent and kissed her again. She took one of his sinewy hands and placed it between the fullness of her ripe breasts. He could feel the jolting slams of her heart in irregular cadence, and smiled.

"Me too, darling. *Adios.*"

As Garrett rode due west from the P Up-and-Down toward Garrett's place, the waning daylight grew mellow with orange shades. The deputy's emotions were a jumble of confusion, but he promised himself one thing. Come what might, he would not be the man to gun down Jem Garrett.

The desire to kill the renegade was there, as well as more than enough hatred, fed by the memory of Sue's remark about Jem having beaten her. It was just that if he killed the man himself the spectre of the dead husband would always be between Sue and Boyd himself, regardless of whether Sue had loved Jem or not.

Dylan felt old and tired when at last he topped a land swell and began the descent toward ghostly, unpainted buildings nestling in a beautiful little valley below. He recalled Powell Plover's fidgeting when he had asked the route to the J G Slash, and grinned. Plover had agreed to stay home until Dylan came back or, if he didn't, to wait until definite word of his death came. Then he would help Sue escape from the Santa Maria country.

Plover's face had been deathly white in the dying daylight, but he had promised. Dylan thought of him, hunkered in his barn with a carbine over his knees, scared half to death.

Dylan was grinning again as he swung down in a clump of scrub-oak. He left his horse and spurs behind, and began inching toward the dark, sinister-looking ranch buildings.

The J G Slash seemed deserted. There were four good horses in a corral by the log barn that caught his scent and looked toward him, ears up and heads forward. Boyd went toward them, saw that the manger was empty and felt better. If they hadn't been fed yet, Jem probably wasn't on the ranch.

He moved off toward the barn, stepped inside and stood still, letting his eyes become accustomed to the gloom. It was while he was motionless that the sound of cattle came to him faintly. Driven cattle, he could tell, by their protesting sounds. Wondering, he made a fast, cursory examination of the barn's interior and found nothing but some old rags soaked with blood.

The cattle were coming closer. Dylan went outside to make a guess at their route. He didn't want anyone stumbling onto his tied saddle horse, but the mount was safe. The cattle were being driven out of the night west of the barn, toward the network of corrals.

Dylan surmised that Jem Garrett was bringing in another herd to be used in the drive south, into Texas, where the contraband gold would be sewed into their hides before they were driven leisurely back home again. He stayed in the shadows close to the barn, watching. A rider loped up out of the warm night with its Comanche moon and weak, moist light, and opened a corral gate, spun his horse and rode back out of sight again.

Dylan recognized the big hulk of a man—Jem Garrett. The deputy loosened his gun in its holster, then shoved it down deeper again. He wanted Garrett alive. The gun was useless in the face of his resolve.

Cattle came out of the night like dark silhouettes moving on legs that propelled them only because those behind were pushing. Dylan tried to count them, but gave it up when they began streaming through the gate opening, three and four abreast in a riot of scorching, heavy dust and rattling horns. He didn't move again until the lone rider swung down, kicked the gate closed and snapped the chain.

He anticipated the man's next move. He sidled toward the barn where Jem Garrett would unsaddle.

BOYD DYLAN was smiling to himself as he made use of every shadow and cover to get close to the unsuspecting outlaw. It would be almost too easy.

Garrett unsaddled and put the horse in the same corral with the others the deputy had seen. The cattleman dumped his saddle, bridle and blanket unceremoniously on the ground and went inside, reaching for a pitchfork that hung between two nails just inside the door.

Dylan waited until he saw the fragrant hay being forked out the opening in the side of the barn into the horse's manger, then started to close in. He was moving around the side of the barn, north of the corrals, when a loping horse coming in from the east, stopped him in his tracks.

Listening, Dylan knew the animal was being ridden, was not traveling loose. Hurriedly, frantically, he looked around for cover. The best available hiding place was by the big slab watering trough in the horse corral. He holstered his gun, slid through the corral stringers and darted toward it.

He had just barely hunkered down, squeezing his six-foot frame into a lump that blended with the darkness, when the rider loomed into sight and swung down.

VI

JEM GARRETT came stamping out of the barn, tossing the pitchfork away as he came, and squinted toward the dismounted rider. Recognition came slowly to Boyd Dylan because he didn't know Rue Colton's outline as well as he might. It was Colton's voice that identified him for the deputy.

"Jem, I got—"

"You bring the divvy, Rue?" Garrett cut in harshly.

"Yes. Here." Two pouches passed between them, then when Colton spoke again there was an urgency to his voice that made Jem Garrett look at him quickly. "Listen, Jem. That old gaffer, Rensberg, is up to something."

"What're you talking about?"

"I'm not sure. After this whelp Dylan downed Slim, old Boss came over to the saloon with blood in his eye. First time I ever seen him get that way."

"Get to the point, dammit," Garrett said edgily.

"Boss told me to get rid of my boys and either clean up my business or get out of Santa Maria."

"He can't talk like that, the damned old goat."

"Well, he did. I don't think he suspects a thing about the gold, but—"

"I'll tell you what's biting him," Jem Garrett cut in. "He thinks that imported deputy of his is all wool and a yard wide. He's sore because of the risk this Dylan's running. Well, damn his lights, he'd better worry. I'm going to kill that—"

"You mean you haven't done it yet? Jem, I told you—"

"What I'm supposed to do—use Injun magic to bring him where he can be bushwhacked? I haven't seen him since the fight in town. He rode out right after that, remember? And I had things to do—"

"Well"—Colton's eyes went to the bawling, milling cattle in the corral—"you'd better turn these cattle back out. We'll just have to slack off for awhile. At least until this deputy's done for. By hell, we'd better just down old Boss, too. He's getting his neck up, and I don't like it."

"Are you crazy?" Garrett demanded. "Just who in hell's going to do all these killings. I'm not. You'd better send word down the back trails you need another two-gun man."

"I thought of that, while I was riding out here. We could bring one of those Mex killers out of Texas. One of the gang that're looting the stages for this gold we buy at a dime on the dollar."

Jem Garrett was shaking his head even before Colton finished speaking. "Nope. That end of things is working too smoothly. Don't mess it up by taking a man away and having to break in a new one."

"Well?" Colton said. "What then?"

Garett was silent for awhile. When he spoke, his voice was sullen. "I don't know.

We'll just lie low for a while. I'll knock off that troublesome deputy. Old Rensberg'll raise hell and prop it out with a chunk, but in time he'll forget it. Then we can get back to our smuggling again. It's too good to let die."

Rue Colton sighed loudly. The sound carried to where Dylan lay, his cramped legs aching. The deputy had his gun out, ready when Colton spoke again.

"Well, dammit, let's go get some coffee. This thing's got me worried a little."

"Coffee, sure, but no food. I can't cook and Sue's not here."

"Not here?" Colton echoed in surprise. "You mean she's not home from town, or something?"

"Hell, I don't know. She just ain't here. Wasn't home when I got back from town. Her horse is gone, too. Maybe the damned fool's finally run away, like she said she would." Garrett's big shoulders rose and fell in annoyance. "Good riddance."

Colton licked his lips nervously. "You're through with her, Jem?"

"Hell, yes."

"I'll make you a deal. That big Denton gelding for her. I'll bring the horse out in the morning. You bring her in to the saloon as soon as she comes back."

"All right." Jem Garrett nodded grimly. "That's a trade. But what if she don't come back?"

"Then we'll track her down and bring her back."

BOYD DYLAN had heard more than enough. He knew about the gold. Its source and all. Jem Garrett had enough evidence in the two pouches in his pockets right now to convict them both. Just one thread remained. The thieves in Texas who stole the money. But that was a job for the Texas Rangers.

It was the callous trade for Sue that brought Dylan's fighting blood up in a gorge of murderous fury. He stood up, suddenly, and cocked his .45. The sound carried. The horses at the manger shied and snorted softly, eying him distrustfully. His voice was low and clear even before Garrett and Colton turned in their tracks to locate him.

"Don't budge, either of you. One move—just one—and you'll go to hell."

Jem Garrett's eyes were bulging. But Colton didn't lose his head. He saw in a flash that during the deputy's progress across the corral would be their only chance to escape, or to down him. At the first shot, the corralled horses would charge around the lawman's area in terror. But if Doylan got clear of the corral and into the yard, he'd have them both.

With a short, falsetto yelp, Rue Colton gave Jem Garrett a shove and leaped toward his horse. The mount shied at the hurtling figure and Colton fell flat. Jem roared his anger at Colton, ran wildly onward the saloon owner's trotting horse, caught the animal and threw himself at the saddle just as the darkness flew apart and Rue Colton, on one knee, fired frantically at the shadow in the corral.

Boyd Dylan cursed and ran forward. By the flash of Colton's shot he saw Garrett escaping, and flung himself over the corral stringers with a curse. Leveling his pistol at the kneeling man, he fired. Colton sagged, straightened, and swung his gun up again. Dylan's second shot knocked him sideward in a sodden heap. Rue Colton's cocked gun lay in the dust beside him.

Dylan was tumbling down from the top pole of the corral when Jem Garrett, twisting in the saddle, snapped off his first shot. It wasn't even close. The deputy took deliberate aim and squeezed trigger. The horse gave a great lunge forward, then went jolting forward in a rocky gait inspired by terror and the pain of a twisted ankle.

When the horse didn't fall, Boyd holstered his gun, tossed the inert Colton a quick glance and sprinted for his own mount. Jem Garrett had gained precious seconds. Dylan clawed at the tie-rope, swung up and whirled east again, listening to the faint, uneven hoofbeats of the horse the man rode, then roared out in pursuit.

He rode all the way to Santa Maria and still didn't sight his prey. Bewildered, certain the injured animal would be down by now, he met Boss Rensberg riding out of town.

The sheriff eyed him dourly. "I been

thinking," he said without preface. "I got a suspicion when you was asking me about smuggling this morning. Colton's no good, nor Jem either, for that matter, and I want to know what's going on. 'Course, they hate each other, so I figure Jem, who used to be pretty friendly with Rue, could tell me about what Rue's up to."

Boyd nodded impatiently. "You seen Jem in town?"

Boss shook his head. "Nope. I looked for him. It would of saved me this darned night ride, if he'd been around. Why?"

"Well, ride along with me. I got a few things to tell you."

Boyd Dylan began to tell them, and he didn't finish speaking until they were turning into the lane to Powell Plover's P-Up-And-Down. After the deluge of words stopped, Boss Rensberg rode along, head low on his chest and hands clasped with the reins, over his saddle-horn.

"I'll be damned," he muttered. "Completely and absolutely damned." He looked over at his deputy. "You was right, Boyd. Things *have* changed since I commenced lawing." He shook himself like a dog coming out of the water and squnted ahead at the dark, sinister-looking outline of the Plover house and barn. "Well, Jem Garrett won't get far, that's a gut. One good thing about telegraph. Especially when he's afoot." He shrugged. "All right, son, you done it. Now listen—I expect you think I'm an old mossback. You might be a mite right at that, but I want you to do me a favor."

"What?"

THE sheriff grinned. "Well, don't get your nose out of joint because I didn't go along with you in this thing. Stay on being my deputy. I got reason to need new blood around me, Boyd. I got a lot to learn. Thing's've changed boy. They sure as hell have." He reined up suddenly and pointed to something dark and lumpy in the foreground. "What's that? If it ain't a man and a horse, I'll kiss your foot."

"Hold it, you two. Right where you are!"

The words came at them with all the vigor and threat that was possible in a man who means what he says. Dylan's heart was in his throat. The dead horse meant that Jem Garrett had ridden for Plover's place.

The voice of the hidden man growled at them again. "Who are you?"

The sheriff answered, biting off each word angrily. "Sheriff and deputy sheriff of Santa Maria County. You come out in the open with that gun, hombre, then toss it down!"

To Doylan's amazement, the man came out of the barn, jettisoned the carbine and strolled over to them. He had never seen an ugly face that looked so good to him.

"Powell! Where's Sue?"

Plover jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "In the barn there. She come running out after I shot Jem, there. He come riding in here on a half-dead horse and threatened to kill me if I didn't give him a horse." Plover's face beamed genially, proudly. "I don't have horses to give away, so I just ups with the carbine and shoots him down." He looked at Boss Rensberg, who was regarding him in monumental surprise. "It was plain self-defense, Sheriff, s'help me."

Boyd dismounted stiffly and went toward the barn opening. Sue heard his spurs and ran into his arms.

Boss Rensberg lifted his old eyes from Plover's sweaty, anxious face, to the blending silhouettes in the yard before the barn. He leaned forward in the saddle, squinting mightily. His voice was garrulous.

"Say, Boyd! What the devil are you doing, boy?"

He got no answer until Powell Plover, rubbing his sweaty palms together, looked at the lovers, then back to the old man.

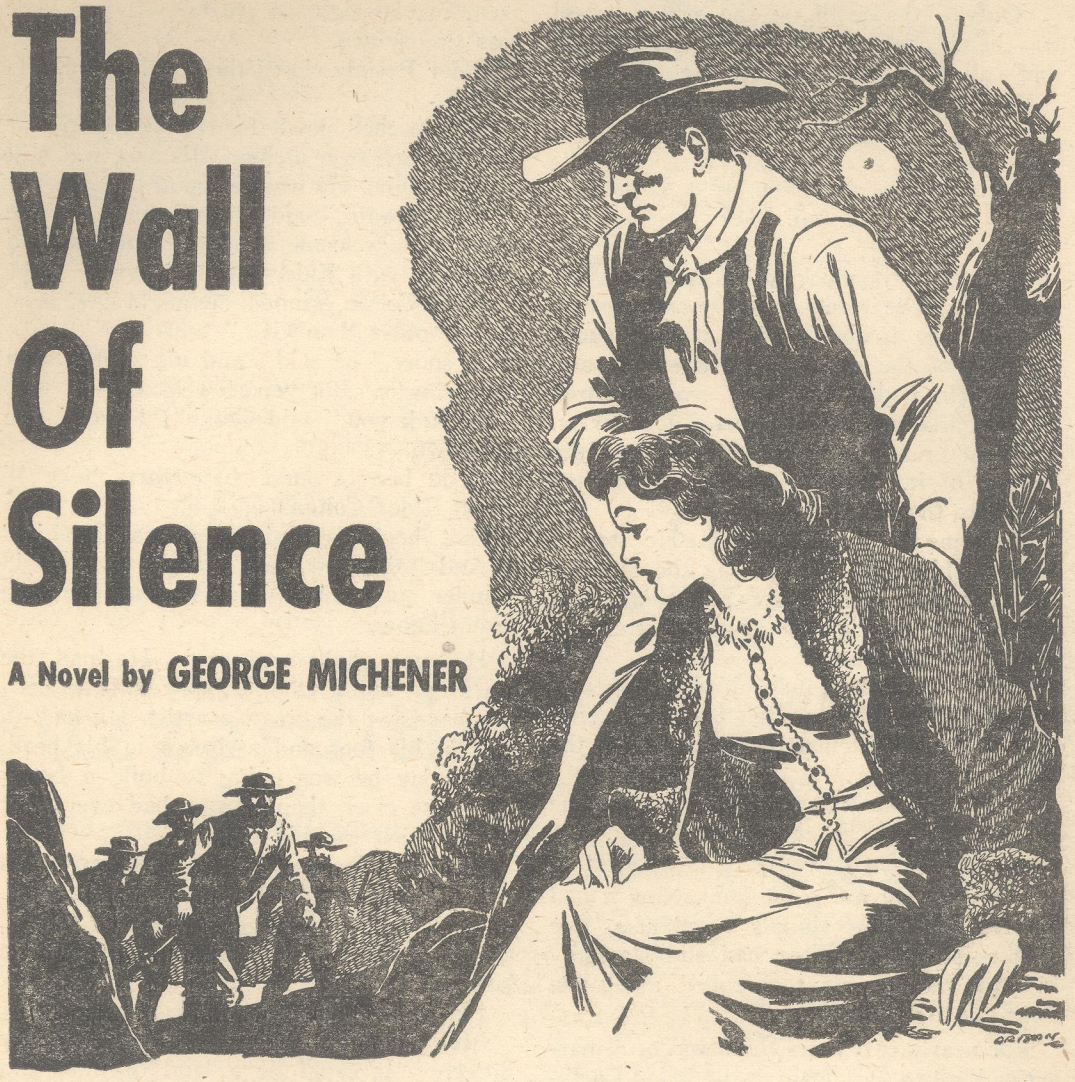
"Oh, well. That's a sort of self-defense, too, I reckon, Sheriff. He's kissing her."

Sheriff Boss Rensberg looked down at the rancher, stunned, then slowly gazed back at the man and woman again and began to wag his head back and forth like a bewildered buffalo bull.

"I'll be damned. Completely and miserably damned. Powell, things're changing, boy. World's getting too complicated for me. Used to be women, horses and cattle a lawman had to figure as the root of trouble. Now it's women and gold and smuggling, then horses and cattle, I reckon. I'll be damned."

The Wall Of Silence

A Novel by **GEORGE MICHENER**



I

THE clock sat on the oak table, centered in the yellow pool of lamplight. Beneath the dial of the clock was painted a fabulously impossible bird. The clock was sixteen years old. Sixteen years is not long—not in the life of a good clock. Time is the element in which a clock moves. A good clock moves through Time with the serenity of a fish in water.

Forget her, she's a Mormon, they warned him — but he couldn't forget

"One of the teeth on the escape wheel was bent," he said. "It needed cleaning—that's all the trouble was. It's a good clock."

With quill and ink, on the paper in the back of the clock, he wrote neatly:

CLEANED AND REPAIRED BY LEE GALT, FEB. 3RD, 1846

He carried the clock to its shelf. His fingers worked delicately with the crutch-wire, straightening it and bending it again until the beat of the verge sounded steady and sweet. He nodded. A faint smile showed on his thin, dark face. It was a good clock. Pride of craftsmanship had gone into the making of it. Pride of craftsmanship had gone into the repairing of it.

He came back to the table. He stowed away in his small leather bag the tools of his trade—file, screwdrivers and pliers, dogwood pegs, the tiny bottle of oil from the jaw of the porpoise.

Elder Proudy, squat, black-whiskered, massive-headed, went to the door and opened it. He listened to the noises of the night.

Elder Colton leaned tensely across the table, staring at Elder Proudy's back. He, too, seemed to be listening.

Fear was abroad in the land. Now it had entered this little Illinois farmhouse. Lee Galt could feel it. Fear had slid stealthily in with the icy air that rolled along the floor like a rising tide.

For nearly two years the blood of a martyr had been a dark stain in the jail at Carthage. Now the mobs were howling here in Illinois as they had howled six years before in Missouri. This was the "year of the burnings." Farmhouses were going up in flames and fat farm lands were going for a song. The Saints were fleeing to Nauvoo, the "Beautiful Place." They were gathering their strength so that their Moses might lead them from out of the Wilderness.

LEE GALT'S eyes sought the shadows beyond the table where Mary Proudy stood stiffly motionless. He imagined he could hear her soft breathing. She was Elder Proudy's daughter. She was seventeen, maybe eighteen, years old. Lee Galt was twenty-two.

Elder Proudy closed the door. "Cold," he said.

Galt reached slowly for the sheepskin coat he had hung over a chair. His gaze was still upon the girl. He was reluctant to leave.

"If you want," said Elder Proudy, "you're more than welcome to stay the night. You can sleep with Elder Colton."

Elder Colton grinned. He might have been a year older than Galt.

"I snore," he said, "and it's stuffed with corn shucks. But you're welcome."

"Thank you," said Galt. "I'll stay." He sat down.

"You been around these parts before?" asked Elder Colton.

Galt shook his head. "I just wandered in."

And tomorrow, he thought, he would wander out again. Where he was going he didn't know.

He was slight and wiry. He had the black hair and eyes of a gypsy and the slender hands of the creative artist. He had an itch in his foot and a dream in his head. Some day he was going to build a better long-case clock than anyone had ever built before—that was his dream.

But first, before he built this marvelous clock of his, he was looking for something. What it was, he didn't know, either. Maybe, though, he had finally found it. Maybe he had.

He kept looking at Mary Proudy.

"It's not good here," said Elder Proudy bitterly. "It could be a land of milk and honey, and it's not." He seated himself heavily across the table from Galt. "We're leaving," he said.

Galt nodded. He asked no questions; he didn't need to. He knew why they were leaving. Colton, Proudy and Mary Proudy would be joining the trek from Nauvoo to the Promised Land. And no one—perhaps not even Brigham Young, the energetic organizer, that man of iron purpose—knew where the Promised Land was. They'd go on and on, thousands strong, and Faith would lead them and Intolerance would drive them, the modern Children of Israel.

Mary Proudy moved closer to the table.

He tried to wring the knife from Fain's grasp

Her face was pale, as if she had been indoors too much. Her eyes were large and darkly wondering.

"You go around repairing clocks?" she asked, almost timorously. "You just going anywhere?"

Galt nodded promptly. "Watches and clocks both."

She gestured toward the clock. "It's so—so complicated."

"Not that one," said Galt. "There's no attachments—only a striking train. Did you ever hear of the Strasbourg Clock?"

She hadn't. She leaned forward at the table, her eyes widening as Galt described the great clock at Strasbourg, the numerous dials, the wondrous, turning globe of the heavens, the pantomiming puppets, the crowing cock.

He told of other famous clocks—the ones at Venice, Lubeck, Lyons. His voice, as he spoke of these works of long dead masters, became hushed and reverent.

"And the story is," he said at the end, "that when Lipp finished the clock at Lyons, he had his eyes put out so he would never be able to make another clock like it."

"Wickedness!" interrupted Elder Proudy. "I'll have no such talk here of a man maiming himself. The body is sacred!" For a moment Elder Proudy regarded Galt sternly. Then he said, "It is our custom to have a small service at this time of the evening . . . Elder Colton, will you read?"

Elder Colton got out a book. "And it came to pass that Coriantumr wrote again an epistle into Shiz, desiring that he—" and his voice droned on.

Elder Proudy sat straight and as attentive as a statue.

Mary Proudy's eyes were glistening in the lamplight. Her lips were slightly parted and a faint flush had come into her cheeks. It wasn't religious fervor that had gripped Mary Proudy. Elder Colton's reading was scarcely that inspired. In fact, Elder Colton read very badly.

He squinted and scowled and had a tendency to mumble.

"'And it came to pass'," he went on doggedly, "'that they fought all that day, and when the night came—'"

MARY PROUDY'S gaze met Galt's, and she averted her eyes. The flush ran higher in her cheeks.

Elder Colton struggled on with his reading.

Mary Proudy's eyes remained averted. Galt had the notion that she was watching him from beneath her long lashes. He felt warm inside. He no longer heard Elder Colton, and he had forgotten Elder Proudy. He was conscious only of the girl.

Suddenly Elder Proudy slapped the table. "What's that?"

Elder Colton stopped his reading. Galt heard a distant bawling voice:

"Proudy! Yee-ow! We're a-coming, Proudy!"

Galt saw Elder Proudy's glance flick to the rifle that hung on pegs above the door. He saw Mary Proudy's face, white as death now. Then Elder Colton blew out the lamp.

Fear had entered the farmhouse again. Galt could feel it crawling in the blackness. He heard Mary Proudy's muffled gasp.

"Clock man, you will have to go." Elder Proudy spoke with a resigned calm. "Elder Colton, I put my Mary in your charge. Hurry now, the three of you. Out the back."

The voice from outside came again:

"Yee-ow! We're a-coming, you darned old—"

The yell ended in a burst of obscenity. There was a chorus of drunken laughter.

Galt's hat and coat were thrust into his arms. He groped in the dark, trying to find his little bag of tools. Before he could find it, Elder Colton's big hand jerked him to his feet. He was hustled across the room, stumbling, overturning a chair. At the doorway he lurched against Mary Proudy.

"Hurry!" cried Elder Colton.

"Yee-ow!" There was the blast of a gun, the tinkle of glass.

Galt seized Mary Proudy's arm. Elder Colton towed them both, pell-mell, across the kitchen and threw open the back door.

"Clock man," he ordered, "stay with her! To the creek—run!" He gave Galt a shove.

Galt and the girl ran. Galt glanced back. Elder Colton was no longer with them. He had remained behind with Elder Proudy.

A man came tearing around the side of the house. At once he set up a shout:

"Baggsy! Here's two of 'em! Baggsy!"

Galt pulled the girl along rapidly. From the front of the house they heard another gunshot. Two more in quick succession.

Galt ducked behind a horse shed. He crashed through the brush that lined a creek bed beyond. He followed the creek, slipping on occasional patches of week-old snow. The girl fell and lay prone on the frozen, iron-hard ground. Galt stooped to help her up. He listened, and he could hear no sound of pursuit along the creek.

The cold was intense. It pinched Galt's nostrils. He was reminded of the hat and coat he still carried under his arm. He put on his hat, lifted the girl and placed the coat about her.

Her eyes were closed and she was panting. He could feel the violent pound of her heart.

"Oh, Lord Jehovah!" she whispered with sobbing breath.

Galt stood up and pushed aside the brush. From here, dimly visible in the moonlight, he could see the rear of the farmhouse. He saw three men on foot and a man on horseback. The horseman pointed toward the creek and the men ran that way. The horseman sat motionless and watching—a huntsman who had unleashed his hounds.

Galt gripped the girl's arm. "Come on," he said. He hardly could speak; rage constricted his throat and dried his mouth.

He ran on, tugging Mary Proudy after him, keeping to the creek. Bare, cold-stiffened branches whipped his face, cracked his knuckles. The creek made a bend, and Galt saw a house and barn.

A house might mean kindly, civilized folk. A barn might mean a haven, a place of concealment. He headed toward the barn. The girl stumbled and gasped. A large dog rushed at them.

The dog backed Galt and Mary Proudy against the wheel of a hay wagon that stood in the barnyard. The dog danced about them, snarling, daring them to move.

A WOMAN wearing a shawl came around the corner of the barn. She halted a few feet behind the dog. Her face in the moonlight was thin and cold. She looked at the two by the hay wagon, and she looked through them, and she seemed not to see them. They were apostates, pariahs. Whatever they were doing here, they were beneath her notice and unworthy of her curiosity.

She spoke to the dog and turned disdainfully away.

Suddenly, from the creek brush not far distant, came again that dreadful, idiot yell:

"Yee-ow! Yee-ow!!"

Mary Proudy's eyes went wide with terror. Her knees were buckling.

"Oh, Lord of Zion!" she moaned. "Run, clock man! Don't wait for me—run!"

Galt swung her from her feet. She was as light as a child. He cradled her in his arms and glared about him.

"Here! Not the barn. They'll look there. Here!"

It was the woman with the dog. Her features, so frigid a moment before, now were furious. She beckoned imperiously and ran to a little smokehouse midway between the barn and the main house.

Galt raced after her. She jerked open the door. Galt set Mary Proudy on her feet, and the three crowded in. The woman pulled the dog in with them and shut the door.

It was black and close in here. Galt was squeezed in between the two women. The dog pressed against his legs and growled.

There was the thud of feet in the barnyard. A yell. The crash of a bottle on the iron tire of the hay wagon.

"The barn!" shouted someone.

"The smokehouse!" shouted someone. "We'll smoke 'em out!"

There was laughter. The thud of feet came closer.

The women opened the door. She went out with the dog and banged the door behind her. Her voice cut shrilly through the winter night:

"You drunken, filthy pigs! Get out!"

Galt peered out through a tiny ventilation opening. He saw three men, bewhiskered and lumpish. He saw the long shape of a gun and the dull sheen of a butcher knife. The three men were halted and

abashed. The woman was facing them.

"We wasn't meaning any harm, ma'am," one of the men said placatingly. "We was just after—"

"I know what you're after! They went through here a minute ago. That way." The woman pointed. "Three men and a girl!"

"Three?" There was a shocked silence.

"And two of them had guns. They may be watching you now."

The men hastily withdrew toward the barn. They held a consultation. Abruptly they turned and went back the way they had arrived.

II

GALT opened the smokehouse door. He and Mary Proudy came out.

"Mrs. Gregor, I don't know how to thank you," Mary Proudy said. "We've been neighbors so long, and we've never hardly spoken. We—"

"You can thank me," interrupted the woman coldly, "by getting out of here. There's been nothing but trouble since you people came here. Get out—all of you! Go back to Missouri!"

Galt could feel Mary Proudy stiffen, then shiver.

"Cross the road," said the woman, "and get into the woods. You ought to be safe there. Now, get out!"

Galt and Mary Proudy went on.

"I don't understand it," said Galt. "She does a fine thing, then blackens it by insult."

"I can understand it," murmured the girl sadly. "It's not how she feels, it's how she thinks she's supposed to feel. Down underneath she's good and kind. You must forget what she said and remember what she did."

Galt took her arm. "You're limping," he said.

"It's all right," she said. "I turned my ankle a little."

They crossed the road, climbed a slope and entered the shadow of the woods. They heard the clatter of a horse. The rider went by on the road below, as straight in the saddle, as arrogant and aloof, as when he had appeared in Elder Proudy's yard. His face was hidden by his broad hatbrim. He was another whom Galt would remember—the rider darkly perceived, the faceless horseman of Intolerance.

"Who is he?" he asked.

"I don't know," said the girl wearily. "There are so many."

"Where'll I take you?" he asked. "You can't go back home."

The girl stood motionless and silent. She stared at the hillock behind which was her father's house. The top of the hillock was black and sharply outlined. Beyond it, the sky was beginning to glow.

"My father," she said. "Elder Colton—"

It was a question only half asked. She expected no answer, and Galt could give her none. They watched the brightening glow.

"It was like this in Missouri," she said. Her voice was emotionally flat, detached, as if she were recounting a dream. "I was eleven then," she said. "I saw our house burned. I saw one of my uncles killed. My mother died a month ago. I'm glad she didn't see this."

The glow in the sky was turning fierce and red. It was fire in the night, as warm and mystic as light through a decanter of wine, as splendid as a man's home going up in flame, as lovely as that dark stain the mobbers left in the jail at Carthage.

Galt swung her around so she could look no more.

"Where'll I take you?" he asked again.

"I don't know," she said. She peered blankly into the depths of the woods. "There's another road over there. It goes to Nauvoo."

They climbed on up the slope, following a faint trail among the trees. Suddenly the girl slipped and went down. She sat on the ground, hugging her knees.

"Just—a minute!" she gasped.

Galt leaned over her in an agony of apprehension. The cold pressed flatly to his shirt and chilled the dampness under his arms.

She looked up apologetically. "It's my ankle again. It'll be all right in a little while."

"I'll carry you," said Galt.

He knelt beside her. She put her arm about him.

"You're cold," she said. "I have your coat."

"No," answered Galt huskily, "I'm warm."

Her arm tightened. Her face was hidden against his chest. He held her, and they huddled there in the deep gloom. A wind stirred and bare branches clacked overhead.

"It's better now," she said. "You needn't carry me."

"Only a little way," said Galt. "Just over the rise."

He lifted her and strode on through the woods. She was so small and so ridiculously light, he could have carried her for miles. He could have carried her forever.

THEY came to the road on the far side of the wood patch and sat on a windfall. He felt the cool smoothness of her cheek brush his, and he turned slowly and kissed her.

"Is it wicked?" she said softly. "Just this one little minute? We don't know each other. We hardly know each other's name."

"Lee," he said.

"I know. Lee Galt. I saw you write it in the clock. And now even that's gone. We'll never see each other again."

"We'll see each other," he declared hoarsely. "We'll see *lots* of each other!"

"No," she said, "you don't understand. It would never be allowed. You must forget. In a little while you will. And so will I. Lee—Lee Galt."

She spoke the name lingeringly, as if planting it deep in her memory.

She pressed against him and her head was thrown back and her wide eyes were fastened upon the cold moon.

"Oh, Lord Jehovah," she whispered, "please don't call it wicked. So much trouble—and this one little minute."

There was a knowledge and sadness in her smile that twisted Galt's heart.

Four men came around a turn in the road, footfalls suddenly and startlingly loud in the chill air. Galt sprang erect, reached down to lift the girl.

"I can walk now," she said. Then, "It's Elder Colton!"

Elder Colton had a knife slash on his cheek. He kept the bloody side of his face away from Mary Proudy.

"Gentile," he said to Galt, "we're beholden to you for taking care of Elder Proudy's daughter."

The men accompanying Elder Colton were armed. They glared at Galt with savage eyes. They formed a tight, protective group about Mary Proudy and went back down the road with her. Galt watched them go. Elder Colton remained before him, blocking his way.

"Gentile," said Elder Colton, "we're beholden to you, so I'm giving you good advice. Don't try to follow us."

"Where's Elder Proudy?" asked Galt.

"He was wounded," answered Elder Colton. "He's safe now. The Gentiles tried to kill him."

A short while ago Elder Colton had offered to share his bed with Galt. Now he seemed to have forgotten.

"Gentile," he said, "we're a peculiar people. Our ways are not your ways. Get out of these parts as fast as you can." Elder Colton stalked after his companions.

Galt sat down again on the windfall. He was thinking that the word Gentile, as used by a Mormon, meant anyone *not* of their faith.

His shirt was taut across his bent back. His breath lifted in tiny puffs of vapor. He put up his fingers to his cheeks and noted curiously how numb and cold they were. He arose and swung his arms, started walking in the direction taken by Elder Colton.

Beyond the turn, the road forked. Galt chose the right-hand fork and began running. The road was winding and woods-bordered. Ahead of him a light wagon was parked in the road. The driver sat slumped in the seat, his head turned toward Galt. Galt strode forward.

"Did you see some men go by here?" he asked. "There was a girl with them."

The man had a long, mournful face and a cud of tobacco in one cheek. He scrutinized Galt minutely.

"No," he finally answered, "I don't recollect that I did."

"Is this the road to Nauvoo?" asked Galt.

A horse and rider came crashing out of the brush. This was not the same horseman

Galt had seen at Proudy's. This was a fat, jolly-looking man with a rifle resting across his saddle pommel.

"Who we got here, Eph?" he said to the wagon driver.

"Don't know," replied Eph. "He just come along. He wanted to know if this is the road to Nauvoo."

"You a Mormon?" demanded the fat man fiercely.

"No," said Galt. "I just asked for the road to Nauvoo."

"Didn't see anything of a Negro along here, did you?"

"No," said Galt.

THE fat man sighed. "Doggone!" he said sadly. "I hate to lose that man. Best wood-chopper we ever had, wasn't he, Eph?"

"He wasn't bad," said Eph.

"Ungratefulest Negro I ever see," continued the fat man. "I give him a nice warm cell for all winter and nothing to do but chop wood, and what does he do the first time Eph forgets to lock him in? He cuts and runs for it!"

" 'Twasn't my fault," said Eph. "How'd I know he'd be crazy enough to run off in the winter?"

The fat man shook his head. "I sure hate to think of all that wood that needs chopping." He regarded Galt speculatively. "Kind of a stranger around here, ain't you, son?"

Galt nodded. Then he had a sudden suspicion.

"And no coat, neither," murmured the fat man. "Son, you must be cold. I hate to see that. I hate to see anyone suffering in the wintertime . . . Eph, ain't we got a blanket in the wagon?"

"Guess we do, Sheriff." Eph descended from the wagon.

Galt took a backward step. He turned, dashed for the woods.

Hoofs clattered behind him. The fat man swerved his horse shrewdly and Galt was knocked sprawling.

The moon was describing dizzy rolls in the blue-black sky when Galt sat up. The fat man had dismounted. He was bending over Galt and clucking sympathetically.

"Son," he said, "you hadn't ought to have done it. Resisting a sworn officer—that's a serious offense."

Galt tried to struggle. Eph was sitting on his legs and tying them with rope. The fat man held Galt's arms in a crushing grip.

"Son," he said reprovingly, "this is no way to act. Here I am, trying to do you a favor, and . . . All set, Eph?"

The two men picked Galt up, carried him to the wagon and laid him in the back end and tied him there. The fat man wrapped a blanket about him.

"In an hour," said the fat man encouragingly, "we'll have you in a nice warm cell. You ain't going to have a thing to worry about the rest of the winter." He added severely to Eph, "And if this one gets away, you're going to do the wood-chopping yourself."

"He won't," replied Eph. "I'm going to watch this one. . . ."

Two and a half months later the fat sheriff said, "Son, I hate to lose you, I swear I do. You turned out to be a right good wood-chopper. You take care of yourself, son."

Lee Galt stood on the steps of the dank little jailhouse. His slender hands were callused, high-ridged where the ax handle had fitted. He had eight dollars in his pocket. The money had been in his pocket the night the sheriff picked him up. This morning, the sheriff had returned the money. He was an honest sheriff. He was a kindly, jolly-looking sheriff who knew how to keep his woodshed filled.

He stood there, Lee Galt, feeling the sun of late April warm upon his neck and shoulders. His gaze traveled the road that left this drab village and wound off through the greenly bursting countryside.

"That go to Nauvoo?" he asked.

"It'll get you there," said the sheriff. "But the Mormons are gone. They're across the river in Iowa, now. They've made a kind of a camp along Sugar Creek."

"How'll I get across the river?"

"Just follow the road and take the right fork. That'll get you to the river. You'll find someone to ferry you over." The sheriff tapped Galt on the shoulder. "Son," he said earnestly, "don't you fool around no

Mormon camp. You take my advice."

Galt began walking. He walked away from that drab village and the jolly-looking sheriff and his not quite so jolly-looking jail. He strode along the narrow road that wound among the lush woods and fields, and the song of birds was in the air and the wild aching throb of spring was all about him.

HE WALKED steadily, hastening, and not stopping until the broad, roily waters of the Mississippi were before him. Riding the back of the mighty current were a lumber raft and a slowly turning chicken coop, and far off, hugging the Iowa side of the river, he saw an upbound steamboat with twin stacks and frothing paddles. Close by was a man in a skiff searching for drifting saw-logs.

Galt called, and the man brought his skiff inshore. For fifty cents Galt was ferried across to Iowa.

Here, for a short distance, he followed a road that skirted the river, then the road turned inland. Ambling along behind him came a horse and buggy.

"You want a ride, young feller?" the driver asked.

Galt nodded gratefully. He got into the buggy.

The driver was a huge old man with fiercely sprouting white eyebrows.

"You one of the Werner boys from upriver?" he asked.

"No," said Galt. He told his name. He asked how far it was to the Mormon camp on Sugar Creek.

" 'Bout nine miles," said the old man. " 'Bout two miles beyond my place." His own name he said was Abe Zegler. He surveyed Galt out of twinkling, red-rimmed eyes. "You one of the Saints?"

"No," said Galt.

III

OLD ABE made a sweep of his arm, indicating the river behind them.

"I seen 'em," he said, "when they crossed over from the Illinois side last winter. Thousands of 'em! It was a sight to see! Cold, too. Early in February. Why'd they have to chase 'em out of Illinois, burning their homes that way? What harm had they done?"

"I don't know," said Galt.

"They come over in skiffs and scows and anything they could get to float," said old Abe. "Ice was coming down the river, too. Later on, the river froze over and they walked across on the ice. I took one young girl into my place for awhile. Her feet was froze."

Galt was warm from his walk. He could feel the moisture seeping out from under his hatband.

"Was her name Mary?" he asked.

"I don't think so." Old Abe shook his head. "I don't remember all their names—I took in so many last winter. I hear she died later, poor thing! She wasn't more'n ten or eleven."

Galt leaned back against the seat. He took off his hat and let the breeze stir his damp hair.

"Did you ever happen to run across a Mormon named Proudy?" he asked. "A man about fifty, short and with black whiskers. He had a daughter about eighteen."

"No," answered old Abe, "I don't remember that I did. That the reason you're goin' to Sugar Creek? Someone you know?"

Galt nodded.

The old man's eyes were twinkling again. "The girl, eh?"

"Yes," said Galt. "The girl. A Mormon girl."

Old Abe glanced shrewdly at Galt. He changed the subject. He spoke of California and Oregon and the tide of emigration starting to stream that way. He, Abe Zegler, had lost his wife the previous summer, and he had no children. At seventy-eight he was foot-loose and free. He, too, was going West. California, where the trees were a mile high and it never snowed!

The old man was well-meaning and garrulous. Galt scarcely was listening. He was impatient with the slow progress of the horse.

They turned in at a small farmyard. Galt got out of the buggy and thanked old Abe. The old man pointed.

" 'Bout two miles farther down the road," he said. "You can't miss it. But remember,"

he warned, "they're peculiar people."

Galt hustled on. On his left, paralleling the road, he could see the line of brush and trees that marked Sugar Creek. Presently, activity blossomed by the roadside. Thin-faced children with great serious eyes stared at Galt and retreated as he approached. Women in long poke bonnets were working truck gardens. They glanced up and then quickly averted their gaze. In an open field a dozen slouching men were drilling with guns.

Galt turned off the road toward the creek. He followed a wide slash in the woodland where stumps showed white-topped and glistening in the sunlight. Beyond were parked wagons and carts, tents and bark-and-brush huts and empty ridge poles where tents once had been. He met a man driving an ox cart.

"Where will I find Elder Proudy?" asked Galt. The man looked blankly at Galt and shook his head.

Another man was peeling a hickory pole with deft strokes of an ox. He paused to mop his face and grin cheerfully at Galt.

"Where," repeated Galt, "will I find Elder Proudy?"

The man's eyes went blank. He started swinging his ax again. "I don't know," he said over his shoulder.

A girl, maybe fourteen years old, was trying to lug a bucket of water. Galt carried it for her. They walked silently side by side. The girl stopped before a bark hut and Galt set down the bucket. She gave him a shy smile.

"Thank you," she murmured.

"Can you tell me," he asked, "where I'll find Elder Proudy?"

The girl looked down at the heavy bucket. She kept her head bent. "Ask Deacon Hasbrock," she said in a low, quick tone. "That tent right ahead." Abruptly she turned and fled into the hut.

Deacon Hasbrock was a portly man with flowing beard and austere features. He stood before his tent and shook his head in courteous regret.

"No," he said to Galt, "I'm sorry, but I can't help you. Elder Proudy and his daughter are not in this camp."

"Can you tell me where I can find them?"

THE deacon's eyes were bland and remote. "I'm sorry," he said again, "but Elder Proudy and his daughter are not in this camp."

"All right." Galt nodded grimly. "But I'm going to make sure!"

"Gentile," thundered the deacon, "do you doubt my word? I forbid you in this camp!" And the deacon brushed by as if Galt no longer existed. He stalked majestically away.

A woman came out of the deacon's tent, began sweeping the ground in front of the tent with a willow-twig broom.

"Young man," she said severely, "you ought to know better than that. If the deacon says the Proudys ain't here, they ain't! The deacon never told a lie in his life."

Galt looked at her hopefully. "Maybe you can tell me where I can find them."

The woman did not answer. She continued sweeping.

Galt had a feeling of bewilderment. For some reason a wall of silence seemed to have closed about the Proudys.

"Do you know them?" he asked almost pleadingly. "Are they all right? Can you tell me that much?"

"Oh, yes." The woman nodded. "I know them real well. So far as I know, they're all right." She glanced up with what looked to Galt like a spark of warmth in her darkly veiled eyes. "They're *both* all right," she said with gentle emphasis.

"But you can't tell me where they are?"

The woman swept furiously. Dust arose.

"Yes," she continued ruminatively, "I've known the Proudys a long time. They always believed in independence. Independence is a fine quality, young man."

"Yeah," muttered Galt, "I guess it is."

"That's what a body always looked for in the Proudys—independence."

The broom raised a veritable cloud of dust. Galt coughed and backed away. He thought, Is she crazy?

"Gentile!"

A heavy hand was clapped on Galt's shoulder. Galt whirled. He was confronted by a big, burly man in a plaid shirt. A second big man seized Galt's other shoulder. Galt was escorted to the road. The two big men gave

him a shove.

"Gentile," said one of the big men, "keep going!"

Galt kept going. The sun rested behind him, and his stilted shadow plodded wearily before him. He kept on going until he came back to Abe Zegler's place.

Old Abe leaned against the fence and regarded Galt quizzically.

"Did you find 'em?" he asked.

"No," answered Galt bitterly. "I made a mistake. I doubted Deacon Hasbrock's word."

"Ah," said the old man, "that *was* a mistake. I know the deacon. What happened?"

Galt explained the situation. "Tonight," he said, "I'm going back. I'm going through that camp until I've seen everyone in it!"

"That's no good." Old Abe shook his head. "They ain't in the camp. If Deacon Hasbrock said so, it's true."

"Then where are they?" asked Galt desperately.

"That's hard to tell," answered the old man. "They might be anywhere. Lots of the Mormons have pushed on. They must be strung out half across the state by now. The point is, though, Deacon Hasbrock wouldn't give you any information about these Proudys. That looks to me like they might have been sent on a mission."

"What kind of a mission?"

"A scouting mission, sort of. I hear Brigham Young ain't sure yet where he's going to take all these folk. He's been sending out a few of 'em on the regular wagon trains heading West. The idea is for them to send back reports on the country."

"But why wouldn't Hasbrock tell me, if that's where they are?"

"And how far," asked old Abe, "d'you suppose a Mormon would go in an Illinois train, if they found out he was a Mormon?"

Not far. Galt knew the black answer to that one.

"You can see," said old Abe, "why the deacon ain't going to give information of that kind to a Gentile."

Galt nodded.

"On the other hand," went on old Abe, "this Proudy maybe was sent on a preaching mission. Maybe he's gone to England or Brazil. Maybe he's anywhere in the world. And if the Mormons won't tell you, you ain't going to find out."

GALT was silent. He'd find out. It was merely a matter of patience and time. In the end he'd find out.

"Lee," the old man said, and put his hand on Galt's shoulder, "what you're up against is organization. You're butting your head into a stone wall. You better forget that Mormon girl. There's a heap of other girls in the world. Lots of 'em!"

Galt straightened. "Yes," he said, "I guess you're right."

Lee Galt forced a grin for this kindly old man. A grin of careless resignation—a Judas grin. It was a lie, and Lee Galt knew it was a lie. There were no other girls. There was only Mary Proudy. A Mormon girl. A frightened girl running in the night. A girl with a sadness in her smile that twisted into your heart and never would come out.

And you'd bang your head against that stony wall of silence until you crashed through and found her. Or until you could bang no more. But there'd never be another girl.

"What you ought to do," Old Abe was saying, "is go to Californy. That's the place for a young feller. In two weeks you'll forget all about this Proudy girl. You go down to Independence and catch on as a driver on one of the wagons. You won't have no trouble."

"Thank you," said Galt abstractedly. "You've been very kind, Mr. Zegler. I guess I'll be getting along now."

He started down the road. Where he was going, he wasn't certain. Maybe, after dark, he'd try the camp again. He'd bang his head against that . . .

He halted in midstride. He went back.

"What's the name of that place?" he asked in a strained voice.

"Independence," said old Abe. "That's where most of 'em start out on the Oregon-Californy Trail."

Galt stared at the old man. Actually he didn't see him. What he was seeing was a Mormon woman with a willow-twig broom. A plain, stony-faced woman who had com-

passion in her heart. A woman who had dared open a crack in that wall of silence.

He thought, So she wasn't crazy. She was telling me something. She was telling me where to find the Proudys.

The Proudys, she had said, believed in independence. *Independence!*

"Lee," old Abe Zegler was saying earnestly. "I sort of like you. I tell you what you do. You stick around here for a week or two till I get the sale of my farm here settled. Then you go with me to Californy. I can use a spry young feller like you."

"No," said Galt. "Thanks, Mr. Zegler. Thanks a lot. But I got to be going now. I just thought of something."

He went down the road again—seven miles back to the river. And then how far to Independence? How long would it take him to get there? Galt didn't know. He walked quickly, almost running. He forgot that he was tired, that the day was nearly spent. He was hurrying toward the brown, rolling waters of the Mississippi, hurrying while the gloom of evening deepened about him.

* * * * *

"The ratchet is stuck," he said. "That's all your trouble is. Maybe there's grit in it, or the ratchet spring is broke. It's just a tempered wire. I can fix it in a minute."

Lee Galt poked the clock gravely with the tip of a clasp knife. The clock sat on the bar in Colonel Noland's tavern in Independence.

"That all the tools you need?" asked the tavern man.

"It'll do," Galt said. "I lost my tools."

He freed the ratchet and tightened the spring. He put the works back in the case, and when he wound the clock, it started going. He used a stub pencil and wrote on the clock-paper:

REPAIRED BY L. GALT, MAY 2ND, 1846

"How much do I owe you?" asked the tavern man.

"Nothing," he said. "I just hate to see a clock not going."

"Have a drink," said the tavern man warmly. "Just help yourself." He set a bottle and glass on the bar.

"Thanks," said Galt.

Maybe a few drinks were what he needed. He felt a little chilly. The weather was warm, but he was chilly.

He had come down the Mississippi to St. Louis on a lumber raft. From St. Louis he had come up the Missouri on a steamboat. He had been in Independence a week. He had been through all the wagon camps, he had been everywhere, and the Proudys weren't here.

He wasn't sure what he was going to do now. His eyes burned and there was a dull ache in his head. When he tried to think, his head pained worse.

"You feel all right?" asked the tavern man.

"Sure," said Galt. "I feel fine."

"There's a lot of fever around."

"I feel fine," repeated Galt.

IV

TOSSING off a drink, Lee Galt shut his eyes as the forty-rod shuddered home. He opened his eyes and watched the tavern man set the clock on its shelf. He took a second drink, more slowly this time. He looked about, became aware of the others in the tavern.

Two soldiers from Fort Leavenworth were drinking beer out of leathern mugs. A Mexican in slashed pantaloons stood discreetly in a corner and rolled a shuck cigarette. A big bullwhacker—a Sante Fe Trail man, Galt judged—was picking his teeth with a bowie knife. At the far end of the room a mountain man in buckskins was trying to sell his services to a group of emigrants.

Two men came along close to Galt.

"I tell you," one of them was saying nervously, "they're following me! I got a feeling I'm being watched all the time!"

His companion laughed. "John," he said, "you've been listening to too many stories. There's no such thing as a Danite."

"You pulling out for California pretty quick, Mr. Ritler?" put in the tavern man.

The nervous man jumped and whirled. "Tomorrow," he answered. He had pale eyes and an unpleasantly narrow face.

The man with him, lean and almost as dark as an Indian, was still laughing. "John," he said, "you need bucking up. You come along with me. I know how to take care of what ails you."

He placed his arm on the nervous man's shoulder in the friendliest way possible. The two went out.

"What's a Danite?" asked Galt.

"A Mormon," said the tavern man. "An Avenging Angel. Mostly, though, I judge it's a lie. They're supposed to be sent out to kill Gentiles the Mormons don't like."

"That would kind of even things up."

"What you say?" The tavern man looked puzzled.

"Nothing," said Galt.

He left the tavern, stepped ankle-deep in mud. The town was swarming with drovers and freighters. The soft May air rang to the beat of hammer and anvil. Merchants and trail outfitters cried their wares. Down-river men, bull-tongued, cried their freedom and exuberance of spirit. Indians stalked and lounged, blanketed and bemedaled, silent and incredibly dirty.

And there were, of course, the movers. No company of penniless adventurers, these, seeking the quick dollar. No vision of easy wealth beckoned at the end of the trail, not at the Oregon end nor the California end. These, for the most part, were solid men who had torn up their roots with the hopes of transplanting them on the far side of the continent.

Here was itching foot on the grand scale. Here was a national response, rationalized and dignified by the presence of family and possessions, to the legend of new, far places.

They came from New England and from Arkansas, the movers, and they came from points in between. They came up from the steamboat landing on six miles of surfaced road, and they dropped in the mud at Independence. They rolled their great wagons through the mud, and they drove their cattle through. They churned the mud to deep, sticky soup. And they shouted to each other that question of vast enterprise:

"Where you for—Oregon or Californy?"

Galt began drifting along the street. He sought the mud where it was shallowest, trying to avoid the splashings of reckless, hurrying horsemen. He paused by a blacksmith shop. The movers were leading in their mules and oxen. The smiths, bared arms glistening with sweat, worked their bellows and swung their ringing hammers.

A tall man in a smocked red shirt took Galt's attention. The man had a close-cropped blond beard; he glanced casually at Galt and without interest. Somewhere Galt had seen the man before, but he couldn't remember where.

His head was aching again. He wandered around back of the blacksmith shop and sat on the tongue of a parked wagon. He half closed his eyes and watched the sun dropping below the horizon. The man with the short blond beard came and sat down beside him.

"Do you know me?" he asked.

BENEATH the beard Galt saw a knife scar. He knew now where he had seen this man before. He tried to keep the elation out of his voice.

"Elder Colton," he said.

"Not here," said Colton. "Not 'Elder.'"

Galt nodded. He understood well enough. The faceless horsemen still were riding. This was Missouri, the state where six years before the governor, Lillburn Boggs, had issued the ferocious Extermination Order against the Mormons.

"California?" asked Colton. "Oregon?"

"California," said Galt. He had to have a reason for his being here. It wouldn't do to tell Colton the real reason. Not yet. Lee Galt had learned caution. "And you?" he asked casually.

"We're not quite certain. California, I think."

"We?" queried Galt.

"Yes," said Colton. "Elder Proudy is here, too."

And who else?

But Galt didn't ask the question aloud. He waited. He gazed across the plain to where the movers were camped eight miles beyond. From here he could see the line of traffic between camp and town, the distant wagons jerking stiffly as if they were cardboard figures drawn by strings.

"I've often thought of you," murmured Colton. "How did you make out that night last winter?"

"I made out all right," said Galt. He was thinking, but left it unsaid. "I made out fine, Elder Colton. I spent the winter in jail and I wore out my hands chopping wood and I ate out my heart from wondering and not knowing. Where is she, Elder Colton? Where is she!

"After they burned out Elder Proudy," said Colton, "the same ones went on to another place. They killed an old man there."

"Four of 'em," Galt muttered. "One on horseback."

"And three of them are dead now."

Galt stared.

"Dead!" repeated Elder Colton in a deep voice. "All but John Ritler. May the sword of the Angel Moroni strike him!" His eyes held a feverish gleam. He held up a finger. "Only one left—the man that was on horseback. He's here now, in Independence!"

"Ritler?" exclaimed Galt. "I saw him! He was in Noland's tavern. A man with a face like a hatchet. He was with another man. A dark man, handsome."

"Ah," said Elder Colton, and he smiled faintly.

"He said he was going to California—Ritler, I mean."

"I hardly think so." Elder Colton still was smiling. "No," he said, "I don't think John Ritler is going to California."

Galt started to speak, and Colton shook his head. "Don't ask any questions. I've told you enough. Too much, maybe." Colton stood up. He was going to leave.

"Where is she?" Galt cried out, springing up. "Mary, Elder Proudy's daughter. Is she here, too?"

Elder Colton looked at Galt and his gaze seemed to become distant. There it was again, the same curious expression of blankness that Galt had run into at Sugar Creek. The wall of silence was forming. Then Elder Colton spoke.

"She's dead," he said quietly.

"Dead," muttered Galt. He brushed the back of his hand nervously across his lips. "No," he said with great distinctness, "I guess you didn't understand. I asked after Mary Proudy."

"She died," said Elder Colton, "on the way here. It was this fever, I think. Mary Proudy is dead, Gentile."

"Dead," repeated Galt.

"Yes," said Colton. "I'm sorry, Gentile."

Elder Colton turned and walked away.

Galt sat down again. He watched the far, crawling wagons dipping and jerking as the wheels hit the mud-holes. The sun had disappeared. Gray shadow was spreading across the land. He rubbed his eyes. His skin felt hot and dust-dry. He rested his head on his hands. . . .

SOMEONE was shaking him by the shoulder.

"Hey!" said a voice. "You sick or something?"

Galt raised his head. He was surprised to see how dark it had become. The man's face blurred before him.

"No, I'm all right," Galt answered slowly.

The man went on his way.

Galt contemplated the sky, moonless and star-studded. The stars grew brighter—and all at once it was night.

"Oh, please don't!" an anguished voice cried behind Galt. "Please don't!"

There was the sound of a blow, of running feet.

Galt got up and approached the darkened rear of the blacksmith shop. A long figure lay on the ground. Galt struck a phosphorous match, looked down into the narrow, contorted face of John Ritler. The man's limbs made stretching movements, then were quiet; his eyes rolled upward. Galt dropped the match.

One of the blacksmiths came from a back door in the building.

"What's going on here?" he cried.

Galt laughed softly. The smith bent down.

"Dead!" he ejaculated. "Knifed!"

"No," corrected Galt, "he was struck by the sword of Moroni."

"Moroni?" The smith straightened. He peered at Galt, took a forward step and hesitated. "Hey!" he suddenly bellowed. "Hinky! Bert! Bring a gun! There's murder here!"

Galt slowly retreated. The smith followed cautiously, doubling his wild bellowing. Galt heard the pound of boots. He turned and ran.

"Grab him!" someone yelled. "There he goes! Shoot the damn Mormon!"

A gun roared. There was the whistle of the slug as Galt raced around the blacksmith shop, and the men came howling after him.

He ran on, leaving the wheel-churned mud of Independence and feeling soft, springy sod underfoot. He ran on till pursuit had ceased, then changed his pace to walk. He walked steadily and rapidly out into the moonless night and the open prairie land. He walked until his breath was rasping in his burning throat, and the stars were reeling overhead. He stumbled and fell. . . .

Shafts of the early morning sun and the thin voices of children awakened Galt. He began to shiver, and he couldn't stop. His teeth rattled. He heard the yapping of a dog and the pop of a whip.

He rolled over and lifted his splitting head. He was lying on a slight rise in a bed of tall rosinweed. He lay there, shaking, and watched the wagons going by, pink-tinted by the sun.

The wagons were toiling over the crest of a far knoll, appearing suddenly, four and five abreast, and fanning out onto the long rolling grass land.

Flanked by harrying outriders, they progressed in stately confusion, trying to form in parallel lines and not quite succeeding.

Herded along after the wagons, like a mob of small boys following a parade, came the loose livestock.

Some of the movers passed close to Galt. He saw Elder Colton riding a horse. An ox-drawn Conestoga wagon creaked by. A girl in a poke bonnet sat in the rear of the wagon. The girl looked at the concealing bed of rosinweed where Galt lay.

She was a small girl, with large dark eyes. She was seventeen, maybe eighteen years old. She looked right at Galt, and she didn't see him because of the rosinweed. Her gaze passed on.

Galt tried to spring to his feet. "Mary!" he shouted. The sound was weak.

Half arisen, he pitched forward on his face. He pushed himself upright again, staggered out of the weeds.

The Conestoga and the girl in the poke bonnet were gone. The whole wagon train was gone, vanished like a dispelled mirage. The sun flamed down brightly from a position high overhead. The empty grassland stretched away as far as Galt could see. The horizon revolved slowly; it blurred then sprang at Galt with dazzling clarity. He began running after the vanished wagon train.

HE RAN for a long time. Falling sometimes and resting. Getting up and running on. He saw the wagons in the distance. He was catching up to the train. He ran harder. He stumbled. . . .

Galt lay on his back and looked up into a circle of faces. Beyond the faces he could see the curved outline of a wagon bow. One of the faces drew closer. It was the face of an old man with fiercely sprouting eyebrows —the face of old Abe Zegler.

Lee Galt wasn't surprised to find old Abe in the wagon train. He was past all surprise. He had seen Mary Proudy; he had witnessed resurrection.

"Well," he said, "I caught up with it, didn't I?"

"Caught up with what, Lee?" asked old Abe.

"With you," said Galt petulantly. "With this train you're in. I've been chasing it all day. I'm tired."

He *was* tired. Fortunately, his head no longer was aching. His head, all of him, felt light as a feather. He closed his eyes and he had a sensation of floating. He heard old Abe's voice as from a great distance.

"Goshalmighty, Lee!" old Abe Zegler was crying. "This ain't no train. This is the wagon camp at Independence!"

V

WHEN Lee Galt opened his eyes he saw overhead a stretch of gray canvas. He had had a good sleep. His eyes moved from side to side. He was lying in the bed of a Conestoga wagon.

His mind was working well, at least better than it had been working yesterday. He thought over what had hapened. He had seen Mary Proudy. Elder Colton had lied; Mary Proudy wasn't dead at all. She was in a wagon train. Galt had tried to follow the train, and somehow he had become confused. He had circled back to Independence, and he had run into old Abe Zegler again.

Old Abe had sold his farm and was going to California. California, where the trees were a mile high!

This must be Abe Zegler's wagon in which he was lying now. He was still in Independence! And Mary Proudy was in the wagon train and getting farther away every hour! Somehow, he'd have to get hold of a horse. It was the only way he'd catch up with the train.

He started to arise. He fell back, panting. He looked at his hand: it was bone-thin. He rubbed his chin; he had a beard.

Old Abe's face appeared abruptly at the back end of the wagon. Old Abe was grinning.

"So you're finally taking notice," he said. "I was beginning to get discouraged. How you feeling?"

"Fine," said Galt. His voice was a whisper. He kept rubbing his bearded chin. He knew, now. It wasn't yesterday, nor was it the day before that. "How long?" he asked. "What was it—the fever?"

"Yep," said old Abe, "that's it. It's pretty nigh onto three weeks now. You had it good!"

Three weeks!

"The wagon train?" Galt whispered.

"You mean the one you said you was chasing?" Old Abe was grinning again. "'Tain't so far ahead. You've been on the Oregon Trail yourself for about two weeks."

Another face appeared beside old Abe—a dark, stern face. It was the face of the man Galt had seen with John Ritler in Noland's tavern at Independence.

"How is he?" asked the man.

"Good," said old Abe. "He's finally got his senses."

The man addressed Galt. "You used to work for old Abe?"

"I told you he did," Zegler said. "Lee's a good boy. Good Baptist folks." He winked tremendously at Galt.

"Yes," said Galt. "I used to work for old Abe."

The man went away.

"That's Conrad Fain," said Abe. "He's wagon captain. You don't want to mention Mormons around him. He hates 'em like poison!"

Sometimes, when folks had the fever, they did a lot of crazy talking. Galt wondered how much talking he had done. Later on, he asked old Abe.

"Yep," said Abe, "you did sort of run off about that Mormon girl. But don't let it worry you. No one heard but me. And me—" he grinned— "I'm a Free Thinker and bound for damnation sure!"

Galt told the old man all that had happened in Independence.

"And you think Colton killed this Ritler," said Abe finally.

Galt was silent. That was what he thought.

"The way it looks to me," said the old man, "Ritler had it coming to him. Actually, you don't know who killed him. If I was you, I'd keep quiet about it. Especially since Fain was a sort of friend of Ritler. He might think you had something to do with it."

Galt nodded. He wasn't interested in who had killed Ritler—Ritler, the faceless horseman! Ritler could be riding through hell for all he, Lee Galt, cared. And good hunting to the devil!

They were camped for the night. There were nineteen wagons in this little train, and they had been on the trail a month now. Galt scowled and rubbed his chin. He no longer had a beard.

"But why," he asked, "did Colton tell me Mary Proudy was dead?"

Abe shook his head. "They're peculiar people—I told you that. And maybe—I hate to say this, Lee—he was telling the truth."

"But I saw her!" Galt cried out.

"You had the fever, Lee."

Galt stirred at the dying cook-fire. He had seen Mary Proudy. Fever or no, he had seen her.

She was alive, somewhere ahead in the Oregon trail.

CONRAD FAIN strode by and Galt spoke to him. "How long," he asked, "before we catch up with the train we're following?"

"Pretty soon now," the wagon captain said, breaking stride.

He was a spare, humorless man in his middle thirties. Beyond the vague fact that he was an Illinois man, the emigrants didn't know much about him. But they knew enough; they knew a leader when they saw one. Conrad Fain was a man of iron purpose. The emigrants had faith in him. If anyone could get them to California, Conrad Fain was the man.

"We'll catch up with it and pass it," said Fain. "A big train moves too slow. They'll hit snow in the mountains sure. I hear," Fain went on, "that you were trying to follow that train. Someone in it you know?"

He looked intently at Galt. Lee stared back at him.

"No," he answered firmly.

"Lee had the fever," put in old Abe. "He didn't know what he was doing."

"Didn't he?" Fain continued to gaze at Galt. His somber eyes reflected the glow of the sinking fire.

After Fain was gone, Abe said, "He's a good wagon captain, but he's like the rest of these Illinois folks—hell on Mormons. If you run into those Mormon friends of yours, you want to be careful and not give 'em away."

Galt nodded. He intended to be careful. There was a darkness about this Fain—not of the skin, but an inner darkness—that he sensed and distrusted.

They caught up with the train ahead, finally. It was stalled along the North Platte. Here, parked in a huge, sprawling oval, were perhaps two hundred wagons, some bound for Oregon and some for California. Dogs barked and children squealed as the little string of Illinois movers pulled into the camp. Once again Galt heard the familiar cry:

"Where you for—Oregon or Californy?"

Galt helped old Abe with the oxen. He carried water. He gathered willow brush and buffalo chips. He left Abe at the wagon.

It was late of a warm afternoon. Galt moved slowly among the tents and wagons, peering about. He was searching for Elder Colton or Elder Proudy. Or a small girl in a poke bonnet. There were poke bonnets, aplenty. They were, Galt discovered to his embarrassment, somewhat like tunnels. You had to look directly into the entrance to see what was at the other end.

"Hunting someone, Lee?"

It was Conrad Fain. He had come up behind Galt. A faint smile of amusement lightened his stern visage.

"No," replied Galt. "Just looking around the camp."

Galt returned to the wagon. "Fain!" he said bitterly.

Old Abe nodded. "He's a suspicious rascal. He seems to have his doubts about you. I don't know why. You stay here. I'll see if I can find out anything for you."

Galt leaned against the wagon. He watched Zegler move out into the camp. Old Abe wasn't as brisk as he once had been. This trip had been hard on him. He was seventy-eight and he was "going to Californy where the trees—" He was a fine old man, Abe.

Galt thought of that bleak February night back in Illinois, and of the woman who had hidden him and Mary Proudy from the mob. And of the woman with the willow-twig broom at Sugar Creek. And he thought again of Abe Zegler who had nursed him through the fever.

There were a lot of queer, fine people in the world.

There were also the John Ritlers of this world!

"Found 'em," old Abe said, returning. "I didn't see 'em, but I found out they're here." He waved his hand. "Down at that end of the camp. Colton and Proudy and—his daughter. You better wait till dark before you hunt 'em up."

Galt nodded. He rubbed his sweating palms on his pants. His voice was very calm:

"I told you I saw her. Didn't I tell you?"

"You told me." Old Abe looked at Galt, strangely, almost pityingly. He seemed about to say more, then turned away. "I guess," he muttered wearily, "I'll stretch out awhile."

NIGHT came; Galt moved along the camp. Somewhere in the dark he heard a child wailing fretfully. Somewhere a family group was trying to sing, a nasal keening that was more depressing than the cry of the child.

Occasionally, as he passed the tents and fires, he overheard bits of conversation. "— the danged Pawnees . . . Three hundred yet to the Sweetwater . . . B'golly, if I'd knowed when I started—"

Conrad Fain, Galt decided, had been right. A big train was too slow. The big train had lain at this spot for two days now, supine and starchless, like a pummeled fat boy. It was fever-weakened and ague-shaken.

The happy confusion, the spirit of adventure with which the movers had started was gone. They had come, perhaps, five hundred miles. Behind them were the forks of the Platte, the Big Blue and the Vermilion—and a scattering of graves. Now they were weary and contentious. A good many, Galt guessed, would be willing to turn back right now. Others, like old Abe Zegler, would never give up.

Abruptly Galt halted. He had come upon Elders Proudy and Colton. They were standing by the rear of a wagon. They looked at Galt with no show of surprise. He had a feeling that they had been awaiting him, that they had known of his presence in the wagon train.

The squat, black-bearded Proudy shook hands. "Naturally I remember you," he said. He was formally polite. "Mary!" he called.

She apeared in the back end of the wagon. She stood there in that place of elevation, the red glow of a nearby campfire showing the contour of her body and throwing shadow upward across throat and cheek. Galt gazed at her. He filled his eyes with her. Vaguely he was aware that Proudy was speaking again.

"Mary, do you remember this man?" asked Proudy.

"I remember him very well," she said. "He's the clock man."

Galt started. He felt the cold probing of fear, and a nameless horror. Was that Mary Proudy who had spoken—in that flat, alive-dead voice?

"Mary!" he cried.

She made no answer. She was like an image of stone. Colton's eyes were blank, as were Elder Proudy's. They seemed to be contemplating something far off in the night. Galt glanced over his shoulder; he was confronted by the gloomy countenance of Conrad Fain. "Found someone you know, Lee?" murmured Fain.

"No," Galt replied hoarsely. "I was just talking to them."

"My name is Proudy," said the elder. "Sam Proudy."

"And mine is Conrad Fain. I'm captain of the little train that pulled into camp today."

Fain swept off his hat. He was gazing with luminous eyes at the girl in the wagon.

"This is my daughter—Mrs. Colton," said Proudy.

"And my wife," said Colton.

Galt moved off. What mumbled words of parting he had uttered, he didn't know. He sought refuge in the black shadow of a nearby wagon. He paused there, seeing remotely, thinking remotely.

"You should have believed me, Gentile." It was Colton who spoke, coming into the shadows beside Galt. "You shouldn't have followed."

"You lied," said Galt. "You told me she was dead!"

"Wasn't it kinder that way?"

"You lied once," said Galt. "How do I know now?"

Colton left him. He returned with Mary.

"Tell him," he said.

"We were married," she said. "He is my husband."

A disembodied voice speaking through stone, Lee Galt thought. The closing of the terrible wall of silence. . . . The empty ripple where the straw of hope had been.

"I'm sorry, Gentile," said Colton.

Galt went back to old Abe's wagon. "She's married," he said.

"I know," old Abe said. "I heard that. I'm a coward—I didn't have the heart to tell you." He cleared his throat. "After awhile, you forget."

Fain came along then. "You're on guard, Lee. I'll show you where."

[*Turn to page 102*]

MAN FROM MARS?

This is an actual photo of a SEE Magazine photographer taking underwater pictures of shark-hunting off the coast of Mexico.

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VI

LEE GALT got old Abe's rifle out of the wagon. He followed Fain up a gradual hill-slope. The sounds of the camp became a murmur behind them. They stopped at the crest-line of the hill.

"I keep thinking," said Fain, "that somewhere I've seen you before. Before you joined up with the train."

"In Noland's tavern," Galt informed him. "You were there with another man."

"I recollect now." Fain nodded. "That man with me was killed by the Mormons. Stabbed by a murdering Danite!"

Galt remembered the assurance Fain had given Ritler.

"There's no such thing as a Danite," said, repeating Fain's own words.

"No? I wonder . . . Well, keep your eyes open for Indians."

He turned and went down the hill.

Galt lay in the grass, the rifle beside him. He propped his chin on his hand and peered into the night. There wasn't much to see; only a pool of shadows and the line of another hill-crest a few hundred yards distant. That, and the moving shadows in his mind.

After awhile you forget, old Abe had said. But Abe was wrong. There are things you *never* forget. A home burning in the night. The cry of the mob. A kiss beneath the cold February moon, and a Mormon girl's whispered prayer for understanding: "Oh, Lord Jehovah, please don't call it wicked. So much trouble—and this one little minute."

Ah, no, there had been no wickedness there. Only beauty and a tender sadness. In Galt's memory the minute still ticked on. It was suspended and timeless, and all the turning wheels in all the clocks in the world couldn't pass it by. One little minute. . . .

They came at dawn, just as the sky was paling and the far hill-crest was as sharp beneath it as an ink-drawn line. They came in a scudding mass, up from the hidden recesses of the plains, straight out of the paling sky like a whirling storm fragment.

These were something different from the Shawnee and Kansa that lounged about the streets of Independence. These were roached-head Pawnee, and they meant business. They came on without a sound save the mounting drum of their little cat-footed horses.

Galt jerked up his rifle and fired. Two more guns banked where camp guards were stationed farther along the ridge.

"Indians! Indians! Here they come!"

Galt and the other guards raced for the wagon trains. The camp had stirred to life. There was a rattling among wagon-boxes and a vast surge of voices. Dogs barked and roosters commenced a joyful crowing.

The Indians came screeching over the ridge the guards had just vacated. It wasn't a large band of raiders, but when they began their noise, the voices multiplied enormously. They sounded like the avenging fury of the whole plains.

Guns blazed behind the parked wagons. Galt heard a whisper and whine in the air, felt a searing touch to the crown of his head, and he dived to the ground.

The Indians swept quartering down the slope, away from Galt and toward a bunch of Missouri mules that had been night-herded outside the wagon corral. The mules stampeded. They charged through a row of tents and crashed head on against the wagons.

Fire brands spurted. Tents weaved, collapsed into the gray darkness. Now guns cracked. The Indians howled like wolves and gobbled like demented women. All at once a wagon became a billowing tower of flame.

In the quick burst of light Galt saw an indescribable confusion of rocking wagons, fear-crazed livestock, scantily-clad movers and wildly cavorting Indians.

And as suddenly as they had come, the raiders departed.

Galt went on toward the camp. Fain reared up before him, gun in hand.

"All right, Lee?" he questioned.

Galt took off his hat. There was a bullet-hole in it. There was a smear of blood in his hair. He looked at Fain.

"The bullet came from somewhere in this direction," he said.

Fain nodded. "An accident. I nearly caught one, too. Someone at the wagons must have mistaken us for Indians."

GALT entered the camp. Briefly, in the light of the beginning day, the movers were boisterous. They had been salted. They had, b'golly, taught the danged savages a lesson! As evidence of their victory they had acquired an Indian.

Galt saw him, the dead Pawnee, crumpled against a wagon wheel. He had streaks of vermillion on his cheeks, and his head was shaven except for a center roach of long, bristly hair. A lanky mover was brandishing a knife. He was proclaiming in a high Tennessee whine that he was going to clip him a Pawnee ear for a pocket-piece.

The wagon corral was broken in several places. A large number of the mules and horses were gone, departed with the raiders. Here and there Galt saw arrows on the ground or sticking into wagons. A few were sticking into droop-headed, patient-eyed oxen.

Movers were drifting together in groups. Their boisterousness was fading, now. They were taking count of the damage. Galt carried the rifle back to Abe Zegler's wagon.

Old Abe was stretched out on blankets on the ground. Some one told Galt that the little man bending over Abe was Doc Hunsaker of the Missouri outfit. Doc Hunsaker was extracting an arrow from old Abe's thigh. . . .

It was night again. The horn lantern cast a dim glow within the wagon. Fain's glance flicked from Galt to old Abe.

"The way it looks now," said Fain, "the big train is going to be stalled here for awhile. The Missouri outfit has lost its mules, and some of the rest want to hold an election for a new train-master. We're going on. A few of the Illinois families are going with us. How about you, Abe?"

"Goshalmighty!" cried Abe from his bed in the wagon. "I started for Californy, didn't I? This little aerer wound ain't going to stop me. Sure, me and Lee are coming along!"

Fain nodded to Galt. "Tomorrow we'll go after buffalo. We'll load up with as much jerked meat as we can." He started to leave the wagon, paused. "By the way," he said to Galt, "your friend Proudy and the Coltons are coming with us."

Galt thought of the long trail ahead. So each day now he would see her—and Colton! On to California! And each day marked by a slow twisting of the knife. Why had Fain told him? Did Fain know? He gazed flatly at the wagon captain. Once again he had a warning sense of strange darkness in this man.

Fain smiled sardonically. He disappeared into the night.

There were fifteen men in the hunting party the next day. Like Galt and the black-bearded Proudy, most of the men carried only a rifle or smooth-bore. A few, like Fain and Colton, had Dragoon pistols.

They parked their empty wagon behind a sandhill. Before them the land rolled away in a series of grassy swells and draws. And everywhere, like crawling flies, were the buffalo.

They scrambled around the hills in files and columns, the buffalo. Some stepped out briskly and some moved slowly, grazing. And some just stood dumbly.

"Remember, it's the cows we want," said Fain. "Try for a lung shot. And don't stampede 'em more'n you can help."

The hunters rode forward through the rank grass. They weren't experts, but they knew what to do. You shoot 'em in the lungs, and they go down. You cut off the tails for trophies, and you take a drink of the blood to prove you're a plainsman. Then you go in, elbows deep, and peel out the meat. Tongue and hump ribs for supper!

Galt saw a wolf slink along a draw ahead of him. An antelope poked up his little horns and white throat and peered with black, inquisitive eyes, then breezed away. A bull buffalo came snorting to his feet, glared redly out of a tangled mane, and lumbered off.

Galt sprang from the saddle, sighted on a line of buffalo and shot. The bison broke into a gallop. Galt reloaded. Abruptly one of the cows stopped running. It stood still, tottered, then fell heavily. A bull sniffed at it, and a second bull came along and butted the first bull in the rear.

Galt swung into the saddle again. On either side of him sounded the guns of the hunters. The buffalo were hastening away,

converging to make a massed formation. Dust was rising.

THE hunters took after the buffalo, and the animals began traveling in earnest, short tails rigidly erect. Galt swerved his horse close to another cow and shot her on the run.

Their stampeding numbers constantly augmented, the bison were channeled now between a double line of hills, much as a river is channeled between its banks. They closed in about Galt and hurried him along. Dust was a choking, almost impenetrable fog. Horns clicked and rattled. Thousands of hoofs made a dull jarring of the earth.

On the slope to his left and paralleling the course of the herd, Galt glimpsed occasionally the wildy charging hunters, saw the noise-drowned flash of their guns. Behind him, caught in the press of the stampede, were Elders Proudy and Colton, and yonder came Fain, his stern features cleaving through the rolling dust like some gloomy spirit of the plains.

The hill-lines receded and the herd began to spread out. Galt worked his horse into the clear. The buffalo rushed on by, tails up, heads down, their dark, flowing masses half-hidden in the dust spume. He turned his horse and started back.

Here and there he passed a dead buffalo, shapeless and with lolling tongue. Most of the hunters had escaped being caught in the stampede. He could see them ahead of him now, coming down along the hill-slopes, forming a group about an object that was not a dead buffalo.

Galt reached the group and dismounted. He watched three of the hunters lifting what was left of Elder Colton.

They carried the body to a hillside and deposited it carefully on a clean grass patch. A man wiped his lips and spat out caked dust.

"Right down under 'em!" he said. "His horse must've stumbled."

"Get the wagon, Charlie," ordered Conrad Fain.

The man got on his horse and rode off. Fain moved with sudden nervous energy.

"All right," he said. "We've got to get to work on the buffalo. You've all got knives. Start in on the first ones and work this way. . . Proudy, I guess you'll want to stay here with Colton till the wagon comes."

The hunters rode off. All but Elder Proudy. Galt lingered behind the others, turned and went back. He dismounted again beside Colton's body. He gazed down at that trampled grotesquery of a man and tried to analyze thought and feeling. But there was no feeling—only a husked emptiness.

Colton was gone. And what had been his, Colton had taken with him, had surrounded with the inviolability of the grave.

Galt was thinking drearily, I'm not a vulture. I can't pick dead bones! For the gibbering bones would rise again. He thought, he'd be there. Always!

Elder Proudy was squatted beside Colton's dead horse. He was beating dust from the hide with his hat. He put on his hat again.

Galt stepped up behind Proudy. He saw why Colton's horse had stumbled. A bullet-hole in the shoulder of the dead animal.

"An accident," muttered Proudy. "A wild shot."

Galt remembered the charging hunters beside the stampeding buffalo, the flashing guns. A wild shot—and there was a widow in the wagon train. A small girl with great midnight eyes.

Proudy picked up a handful of dust and covered the bullet-hole. "There's no need for the others to know," he said. "Nothing would be accomplished." He stood up and brushed off his hands. "An unfortunate accident."

Galt thought of that other accident, the one that had left the bullet-hole in his hat. Did Proudy know the answer? He gazed steadily at the elder.

Proudy returned the gaze with curiously blanked stare.

Galt knew the signs, now. The barrier was up. It was the wall of silence again, the moving of nebulous forms in the darkness.

"Lee," murmured Elder Proudy, "it might be better if you were to stay with the main train, not go along with us."

"I'm going along," Galt said.

He wasn't asking much, and he never would now. But when the forms of darkness took shape, when Mary needed his help again—when that time came he was going to be there. That much neither Proudy nor the dead Colton could deny him.

VII

AT DAWN, two days after the buffalo hunt, the Illinois movers pulled out of the camp—a little string of twenty-two wagons hitting the Oregon-California Trail, buckets swinging, chickens squawking in their coops, sheets of drying jerky hung on rawhide lines.

Galt popped his whip and old Abe's oxen pushed into their yokes. They plodded after Elder Proudy's wagon.

It crawled slowly, the little string of wagons, humping over the swells, dipping into the draws and laboriously reappearing, a feeble unit of motion, dwarfed against the vast, sky-limited spaces that surrounded it. Behind it the encampment of the stalled big train gradually dwindled in size. The wagons drew together and were a clump of gray mushrooms in the distance.

Old Abe Zegler lay in the bed of his wagon. His gaunt head was rocked from side to side by the sway of the vehicle. Laughter rumbled in the old man's throat. He was on his way again—on to Californy.

"Ten days to Fort Laramie," he said. "Want to bet, Lee?"

"No," said Galt, "I guess not."

He glanced over his shoulder at old Abe. Abe's arrow wound was clean, but it wasn't healing. The old man had become markedly thinner in the past few days.

The little wagon train made fifteen miles the first day, and on the second day, slowly they continued westward.

Chickens were languishing in their coops from the dust and heat; the movers began killing them. One night Mary brought a bowl of chicken stew for Abe. The old man sat up and polished off the stew with a fine clattering of his spoon. He could eat like fury, but it wasn't putting any weight on him.

"He's getting thinner," said Mary. "Is it the arrow wound?"

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"It's something else," said Galt. "There's nothing to be done. I talked with Doc Hunsaker before we left camp."

"You shouldn't have brought him along."

"He wants to go on," replied Galt. "Doc Hunsaker told me that it wouldn't make any difference if he went or stayed."

"Go back!" she whispered tensely. "Get out of the train! Not for him alone—for both of you!"

"Why?" asked Galt. "What will happen if I don't?"

She didn't answer.

They were standing a little distance from the wagon, were enveloped in the soft dimness of the night. She was very close. He could have reached out and touched her. Between them was the wall of silence—the raised hand of a dead man.

"You're afraid of something," Galt said shortly. "What is it?"

She shook her head. Abruptly, she whirled and hurried off.

"A pleasant night," a voice spoke behind Galt.

He turned slowly, watched the lean form of Conrad Fain going by with quiet tread.

"Yes," he answered quietly.

The movers reached Fort Laramie. Ahead lay South Pass, backbone of the continent. Three hundred miles.

"South Pass in twenty days!" said old Abe.

His cheeks had fallen flat against his jaws. The seams of his skull showed under the sallow skin of his forehead. His red-rimmed eyes were cavernous.

"The old man's dying," said Fain to Galt. "You two had better stay here at the fort."

"He wants to go on," replied Galt.

Fain nodded. "It's your funeral, Lee."

The movers pulled out of Fort Laramie. They went out into the volcanic barrens. They passed Laramie Peak and crossed Wagonhound Creek. Three days later they were following close again to the North Platte. They crawled through heat-filled, bowl-like valleys. Beyond were towering buttes and a jagged skyline. In the distance they glimpsed the Wind River Mountains.

Leaving the North Platte, they turned southwest, rolled down into the valley of the Sweetwater. White, bitter dust inflamed their eyes and cracked their lips. The patient oxen breathed in the dust and grew leaner.

GALT no longer drove from the wagon seat. He walked with the oxen and his feet were scalded, and wherever raw places formed the terrible white dust bit it like acid.

Old Abe lay helpless in the suffocatingly hot wagon. His arrow wound remained clean and unhealed.

Wheels shrank in the extreme dryness. Because the movers had no blacksmith along to shorten the tires, they had to tighten them with wedges. Some of the oxen died, which was disaster.

"Lighten the wagons," ordered Fain.

The movers lightened their wagons. They heaved out heavy tables and chests of drawers that had been prized family possessions. Some of the women complained and then, in tearful desperation, discarded pots, pans and iron skillets—things which they should have kept.

"Three more days to South Pass," said Conrad Fain.

Old Abe lay in the wagon and chuckled. "Three days," he said. "Californy or bust!"

The little train began climbing. The trail went inexorably upward. The air grew thin and men panted without exertion. Then the trail leveled again, and the wagons had crossed to the watershed of the Green River, and the Sweetwater was behind them.

Here, on either side, rearing up from the depths below and projecting into the sky, the movers saw huge, purple-domed peaks, cloud-hung and snow-streaked. Here they drank from a spring which sent its divided water into both the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. Here they had reached the summit of South Pass.

The trail was downgrade now, and the oxen moved along without apparent effort. The movers climbed in the wagons and rode.

Galt glanced over his shoulder. "All right, Abe?"

He received no answer and stopped the wagon. Mary came running back from Proudy's wagon. She and Galt looked in at the old man. Abe's eyes were closed, he was breathing sharply.

The movers behind Galt had halted. They made a solicitous group about the Conestoga.

"What's the holdup here?" Fain pulled up on his horse.

"We'll have to wait," Mary told him. "Abe Zegler's dying."

"Wait for one old man?" exclaimed Fain. "No! We can do five more miles yet today. We'll bury him tonight when we stop."

The girl turned and walked away.

"You were told not to come along," Fain said curtly to Galt. "You can't hold up the whole train."

"Did I ask you to hold up?" Galt shouted thickly. "Clear out! All of you! Go on! Let me alone!"

"Get to your wagons," Fain ordered. "Lee Galt can catch up again."

Galt tied Abe's oxen a little way from the wagon. The last of the movers disappeared around a bend in the trail. He went back to the Conestoga. Mary was sitting in there beside the old man.

"I wanted to help," she murmured.

"They'll come back for you."

She shook her head. "They won't know I'm missing until tonight. Father thinks I'm riding with the Jenkinses."

Old Abe suddenly opened his eyes. "Where's Lee?" he muttered.

"Here, Abe." Galt got in the wagon.

"Lee," whispered Abe, "everything I got is yours. In that chest over there—eight hundred dollars. Yours, Lee." He shut his eyes again, frowned. "Come close. You still there?"

"I'm still here, Abe," Galt answered.

"Busted, Lee. Busted, by golly!"

The old man chuckled quietly. His breathing became sharper. Shallower. Then stopped.

Mary found a prayer book in the wagon, and she read the burial service. It was evening when Galt finished mounding the grave. He leaned upon the shovel. Mary stood beside him.

Above them, the mountain peaks flamed coldly in the last rays of a departed sun. So far, old Abe's stalwart spirit had carried him on, and here, on this high and lonely spot, he had stopped. It was, thought Galt,

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a peculiarly fitting place for old Abe's tired body to rest.

"And he wanted so to see California," said the girl sadly.

"He'll see it," answered Galt. "He'll get there."

THEY yoked up the oxen and went on. They rode together in the seat of the Conestoga. It was night then, and a huge mountain moon sailed up as bright as frosted silver, as bright as it was on that long-ago February night in Illinois.

Galt kept his gaze on the trail ahead. Beside him he heard a stifled sob. The girl's voice ran out to him, muted and tremulous:

"I lied, Lee. I can't go on with it. Elder Colton wasn't my husband. He was my uncle—my mother's brother."

He sat completely motionless, watching Elder Colton sink back into his grave, realizing that his ghost was laid forever.

"Why?" he asked patiently then. "Why did you lie, Mary?"

"Father and Elder Colton didn't want you to follow us. They—we were afraid. I was afraid—"

Her words trailed off into the thin stillness of the night. Her shoulder brushed his in a fleeting, trembling touch.

"And you're still afraid," he said. "What are you afraid of, Mary Proudy? Who are you afraid of?"

She was silent. Retreating. Taking refuge behind the wall of silence.

Without hurry, without lagging, the oxen plodded onward. The creak of the wagon wheels was a weak and solitary sound. Here and there along the route were the skeletons of mules and cattle, dull white in the moonlight and glowing with a pale phosphorescence where the shadows fell.

The trail made a sudden turning. Close before them Galt saw the fires of the camped wagon train.

"Do you remember," he asked, "that windfall in the woods and how cold it was? I didn't notice the cold, not then. You said that in a little while we would forget. Have you forgotten, Mary?"

He waited, not looking at her. The camp drew closer. There was singing.

"Have you forgotten?" Galt asked again.

"No," she whispered. "No, clock man. You know I haven't."

He turned and held her tight.

"What have I done?" Her voice was despairing, muffled against his shirt. "You'll never leave the train now. You must! You'll be killed!"

"Why? Because of you?" He tilted her head until he could see the soft curve of her cheek. "Who will kill me?"

"*He* will! He's been . . . Oh, Lord of Zion! There he is now!"

She pushed away from him. Her eyes were wide pools of terror.

The oxen halted. Shadow figures were coming from the fires to the wagon.

"Did old Abe die?" someone asked.

"Yes," Galt answered.

"Mary, you had no business to run off like that!" Elder Proudy was at the wagon. "Get down, girl!" he ordered sternly.

Mary climbed out of the wagon. Conrad Fain stood beside Proudy.

"Lee, you're on guard tonight," he said. "Eat first, then I'll show you where."

Galt parked the wagon and ate. He got out his rifle. He held the rifle ready in the crook of his arm and followed Fain away from the camp.

Fain waved his hand toward the hill slope beyond. "Up there," he directed. He wheeled abruptly and went back to the camp.

Climbing the hill, Galt lay down in a shadowed hollow at the crest. Below him the fires of the encampment began to die out. The singing had ceased. The wagon train slept. The moon slid westward. . . .

Galt arose to his knees. He swung his rifle around.

"Everything all right, Lee?"

Fain came into the hollow beside him. Fain, who carried the responsibility of the train, making sure that his guards were alert. He was empty-handed, without gun or pistol. His coat flapped loosely open.

"Did you thnik I was an Indian?" he asked.

MOONLIGHT showed the wagon captain's faint smile. Smiling, he pushed aside the muzzle of Galt's rifle. He gripped

the rifle in both hands as Galt tried to pull it away.

"Now wait," he said softly. "Wait, Gentile. Listen to what I have to say."

"Gentile?" Galt stopped tugging at the rifle. He knelt there quietly, peering up at this lean, sardonic-visaged man, this form taking shape out of the darkness. "Gentile?"

"That's it, Lee."

Galt's thoughts ran back to the first time he had seen Fain, in the tavern at Independence with John Ritler. Ritler's nervousness and the laughter of Fain. Fain with his friendly, reassuring arm upon Ritler's shoulder. Ritler dying behind the blacksmith shop.

"So it wasn't Colton who killed Ritler," said Galt.

"No," replied Fain, "it wasn't Elder Colton who did that."

"Why tell me this?" asked Galt.

"Once," continued Fain, "I tried to kill you, too. The morning the Indians came. The bullet through your hat. Remember? I had found out that you knew the Proudys, and I was afraid you would give them away. But Elder Proudy swore you could be trusted. So after that—" Fain smiled again, gently, deprecatingly—"so after that I didn't try any more to kill you."

VIII

COLD crawling at the back of his neck brought Galt to his feet. He held tight to the butt of the rifle so Fain couldn't jerk it from him.

"Why tell me this?" he persisted.

"So you'll understand that I mean what I say," replied Fain. "Tomorrow when we go on, five of the wagons are staying here till the next train comes along. Their oxen need rest. So do yours, Lee."

"No," said Galt through the darkness.

"Yes," said Fain. "The Mormon girl is not for you, Lee. You understand now why you'll stay behind."

"Is that why Colton stayed behind?"

"What?" Fain gave an almost imperceptible start.

"You were carrying a pistol that day. Was it a pistol bullet that made Colton's horse stumble?"

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Fain looked steadily at Galt. His contemplative gaze took on a sort of volcanic glow. One hand reached under his coat. Galt saw the drawing sheen of the edged steel, flung himself at Fain, grabbing for his wrist.

"Gentile!" Fain surged forward.

The rifle dropped between the two men and banged on Galt's shin. He tripped and was borne backward. He landed on his shoulders and neck with Fain on top of him. He heard the clean, soft *snick* as the knife drove into the earth by his cheek.

Fain knelt on Galt's stomach. With one hand he throttled Galt, while with the other hand he strove to wrest the knife from the ground.

Galt held both of Fain's wrists. He tried to push the knife deeper into the ground, tried to break the grip on his throat.

Conrad Fain wasn't a large man, but he was strong. He was all sinew and purpose. The fingers clamped about Galt's windpipe were enclosing pincers. Slowly, outmatching Galt's straining effort, Fain withdrew the knife from the earth, lifted the weapon above Galt.

As desperately as he had opposed the ascent of the knife, Lee Galt now opposed its descent. He shook Fain's wrist, tried to wring the knife from his grasp. He tore at the fingers digging into his trhoat. Inexorably Fain pressed the blade downward.

Galt was strangling. He kicked and squirmed. Fain refused to be dislodged; he

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AS AMENDED BY THE ACTS OF MARCH 3, 1933, AND JULY 2, 1946 of Triple Western, published quarterly at Kokomo, Ind., for October 1, 1954. 1. The names and aaddresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Best Publications, Inc., 10 E. 40th St., New York, N. Y. Editor, James B. Hendryx, Jr., 10 E. 40th St., New York, N. Y. Managing editor, None. Business manager, Harry Slater, 10 E. 40th St., New York, N. Y. 2. The owner is: Best Publications, Inc., 10 E. 40th St., New York, N. Y., N. L. Pines, 10 E. 40th St., New York, N. Y. 3. The known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: None. 4. Paragraphs 2 and 3 include, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting; also the statements in the two paragraphs show the affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner. Harry Slater, business manager. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 1st day of October, 1954. Max Ullenberg, Notary Public. (My commission expires March 30, 1956).

rode Galt like some terrible monster of the night. Galt felt the knife point thrusting against his neck, dimpling the skin. He gazed straight up into Fain's convulsed features, his glaring eyes.

Above Fain, starkly outlined across the night sky he saw a furiously leaping figure, saw the glinting arc of a swung gun-barrel, heard the *plopping* crash as it struck Fain's head.

Galt rolled on his side. He rubbed his throat, gasping, gulping in air. Dimly he was aware of a bearded face bending anxiously over him. Elder Proudy.

"I was afraid of this," Proudy said. "I saw him leave camp and I had an idea he might be up to something. You're not hurt, are you, Lee?"

"I'm all right," Galt wheezed.

Lee Galt was fine. His throat was on fire, he was still dazed from his peep into eternity. Nevertheless, he was fine. He sat up and squinted at the crumpled, motionless Fain.

"Dead," pronounced Elder Proudy in a sepulchral voice.

"Did he know that Mary wasn't married to Colton?" Galt asked.

"So she told you, did she?" Proudy shook his head. "No, Fain didn't know that. He was a dangerous man and he had a certain reputation with women. Colton and I felt that for Mary's protection, we should—"

"And do you still think Colton's death was accidental?" Galt broke in.

"I don't know," Proudy answered evasively. "It's difficult to believe. One of his own people. It's something we'll never know."

Galt got the impression that Elder Proudy didn't want to know, that Elder Proudy was glad he never would know.

PROUDY picked up the knife that lay beside Galt. He held it a moment, pondering, then shoved it under his belt.

"Perhaps," he murmured, "it would be better if nothing of this is known in the camp. Explanations might be complicated.

Galt nodded. He got the point exactly. But how, he wondered, did you conceal the fact of a dead man? Elder Proudy strode

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over to Fain. When he rose, Fain's body was slung across his shoulders.

Galt kept rubbing his throat. He watched the burdened Proudy march briskly off along the slope, away from the camp, vanishing in the far shadows.

Farewell to Fain, Galt thought. Dark Saint. Out of darkness. Into darkness again.

Elder Proudy was gone a long time. Galt lay on his back waiting, gazing up at the paling stars. Was it that late? That early? Daylight so soon?

The sky lightened. From the camp Galt heard the first stirrings of the movers, the thud of an ax. From the opposite direction he heard Elder Proudy returning.

Galt got to his feet. He shook his head.

"It's no good," he said. "They'll hunt for him and find him."

"Yes," answered Elder Proudy, "of course they will. However, there are certain deceptions—" He coughed delicately. "I think," he said, "that when they do find him, they may lay the blame on the Indians. It's a possibility."

Galt experienced a faint chill. He was remembering the knife!

Elder Proudy picked up his rifle. Proudy, expert on the ways of silence, was now starting back to camp.

"Wait," said Galt. "You know why Fain tackled me?"

"I can guess. On account of my Mary." Proudy looked dreamily into the distance. "Unfortunately, Gentile, there are reasons—"

"No," interrupted Galt, "there are no reasons. And I'm tired of being 'Gentile.' And I'm tired of being unfortunate. I'm tired—" Anger leaped in Galt like a bright, thin sword. He planted himself directly before Proudy. "Shall I tell you, Elder Proudy," he asked, "all the things I'm tired of?"

Proudy stared bleakly. Then, briefly, his beady eyes showed a melancholy warmth.

"I don't think that's necessary," he replied gently. "I *know*, Lee. Perhaps I should speak of this to my daughter."

"We'll both speak to her," said Galt.

They went down the hill-slope, entered the camp.

Mary Proudy was on her knees before the Proudy tent, trying to build a fire. She glanced up. She remained kneeling there, a box of matches in one hand and a blazing tuft of whittlings in her other hand. Just so she had looked at Galt in that lamplit farmhouse in Illinois, her dark eyes widening, a flush running high in her cheeks. And how long ago? How do you measure the interval between now and then? By weariness? By emptiness? The miles traversed? The days of the calendar? By the timeless poignancy of memory? Just one little minute!

And the minute ticked on—

Lee Galt was thinking, can you hear it, Elder Proudy? Can you muffle it behind your wall of silence?

There was a sigh from Elder Proudy, the quiet sigh of resignation.

"You are right, Lee," said the elder. "There are no reasons."

Then Elder Proudy turned and walked away.

Buzzarditis

By
Raymond K. Winburn

FORTUNATELY for ranchers of the great Southwest, outbreaks of "buzzarditis" are fairly rare, occurring only when the number of black-robed ghosts outstrips the carrion supply. When this happens the buzzard, though greatly talented in the art of fasting, becomes a vicious predator.

His favorite method of attack is to catch a ewe in the act of lambing, then swoop down and pick the eyes out of both the lamb and ewe. Blinded and with the instinct for self-preserva-

tion practically nil, lamb and ewe are then virtually eaten alive by the starving vultures.

To combat this situation ranchers in areas infested with buzzarditis sometimes build traps and bait them with sheep carcasses, hoping in this way to lessen the extent of vulture depredations. The traps, constructed of chicken wire, are built on the order of fish traps and once the buzzards walk through the opening they rarely ever find it again.

In one season a single trap has captured as many as a thousand buzzards. The trapped vultures are shot through the head at leisure, the remains saturated with gasoline and burned.

THE STAGE COACH

A Cargo of Range Facts and Oddities

IT APPEARS that the tales about stoic Indians are not just legend.

"It's an amazing thing but apparently true," says Dr. H. H. Donahue, Oklahoma state mental health director, commenting on the way full-blooded Indians defy all theories of emotional and galvanic response in lie detector tests given them.

"Every Indian tested has shown nil," states the veteran psychiatrist. "We get no results at all. The graph just runs along without the slightest quiver."

Mixed-bloods do have definite reactions, however. Like mixed drinks, we might add.

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Texas maintains the right to divide itself into five states at any time—without the consent of the U. S. Government. Tsk, tsk.

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Any time you begin feeling sorry for yourself as to current postal rates, you can undoubtless gain a modicum of comfort from the fact that during Pony Express days it cost $5 to send a half-ounce letter from St. Joseph, Missouri to San Francisco.

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James Bowie, veteran frontiersman and one of the heroes of the Alamo, was confined to bed with pneumonia during that famous battle. Yet it is said he accounted for nine Mexicans before the overwhelming forces of General Santa Ana finally put out his bright and shining light.

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The name of the State of Utah comes from a Spanish word meaning "snow clad." 'Snow joke, son.

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It is a strange fact that some of the hottest, most arid regions of the Southwest have huge caves packed with solid ice of unknown age. The principle ones are the ice caves of the Modoc lava beds in northeastern California and an important group near the base of Bandera crater in Valencia County, New Mexico. All these frigid caverns are in areas deeply blanketed beneath ancient lava flows. But just why a few of these underground pockets continue to remain filled with perpetual ice is a mystery.

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Origin of the name of another state, Oklahoma, is a Choctaw word meaning "red people." On account of they were so "well-red," don'tcha know.

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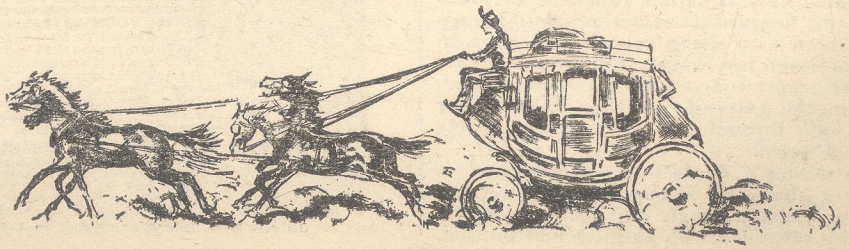
There are oyster beds a mile above the sea in some of the mountain rivers of Montana, which may be of importance only to another high-living oyster. But don't say we didn't warn you.



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