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TOPS IN WESTERN STORIES

7 OF THE BEST RANGE STORIES EVER PUBLISHED

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THE LAST RIDE OF POTHOOKS MARRS

By LES SAVAGE, Jr

Marrs struggled against the crazed, milling herd, then reached down into the foamy water and came up with Solo Sam under his arm.

Is the width of the Texas plains, or the winding length of the dusty Chisholm Trail big enough to hide the stinkin' backtrail of a drygulcher? One of 'em thought so—Pothooks Marrs—hot target-bait of the King Colts parade

BOB SLAUGHTER came awake with someone touching him, and grabbed for his gun. Then, with his hand on the weapon, his sleep-fogged vision was filled with a woman's face—windblown taffy hair framed large, gray eyes, and the damp, ripe curve of a rich underlip.

"Gail," he snapped. "Don't you know how to wake a man on the trail yet? I might have thrown down on you."

"All right, Bob," she panted angrily. "Next time I'll stand ten feet back and pelt you with a pebble. The crew's hoorawing the cook down in the river. You've got

to stop it. They're mad enough to drown him."

"Not again," groaned Slaughter, pulling himself out of his sougan, fully dressed. He was near forty-five, but his long, driving legs in the rumpled striped pants, and his lean pivoting waist held the hard, vital youth of a man fifteen years his junior.

Following Gail through the smoldering cookfires, he ran his hand roughly across the strong, cutting thrust of his jaw, feeling the greasy blond stubble. His long yellow hair fell over a belligerent brow, and the impatient toss of his head, throwing it back, flashed chill little lights across his hard blue eyes. The movement made him wince. A dull ache shot through his temples, and he squinted his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose. Either the liquor was getting stronger in Dallas, or he was getting older, he didn't know which. He must have slept right through the fuss this morning.

They skirted the untended trail herd, and Gail pushed through the elderberry. Even in his vague stupor, Bob felt the keen appreciation of her presence. Hair that hung like rich strands of taffy down over her shoulders, and the faded blue cashmere robe failed to hide the mature rondure of her hips, the lissome motion of a body every man on the Chisolm Trail talked of. She had been married to Paul Butler for ten years, and for three years Slaughter had bossed their Pickle Bar trail herds north to the Kansas markets, and each year he thought she became more desirable to him.

They burst from the brush onto the rich, mucky soil of the Trinity bottoms, and could hear the men shouting and milling around in the shallows of the river. In their midst, Slaughter could make out the surging, struggling figure of the cook. Don Vargas was the vaquero who claimed to be descended from Spanish royalty—a lithe, slim whip of a youth in fancy taja leggin's and a frogged charro jacket—hopping around on the fringe and shouting.

"Dunk him again, he's been cutting pieces off my saddle for those atrocities he calls steaks ever since we left the Nueces."

The peg-legged man holding the cook by his shirt front had been dubbed Pata Pala by Don Vargas, which meant Stick Foot in Mexican. Despite his handicap, he was the best all round hand in the crew, and the bully of them to boot. He straddled the biscuit shooter and put his head under water again.

"Let him go," shouted Slaughter, descending on them in a vicious, long legged stride.

"Stay out of this, Slaughter," called Waco Garrett, holding one hand across his belly as if to ease the pain of some old internal injury so many brush hands carried within them. "You can't palm a pothooks like this off on us. My system's so saturated with that hog belly he's cooked for beef that I sweat straight leaf lard and my hide's so slick I can't keep my leggin's on."

"Leave go of him, I said," roared Slaughter. Reaching the crowd, he pulled Windy aside with one sweeping arm to get at Pata Pala. Windy staggered back and sat down in the water, his mop of white hair falling over his eyes. Slaughter hooked one hand in the peg-leg's belt and heaved backward. Pata Pala let go of the cook and whirled about before he lost balance. He was taller than Slaughter's six foot one, and twice as big around the waist, a great, beefy bully of a man with a matted roan thatch and a stubble beard so filled with grease and dirt its color was indeterminate. He caught Slaughter's arm in one hand. Slaughter slugged him in the belly. Pata Pala grunted, bent toward Slaughter, raking for his face. Slaughter pulled the Navy Colt from his belt and laid it across the man's face. Pata Pala toppled sideways with a heavy groan, and Slaughter jumped on him before he struck the ground.

Solo Sam had grabbed the sputtering cook, jamming a sopping wet hat into his face, and Windy had risen to boot the biscuit shooter in his behind. They both stared at Slaughter, and released the cook.

"Now," said Slaughter, holding the gun for whipping, "if anybody else wants to hooraw this pothooks, let him come ahead. I'll whip strips off his face and make jerky of it." They spread away from the choking, gasping cook, staring sullenly at Slaughter. "Vamoose, then," he said, finally. "Get back to camp and catch up. If this is what you want, we'll ride without breakfast."

PATA PALA rose sullenly, holding the bloody weal cutting its livid swath through one cheek. His little bloodshot eyes held Slaughter's gaze for a moment; then, without speaking, he wheeled sharply and walked as fast as he could up the bottom slope, hitching the hip of that peg leg forward with each step. The others followed, one by one, until only the cook and Slaughter were left in the water.

"Now get back to your chuck wagon," said Slaughter. "And do something about that cooking of yours."

"There won't be any more cooking," sobbed the bow-legged, bald-pated little man. "I'm through, Slaughter."

"The hell you are," said Slaughter." You know we can't get another range cook in this town. You're staying, belly cheater, or I'll lay this dewey on you too."

"Go ahead," snarled the man. "You can beat me all day. It still won't make me stay."

With a curse, Slaughter lunged at him, but Gail cried out from farther up the bank, and slopped into the shallows to grab at him. "Slaughter, let him alone. Haven't you gone far enough already?"

"Far enough! What the hell did you want me to do, kiss their boots?"

"Haven't you got any diplomacy in you?" she said hotly. "You can't drive men like a bunch of cattle, Slaughter. Maybe they had a legitimate quarrel here. You didn't even stop to reason with them."

"You don't know men like I do," he said. "I've been bossing crews for ten years, Gail, and commanding troops for five before that. You've got to make them respect you."

"It isn't respect you win by whipping them at every turn," she said. "You've got to do something more than that. They may fear you and jump whenever you yell, Bob, but I wouldn't call that respect."

He realized the cook had left. He caught her elbow, moving her out of the water, putting a check on his anger with great difficulty.

"Gail dear, let's not quarrel like this. I don't want to quarrel with you, you know that. Every boss has a way of handling his men. This is just my way, that's all. It's always worked out."

She stared up at him. "What is it that keeps you driving so hard, Bob? You're afraid to let down one minute. You're past forty, yet you drive yourself like a man half your age."

"A man has to keep stepping to stay at the top," he said.

"Is that it?" she said. "Are you that afraid of slipping?"

"Afraid? Why should I be afraid?"

"I think you are," she said.

He felt the old discomfort under the candid, searching probe of her quiet gray eyes. "You're being very mysterious," he said. "I don't want to talk this way with you. Gail—" his voice sobered—"how is Paul?"

She accepted the abrupt transition without issue, her face darkening. "About the same," she shrugged. "That jolting wagon isn't helping him much."

"Why do you stick with that whining little baby, Gail?"

"He's my husband, Bob."

"He hasn't been your husband for five years and you know it," he said. "He's just been a name on the Pickle Bar checkbook. You've run the outfit as long as I've worked for it. He's just been a whining sniveling bundle of rags in one bed or another to sit beside and nurse and—"

"Bob!"

"It's time I spoke out," he said, facing the horror in her eyes. "Don't let any false sentiment come between us, Gail. I know you feel the same way I do. I hear him going for you in that wagon. You don't get a word of thanks. It's all whining and swearing and berating, like an old woman. I don't understand what you saw in him in the first place."

Her eyes seemed to focus on something beyond him, and her voice was barely audible. "He was very handsome."

"When are you going to quit, Gail? You don't owe him anything. He doesn't deserve your life. Waco Garrett leads a normal life with that injury of his. He does the work of two men with his belly hurting him so much most of the time he can't even see. Pata Pala makes out fine with only one leg. They don't go to bed everytime it starts bothering them. If Paul can't face it like a man, it shouldn't—"

"Bob, stop it."

"I won't. You were meant for something more than that, Gail. You need a man."

Her brows raised. "You, Bob?"

He took her elbows, lifting the weight of her body toward him. "You know how I feel, Gail."

"I can see you don't know how *I* feel, Bob," she said, pulling away from him. It was no violent effort, but it held an unyielding insistence that caused him to release her. "What makes you keep thinking Paul is the only reason I haven't turned your way?"

A THOUSAND cattle was shifting about nervously on the bed ground, cropping at weedy grass in a vain effort to fill their bellies. Bob Slaughter moved back through them moodily, a few minutes after Gail had left him there in the bottoms and returned to camp herself. The whole camp was ominously silent until Guy Bedar showed up, coming from behind the chuck wagon on his hairy little day horse. Narrow enough to take a bath in a shotgun barrel, he had a face as sharp as a Karankawa war hatchet, and kept his lips clamped shut so tight they made a jumptrap look slack. The tattered brim of his horse thief hat was pinned back against a crown so filthy it looked black, his leather ducking jacket was streaked with grease and tobacco juice, his leggin's were caked with mud and dropping.

"Where is everybody?" Slaughter asked him.

"Most of the crew went into Dallas for a meal," said Bedar. "Told me they wouldn't come back till you got them a decent cook. Incidentally, a man named Rickett would like to see you over by the grub wagon."

The chuck outfit was about twenty yards this side of the linchpin wagon in which Paul Butler had kept his sick bed since taking cold and a fever on the Colorado near Austin. The two men standing on this side of the chuck wagon would be unseen from the linchpin. One of them was a short, thickset man in a black Prince Albert and a black string tie. He had a square, open face and guileless blue eyes and lips with such a facile twist they reminded Slaughter of the fluted edge around the crust of a pie.

"I'm Harry Rickett," he said. "Perhaps you've heard of me. Or of Thibodaux."

The man he indicated leaned against a wheel in languid indifference, something creole to the almost womanish beauty of his long-lashed eyes, staring at Slaughter without seeming to see him. The simple black butt of his gun held a quiet, professional competence.

"I've been trying to remember where I'd seen you," Slaughter told Rickett. "You used to run a faro layout in the Alamo."

Rickett's smile faded. "A man has to start somewhere. You should see the Alamo now, Slaughter. Quiet as a churchyard. All of Abilene's dead, for that matter. You know, some claim it was the quarantine regulations and the opposition of the farmers that drew the cattle trade away from Abilene and caused it to decline as a cowtown. But those who really know, date the beginning of that decline from the year you decided to drive the Pickle Bar to Ellsworth instead of Abilene. Twenty trail bosses followed your lead. I never believed the stories they told about you till then. They said you were the biggest man on the trail. The first up the Chisolm every spring, the spearhead for the whole bunch."

"Do you always grease the axle?" said Slaughter.

"I'm not laying it on *that* thick," grinned Rickett. "It's the truth, and you know it. A man with your reputation, driving for one of the most famous outfits on the trail, constitutes sort of a guiding star. That's why I've come to you, Slaughter. You know what happens to the gambling interests when the cattle stop coming to a town like Abilene. They fold up. They lose money. Not only do they stop making it, their original investments go down the drain. A lot of headaches, Slaughter, a lot of lost fortunes. It happens to every cowtown. The trail keeps bending west, and it keeps happening over and over again. Coffeyville, Baxter Springs, Abilene. And now it's happened to Ellsworth. The quarantine line has been moved west of town. Certain farsighted interests had seen what happened to Abilene and the others, and had prepared to pull out of Ellsworth in time. But this

quarantine law fouled up their plans. If no cattle are driven to Ellsworth this spring, the interests I represent will go under with as disastrous results as they did in Abilene."

"And you want me to buck the quarantine?" said Slaughter.

"Isn't he perspicacious, Thibodaux?" asked Rickett.

"Perspicacious," said Thibodaux.

Rickett saw the flush start creeping up Slaughter's neck, and held up a placating hand. "They'll follow you, Slaughter. If you push on to Ellsworth and show this quarantine deadline up for the foolish thing it is anyway, the other trail bosses will be right on your hocks. Five hundred cowboys in the Lone Star district, Slaughter. Listen to the lion roar and buck the tiger. Nothing like a booming trail town for high-heel times."

"The quarantine law isn't such a silly thing when there's an army of inspectors and officials backing it up," said Slaughter.

"Not quite an army," pouted Rickett. "Maybe they'd let you slip by anyway, if their palms got a little oily."

"From your money?" asked Slaughter. "What about the grangers? You couldn't pay them off. There's too many."

"You've pushed through worse things than a few sodbusters with rusty old Greeners," said Rickett. "What about the time Jared Thorne and his jayhawkers tried to stop you?"

"I lost half the herd and half my crew," said Slaughter. "Which is just what would happen here. It's always the cows that suffer."

"What's a few cows?" said Rickett. "When the other bosses saw you got through, there'd be twenty outfits coming into Ellsworth. With that many on the trail, the farmers wouldn't stand a chance."

"That would be after I got through," said Slaughter. "Losing that many cows would put Pickle Bar on the red side of the ledger for this year. They're skating on thin ice already. I think it would finish Butler if he didn't show profit for this drive."

"It wouldn't finish you," said Rickett. "You'd have enough to establish an outfit of your own, Slaughter. Bigger than the Pickle Bar ever dreamed of being. Get through to Ellsworth and the interests I work for would see to that."

"They won't get a chance to," said Slaughter. "I may have had my high-heel times, Rickett, but when the last boot is empty, no man can say I bunch-quit the outfit I worked for."

"You're getting along, Slaughter," said Rickett. "There won't be many more years of bossing an outfit this size for you. It takes a young man. What then? Back to twenty and found in a puncher's saddle. Look what happened to Bert Pierce. Almost as big a man as you on the trail, Slaughter, in his day. They say he's swamping for some saloon in Wichita now. A lot of them go that way, Slaughter, when they get too old for rodding a job this tough."

"I'll be bossing a trail herd when you're getting pitched off a cloud, Rickett—" Slaughter halted his guttural explosion, surprised at the vehemence of it. He forced his voice to a strained mutter. "I don't want your proposition. I'm turning west at Red River for Dodge City."

"I've told you the example you provide for the other drivers," said Rickett. "Reach Ellsworth and they'd follow your lead. On the other hand, Dodge City isn't established as a trail town yet. They'll be watching you on that route, too. If you didn't make it to Dodge, a lot of them would turn back to Ellsworth."

"Is that a threat?"

"You interpret it any way you choose," said Rickett. "For my part, I'm just trying to show you how, either way, you'd provide an example. Jared Thorne and his jayhawkers are still active up there, Slaughter. They're a lot stronger than the year they tried to hooraw you. Last year they tied Pie Cameron to a tree and whipped him to death. When his hands found Pie, they turned back to Texas and left the whole herd for Jared. A lot more grangers over that way, too. Snaky. Mean. Organized. Just as liable to shoot a cowhand as not on sight."

"If you put a bug in their ear," said Slaughter.

"The interests I work for have connections in surprising directions," said Rickett. "They could throw a lot of things your way—or *in* your way. Why don't you re-

consider? As I say, in either direction, you could provide the example which might well affect the other drivers. But one way you lose, and the other way you win? Only a fool would deliberately put the chips on a losing number."

"And where I win, the Pickle Bar loses," said Slaughter. "I told you where I stood, Rickett. I'm asking you to leave my camp now."

"Don't be a fool, Slaughter—"

"Will you get the hell out!" shouted Slaughter. He saw Thibodaux straighten unhurriedly from the chuck wagon, unlacing his fingers from across his belt buckle. Slaughter pulled his elbows back slightly until his hands were pointing inward by his hips, focussing attention on the butt of his gun, thrusting its oak grips from the middle of his belt. "Go ahead," he told Thibodaux. "If that's what's in order now. I'd like you to. I'd like you to very much."

"Not now, Thibodaux," said Rickett. The flannel smile still curled his lips, but for a moment, in his eyes, Slaughter caught the hint of a raw, ruthless force that was totally out of keeping with the oily, genial surface of the man.

"But that doesn't necessarily mean never, Slaughter," said Rickett. "We'll let you sweat it out through the Indian Nations. That's a wild territory. Lots of things can happen there to change a man's attitude. And here's a thought to take along for the next time we meet. You make your living by what you can do with cattle, and you're one of the best in the game. Thibodaux makes his living by what he can do with a gun, and he's one of the best in the game. I know he would never be foolish enough to try and match you in your field. You'd make him look very silly." He looked at Slaughter's gun butt. Then his eyes raised until they met Slaughter's, and that rippling smile filled his mouth. "I'm sure, after a little thought on the matter, you wouldn't really like him to. Would you now?"

II

EAST of the Texas and Pacific tracks, the streets of Dallas were filled with mud like slick black wax. Gail Butler turned her little bald-faced bay up Jackson Street, passing a freight outfit stuck hub deep in the ooze, wincing at the blistering profanity of the roaring, laboring teamster and his swamper as they tried to get the mud-caked mules to budge the immense Murphy. She saw Kettle Cory's hairy, heavy-rumped cutting horse hitched among several other animals before the Oxbow Saloon, and turned her mount into the rack. She looked at the mud beneath her feet, reluctant to get off, and bent over the saddle horn, trying to peer over the splintered batwing doors.

At this moment another rider appeared down the street in the same direction from which she had come, showering mud on the cursing teamsters as he cantered by them. It was Bob Slaughter, driving his horse in the same flamboyant, reckless way that he drove himself, pulling it up to a rearing halt before Gail.

"What are you doing in town?" he asked her.

"Trying to get my crew back before they get so drunk we'll be stuck here a week," she said. "And incidentally, looking for a cook. Kettle's in here. Help me off, will you?"

Reluctantly, Slaughter threw his rawhide reins over the dun's hammer head and stepped off, sinking halfway to his knees in the mud. She allowed herself to slide off one side of her animal into his arms. They were strong and hard about her body. She could not deny the excitement his intense masculinity stirred in her. Paul's arms were weak, flaccid.

Slaughter set her down on the plank sidewalk, but did not step back. She moved away from him, staring up into his face with a half-pout, half-smile. He was handsome, there was no denying that, with his blond, leonine mane, his chill, demanding eyes and thin, expressive lips, the deep cleft in his chin. *If you were only a little different, Bob, she thought. And if only there weren't Paul. And if only a dozen other things,* she concluded bitterly, drawing a deep breath and turning into the Oxbow.

The barkeep looked up in surprise, but she gave him no heed. She had been doing a man's work with the Pickle Bar too long to worry about the dubious impropriety of her presence in a place like this. Kettle

Cory sprawled in a chair against the wall, a tall bottle of red bourbon on the table before him, half empty. He was a prodigious man, with a great kettle gut that was always forcing the tails of his red wool shirt out of his belt with its insistent, beefy rolls of fat. Gail had never seen him when he wasn't sweating. Perspiration rolled like tears from the veined, dissolute pouches of his little eyes, gathering in rivulets along the deep grooves formed by his ruddy, unshaven jowls, and seeping greasily into the clefts and crevices of his assortment of chins. He was dozing placidly, with his fat hands folded across his paunch and his muddy high-heeled boots spread out wide.

"Kettle," said Slaughter, shaking him.

The man opened his eyes without moving. They held a blue, lucid clarity that constantly surprised Gail, in such a gross beast. "You don't need to shake me," said Kettle through pouted lips. "I know you're here, Slaughter."

"Come back to camp, Kettle," Gail told him. "We'll get a decent cook. I want to move out of here by morning."

"Let me kill this soldier," said Kettle. "I'll be there when you need me."

"You're coming now," said Slaughter, grabbing the man again.

"I said you didn't need to shake me, Bob," said Kettle, without raising his voice.

Gail saw the flush filling Slaughter's face, and she put a hand on his arm, dragging it back. "All right, Kettle," she said. "I know you'll be there. Where are the others?"

"Couple of them wandered in here," said Kettle. "Then Windy showed up with word they'd found a good place to eat. Bean Buster's Heaven, or something. Down at Jackson and Poydras."

"All right, Kettle," Gail told him. "I'm counting on you." She kept that hold on Slaughter, pulling him out through the doors with her and turning down the sidewalk toward Poydras. "Why do the other men always leave him alone, Bob?"

"He's one of the best all around hands I've ever seen," said Slaughter. "But he used to be a cattle inspector for the San Antonio Cattlemen's Association. You won't find many cowhands who cotton to those Association detectives."

"But he isn't with the SACA now," she said.

Slaughter shrugged. "The taint still remains. His personality don't help. As long as he does the work, that's all I care."

THERE was a sign above the false fronted building. Bean Buster's Heaven, it said, in faded letters. Solo Sam was sitting disconsolately on the curbing, holding his jaw.

"I think he busted every bone below my teeth," he mumbled. "You aren't going in, are you?"

"Who busted?" said Slaughter.

"Pothooks Marrs," said Sam. "The coosie in there, the belly cheater. He's got the rest of the gang trapped and won't let them go."

"Trapped?" Gail wheeled angrily into the open door. It was ominously quiet in the single, large room. There were half a dozen round tables at one side, but they weren't occupied. It seemed to Gail that her whole crew was sitting on the long-legged stools at the counter. Like a bunch of dry dogies staring at water beyond a fence, their attention was fixed almost painfully on the man standing beside a steaming griddle.

He was built along the lines of a bull. Not the gaunt, cat-backed, rangy Texas longhorn variety, with all the beef melted from them by years of running the brush. More like a surly, shortened Angus breeder that had wallowed too long in a rich pasture, sleek all over with too much tallow on his hips and ribs, but giving the sense of coiled, potent muscle beneath that tallow, with every motion he made. He even kept his head lowered like a ringy bull. His curly, dark-brown hair was thinning at the back of his head, and his neck was so thick a roll of leathery flesh pinched out over his dirty white collar every time he lifted his head slightly.

"Listen to them frijoles simmer," said Don Vargas, wonderingly. "Just like they used to sound in Juarez. I hope you're not cooking them gringo style. The Mexican way is the only way. The longer you cook them the better they are. And the chile. *Ay, que delicioso.* You break off the stems and roast the pods and steam them until

they are tender, then you peel the meat away from the skins—"

"I'll cook the food," said the cook, without turning around. "You eat it."

"*Por supuesto,* of course, Senor Pothooks," said Don Vargas, placatingly, "I was just telling you—"

"You better not tell him anything, unless you want to git thrown out like Solo Sam," said Windy. "I never seen anybody like this since Pecos Bill. Did you ever hear about the time Bill got engaged to Slue Foot Sue? She insisted on riding Bill's horse, Widow Maker. Now she knew nobody else but Bill could ride that bronc, but no horse had ever throwed her, either, so—"

"Will you shut up," said Waco Garrett. "Them beans is boiling over, Pothooks."

"Yah," grumbled Pata Pala, "if you don't serve those steaks soon they'll start sprouting legs again and—"

"I told you I'd do the cooking," roared Pothooks.

Pata Pala reared up so hard his stool went from beneath him and the only thing that kept him from falling with it was his quick backward thrust of hips that slammed his good foot and the end of his leg onto the floor. Only then did Gail see what had caused him to jump like that. Where a moment before, nothing but the bare wood of the counter had been, the blade of a big meat chopper was now buried. Pata Pala had been sitting with both hands flat on the counter, about three inches apart, and it must have struck directly between them. It was made from an old machete that had been broken off halfway down to the hilt, leaving about six inches of the broad, wicked blade, looking like a broad-bladed hatchet.

Gail could not believe the cook had thrown it without looking, but she had not seen him turn, and now he was bent over the steaks on the griddle, rolling them in batter one by one to pop in the oven. An utter silence had settled over the room. Windy's mouth was still open. The scrape of Pata Pala's stool was startling, as he dragged it back between his legs. Gail could not believe the man's violence alone held them in this awed silence. All of Slaughter's blows had never subdued them to this point. Then she saw the dirty plates before each one.

"If you're going to stay," whispered Solo Sam, thrusting his bruised jaw hesitantly through the door behind Gail. "Try and fix it up so I can get another one of them steaks too, hey?"

The hissing whisper, in that dead silence, turned the cook around, and Gail saw his face for the first time. The eyes matched the sullen dip of that head, heavy-lidded, somnolent, filled with a dark, smoldering violence that was veiled very poorly. He had a small dark mustache, and his lips did not move too much around the words.

"If you're eating, sit down. I'll get to you in a moment."

GAIL glanced wryly at Slaughter, moved to the end of the counter, seating herself by Windy. "What's going on," she said in a low voice. "I never saw anybody hornswaggle the whole bunch of you like this before."

"He can throw all the knives in the place," said Windy, "as long as he keeps on cooking them steaks. Ain't a one of us'd do anything to jeopardize this next batch coming up. You saw old pegleg. After a month of that last biscuit shooter, he'd crawl under a snake if it'd keep this kind of food coming our way. Pothooks Marrs this coosie calls himself. That's what Solo Sam got throwed out for. He started asking too many personal questions about the name."

Gail found her eyes on Marrs' hands, moving with swift, solid skill at his tasks, never a wasted motion. They were square and competent looking, with a faint fuzz of curly black hairs covering their weathered, sinewy backs. She had not realized the significance of the scars, at first. Now she saw that they were not the marks a man would get on the stove. Gail had lived among cowhands too long to be mistaken about rope burns. There were no fresh ones, but they would mark him for life. He served Gail's crew, and then came down to her, wiping his hands on a dirty apron.

"How long since you rolled biscuits on a chuck wagon?" she asked.

He stopped wiping his hands, and for a moment, there was a strange, poignant, almost stricken look in his eyes. Then that

was obliterated by a sullen, angry defiance, and those heavy, bluish lids closed over his eyes till they were almost invisible. "I never cooked on a chuck wagon," he said.

"You ate at one," she said.

"Any man who hasn't, shouldn't be in Texas," he said. "Whats' it to you?"

"Take it easy, belly cheater," said Slaughter. "The lady is interested in cooks right now. We're the Pickle Bar and we just lost our coosie."

"How much do you make here?" said Gail.

"If you came in to eat," said Marrs, "give me your order. If you came in to ask questions, there's an information booth down in the Texas Pacific station for that very purpose."

Slaughter started to bend across the counter, but Gail caught him by a shoulder. "All right. I won't ask questions. I don't care what you make. I'll double it, if you can keep my crew this happy as far north as Dodge City. I'll even give you a bonus if you go the whole way with us."

"I'm happy here," said Marrs. "There's plenty of cooks around."

"Not range cooks, and you know it," she said. "They're as scarce as black spots on albinos."

"When you find a black spot send me a letter," he said. "Do you want something to eat or don't you?"

"She wants you to answer a civil question," said Slaughter, kicking his stool back from under him, and this time Gail couldn't stop his lunge across the counter. He caught the front of Marrs' shirt and jerked him across the planking, starting to yell in his face. "Now tell the lady—"

It happened so fast after that Gail could not quite follow it. She heard the rip of cloth and saw Slaughter's hand in midair with a handful of white cotton. Then Slaughter was staggering backward and Gail realized Marrs must have hit him in the face. Marrs didn't stop with that. He grabbed a dishpan full of dirty china from under the counter and heaved the whole thing across the top at Slaughter. The trail boss was still staggering across the room, and had just been stopped by a table, when the dishpan and crockery struck him with a deafening clatter. He went backward over the table with the tin and china raining down over him and onto the floor, and the table collapsed too.

"Now get out, damn you," roared Marrs, whipping around to get a pot of boiling water and throwing it, pot and all, at the other men. "All of you, get out. Vamoose. Take a pasear. Empty the wagon—"

Howling with the boiling water in his face, Windy ducked the pot itself, and it clanged against the far wall. Then clean china began to rain down on them, and cutlery, and a dozen stools toppled as the crew made for the door, hands over their heads.

Pata Pala was the only one who even tried to fight back. He grabbed that machete from where it had still been buried in the counter, and started running down toward the end. Marrs vaulted the counter and caught the peglegged man right there. Pata Pala came down with the flat of the blade at Marrs' head. The cook dodged in under it and struck Pata Pala's waist, knocking him back with such force that the man staggered clear back out into the street and fell in the mud.

Slaughter was starting to rise up from the wreckage across the room. He was still too dazed to do much but make a feeble pass as Marrs caught him by the belt, swinging him around, and shoving him toward the door. Slaughter tried to catch the doorframe and stop himself. Marrs scooped up a chair and threw it at him. It knocked the trail boss out across the sidewalk to fall on the peglegged man just as Pata Pala started to rise. Snorting through flared, fluttering nostrils, making guttural animal sounds deep down in that thick throat, Marrs swept the curly hair off his forehead with a vicious motion of one hand, wheeling back toward the counter. He must have forgotten Gail, for he stopped, unable to hide the surprise.

"Aren't you going to throw me out, too?" she said, drawing herself up high and trying to fill it with cold contempt.

"Lady," he said, standing spread-legged in the middle of the carnage, "if you don't go on your own two feet, right now, I sure will, very happily."

She stared at him for a moment. The humor of the whole thing had been push-

ing insistently upward in her since it started, and finally she could hold it down no longer. She lifted her chin to laugh.

"I have no doubts that you would," she said, and walked with as much dignity as she could summon to the door, turning there. "But don't forget, that offer still holds, twice what you're getting here, and a bonus. Our bed grounds are on the river south of town. Pickle Bar. Gail Butler."

"Get out!"

Slaughter wanted to go back inside and tear the man apart, and it took the whole crew to keep him from doing it. If he hadn't been so dazed from the dishpan, even that would not have stopped him. Finally Gail got him pacified, and moved down the street.

"I never saw a cook that wasn't ringy," said Windy, wonderingly. "But I never saw one that ringy."

"You must have touched him on a sore spot," Don Vargas told Gail. "If he punched cows, it was way back. He must have a good reason to keep him away from it that long. A lot of men with reasons that good are a little touchy about them."

"He won't show up on our outfit, that's sure," said Solo Sam.

"He'd better not," said Slaughter, viciously.

"On the contrary," said Gail. She was looking back toward Bean Buster's Heaven, and in her mind was a picture of that momentary, indefinable poignance in Marrs' eyes when she had mentioned the range and the chuck wagon—like the almost unbearable nostalgia of an exile upon mention of his homeland—before the sullen suspicion had lowered the heavy lids over it, hiding it. "On the contrary," she said. "Somehow, I think he will show up."

III

SICK, gray, ground-fog filled the hollows and crossed the higher flats in languid serpents when Gail peered out of the wagon at five the next morning. Already the cows were lowing disconsolately on their bed ground, and someone was puttering about the chuck wagon. She saw Windy's white head of hair. Slipping into a faded crinoline dress, she took the pins from her hair and started combing it out, looking down at Paul beside her in the bed they had made in the linchpin.

His face looked even weaker in sleep. The relaxation of facial muscles dropped his mouth open, allowing his undershot jaw to recede into the sallow folds of flesh forming his neck. It seemed to epitomize the weakness she had come to see in him so clearly these last years. She found a strange, vagrant thought in her head. How would Pothooks Marrs breathe in his sleep?

It almost made her laugh. What a crazy thing to think. She tossed her taffy hair, sighed deeply, climbed out over the tail gate, and walked through the damp grass to the chuck wagon.

"Thought I'd get a few things ready for you," Windy told her. "Fires lit. Dutch ovens are hot. This ain't going to be no picnic, Miss Gail, trying to cook for them ranahans."

"I'm sure they won't dump me in the river if I burn the steak," she said. "Anyway, it's just till I can hunt up a cook. Did you get someone to cut out a steer for meat?"

"The Caverango Kid is saddling up," said Windy, disgustedly. "He's so eager to graduate off the cavvyard he'd rope a locomotive if you asked him."

"How many times have you told me you started by wrangling horses for the Bib Skillet?" she chided him.

Windy shrugged, making unintelligible noises that moved his Adam's apple up and down in his scrawny neck. Then the voice of Don Vargas floated around the chuck wagon.

"Now why don't you take my advice and use this rawhide reata, Kid. Look how supple she is. So narrow the wind don't affect her at all. You want to be a good roper, don't you? Only the best use rawhide."

"And when twelve hundred pounds of beef hits the other end, the rawhide comes apart like hot molasses," said the Kid.

"Nothing breaks if you dally," said Don Vargas in a hurt tone.

"They wouldn't let me back in Texas if they found me taking turns around my horn."

"Sacramento," exploded Don Vargas.

"You Tejanos think the only way to rope is to tie it so hard on your horn a herd of buffalo couldn't pull it off. What happens if the bull bounces back up and goes for you? I've seen more than one tie-hard man gored to death because he couldn't let go his rope quick enough."

The Kid must have been tugging at his latigo, because the words came out in a series of grunts. "Any roper bad enough to let that happen deserves whatever he gets."

"Buey, buey," spat Don Vargas. "Just wait a minute. I'm going out with you right now and prove how much better a rawhide reata is than your stupid sisal clothes line. You don't know what roping is till you've seen a real Mexican vaquero toss a hide string."

"Doesn't the Don ever give up?" said Gail, dumping a whole pound package of triple X into the coffee pot.

Windy emitted a snorting laugh. "He's been telling me how superior those Mexican cactus tree saddles is to our Porter rigs all the way from Austin. Last rain we came through got his tree so wet that cactus wood turned to pulp and his whole saddle just sort of melted out from beneath him while he was sitting right in it. I never saw a man look so—so—" Windy broke off, looking past her, and that Adam's apple began to bob up and down, and she knew what was coming out—"well, eat all my blackstrap, if we ain't got a cook!"

Gail turned to see Pothooks Marrs riding up out of the river bottoms. It was an old whey-bellied mare he rode, but there was a cattle brand on its right hip, and it still tried to pick up its feet like it had cut a pretty thin biscuit in its prime. He had on an old canvas mackinaw with his hands stuffed in his pockets, and a disreputable flat-topped horse thief hat jammed down so low on his head it almost hid his eyes. The bridle reins were tied and slung on the horn, and he didn't even bother taking his hands from his pockets when he dismounted. Gail knew the animal had been a roper then, for it halted sharply as soon as Marrs swung his right leg over the cantle to step off. On the ground he turned and unlashed a warbag from behind the battered old Porter saddle, and without a word, walked over to the chuck wagon, and heaved the bag through the pucker in front. Then he came back and faced Gail.

"I was drawing down fifty a month at the Bean Buster's," he said.

"A hundred dollars is a lot for a cook," she said. "But I gave you my word. A couple of the boys will be in with a steer for steaks in a few minutes. I've got the triple X boiling."

THEIR talking had finally roused others in the crew. Solo Sam thrust his long, sleepy face over the lip of his sougan, and when he saw who it was, let out a wild rebel yell that brought the others bouncing out of their blankets and grabbing for guns. They crowded around Marrs, clapping him on the back and laughing like a bunch of schoolboys. He took it all indifferently, shoving them off like a patient dog tolerating a bunch of children, but they would not leave him alone, and at last, Gail saw a flitting smile part his lips, revealing startling white teeth beneath that little mustache. Then, abruptly, all the good-natured raillery ceased. Bob Slaughter had appeared.

He must have been down at the river, sousing his head, for his long yellow hair was streaming down his face. He shoved it back with an impatient palm, striding in that long-legged way through the men toward Marrs. Gail drew in a sharp breath, stepping toward him, but he reached Marrs before she could stop him.

"You got a lot of gall coming out here after yesterday," he told Marrs.

"You take it too personally," said Marrs. "You should know better than to rile a cook. Miss Butler's hired me, Slaughter, and I'll tell you right now, boss or no boss, the same thing will happen again any time you poke your nose in my kitchen. I'll tend to my cooking and you tend to your cows and everybody'll be happy."

Slaughter's grin flattened his lips against his teeth in a cold, mirthless way. "The other cooks had the same ideas, Marrs. That's why I'm not going to bother to take it personally. You'll dig your own grave. I don't think you'll measure up to this crews' standards for a biscuit shooter. They may welcome you like a long lost brother now, but that's because they haven't eaten decent food in a week. Wait till we run

into a sandstorm and you get your pie full of gravel. It isn't the same as cooking inside a nice dry room. Wait till it rains too hard for fires and they have to eat jerky and dried apples three or four days straight. You'll wish to hell you were back in Dallas at a tenth the salary you're getting now. I'll give you two weeks, Marrs. And that's stretching wet rawhide."

Before Marrs could answer, a shout caused them to turn westward. The Caverango Kid and Don Vargas were hazing a big steer the color of mulberries away from the fringe of the herd and toward the chuck wagon. The Kid was swinging his sisal rope around his head.

"I told you Tejanos didn't know how to rope," bawled the Mexican. "You'll scare every cow off the bed ground swinging that community loop on top, Kid. Watch a real roper."

"Let's not have any rodeo," Marrs shouted at them. "Just set the steer down here and leave your fancy work for the grandstand."

"Viva," cried Don Vargas, and made his bid in an underhanded dab that flirted the light, supple rawhide out toward the steer's forelegs. But the steer veered and put its head into the loop.

"Is that the way they do it in Mexico?" jeered Windy.

Crestfallen, Don Vargas spurred his horse in to get slack, but Marrs called to him in an angry voice. "Leave it on his neck. I don't care how you throw him, just get him down. Heel him, Kid, and stretch him out."

With an eager whoop, the Kid raced in at the rear of the bull, tossing for the kicking hind legs. Windy held his nose at this poor show. Any Texan considered it beneath him to team rope a steer. Just as the Caverango Kid made his throw, the steer wheeled sharply. This caused its full weight to hit the end of Don Vargas' rope anew.

There was the squeal of hot rawhide as the dallies slid on the Mexican's flat-topped horn. But even this did not provide enough give. The pop was sharp as a gunshot, and the steer somersaulted with the broken end of the rawhide rope flaying empty air.

"Let him go, Kid," shouted Solo Sam, "you'll—"

But the Kid's loop was already out, catching those heels as they came up from the somersault. He had a short rope and it was tied hard and he was still running in the direction he had turned when he expected Don Vargas' rope to be on the other end. He tried to rein away so the weight wouldn't hit the end of his rope with the horse still broadside. The horse changed leads to wheel, and a thousand pounds of beef hit the end of the rope right there, with the horse completely off-balance. Gail heard the sick sound Windy made as all four feet went from beneath the horse.

WITH a scared shout, the Kid tried to kick free of his stirrups. His left leg was still beneath the horse when it hit, though. With slack in the rope, the dazed bull scrambled free of the loop and lunged to its feet. The frightened, whinneying horse did the same thing. Then Gail saw why the Kid hadn't gotten that other leg free. His heel had broken off and his foot had slipped through the stirrup.

"Get him," she screamed, running toward the horse, "get him somebody, he'll drag—"

This only frightened the horse more, and it spun and bolted in the direction of the wagons. The other men all started going after it, but it was the cook's movement which caught Gail's attention. She did not think she had ever seen a man move so fast. Instead of going directly after the horse, Marrs spun and ran in quick, stabbing little steps to the sougans scattered over the grounds. Most of the men used their own saddles for pillows, and he bent over, without lessening his driving run, to rip a rope off one of the rigs. His run had quartered him away from the animal so that he was now out at one side of it, while the other men were still bunched directly in behind the beast. But it was obvious they could never catch it, and Pata Pala had already veered off to get a horse.

The running animal had almost reached the chuck wagon, dragging the Kid, his head banging from side to side on the ground, his arms flailing—and Gail knew the boy would be killed if the horse ever got past the wagon, with the whole prairie

to run in. It was only Marrs, in that last moment, who held the Kid's life in his hands.

He did it casually, with no sense of crisis to the thing. Still running, he flirted the loop out and made the toss in an underhanded swipe that came straight out of the Texas brush.

"Oh, no," sobbed Gail, because the horse was running to go behind the chuck wagon, and by the time that rope reached him, there would be no more than a foot between the hind wheel and the front of the horse, and the loop was too big to go in front of the animal without fouling up on the wheel. Gail stopped running, sinking to one knee in hopeless despair as that swinging loop sped after the horse. Then, though she could not really believe it, she realized that the loop was growing smaller as it flew, the hondo was sliding down the rope even as Marrs paid it out. At the finish, it was no bigger than the top of a Stetson.

It still would have struck the wheel, but in the last instant, Marrs flirted his downpointed hand upward, and the loop stood on end, and went between horse and wagon wheel like a rolling hoop. The horse put his forefeet right into it. Marrs wheeled away with the rope across one hip, and his whole body jerked as the animal went down. Gail still remained on that one knee, dazed, unable to believe it possible. The other men had run up, and Solo Sam sat on the horse's head while Windy disentangled the Kid's foot. Blood covered the boy's face, but Gail got a pail of water from the butt and one of the clean dishrags, washing it away, and saw that the cuts were not bad. He was not completely unconscious, and when he had recovered somewhat from his daze, he just sat there staring up at Marrs, holding his head in his hands.

"I didn't get it all," he muttered. "I only know there wasn't enough room between the wagon and that horse to stick a barlow knife in. I didn't even look for it to come from you. How did you get a rope on him?"

Marrs shrugged. "Never had any more room than that down—"

He caught himself up, and Gail looked at him. "Down where, Pothooks?"

She saw that sullen withdrawal lower the heavy sensuous lids over his dark eyes till they were barely visible. "Never mind."

"But we will mind," said Slaughter, something mocking to the laughing tone of his voice. "Looks like brush country roping to me. Is that what you mean, Marrs? Down in the brush. What are you doing so far north—"

"I said, never mind," Marrs told him in a sharp, guttural tone.

"Reminds me of the time Pecos Bill lost his horse across the river," chuckled Windy. "It was spring flood and bank full and too dangerous for him to swim, but he was afraid the animal would wander off over there if he didn't stake him. So he tied six ropes together till he had about three hundred and fifty feet of line, and—"

"Put your jaw in a sling, you're liable to step on it," growled Pata Pala.

"If somebody don't get me that steer," said Marrs, "all you'll eat for breakfast is whistle berries and Texas butter, and not much of that."

SOLO SAM got a rope and walked out toward the remuda for his horse. Marrs went around to the fires and began stirring them up. Gail made sure the boy was all right, getting some kerosene and lard from the drawer behind the chuck wagon to put on those cuts and bruises. Sam brought in his pied bronc and slung a kak on and then went out after the blue steer again. While he and Windy were throwing and killing and butchering it, Gail watched Marrs make his bread. She found her eyes on the casual competence of those square, hairy, rope-scarred hands again, as he rolled the dough out for lightbread, shaping it in pans and slipping the pans into a Dutch oven. The lid of the oven had been previously heated, and on the top of it, he put several more shovels full of coal. Windy brought him a hind quarter of the yearling, and Marrs cut many thin steaks about the size of his palm from it. These he rolled in the flour left from the breadmaking, and dropped into another Dutch oven, which already held about three inches of crackling, red-hot lard. When these steaks were finished, Gail got three or four of them, covered

with crisp, delicious brown batter, for herself and Paul, and putting tin cups of coffee and pan bread on the tray, carried it to him. He was awake and stirring restlessly.

"It's about time you got here," he said. "What's held you up? This bread is soggy."

"It was too dry yesterday," she told him. "You're getting peevish in the wagon, Paul. You haven't any fever today. Why don't you get out a little bit?"

"And catch my death of cold," he said. "You know I'm not well yet, Gail. Why do you always prod me to get out?" The whites of his eyes had a yellowish tinge in the gloom, sliding up to her. "Maybe you want me to get sick, is that it?"

"Oh, stop it, Paul—"

"You and Slaughter must be having a good time, out riding the herd with him every day, going into town—"

"I had to go into town. We needed a new cook."

"And at Corsicana you needed some flour," he said. "I know, Gail, I know, a sick man doesn't please you very much, does he; a nice, healthy young woman like you needs a hand with some vinegar in his blood—"

"Paul, will you stop it," she said. "It's not that and you know it."

"What is it, then?" He studied her narrowly. "You'd do it if I was well anyway. Is that it?"

"Do what?" she said thinly.

He grimaced at the coffee. "You said a new cook? More like a crazy wagon belly cheater with this sheep dip."

"It's the best coffee you've had in months and you know it."

"How ardent you are in his defense," he murmured. "Perhaps the cook is handsome too."

"Paul, will you stop it, please." She turned away, on the verge of tears. "Why does it have to be like this? All the time. You're getting morbid in here, Paul. Won't you please get out, just a little bit?"

"No, will you stop asking me that, no!" He swept his food off the tray with a vicious motion, dropping heavily back into the blankets. "Take it out. It's foul. Get me something decent to eat."

She remained on her knees, staring dully at him. Then she started gathering it up.

She made no sound, but she could not stop the tears from gathering in her eyes. She tried to turn her face away before he saw the first one across her cheek. But he must have caught it. She heard him stirring at her side, and tensed for another tirade. Instead, she felt his hand on her arm, turning her around, and she was pulled against him.

"Gail, honey, I'm sorry, forgive me, Gail?" His hands were moulding her shoulder, her neck, caressing her hair tenderly, deftly. "I don't know what makes me like this. It is the confinement, I guess. Forgive me. I'm a fool."

Her face was against his chest, where she had found such comfort before, after their battles. But now she could gain no assurance from his contrition. The hands were too deft, stroking her head. It had happened too many times before.

"Why do we have to be this way, Paul?" she said in a choked, tortured whisper. "We never used to quarrel."

"I don't know, Gail," he said. "It's my fault. This sickness. This worrying over the Pickle Bar. Forgive me, honey."

She drew a heavy, resigned breath. "Yes, Paul."

He emitted a small laugh, settling back. "That's better. No reason for us to quarrel. Tell me about the new cook."

"Not much to tell." She started gathering the stuff up once more. "He's rather reserved. He's a good roper."

"Roper?"

"Yes." She looked up, staring blankly at the hoops of the wagon, as it was brought to her mind again. "In fact, Paul, he's probably the best roper I've ever seen. Did you ever see a man throw a hooley ann clear to the end of a rope, Paul?"

He shrugged. "That isn't so rare. Any top hand can do it. I've seen Waco pull it in a corral."

"But not put a mangana in it at the same time," she said. "If Waco can hit a mangana it's got to be a community loop at half that distance, and even then he misses one out of two. But Pothooks was throwing a hooley ann, Paul, the loop wasn't any bigger than the crown of your hat when it hit the end of that rope, and

he stood it on end in the neatest mangana you ever saw. That horse stepped right into it."

Paul let out a rueful laugh. "All right, all right, don't get so excited about it. So he's a grandstander."

"No," she said. "It couldn't have been done any other way. He saved the Kid's life." She turned to him, a plate in her hand. "Paul, he isn't a fairgrounder. He isn't the type. He didn't want to do that. I saw it in him, just that instant before he went for the rope, just a moment there, when he had to choose between revealing how good he was with a clothesline or letting the Kid die."

Paul was interested now, frowning at her. "You mean he's that good?"

"I told you, Paul," she said. "I never saw anything like it. A man like that doesn't come along often. Pothooks Marrs. Does the name mean anything to you? Pretty far back, probably. Those rope marks on his hands were old. Ten, fifteen years. Down in the brush country. A short, heavy-set man with eyes like a sulking bull and a little black mustache and very white teeth."

"Pothooks Marrs," Paul said it speculatively, sucking in his lower lip. He shook his head faintly. "No. It doesn't do anything to me. You mean he has a past?"

"All the signs point that way," she said.

He shrugged again. "Well, so what, half the men you run into along the trail have a past. I think Solo Sam is riding from something. Slaughter himself has buried a lot of dirty bones in his time."

"But not like this," she said. "Not so afraid of revealing themselves that they'd take another job. That would be the worst kind of torture for a man with cattle in his blood. Maybe this isn't his real name. Can't you think of someone, Paul? Someone so good at his trade he can't work at it for fear his skill would mark him."

"They don't come that good very often, Gail. You know it. Quite a few men dropped out of sight down San Antonio way during that time. Ten years ago? You know how rough it was. Gardin Barrett was awfully good on the rope. But he was a big lanky man." He halted so sharply she bent toward him. "M," he said. "Marrs." His eyes narrowed. "Lee M. Benton. Could that be it? Nobody ever did know what the M was for." He shook his head abruptly. "No. It couldn't be."

"Who was Lee M. Benton?" she said.

"Never mind. It couldn't be him."

"Who was he?" she insisted.

"I told you never mind," he snarled. "You wouldn't want to know."

"Paul." She could not help the ominous little catch in her voice. "Why wouldn't I want to know?"

IV

A THOUSAND three and four-year-olds with the elongated Pickle Bar on their gaunt, dusty rumps strung out up the bottomland of the Trinity toward Denison and Colbert's Ferry and Fort Sill and Dodge. The dust they raised formed a haze that sometimes obscured the sun, and their hoarse bawling formed a constant undertone to the intermittent shout for a drag rider or a pointer. On the tail end, a ghostly, rocking figure in the dust, rode Solo Sam, singing *That Dad Blame Boss* in his dubious baritone.

"I'll get me a new slicker
And some Coffeyville boots
Buy a quart of good red likker,
And quit this old galoot . . ."

At the chuck wagon, Pothooks had dumped the remaining hot water in the wreck pan full of dirty tin plates and cups, and was washing them. For a moment, the sounds of cattle and the dust and that off-key song lifted him out of his brooding, somber mood. He stared out across the dim, bobbing, long-horned heads, and took a deep, careful breath, like a man would take a deep draught of good liquor, savoring it. How long was it since he had been a part of this? He didn't like to recall. It was like a lost space in his life, a vacuum. It was strange how the life remained in a man's blood. He had heard an old sailor try to explain the same thing about the sea once. If it got hold of you, there was no forgetting it, there was no denying the strength of its pull. Only someone who belonged could understand. It was why he had come,

when Gail made that offer. He had resisted the pull so long, now, and could not resist it any longer. He had thought he would be safe. The rest was so far behind. And then, the first horse in the corral, that kid had to go and make him throw a rope. He had seen the look on Gail's face. Something was in her mind already. He looked up as the whinny of a high stepping horse heralded the approach of the Kid, herding the cavvyard of spare animals by. He reined his own bronc in, greeting Marrs.

"How's the head?" asked the cook, without smiling.

"Fine, thanks to you," grinned the Kid. His horse pirouetted around, but the boy reined him back to look at Marrs once more, a strange, indefinable expression shining in his eyes. Then he spurred off after the remuda. Guy Bedar came around from the front of the chuck wagon, leading a horse. The earth caked on its fetlocks looked like drying bottom mud.

"If Slaughter's right about you still having to make your peace with the crew, there's your first recruit," said Bedar, leaning against a wheel to roll himself a cigarette. He chuckled throatily. "It's funny about a kid, isn't it? First off, Slaughter was a little tin god. He couldn't do wrong. Caverango was going to be a trail boss and woo every filly from Doan's Crossing north and take Dodge apart with his bare hands at the end of every drive. He was bouncing around too much to get a good look at that job of roping you did, but they've all been feeding him full of it. He was out there this morning trying to put a mangana in a hooley ann."

"He'll get over it," said Marrs heavily.

"You better hope not," said Bedar. "Come a time when you're going to need every friend you got in this outfit. And they don't exactly number in the thousands right now."

Bent over the wreck pan, Marrs looked up abruptly. "What the hell are you hanging around for?"

"Slaughter told me to pilot you over the rough country northward," said Bedar. He took a deep drag on the cigarette, glanced over toward the linchpin. There was no sign of Gail, and he dropped the smoke, grinding it out with a heel. "Someone else also told me something. There's a man down in the brakes that would like to see you."

"He wants to see me he can come up here," said Marrs, piling dishes into the chuck box.

"On the contrary," said Bedar. "You'd better go down there . . . Lee."

MARRS whirled so sharply it jerked a breath from him in a hoarse grunt. The blood had receded from his cheeks, leaving them pale. His nostrils fluttered faintly, like a spooked horse. When he spoke, it was barely audible.

"Bedar!" he said, frowning, searching the man's face.

The man laughed, tossing his head. "Oh, don't go hunting your backtrails for me. I wasn't there. First time I laid eyes on you was this morning. But when I told Rickett about that roping, he knew who it was right away."

"Rickett!"

"Yeah," said Bedar. "Down in the brakes."

Marrs walked around to the front of the wagon, climbing on a wheel to reach behind the seat for his warbag. From this he extracted a big Whitneyville Walker with most of the blueing worn off its long barrel. He thrust it in his belt right behind the buckle. Then he slung the ancient, rawhide-laced kak on his whey-bellied mare and unhitched her from the wagon, walking her back to where Moore stood.

"Let's go," he said doggedly.

The mud along the bottoms had that same waxen gloss to it as the muck in the streets of Dallas. The animals sank to their fetlocks in some places, and every time they stopped, the mud relinquished their hooves with sucking, chortling reluctance. Rickett was waiting in a bunch of scruboak. It was the same facile mouth, thought Rickett, a little heavier about the jowls, the same eyes, pouched a little deeper by dissipation. Gray was beginning to tinge his temples. He bent forward slightly, to stare at Marrs, a vague wonder filling his eyes.

"I'd expected a little change," he said, in a low voice. "Not this much. I don't think I'd recognize you if I saw you on the street, Lee."

"What do you want?" said Pothooks, sullenly.

"Now don't be like that," said Rickett. "This is Thibodaux, Lee."

"Pothooks," corrected Marrs, doggedly. He needed but one glance to read most of the story in the dark man with queued hair and the slender, pendant hands. "I asked you what you wanted, Rickett."

"I want to tell you about Ellsworth," said Rickett.

"You don't have to," said Marrs. "With the quarantine law extended west of town, it's easy enough to see Ellsworth is through as a cattle terminus. Is that who you're working for now, Rickett? All the boys on South Main. I do imagine it pays more than inspecting brands for the old Refugio Association."

A subtle alteration darkened those guileless blue eyes momentarily. Then Rickett shrugged. "It does at that. A lot of money in gambling, Lee-ah, pardon me, Pothooks. That is, if you're on the right side of the table. The interests I represent hate to lose that money. They will if the cattle don't hit Ellsworth this year. I tried to explain it to Slaughter. I tried to show him how a man of his calibre formed a greater example than he realized along the trail. If he busted through to Ellsworth, the others would follow. On the other hand, Dodge City isn't established yet, and if he turned off on a new route in that direction, and a whole string of appalling accidents happened, preventing him from getting through, it would cause a lot of them to go to Ellsworth anyway. He's turning off toward Dodge at the Red. Those accidents are going to start happening right soon. You're going to cause a lot of them. You always were good at the head of a herd, Pothooks. The Washita's flooding hell over her banks. She's ripe for you to help Bedar get that herd of Pickle Bar's in a mill and drown as many as you can. Maybe that'll make Slaughter believe we mean what we say. If it don't, we have a lot more cards up our sleeve."

"You just dropped this one out," said Marrs. "I told you it was no go."

"Did it ever strike you," said Rickett blandly, "how many men would like to see you dead?"

There was no sound for a moment after that. They stared at each other without speaking. A horse snorted dismally. Finally Rickett laughed harshly.

"I guess you know that about as well as anyone," he said. "I guess it's why you stayed so low after you got out of jail. They didn't think they were dealing with such a dangerous man when they chose you, did they? They thought you were just a simple little maverick to hang a bell on."

Marrs made a spasmodic, impatient move to one side, as if to wheel his horse, but Rickett held up his hand. "That's just what I mean, Pothooks. Were you planning on leaving the Pickle Bar now? How useless it would be to try and skip again. All I'd have to do is drop the word that I'd seen Lee Marrs Benton. You couldn't change your appearance so radically again. Age did most of it for you. And there's hardly a place you could run that they wouldn't be.

"Boa Snyder and Curt Young are up in Montana now. Boa has the biggest outfit in the Territory, runs a crew of a hundred men. If he heard you were back, and what you looked like, and what you were doing, you couldn't put your foot north of the Platte without him finding you. The Melbourne brothers are big shippers in Frisco, too. And Dee Nation sits a fancy saddle in Webb County politics—a sheriff and a dozen town marshals to work for him, even a few Rangers to put on your track if he really tried hard."

MARRS stared at him another long space, the smoldering fire in his eyes growing brighter and brighter, and then, with a vicious jerk, he necked the mare in a wheeling turn. Rickett took one step forward, grabbing her bit before she could get all the way around.

"Hold up, Pothooks," he said. "I want your word on it. You're staying with the Pickle Bar. You know how useless it would be to run. And you're doing what I ask, all along."

"I am not!" It left Marrs in an explosive shout. He let Rickett's pull on the bit spin the mare back, and leaned out of the saddle toward the man, saying it in a guttural, shaken way. "I didn't come back looking for any blood, Rickett. I'm not bitter and I don't want revenge. I just want

to be left alone. And by God, if you don't leave me alone, I'll kill you."

"He said he'd kill me, Thibodaux," said Rickett.

"C'est extraordinaire," murmured the Creole.

"Let go, Rickett!" shouted Marrs.

"Don't get so high-handed," said Rickett, yanking the rearing mare back down. "You're in no position—"

"I said let me go," roared Marrs, once more, necking the mare this time so hard that she spun in against Rickett, and booting her in the kidneys at the same time. She bolted forward, jerking Rickett off-balance, and bringing him within range of Marrs' boot as he jerked his foot from the stirrup and lashed out at Rickett. It caught Rickett in the shoulder, tearing his grip off the bit, and the forward plunge of the horse spun him around on its barrel, back against Marrs' leg. Marrs kicked him away.

"Get him," shouted Rickett, trying to keep from falling into the mud.

With the mare still bolting forward, Marrs saw what Thibodaux meant to do, and knew he was in no position to meet it with his own gun. He laid the reins on the right side of the mare's neck with a vicious jerk, and the horse veered sharply to the left, right at Thibodaux. The Creole had to forget about his gun and take a dive aside to keep from being struck by the charging beast.

Guy Bedar's cowpony must have had a takeoff like a jackrabbit, because it lunged into Marrs' vision on his right side, head lifted high with the pain of the rider's big Petneckey spurs raking its flanks. It caught the mare a few feet beyond where Thibodaux had left it, and Bedar threw himself bodily off his horse at Marrs.

The man's weight carried Marrs off his mare, and they fell heavily into the mud. Marrs struck first, with Bedar's weight coming fully upon him to knock the breath out.

Still, he managed to hook an arm about the man's neck and roll over on top. Then all that latent, smoldering violence fulfilled itself in the savage fist Marrs smashed in the man's face. Bedar made a sick sound, and went limp.

Marrs started getting onto his feet, but he was faced in such a direction that he caught a dim, blurred glimpse of Thibodaux rising from where he had dived into the mud, and of the man's intent. Knees still bent, Marrs whirled toward the Creole, yanking at the Walker Colt in his belt at the same time.

"Thibodaux," shouted Rickett. "Hold it," and Marrs stopped his own draw with the tip of the Colt's barrel still through his belt. What would have happened if he had pulled it on out was a certainty. Both men had started diving for iron at the same moment, but Thibodaux's gun had cleared its holster before Marrs even touched the handle of his Walker. Marrs would have finished the draw anyway, if Rickett hadn't shouted. But the chance that Thibodaux would obey Rickett was better than bucking certain death by going through with his draw.

Carefully, Marrs straightened up, shoving the Colt slowly back into his belt. Thibodaux stood holding his gun on Marrs with no expression in his sloe eyes. Rickett got up out of the mud, taking a futile swipe at the muck on his pants.

"Just had them cleaned, too, damn you," he said, mildly. Then he looked up, as if seeing the scene in its entirety for the first time. "How do you like my boy? Did you ever see anybody so fast with a smoke pole?"

He paused, as if expecting an answer. When Marrs made no sound, Rickett spoke to the Creole without looking in his direction. "You can put it away now, Thibodaux. I don't think the man is going to antagonize us any more. I think he knows what a tight chute he's in. I think he'll go back to the Pickle Bar and stay right there, in a prime position to do whatever we want, whenever we want. Don't you, Thibodaux?"

"Whatever we want," said Thibodaux.

NORTHWARD, clouds formed tiers on the horizon, darkening with the threat of rain, as somber as the mood that filled Pothooks Marrs as he made his way back to the chuck wagon. A few hundred feet from where he had left Rickett and the others something caught his eye. It was a bit of red cloth caught on a bush, and

beneath it, the mud was trampled as if a horse had stood there for some time. Bending to scan the ground, he saw footprints leading away from the bush back in the direction from which he had come. It was all fresh sign, and could not logically come from any of the men he had seen. He picked the red patch off the bush, feeling its texture. Woolen. He stuffed it absently into a pocket and rode on.

In his mind, mostly, were Rickett's words. *There's hardly a place you could run that they wouldn't be.* For a moment, the certainty of that filled him with a tenuous, insidious fear. How well Rickett had read him. He *had* meant to skip the Pickle Bar, to get out, to run. The impulse of it had leaped into his mind the first time Bedar had mentioned Rickett's name, there at the chuck wagon. But now, Rickett's words only underlined the futility of that. Marrs shook his head in a dogged way, eyes squinted with the terrible frustrated feeling twisting him up inside. He just couldn't see himself drowning those Pickle Bar cows. Yet, if he didn't, Rickett could drop that word, and the world would not be big enough to hide Pothooks Marrs.

Still filled with the bitter confusion, he hitched his mare behind the chuck wagon. He saw that the linchpin had already left. He had come up on the blind side of his own outfit, and only when he started around the other side toward the front did he see the immense, kettle-gutted man standing by a hairy black cutting horse. Marrs stopped like a snubbed bronc, sick with the shock of it. Kettle Corey turned toward him, wiping perspiration off his beefy face with a soggy, grimy bandanna. His little blue eyes were totally incongruous with the gross carnality of the rest of him.

Like icy blue pools, almost hidden by the veined pouches of his eyelids, they held the chill lucidity of the patient, keen, incisive mind in that monstrous, ugly head. It was what Marrs had remembered most.

"You must be the new cook," said Kettle. "I got blotto in Dallas. Woke up in that alley behind the Oxbow about an hour ago. Slaughter will have my hide for it, I guess." He chuckled ruefully, shrugging. "How about a cup of triple X before I catch up with the herd?" All the time, he had been scrutinizing Marrs closely with those little eyes. "What's your name, coosie?"

"They call me Pothooks," said Marrs.

The fat man's chuckle shook his wattles. "Good name for a cook." A deep furrow dug into the flesh between his eyes, and he bent toward Marrs. "Did you ever spoil the grub for the Double Bit outfit?"

What are you doing, damn you, thought Marrs, *cat and mouse?* "Never got up to the Panhandle," he said, dipping a tin cup into the kettle of coffee.

"I don't know," said Kettle, studying him. "You look familiar."

Handing the cup to the man, it struck Marrs for the first time that Kettle was allowing the top of his long underwear to suffice for a shirt. Out of the red wool, just about his belt, on one side, a patch about the size of a man's thumb had been torn.

Marrs' neck pulled into his shoulders slightly, and he started hitching up the horses.

"A quiet man," observed Kettle, finishing the coffee. "I like quiet men." He set the cup down, turning to hoist himself aboard his hairy animal. The rig creaked so loudly Marrs thought it would come apart, and Kettle almost pulled the whole saddle around beneath the horse before he finally got his weight settled. He looked down at the cook, a strange, sad expression in his sweating face. "Did it ever strike you," he said, "as short as a man's life really is, how long it can be, sometimes?" He reined his horse away to leave. "Sometimes too long."

Marrs watched him trot off into the lowlands, then kick the animal into a heavy canter. It was unbelievable that Kettle had failed to recognize him. He kicked out the fire, closed the tailgate, which formed the chuckbox lid, and climbed into the seat. Guy Bedar came walking his horse up out of the bottoms, and about thirty feet away, jerked his head northward, indicating he would scout out a decent trail for the wagon to follow. The first big drops of rain started plunking into the canvas top of the wagon as Marrs shook the reins out. He reached for his mackinaw and hat and hunched down to ride the wet spell out.

THEY rounded the herd and picked a spot in some blackjack timber for lunch. It took Marrs fifteen minutes to find dry wood, finally digging out some dead cottonwood down by a wash. He tried to set up tarps for flies to cover the fires, but a wind had come up, and whipped the rain in under these anyway. Wet through to the skin, slopping around in the mud, fighting wind and rain, he was in an unspeakable mood when the riders started to come in. They were pushing the herd on by and arriving for lunch two and three at a time. He could not keep enough fires going to keep the coffee warm and cook the meat and bread, too. A horse got loose and kicked the lid off a dutch oven, and by the time Slaughter and Solo Sam came in, they had soggy, fallen bread, and cold coffee and burned steaks.

"What the hell," growled Sam, "we don't ask it to taste like cream puffs, but you could at least have it hot."

"You want it hot, you build me the fires," growled Marrs.

Slaughter swallowed his cold coffee without saying a word, but there was a faint, wise smirk on his face that Marrs had a great desire to wipe off with a dishpan. When Gail came back with the tray from their wagon, it looked as if she had been crying. She set it down, and left hurriedly, and he saw that little of the food had been eaten. It began to thunder, and all hands had to hurry back to the herd to keep it traveling quietly. It was probably the only thing that prevented a clash between Marrs and the grumbling men.

There was a green rawhide stretched beneath the chuck wagon they called the possum belly, and into this, Marrs dumped as much of the dry cottonwood as it would carry. Then he packed up and started another wet drive. The rain had increased by now and the first big creek they reached was flooded. Dripping wet, cursing as only a disgruntled cook could curse, Marrs had to stop and cut down a couple of young trees, lashing them to either side of the wagon. Bedar was not with him now, for they needed every hand on the herd, and alone, he started to ford the stream down a dugway hollowed out by the cattle.

When it became too deep to roll, the logs lashed on the sides of the bed floated the wagon. He made it to the far bank all right but the current swept the stern end of the wagon into the bank, smashing up the off-wheel. He could not repair it, and in the driving rain, had to lash one of those slim logs slantwise along the bed to form a drag. This slowed him down to a snail's pace, and it was already dark by the time he reached the bed ground. The cattle were shifting mournfully in the rain, and the dull glint of a yellow slicker guided Marrs to the camp spot. A lantern burning within the covering of the linchpin gave it a sick, saffron glow in the dark. The men stood in a group beneath the blackjack timber, huddled into their slickers. There was something in their shifting, nervous silence that bothered him as he climbed off the wagon.

"What made you so damn late?" said Pata Pala.

"It was running so easy on all four wheels I took the right rear off to make it feel more like home," said Marrs, sarcastically. "I'm sure obliged to all of you for stirring me up a fire, too."

"Don't get oily," said Slaughter. "Hurry up and throw that boggy top together."

"Boggy top?" Marrs dragged some of the cottonwood from the possum belly, saw that it was saturated. "There ain't going to be no pie tonight. You'll be lucky if you get anything, the way this wood is."

"No boggy top," said Windy. "Why, that reminds me of the time Pecos Bill was out on roundup and the cook didn't have no pie for him. Pecos was so mad he took his clothes line and—"

"Shut up and start hunting for some dry squaw wood," growled Marrs, moving over to a bank where he began kicking the earth down in search for some buried buffalo chips.

"Sure," said the Caverango Kid, "the least we can do is help him."

"You tend to your remuda," Slaughter told him.

"But—"

"Kid," said Slaughter, "if you don't get out there and ride herd on that cavvyard till we get supper, I'll put you to holding cows all night long without your slicker." The boy left reluctantly, glancing in a

strange way at Marrs. The cook could see them all watching him, now, and sensed the rising issue. None of them made a move to aid as he finally located some dry buffalo chips and carried them over in his hat, digging out a hole beneath the bed of the wagon. He had to rip off the possum belly and throw the wood out to give him height enough for the fire.

Soaked to the skin, hands muddy and slippery, he was thoroughly maddened by the time he got the fire lit. He piled the cottonwood about the feeble blaze in an effort to dry it. He found that the butchered yearling had come off its gaunch hooks within the wagon and the quarters and ribs were half-buried in the mud and debris he had collected fording the river. He tried to clean them off, but the muck was so impregnated in the meat he had to give this up. It was hog side, then, and the hell with them.

"Oh, no," said Waco Garrett, when he saw it. "I ate so much of that chuck wagon chicken with the last belly cheater I started grunting in my sleep and was afraid of looking around behind me for fear I'd sprouted a curly tail."

"And hot rocks, too," growled Guy Bedar when Marrs got out the biscuit makings. "That sure don't sound like boggy top to me."

Marrs wheeled from the chuck box. "Listen," he told them. "One more word and I'm going to cut my wolf loose. You're getting hogside and sinkers tonight and forgetting the rest till next sunshine. Now shut up and man at the pot." Nobody made a move. "Man at the pot!" roared Marrs, "or I'll throw it in your face."

Kettle Cory moved out of the shadows. Slaughter's face turned toward him. Those lucid blue eyes gleamed like a cat's in the dark, meeting Slaughter's gaze. Then they swung to Marrs, filled with a strange expression, and Kettle came on out and got a handful of tin cups and began to dip the coffee out of the pot beneath the chuck wagon, handing out the full cups.

They did not seem as hurried to take them as a crew that hungry should. Marrs knew what was happening, now. He wondered if it had come as a tacit agreement among them to choose this time for a test, or whether someone had instigated it. He did not believe Slaughter would approach them directly. As irritable and miserable as they were, it was a simple thing to shape their attitude with a few incidents.

TURNING back to the chuck box, Marrs saw that wind had blown the canvas fly away, and the biscuits were full of water. With a bitter curse, he tossed them into a Dutch oven anyway. He had to move the coffee pot off the only fire in order to cook the bread. When the biscuits and sowbelly were done, Marrs rattled plates and forks down onto the shelf of the chuck box, stepping aside for them to get the utensils.

His glance dared anyone to say something out of line. Pata Pala was the first. After Marrs loaded his plate with sinkers and meat, the peglegged man dipped himself out another cup of coffee. He stood back, and Marrs noticed he did not start eating until the others had been served. Then Pata Pala took a swig of the coffee, his muddy, swarthy face twisting into a grimace.

"Cold coffee, soggy bread, and hog side fit for a sheepherder," he said, and dumped it on the ground. "I ain't eating this."

"I ain't either," added Waco Garrett, upturning his plate. "After a day like this a man deserves better. Boggy top and yearling steaks or nothing."

The others dumped their food into the mud, and Marrs stared at his bread and sowbelly slowly melting into chocolate ooze. "Pick up them plates and put 'em in the wreck pan," he said. "If that's the way you want it, you'll go without supper."

Pata Pala hooked his thumbs in the waistband of his levis and leaned back, spitting at his tin plate. "We ain't doing anything till you cook us some decent grub."

"You want some more grub, you cook it yourself," said Marrs.

"We dumped the other cook in the river for less than that," said Pata Pala.

"You ain't dumping this one in," Marrs told him.

"We are if you don't throw together some more chuck."

"The hell you are," said Marrs. He saw Solo Sam moving to get around behind him, and he whirled to grab for that sawed off

machete. Pata Pala launched himself in a dive at Marrs' legs, striking him at the knees. It carried Marrs back into the mud. Marrs hooked an arm about Pata Pala's neck, holding the man onto him and slugging him in the face. Then the arm was torn aside by someone else. He saw Don Vargas grabbing for his other arm, and writhed aside, lashing out with a leg at the Mexican. It caught Don Vargas in the knee, and he bent over with a howl.

"Let him go, let him go," shouted the Caverango Kid, running in to hook his hands in Pata Pala's broad black belt, trying to heave him off Marrs.

"Stay out of this, Kid," shouted Waco Garrett, tearing the boy's hands free and throwing him down in the mud. Then he wheeled back and lifted a boot. Marrs saw his intent and tried to get that free hand out of the way. But the spike heel caught it, pinning the hand down into the mud. Don Vargas had recovered now, and he caught the wrist while Waco held it down. Then Windy and Waco each caught a foot.

Overpowered, struggling, writhing, cursing fiendishly, Marrs was carried and dragged through the muddy grass down a dugway onto the flooded river bottoms. Here they held him while Solo Sam grabbed his hair and shoved his head underwater.

"Now," shouted Pata Pala, "are you going to cook us a decent meal?"

"The hell with you," sputtered Marrs, and jackknifed his right leg to straighten it out viciously in Windy's belly. The old man wheezed and doubled over, releasing the foot. This gave Marrs purchase against the ground, and he rolled over in their grasp, fighting like a wild animal. Sam caught his hair and shoved his head under again. Marrs was still breathing and sucked in a great lungful of water. This only made his struggles more frenzied. He felt an arm tear free and lashed out across his body at Pata Pala. He kept jackknifing the other leg, and his head jerked out of the river in time to hear Waco shouting.

". . . he's crazy, Pata, I can't hold him . . ."

"I'll hold him," said the peglegged man, and released his arm to hit him full in the face. It knocked Marrs' head back into the water. Stunned for that moment, he felt them grabbing at him again. Sam pulled his head out again.

"How about that grub?" shouted Pata Pala.

"The hell," gasped Marrs, struggling weakly.

They shoved him under again. He thought his whole being would explode with the awesome frustration of blocked breath and feeble helplessness. He seemed to float away from his own struggles for a moment, feeling them in a detached, dreamy way. Then, with a shocking jolt, he was back within their orbit, gasping, and sucking in a great breath that choked him.

"How about that grub?"

"No, damn you, no!"

Was that him? Feeble, like that? Hardly audible. In a sudden new burst of agony, his body writhed and jerked, and then it was the water again, filling his throat, his lungs, his consciousness. Hands in his hair shoving him under. Hands on his arms and legs holding their wild lashing. Hands in his hair jerking him up again.

"How about it—"

The deafening explosion blotted out Solo Sam's voice. For a moment longer, they held Marrs like that. Then he found himself released, dropped bodily into the water. Choking, gasping, he floundered to his hands and knees, crawling weakly out onto the bank. He was sick there. Finally some focus returned to his vision. He saw the men standing in a bunch where they had dropped him, staring foolishly, almost fearfully at something on the bank. His shaggy, dripping head turned that way. Gail Butler stood in the muddy dugway with a smoking, double-barrelled Greener in her hands.

"Now," she said, "if you don't leave him alone, the next thing I squeeze out of this scattergun will be pointed at something a lot more painful than the air."

V

THE rushing sound of water seemed to be the only thing in Gail Butler's consciousness. The stupor of sleep lay across her in heavy, oppressive layers. She seemed to grope through them one by one, until full awareness of where she was

came to her. Marrs was in her mind, somehow. Had that been last night? She heard Paul draw in a heavy breath beside her, and looked toward him reluctantly. He must have just awakened, and felt her eyes on him.

"Gail," he murmured. "Get me some paregoric."

She felt of his head. "Paul, you haven't got any fever."

"I feel bad," he said. "Get me some, I said."

"Paul, I'm afraid to have you use too much. If you keep it up like this there won't be any left for Waco."

"The hell with Waco," he said, thrashing about in his blankets. "Get me some paregoric, Gail, or do I have to go out and get it myself? I never saw such a woman. Don't give a damn about her own husband. So it's Waco now."

"What's Waco, what do you mean? I just—"

"You just got tired of Slaughter, so now you're playing around with Waco Garrett. Maybe it brings out the maternal instinct in you—a man with his insides so banged up he can't think straight. Pathetic, isn't it? Much more pathetic than your own husband—"

"Oh, Paul, stop it, for God's sake."

She wheeled and fumbled into her robe, crawling from the wagon blindly, unable to see through the tears. She stood against the tail gate, breathing heavily. How could two people start out with so much beauty and end up with so much bitterness?

She remembered the laughter, the kisses, the dancing. How handsome he had been then, how charming. Could a man actually change that radically? Once more she found herself going back over the pattern of it. When Paul had inherited the Pickle Bar, it had been the biggest outfit south of San Antonio. Then, four years after their marriage, came that awful winter of '71. It had ruined a lot of spreads. It didn't leave much of the Pickle Bar.

It had been the first blow, and after that, the pattern formed itself clearly. Each succeeding blow seemed to have wiped off a little of the veneer. She hadn't wanted to believe it, in him, at first. Had refused to face it. The romance of it was too precious to a girl on this barren frontier. But now all the romance was gone, leaving something sordid, ugly. She found it difficult even to retain bitterness, now. It was only dull, aching, with her constantly.

She found herself headed toward the chuck wagon, with the rattling of pans coming dimly from its rear end. The rain had stopped, but the sun had not yet risen. A thick, sticky ground fog sucked at the wheel hubs. And under all the other sounds was the rush of the Red River. She found Marrs building his fires from more of those buried buffalo chips, and asked him for the medicine. He turned without meeting her eyes, moving with those short, stabbing steps to the wagon.

"Did it humiliate you that bad to have a woman stop them, last night?" she said, taking the bottle from his hand.

He met her eyes for the first time. That sullen reserve started to narrow the heavy sensuous lids.

"Don't be childish," she said, "if a man had stopped them, you wouldn't take this attitude with him. What's the difference? You shouldn't feel humiliated. It's happened to other cooks. You can't fight the whole crew."

He scuffed his boot across the ground, staring down at it, then emitted a short, harsh laugh, shrugging. "I guess you're right. I didn't thank you last night, Miss Butler."

"Forget it," she said. Then she frowned, shaking the bottle. "There isn't much paregoric left, is there?"

"I guess not," he told her.

She handed it back to Marrs. "You keep it for Waco. It's the only thing that will help his old injuries, and we don't run into a town where we can get another bottle till Kansas."

"Won't it cause a row?" he asked. She stared at him, unable, for a moment, to fathom his meaning. "Your husband," he said. She drew a quick little breath, and he made an apologetic motion with one hand. "I don't mean to get personal, but being this near the linchpin, I can't help hearing some of it." He paused, studying something, a faint, humorless smile catching at one corner of his mouth. "You know, it's funny how a man can get to know someone with-

out ever seeing him. I've heard the crew talk about Paul Butler. I've never seen you come out of that linchpin smiling. I've heard him yell at you things I wouldn't say to my dog. You deserve something better than that, Miss Butler."

She drew herself up. "And maybe we'll put the linchpin a little farther away next time we stop," she said coldly. She saw the surprised, hurt look across his face, and then the withdrawal, as palpable as if he had backed away, retiring into that surly, brooding shell, lowering his head till she could not see his eyes, and turning away from her. She reached out to grasp his arm. "Pothooks, I'm sorry—"

"Forget it," he said. "I got breakfast to make."

SHE pulled away, walking reluctantly back to the linchpin. She started to climb in. Then, unable to face the tantrum she knew would come when she told Paul there was none to be had, she stepped back and walked around the wagon, moving aimlessly toward the fringe of trees. She rounded an island of soggy oak, and brought up in a startled way. But it was only Windy, digging up more buffalo chips to put in a rawhide bucket.

"Did Pothooks ask you to do this?" she frowned.

Windy cackled. "Ast me? He ordered me, with that machete meat cleaver over my head. That dunking last night didn't take any of his vinegar out."

She studied him a long, silent period, and finally asked what had been on her mind from the beginning. "Windy, who was Lee Marrs Benton?"

The hoar frost of the old man's eyebrows lifted sharply. He straightened slowly, putting a hand against his back. The expression filling his eyes was almost frightening.

"You know," she said.

"Think I didn't figger it out, the minute he dabbed that hooley ann to the Kid's horse," said Windy. "Not many people knew what that M stood for. But when a man stands as high in his profession as Lee M. Benton did, his skill marks him better'n any name ever would.

"What's the story, Windy?" she said.

He went back to picking at the chips, unwilling to look at her as he spoke. "You remember how mavericking was regarded right after the War between the states. Texas men had been away from their cattle a long time. Five years of increase was running around unbranded. It's easy enough to tell what brand a suckling calf should bear by the mamma it's tailing, but when you get a five year old bull that's been popping the brush so long his horns are mossy, it's almost impossible to tell who he belongs to. There were so many of these mavericks that it became the custom, for a time, to throw your own brand on anything that had no obvious connection with a known outfit. A lot of big cattlemen got their start that way. I worked with Boa Snyder when he started his first outfit purely on the mavericks he'd branded."

"That was just about the time I came from Missouri to marry Paul," said Gail. "I remember. Texas was cattle rich. The big outfits had more cows than they could herd, and no markets for them. They probably encouraged men like Boa to maverick."

"At first they did," said Windy. "But when the northern markets opened up, and a cow became worth fifteen-twenty dollars, mavericking was outlawed. A lot of men like Boa pulled out just in time to save themselves getting the stamp of rustler.

"In fact there's some suspicion that Boa and Curt Young and a few others kept on mavericking undercover a long time after it was outlawed. You probably arrived just after the Benton case.

"A regular war was declared on rustlers and maverickers. A brand inspector for the Refugio Cattle Association was down in Nueces County on a hot trail which he claimed was going to blow the lid off the whole thing. He was found near Corpus Christi. He'd been tied to a mesquite tree and tortured to death. Spanish dagger thorns were in his eyes and his feet was near roasted off in sotol stalks."

Gail could not help the horrified sound she made, and Windy looked up, nodding. "That's the way most folks felt. It sent a reg'lar army of association men and local officers into the brush to clean out them maverickers once and for all. Lee Benton was known to be a leader of one group. He'd started mavericking with Boa and

Curt and the others, but he didn't have sense to quit before it became outlawed. One of the Refugio Association men was Gary Carson, an old saddlemate of Benton's known and loved by everybody along the border. He and three detectives surrounded Benton in a shack south of Corpus Christi.

"The others wanted to fill the shack with lead, but Carson argued them into talking it over with Benton. He went out holding a white handkerchief on a stick, told Benton the situation, that he was surrounded with no hope of escaping, and that he'd save his life by coming out. Benton refused, and when Carson turned around, Benton shot him in the back."

She felt sick, deep down, and stared in horror at Windy. "Why haven't you told me this before?"

"I figured you knew," he said. He went on kicking aimlessly at the buffalo chips. "It was the most useless, wanton killing I ever heard of, I guess, and the brutality of it immediately hooked Benton up with that other tortured man. The detectives filled the shack with lead, thought they'd killed Benton. But he lived to see trial. Feeling was so high that people forgot about the other mavericker down there. For six months, the only talk below the Nueces was Lee Marrs Benton.

"They tried to lynch him a couple of times. The mystery of the whole thing is why Benton didn't get executed. The first judge passed that sentence on him. Then, there came along a decision from the State Supreme Court commuting it to life imprisonment. I guess he got out on good behavior or something.

"Do the other men here know?"

HE SHRUGGED. "Some might have guessed. Kettle Corey is the only one who knew Benton personally. He was one of the detectives who trapped Benton in that shack. If he's recognized Pothooks as Lee Marrs Benton, he hasn't given any sign. I don't know what he's doing."

"But you didn't speak," she said. "That's what I can't understand. Suspecting Pothooks of being that man—"

"I thought of quitting. Oncet I felt sick, thinking of whose food I was eating." He lifted his head, staring at her. "But there's sort of a code among punchers, Miss Gail. It leaves a man's past be. There's a lot of men in Texas with ugly things behind them. I made a dry camp with King Fisher oncet, and didn't ast him why he'd murdered ten men, not counting Mexicans. If I had, it would probably have been seventeen."

"That's why you're tolerating this man," she said scornfully. "Not for any code. You're afraid of him, you're afraid to speak out against him!"

An indefinable, hurt expression lined Windy's face, and he lowered his head, nodding. "Maybe you're right. A lot of salt has spilled out of a man when he reaches my age."

"I won't have a man like that working for the Pickle Bar!" said Gail. She whirled and started back to the wagons, aware for the first time that the men were saddling up, the plates still piled untouched on the chuckbox lid. Don Vargas was trying to cinch up his prancing, pirouetting black horse.

"Hold still there, you *chingado*, you *rumbero*, you *poridiosero*—"

"If you'd stop using that baby talk on him and try some real cuss words, he might mind," said Pata Pala, disgustedly, swinging onto his hairy cutting horse and jamming that pegleg through the shortened stirrup.

"Baby talk!" exploded Don Vargas. "You don't know what profanity is till you've heard a real Mexican vaquero swear. *Sinverguenza!* What can match that in English?"

"It don't curl my ears," said Pata Pala. Gail ran up to them, asking what had happened, and the peglegged man nodded toward Slaughter, already out getting the herd off the bedground. "Bob says the river's getting higher every minute, and wants to put the cattle over before it gets too rough. Didn't even let us wait for breakfast."

Hurriedly, she turned back toward the wagons. Marrs was forgotten in the excitement. He had already kicked out the fires and hitched up his team, and she watched him drive toward the bank with a mingled intensity of emotions. Finally, she turned to hitch up her own horses and mount the linchpin's seat. Paul crawled out, a blanket over his shoulders.

"What's going on?" he said bitterly.

"Where's that paregoric?"

"We'll have to get it later, Paul," she evaded. "Why don't you stay out and watch them put the cattle across? It always thrills me so."

"Oh, hell," he said, spitting aside. But he sat down on the seat, staring woodenly ahead, a resentment twitching his face at each jolt of the wagon.

The river swept bankfull before them, chuckling and gurgling at the mouths of the dugways, the great chocolate expanses of muddy water ripped asunder suddenly by a smashed tree, vomited from beneath, to ride a hundred feet on a streak of foaming white water, then sucked down again in a whirlpool formed by a hole dug in the bottom by the rampage. The cattle approached the dugways reluctantly, bawling and lowing.

A steer the color of a sandhill crane balked at the mouth of the dugway; and behind him a beef of blended gold and brown and black which the Mexicans called *hosco golondrino* dug its sharp hooves into the mud and refused to push the steer. They piled up like a backwash behind it. Their great long horns crashed and rang against one another with the sound of a thousand fencers. The raucous bedlam of their bawling rose above the roar of the turbulent river.

Then it was the swing men, pushing in from either side to force that grulla steer out into the water, and make the *hosco golondrino* follow, awkwardly, long bony legs sprawling out like a fallen child, thrusting its heavy, ludicrous head forward with eyes rolling white. Slaughter was right in the middle. No denying that. The first man in the water, swimming his big roping mare right alongside the *hosco golondrino,* leading them on with his voice as much as his actions. It was a scene that could not help thrill Gail. She was lost in thought.

"Oh, I'll shake this job tomorrow
Pack my soogans on a hoss,
And pull my freight for Texas,
Where there ain't no dad-blamed boss—"

IT WAS Solo Sam on the swing, his lean figure swaying in the saddle as he came in from the side to force the bulk of the herd into the dugway and out into the water. After him, from the other flank, came Guy Bedar. After another space of plunging bawling animals filling the dugway, Kettle Cory's great head appeared above the cattle. His shaggy chopping horse stepped down through that slippery mud so daintily it was hard to believe he was packing close to three hundred pounds on his back. But a heavy man could ride as light as a little one if he was good, and Gail had never seen a horse in Kettle's string black branded.

Then came Don Vargas on the prancing, nervous black. The cattle were spreading out in deeper water now, pushed by the oncoming ranks behind. Slaughter was near the middle, and Gail could barely hear his voice, calling orders to the men. Once, Gail thought she saw Guy Bedar's narrow head turn back toward the chuck wagon, where it had halted on the bank a few yards below the linchpin. It directed her gaze that way.

Marrs was busy lashing logs onto the sides of his wagon, oblivious to the scene. Beside Gail, Paul shifted morosely in his blanket, huddled over on the seat, watching the stirring pageant indifferently.

"Slaughter had better send enough men back to get this wagon over safely," he muttered petulantly.

Gail sighed. "I'm sure he will, Paul."

"Hey, Bedar," bawled Windy, from the bank. "You're pushing that *golondrino* away from its trail mate. Get them separated and you'll have a mill, sure."

There was a sharp note to his cry that stiffened Gail on the seat. She had traveled north with enough herds to know the habit of steers choosing a trail mate and traveling a thousand miles without leaving its side. More than once, she had seen a steer bunch-quit to hunt for its mate, refusing to return to the herd until they had found each other again. Evidently the *golondrino* steer had been traveling with the slate-colored leader. She recognized the tone of its call now, the toss of its head. Somehow, Bedar had shoved a cut of steers between this one and the leader, and the *golondrino* had halted completely, swirled around and around by the tide, bawling helplessly for its mate. The grulla leader looked around, and seeing

its mate gone, turned to swim back to the *golondrino*.

"Stop that leader," howled Slaughter. "He'll turn the whole herd in a circle."

Bedar left the *golondrino* to swim his horse through the outer fringe toward the leader, and Kettle came in the other way. It looked as if Kettle would reach its flank and turn the beast, but some clumsy maneuver of Bedar turned another cut of steers between Kettle and the slate colored one.

"Get out of there, damn you," bellowed Slaughter.

"What the hell," shouted Bedar, "I can't help what those critters get in their mind."

He wheeled his horse to swim it out of the growing jam, barely escaping the circular motion of animals which the turning back of the leader had started. The positions of the two steers were reversed, now. The whole bunch was beginning to turn like a great wheel, with the leader actually fighting in toward the center, thinking its mate was still there. Actually, the *golondrino* had been swept to the outer fringes by the circling pressure. The bawling of the steers had become so loud and excited now, that the shouts of the men farther out were no longer audible.

More and more animals were pouring down out of the dugways, into the river, excited by the noise and violence, and Windy and the other men on the bank could not hold them. The circling mass of steers in the water was growing larger and larger, packed in tighter and tighter.

Evidently thinking that if he could get the *golondrino* separated from the rest, the leader would see its mate and break for it and stop the mill, Slaughter had waited till the spinning fringe carried the *golondrino* around past him, and had roped the animal's horns. But the *golondrino* started battling. Dirty yellow water gouted up about them, hiding man and beast for an instant. Slaughter's head appeared out of the whirl, then the animal's horns. It was pulling him on back into the other steers. Gail found herself standing on the seat, screaming at Slaughter.

"Don't fight them that way, Bob, you'll only spook the whole bunch . . ."

Bob Slaughter was in his towering rage. She could feel its awesome force at this distance. She could see how viciously he was spurring his horse, so losing his head that he was pitting his own weight and strength against the bull's struggles, his whole massive body jerking backward in the saddle everytime he pulled on that rope. Vainly, Kettle and Solo Sam were trying to wedge their animals in on the flanks to turn the mill, but their efforts were lost in the general wheeling motion of the whole herd. It was rapidly becoming a great vortex of frenzied steers, that grulla the hub of the wheel. Even Paul could see how it was going now. He was leaning forward on the seat beside Gail.

"He'll lose them," he said, between his teeth. "He'll lose the whole bunch. Damn you, Slaughter, they'll drown each other and they'll all go down."

It was ghastly to watch, that great, turgid, circular motion of bawling, crazed animals, becoming faster and faster. Countless horns flashed and dipped and disappeared in the rocking rolling bodies. The first dead steer floated into sight fifty yards away from the herd. He had been crushed and trampled under, the carcass kicked and whirled along beneath those hooves until it was free of the herd, then thrown up from the violent tide of the river like so much driftwood. The mill was in full tilt now, Kettle and Waco spun around on the fringe helplessly, Slaughter out there still battling madly with the leader, his terrible rage blinding him to what was happening. The awesome, certain finality of it brought the name unconsciously to Gail's lips.

"Pothooks," she said, "Pothooks."

IT WAS as if he had heard, though she had not spoken it loud enough to reach him. There was a violent blur of movement past her, and she saw him running. The Caverango Kid had left his remuda in timber, and brought his horse up on a higher portion of the bank above the wagons to watch the mill, and it was toward him Pothooks ran.

"Give me those guthooks, Kid," shouted the cook, grabbing for the Kid's right boot and unbuckling the spur. He leaned down to snap it on his own boot, and by that time, the Kid had lifted his other foot up to take the right spur off. Pothooks grabbed

this and put it on and then pulled the Kid down off his horse. The cook spun the animal around to get on the left side, jumping high so that his left foot hit the oxbow the same time his rump hit the saddle.

Then he raked the can openers across the animal's flanks and drove it off the bank in a great leap. Man and beast disappeared completely in the water, to bob up ten yards beyond, swirled around and around by the heavy, churning tide. Then the undertow formed by the milling herd caught him, pulling the horse in fast against the outer fringe of cattle.

"He can't do anything," said Paul shrilly. "Nobody could break that mill from the outside now. They're lost, Gail, they're through—"

But Marrs was not trying to stop them from the outside. He had jumped from his hose onto the backs of the cattle. They were packed in so close it was like walking across logs. A tossing horn caught him across the belly, knocking him backward, and for a moment, Gail thought he was gone. He slipped between two great heaving bodies up to the waist.

But before they could pin him, he had caught another horn, pulling himself up. Then, dodging those great slashing horns, ducking aside from a violent, blind toss of a brindle head, jumping the heaving hump of a speckled white steer, he made his way toward the center of the mill. She could see him swing an arm in Slaughter's direction to emphasize the words his roaring, surly shout carried to Gail.

"Quit fighting that *golondrino,* damn you, he's just exciting hell out of all the rest."

Slaughter at last must have realized what his actions were causing, for he tried to get slack enough in his rope to slip it off the steer he had been battling. But the steer kept shifting away, tangling the rope up among the other cattle. The clothesline was tied hard and fast on the saddle horn of Slaughter's rig, and seeing that he could not free it from the animal, he began to tear wildly at the knot on his horn. But it had become wet, and Gail could see he was not having any success. The *golondrino* was going its merry, wild way, pulling Slaughter with it, now, its crazy bawls and frenzied struggles exhorting the rest of the herd into a rising, maddened crescendo of sound and movement.

Gail saw Marrs' mouth move in a curse that did not carry this far, and he whipped his Walker from his belt. Its sullen boom beat flatly across the other bedlam. Once. Twice. The *golondrino* heaved half its bulk out of the water, blood spurting from the wounds to redden the tide about it.

"Now cut it loose, damn you," he screamed at Slaughter. The trail boss fished his Barlow from a hip pocket, whipping it open, and slashed at the rope in a desperate effort to cut it before the drowining steer pulled his horse under. Balancing delicately on the constantly shifting animals, kicking and jumping and rolling like a logger in white water, leaping from back to back, falling to his knees and scrambling erect again, face bloody from the slash of a horn, shirt ripped across his belly, Marrs finally made it to the grulla leader. He straddled the beast like a horse, grasping its horns to hang on. Then Gail understood why he had gotten those spurs.

His legs were out of sight, but his torso jerked with the force of raking the beast with those guthooks, and the burning pain caused the grulla to rear up, emitting its agony in a great bawling bellow. It had been resigning itself apathetically to the general movement of the herd, allowing itself to be spun round and round by the others, but this violent surging motion carried it against them in a decisive movement. Marrs pointed its head with his grip on those horns, spurring it once more.

Again the steer gave a great, leaping surge. It broke the inner ranks this time, turning the others partway in the same direction. Once more, Marrs spurred the animal. Its bawling sound held the frenzy of unbearable pain. Madly, it fought forward to escape those terrible guthooks, trampling under a great brindle heifer, literally crawling across the back of a floundering black. Others turned to get out of the way, and centrifugal pressure forced still others into the path the grulla had left behind, turning after it. This formed a gradually growing movement in one direction.

The pressure of this began to turn the outer ranks, and gave Waco and Solo Sam and Kettle a chance to get free and help

keep the movement going. And all the time, Marrs was driving the lead steer out.

Scrambling, bawling, fighting, screaming, the beast finally broke the back of the milling ranks, and they began to give more easily. Finally Marrs was on the fringe, and in another moment would be free.

Gail saw it happen the same time she heard the cry. It was a sharp, frightened cry, hardly loud enough to be noticed above the other sounds, but it turned her head enough to see Solo Sam go off his horse. He had been working in the fringes, but there was still enough of the mill left to trap him in a swirl of earthen colored bodies and flailing, clashing horns.

"It's Sam," cried Waco, from near the shore. "I can't reach him, Slaughter. You're the nearest. Get him before he goes under."

SLAUGHTER had cut himself free of the *golondrino*, and with his rope trailing in the water, had moved his swimming horse over near enough to Marrs to take advantage of the breaking mill, wedging himself into a rank of cows and turning them toward the opposite bank.

"He'll be all right," he shouted. "Tell him to tail his horse. I leave these critters now and we'll lose them again."

"He ain't got no horse, damn you," shouted Waco, trying to drive his own animal through a solid phalanx of cattle in a futile attempt to reach Sam. "Oh, damn you, Slaughter, you could do it, you're the only one."

Either Slaughter had not heard him, or ignored him, for he was driving his ranks of cattle into a straight run for the bank, breaking the mill for good with the pressure of Marrs' grulla coming in behind. Marrs turned to look back, and then scrambled erect on the grulla, and began to make his way back across them that way. The wagon seat trembled with Paul's violent movement beside Gail. His voice beat vitriolically against her ears.

"Oh, no, you damn fool, they'll mill again, they'll mill again—"

She felt the appalled darkness filling the glance she turned on her husband. He saw it, and a surprised look crossed his face. Her mouth twisted down with more expression than she had allowed him to see in months, and then she turned back. With the drive of the grulla gone, the cattle had started to turn back into the mill, packing together again, and it was across this that Marrs went, sometimes on his belly, moving inevitably back toward the spot Solo Sam had gone under. Gail's breath blocked her throat with the certainty that he would never make it.

But he did. And when he reached the two steers swimming at the spot where Sam had gone down, he jammed a leg down, separating their dripping, shiny bodies. A bloody arm popped up, and he swung down a hand for it, missing. The arm disappeared. Face turned down, Marrs crawled across the back of a huge mulberry stag, moving inward on the mill. Then he reached down between the mulberry and the next steer, grasping for something Gail couldn't see.

There was a violent shift in the ranks, and he disappeared between the two bodies. Gail heard the strangled sound she made, and found herself standing on the wagon seat, staring fixedly out there.

Marrs' head bobbed up again. A thick, hairy arm hooked over the catback of a black steer, the shirt sleeve torn off to the shoulder. Muscles rippled like fat snakes beneath the white skin, pulling him belly-down over the black. He had a body slung under his other arm. It was Solo Sam, a slack, limp figure in the cook's grip.

Marrs got to his hands and knees on their backs once more. This last trip was the most harrowing thing Gail had ever experienced. It had been deadly enough making his way across that precarious corduroy surface of constantly shifting, heaving, turning backs, alone. Now he had to carry Sam with him. Twice Marrs slipped and almost went under. Waco Garrett was near enough to shore so that Gail could see tears streaming down his face every time its profile turned far enough this way. The Caverango Kid had waded out to his waist in the river, staring in a charmed way at the scene. It was about as far to shore as it was back to the grulla, and Marrs had chosen the steer.

Doggedly, stubbornly, tenaciously, Marrs crawled and bellied and snaked across the steers, jammed up again like logs. He was apparently too played out even to try to

gain his feet. His shirt was ripped from him and his whole body was bloody. Once, a shift in their movement flashed his face this way. It was twisted in a ghastly, fixed grimace that showed the bone whiteness of teeth beneath the black line of his mustache.

Finally he made it, throwing Sam belly down across the grulla, straddling it once more as a man would sit a horse. And once more began that game of breaking the mill, the jerk of his body that told the vicious swipe of those spurs, the screaming lunge of the tiring steer, the ranks giving with painful, maddening reluctance.

When he finally broke free, with the mill stopped, and the other steers following their slate leader to shore, pushed on by the riders, Gail found herself still standing in the seat, her whole body so stiff the muscles were twitching with tension across her back and belly and legs. With a sob, she collapsed onto the seat. The Caverango Kid was still standing up to the waist in the turgid, murky flow, hands fisted at his sides, staring across at Marrs.

"My God," he was saying, over and over, "My God. My God . . ."

Gail saw the grulla reach the other side. Marrs slid off and lay on his belly in the shallows. Kettle sidled in and dragged him to dry ground, dropping him once more to lie moveless on his stomach. They dragged Solo Sam off, sitting him up against a tree. Windy and Pata Pala came by with the drags of the herd, putting it into the muddy water. Gail found herself huddled over on the seat, crying very quietly.

VI

THERE was something reassuring about the soft crackle of campfires, after the terrible, violent uncertainty of a few hours before. The rich, humid scent of wet spring earth filled the night. Bob Slaughter leaned against the head of the chuck wagon, hands in hip pockets. He could not help marvel at the incredible vitality of Marrs. The man had recovered from that grueling experience in half an hour, and had been able to help the men get the wagons across the Red, after the herd had been safely put onto ground. Now, five miles north of the Red, he was going about his duties of the evening meal as casually as if it were the end of an ordinary day.

Slaughter shrugged. That was youth. Maybe Marrs was younger than he looked. Then a bitter, driving reaction to that swept up in Slaughter. Youth, hell. What did that have to do with it? He could match Marrs every foot of the way. He could take on any kid half his age and play him out and still have enough vinegar left to dance all night. Youth didn't have anything to do with it. He thrust his body away from the wagon, walking over toward Waco Garrett, where the man sat cross-legged, toying with his food. He felt Windy's eyes on him, and cut a glance at him. Windy was looking his way, but a blank, opaque withdrawal filled the old man's eyes as he met Slaughter's glance. Slaughter turned back to Waco as he halted by him.

"You feel good enough to ride first guard with Pata Pala tonight?"

Waco looked up. There was a movement of empty silence. Part of it was filled with Waco's palpable effort to relax the drawn muscles of his face.

"Sure, Bob. I'm all right."

"What's the matter?" said Slaughter.

Waco's eyes seemed to be looking right through him. "Nothing, Bob. My stomach's all right."

"I don't mean that," said Slaughter. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing, Bob," said Waco, in a hollow voice. He rose and took his dish over to the wreck pan, dumping it in. At the off-wheel of the wagon, he let his eyes pass across Slaughter once more. Then he was beyond, going for his night horse in the remuda.

"Don't you really know what the matter is, Bob?" asked Gail, from over to one side. He wheeled to see her standing in some scrub elm, the buffalo brush forming a silver background for the soft folds of her calico skirt. Her face was pale. Her eyes caught the light like a cat's, gleaming flat and green for an instant, then lost in shadow with the slight turn of her head. He moved over to her, running a hand irritably through the yellow mane of his hair. They were out of earshot from the others here, and he spoke in a guttural, frustrated voice.

"What do you mean, Gail?"

"I'm talking about Solo Sam," she said.

"What about Solo Sam," he said.

"Don't spar, Bob," she told him.

"Listen," he said. "The boy took his chances just like the rest of us. If I'd left those leaders, the mill would have started all over again and we'd have lost the whole herd."

"Is that worth a boy's life?" she said.

"Is that the thanks I get for saving your herd?"

"*You,*" she said, letting something caustic thread it.

"Oh, hell," he said. "You know what I mean. Of course it was Marrs. It was just the choice I made, that's all. I was thinking of your herd, Gail. Of you. If our places had been switched, I wouldn't have expected Sam to come after me."

"And if you had the choice to make over again, it would be the same one." It was more a statement than a question.

He stared at her, knowing the incrimination his answer would cause him. "I would," he said quietly.

"At least you have the courage of your convictions," she said, and again she allowed some of her feelings to color the words, and it was more loathing this time.

"Don't say it like that, Gail," he told her. "A man has his decisions to make and he makes them according to his ethics."

"And they show what kind of a man he is more than all the talk in the world," she said.

"Did I ever try to deny I was."

"Honesty isn't the only virtue," she told him.

He grasped her arms, moving in closer to her, excited by the faint warmth exuding from her body, the scented nearness of her, the pale halo of taffy hair just beneath his chin.

"Don't be like that, Gail. I don't care if the men hold it against me. A trail boss gets the blame for it all anyway. Nothing he does is right. I'd expect it from them. But you—"

"What about me?"

"Gail," he muttered. "Would it help if I admitted it was a mistake?"

"No," she said. "Because I'd know you were lying. At least be consistent, Bob. It's one of the few things left in you I can admire."

SHE tore loose and moved toward the linchpin. She passed Marrs about twenty feet away, but there was something in the fleeting, almost furtive glance she put across him that raised a strange, indefinable jealousy in Slaughter. He made a guttural sound deep in his throat. Then, releasing the anger in movement, he headed toward the remuda in a long, driving stride, like the pace of a huge, caged beast, calling to Caverango to cut out his roping horse. It was his favorite animal, a big quarter horse, with a black stripe down his back. He took it from the boy and led it over to his gear, thrown down a little part from the other sougans. He heaved his heavy Porter rig up with one arm, and as he was taking a hitch in the trunk strap of the latigo, Don Vargas wandered over.

"You going for a drink at the Station House, maybe."

"Maybe," said Slaughter, angrily.

"Can I go too, maybe?"

Slaughter turned to face him squarely, jaw muscles bulging in the ruddy, weathered flesh. "What do you think about Sam?"

Don Vargas shrugged narrow shoulders. "I always say a man takes his own chances on the trail, Roberto."

"At least I've got one intelligent man in my crew," said Slaughter, tugging the trunk strap cinch home with a vicious grunt. "Come on. Let's go."

Grinning, Don Vargas ran out to get his horse. He came back with the prancing black, its coat glistening from the recent rain. Slaughter glanced disgustedly at it.

"Why don't you trade that weedy Arab for a decent cowpony? He couldn't cut a biscuit."

"*Valgame Dios,*" swore the Mexican, heaving his centerfire rig on. "You are talking about a descendant in a straight line from El Morzillo, the war horse Cortez himself brought to Mexico in his conquest, one of the first horses on this continent. He is no weedy Arab, *amigo*. He is a barb of the hottest blood, and he'll make your Texas cowponies look like prairie dogs."

"Then beat me to the Station House,"

shouted Slaughter, raking his roper with his Peteneckey's.

"Holo," shouted Don Vargas, and his immense cartwheel spurs made a flash in the firelight, and his black mount leaped forward.

They raced right through the middle of camp and Windy had to move fast to get out of their way, spilling his supper on the ground. Slaughter didn't give a damn, letting the wind whip his hatbrim back against its crown, trying to empty out all the gathered venom of the past hours in the wild ride.

They trampled through scarlet mallow and dodged into a motte of blackjack. Slaughter ducked a branch and it knocked his hat off to swing behind him in the wind by the tie-thong around his neck. He bent low over the horse, glorying in its delicate response to the slightest pressure of his reins, veering it around a big cottonwood with the slightest switch of his hand, turning it out of the trees into a muddy, rutted road by barely touching the off-rein against its neck.

The quarter blood in the roper had given it the jump on Don Vargas, but now the barb's bottom was beginning to tell, and Slaughter could hear the sloppy beat of hooves in the muck behind. He gave the roper those Peteneckey's again, and it surged into a greater burst of speed, barrel heaving in a labored way between his legs. He saw a big Murphy freighter stalled hub-deep in the mud ahead and tore about one side of it, leaving the angry shouts of the splattered teamsters behind. Again he drove the spurs into the roper, and headed it into a crazy, headlong run for the last quarter mile to the deadfall at Red River Station.

He pulled his heaving, steaming horse back on its hocks before the low-roofed log building set on the bluffs and jumped off, throwing the reins across the hitch-rack with half a dozen others. He shouldered through the door without waiting for Don Vargas. It was an evil den, with sawdust covering the floor and reeking of stale cigars and rotten liquor and foul river mud. There were already a dozen trail drivers and hands at the round deal tables, and they hailed him.

He went over to where a bald, scarred man with a broken nose and mashed ears stood behind the bar, serving the liquor in big tin mugs from a row of barrels set on racks, against the wall.

"None of that tanglefoot, Katz," he said, leaning his elbows on the bar. "Give me some decent sugar-top."

"For you, Bob, anything," said Katz, leaning beneath the bar to open a bung there. The ride had blotted out Slaughter's snaky mood for a moment, but he could feel it coming back now. Don Vargas came through the door, wiping his sweating face with a red bandana.

"*Madre Dios,* you kicked mud in my face all the way down."

"You and your greaser tripe," said Slaughter sullenly, taking half the mugful of whiskey in one gulp. "I've never seen you come through yet with something from below the border. Why don't you get smart?" He slammed the cup on the bar. "Fill it again, Katz."

"On me," Rickett told the man, from behind.

SLAUGHTER wheeled sharply. The short, curly-headed man stood there with that facile smile pinned on his face. He had changed his string tie for a flowered cravat and his Prince Albert for a maroon fustian. Slaughter spotted Thibodaux beyond Don Vargas, leaning against the bar.

Standing at Rickett's shoulder was a man taller and heavier than Slaughter, his curly mat of red hair burned almost gold on the top by the sun, his short, hoary beard turned almost black across the bottom from constant contact with a red wool shirt that didn't look as if it had ever been washed. He had a Navy Colt stuck naked through his belt, and his muddy boots were flat-heeled.

"Still jayhawking, Jared?" said Slaughter, sarcastically.

"Better'n letting my friends die in the river," said Jared Thorne, revealing battered, chipped teeth with his broad grin.

The dull flush crept clear to the roots of Slaughter's hair, but it was Rickett who spoke, that bland smile curling his mouth.

"We heard how you almost had a mill. It would have been too bad to lose so many fine cattle. If that cook of yours hadn't

stopped it, the whole herd might well have drowned."

The memory of it cut Slaughter like a knife. Guy Bedar, with that *golondrino*. He hadn't connected it. *Guy Bedar*. He bent toward Rickett, the bunching jaw muscles filling out down into his neck until the two great muscles there stood out thick as dally ropes.

"You," he said, gutturally, *"you . . . had Bedar do that!"*

Rickett smiled blandly. "The story's all over, Bob. Must be two or three trail herds camped along the river, and they've all heard it by now. First the Caverango Kid, now Solo Sam. Who do you think the cook will get on his side next?"

Slaughter's fists began opening and closing at his sides. The fumes of that bourbon were beginning to fill his head now. Rickett let his glance move to Thibodaux then back to Slaughter.

"How does it feel to lose control over your crew?" said Rickett.

"I'm not losing control over anything," said Slaughter. "But if you keep riding this horse, I will."

"You can't hide it when a crew's disaffected," said Rickett. "Every man in those other trail herds knows what your men think of you."

"The hell they do," said Slaughter, his guttural voice rising higher. "My men don't think any different than they did on the other side of the river."

Rickett spread his hands. "Take it easy, Slaughter. I'm just trying to show you what's happening. The river was just the beginning. That cook won't be around to pull out your bacon every time. Jared here says there's Indian trouble farther north."

"And jayhawker trouble?" asked Slaughter.

That broad grin brought half-moon creases about the corners of Jared Thorne's mouth. "Lots of rough characters up around the Canadian River, Slaughter. Some small herd tried to beat you through to Dodge. Got cut up so bad they turned back."

"Oh, quit dragging it around outside the corral like this," said Slaughter, suddenly disgusted with the whole thing. "Get out. Get away from me."

He saw the puzzled light in Don Vargas' eyes as he turned back to the bar, reaching for the mug Katz had refilled. Then he felt Rickett's body brush him as the man moved in beside him.

"You don't seem to get the point, Slaughter. If the cook don't get the whole crew away from you and finally get your job first, something else can happen. All the way up to Dodge it can happen. That river was only an illustration. On the other hand, if you do what I suggested before, we can take care of Pothooks Marrs with appalling ease. And we can see that nothing happens otherwise."

"Rickett," said Slaughter, with terrible restraint, "If you don't leave me right now I'm going to clean up this room with you."

"Now, don't be like that, Slaughter—"

"Damn you," yelled Slaughter, and let all the gathered venom of this day spill out as he whirled with the mug in his hand at the end of his outstretched arm. It came around and hit Rickett full in the face, knocking him down the bar into Don Vargas. Slaughter saw Jared Thorne move, and jumped on down the bar for Rickett again. Thorne had driven for him, and could not stop himself from crashing into the bar where Slaughter had stood. Don Vargas had turned to grapple with Thibodaux, preventing him from drawing his weapon. It gave Slaughter a chance to get Rickett again before the man could fully recover.

He grabbed Rickett by the front of his coat and heaved him across the room into a table, roaring wildly. Cowhands jumped back, upsetting their chairs, as the table overturned beneath Rickett. Slaughter jumped across at him again, bringing his fist around in a savage haymaker that caught Rickett full in the face and knocked him back the other way.

Coming toward Slaughter, Thorne had to dodge aside to avoid being carried back into the bar by Rickett. Then Rickett struck the bar with a great thud. His sharp, broken cry pierced the room.

Thorne was charging for Slaughter. Slaughter met him with an eager shout, blocking Thorne's clumsy blow with his right, bringing his left into the man's belly with all the animal strength of him. The force of the blow, coupled with Thorne's

oncoming impetus, drove Slaughter's arm right into his shoulder until he thought it had been torn out of joint.

It only stopped the man's charge part way, and Slaughter was carried backward, almost falling over the upturned table, until his back came up against the wall, with Thorne against him. The man was still sick with that blow, and could not stop Slaughter from shoving him away and striking again. It was in the guts again, and Thorne bent over the blow with a ghastly sound. It put the back of his neck to Slaughter, and the trail boss dropped a fist like a hammer there. Thorne went on down to the floor. Slaughter drew back his foot and kicked him as hard as he could in the face.

Then he turned from the man to see that Thibodaux had thrown Don Vargas off toward the door. The Mexican had stumbled on spike heels to the doorframe, catching himself there, and trying to draw his gun.

But the hammer had caught on his fancy silver belt, hanging up, and all his jerking would not pull it free.

"Roberto," he bleated.

"Never mind," panted Slaughter. "I got his number."

Thibodaux wheeled to face him. For one instant suspended in time they hung there, staring at each other, both men inclined forward slightly, both with their elbows hooked out a little. After the bedlam of crashing furniture and shouting men, the abrupt silence filling the untidy room was startling.

Rickett stood against the bar, holding himself up by one elbow, dabbing at the blood covering his face in a weak, irrelevant way. The breath came out of him in a sobbing wheeze. He seemed to become aware of them, and raised himself up slightly, staring from Thibodaux to Slaughter.

He did not try to hide the ruthless malice in his eyes. His lips curled in that smile with some effort, but it held no humor. It held a brutal, savage vindication.

Perhaps it was what the Creole had been waiting for.

"All right, Thibodaux," Rickett said. "Go ahead. Kill him."

VII

IT WAS usually foggy in the morning this near the river. Pothooks Marrs climbed down from the chuck wagon, shivering with the chill. He saw the fires already going, and the Caverango Kid setting up the Dutch ovens. Usually the wrangler acted as swamper for the cook, when he wasn't herding the spare animals, but there was something special, something almost worshipful about the way the Kid showed up every morning, after checking the hobbled remuda, to marvel at Marrs' culinary skill.

Marrs went over to the let-down lid of the wagon and started making dough, rolling it out to proper thickness with a beer bottle. Then he got four pie tins and lined their bottoms, dumping dried apples into this. After putting on the upper crust, he carved a Pickle Bar into each one with his Barlow knife. The Kid had hunkered by one of the fires, stirring it idly with a stick, his eyes on those square, hairy hands all the time.

"Pie," he wanted to know, "for breakfast?"

"I thought you come from Texas?" said Marrs.

"I do," said the Kid. "We had it at home for breakfast. But never on the trail. Slaughter told the last cook—"

"Where is Slaughter?" asked Marrs, glancing over at the man's empty sougan.

"Went to the Station House last night," said Waco, coming up with both hands on his belly. "He always does that when something gets his goat. I don't see how he throws a drunk like that and then comes back and puts in the kind of day's work he does. It would kill an ordinay man."

"He'll burn himself out sooner or later," said Marrs. "Your belly hurting?"

"Like hell," Waco told him. "Where's that paregoric?"

Marrs reached into the shelf holding assorted bottles of medicine. When he upended the paregoric into a tin cup, only a couple of drops leaked out.

"What the hell did you do with it?" said Waco caustically. "There was plenty left when I took it last time." He did not miss Marrs' aborted glance toward the linchpin,

and began to curse viciously. "I might of known. Helluva doctor you are. That Butler don't need it any more than you do. You knew that. Why did you give it to him anyway?"

Marrs' eyes squinted. "I didn't."

"Don't try and lie out of it," berated the man, viciously. "Of all the low-down, ornery, snaky things to do, that's the worst. I ought to take my pistol to you."

"Now wait a minute," said Marrs. "What kind of hurt is it?"

"What does it matter?" said Waco, starting to turn away.

Marrs grabbed him by the arm, spinning him back against the wagon with such force it knocked a pile of plates off the chuck box lid. "What kind of hurt is it?" he snarled. "A postoak swipe you across the belly?"

The man's pinched face held a dazed surprise. "Yeah. Let go. The doc said it probably bruised my intestines."

"You stay right here," said Marrs. "Move a step and I'll take that machete to you."

"What the hell?"

Turning away, Marrs got a can of tallow he used for lard. He poured this into the frying pan and set it over one of the fires. Then he got the blackstrap sorghum and filled a tin cup partway up with this. When the tallow was sizzling and melted, he poured it into the sorghum, and finally added a little powdered alum from the medicine chest.

"Let that cool, and down it," he told Waco. "I've seen my ma give it to more than one brush hand with his guts hurt like yours."

"That slum will burn hell out of me if there's an open sore down there," muttered the man.

"You use it to burn out proud flesh on a rope burn, don't you?" said Marrs. "And then the burn heals right up. That tallow and blackstrap will keep it from hurting. They'll line your guts all the way down. You'll be surprised how soothing it is."

"I never saw such a gezabo," said Waco, staring into the cup, still unconvinced. "One minute he's beating your head in, the next he's mothering you like an old hen with her chicks."

Marrs finished cooking and beat on a wreck pan with a running iron, shouting for them to come and get it. Yawning, rubbing sleep from their eyes, they appeared to get their plates and tools.

"Well," observed Pata Pala, looking at the pie. "Boggy top. If it has as much soda in it as them hot rocks last night, I'll be yellow as jaundice."

"You don't need soda to get that color," Marrs told him.

"Don't get oily," flushed the peglegged man. "I'll punch holes in your skull with my stick foot."

"Reminds me of what Sluefoot Sue looked like after Pecos Bill got through shooting her out of the clouds," said Windy.

"Ah, put a hobble on your jaw," Pata Pala growled. "I'm tired of hearing you blow."

"Why don't you let him finish," said Marrs. "I never heard him tell a story through yet."

Windy looked gratefully at Marrs. "Sure thing. Pecos Bill had a hawss named Widow Maker. Nobody else had ever rid the beast. When he proposed to Sluefoot Sue—"

"Man at the pot," shouted Pata Pala, as Solo Sam got up to pour himself another cup of coffee, "man at the pot—"

"You'll get your java when Windy finishes the story," shouted Marrs, angered by the man's insistence.

"I'll get it or dump this bacon."

"Dump that bacon and I'll dump this coffee right on your head!"

PATA PALA turned over his plate. Marrs grabbed the three gallon coffee pot and upended it on Pata Pala's head. The scalding, inky brew spewed out over the peglegged man's shoulders. He danced away, his screams muffled by the pot over his head. Marrs scooped up the running iron and followed him, tripping him backward so that he fell in a sitting position against the wheel of the chuck wagon.

When Pata Pala made an effort to rise and get the pot off his head, Marrs struck the top of it with the running iron. It made a clanging sound. Pata Pala, stiffened, dropping his hands quickly.

"Now, you finish your story," Marrs told Windy.

"Well," began Windy, hesitantly, staring at the peglegged man. "Sluefoot said she'd marry Pecos if he let her ride Widow Maker. When Sluefoot got on, the hawss bucked the old gal so high she went through a thunderhead and it started raining. That's what caused the flood of '59—"

Pata Pala made another effort to take the pot off. That iron clanged on its top once more. Pata Pala subsided.

"—Sluefoot had some of them newfangled hoop skirts on, and them steel hoops was just like springs every time she hit, bouncing her right back up. She went so high nobody could git her down. Pecos finally had to shoot her down to keep her from starving to death." Windy shook his head from side to side, grinning foolishly. Then a vague surprise filled his wizened face, and he stared around at them. "Well, I did finish, didn't I?" He looked at Marrs with the shining eyes of a starving dog fed a bone. "You know, Pothooks, that's the first time these jaspers let me tell one clear through since I signed on to Pickle Bar."

A quick, gleaming smile fluttered Marrs' lips. Then he lifted the pot off Pata Pala's head. Rubbing his wet, sooty head, winking coffee grounds out of his eyes, the peglegged man jumped to his feet with a roar. He made such a ludicrous picture that the crew burst out laughing. He glared around at them.

"You got the best of it this time and you might as well admit it," Solo Sam shouted.

A grin started at the corners of Pata Pala's mouth, and he could not control it. Pretty soon the chuckles began to shake his beefy gut. He looked down at the coffee pot, reaching up with a little finger to clean coffee grounds out of his ear.

"I guess you're right," he said, and started to go on, but the sight of something beyond the wagons halted him, his mouth still partly open. Don Vargas was coming in with Bob Slaughter slung across the buckskin Quarter horse, head dangling on one side, heels on the other. The whole crew gathered round as soon as the Mexican halted the animals.

"Is he dead?" asked Caverango, in hushed awe.

"Only from drink," said Don Vargas. "He drank up all the rot-gut in the Station House last night and wrecked the place. I been dodging through the blackjack ever since with him like this. I was afraid to bring him back to camp for fear the soldiers would be here. There was a whole troop of them from Fort Sill stationed on the river, and they're all looking for Slaughter."

"Not just for cleaning out the Station House?" said Marrs.

"No," Don Vargas told him. "He got drunk and wrecked everything after he killed Thibodaux. The soldiers want him for murder."

THE uproar of breaking camp filled the blackjack. Pots and pans rattled as Pothooks threw his cooking gear into the chuck box and kicked the fires out. Horses whinneyed and rigging creaked as men saddled up, shouting to each other. Kettle Cory and Guy Bedar were already out getting the cattle up off their bed ground, and the low bawling of the beeves formed a monotonous undertone to other sounds. Don Vargas and Pata Pala were alternately pouring the last of the coffee down Slaughter and dunking his head in a pail of river water in an effort to bring him out of the stupor. Hearing a stir behind the chuck wagon, Marrs went back that way to find Gail Butler standing by the tail gate, taffy hair done up in a chignon, a strained look to her face.

"Have you got any other medicine besides the paregoric?" she said. "Paul's feeling bad again."

"What do you mean, *besides* the paregoric?" asked Marrs.

"Waco needs that," she told him. "It's the only thing that will help him."

The restrained bitterness in his face must have reached her then, and her attention was drawn to the bottle still resting on the lid of the chuck box where Marrs had left it. She picked it up and shook it hard.

"Did Waco use it up?" she asked.

"No," said Marrs. "He was in a lot of pain."

She held out her hand in spasmodic re-

action. "Pothooks, you don't think that I—" Then she broke off, her eyes losing their focus for an instant, to widen in the shock of some obscure understanding. Then they squinted, and the flush of shame crept up her neck. The whole misjudgment he had made struck him, then, and he felt like a fool.

"Look," he said, "I'm sorry—"

"*You're* sorry," she said, pulling herself up. "What for? Getting it in the neck from Waco when he thought you'd given me the medicine? I imagine he can be very acid, can't he? I won't even apologize for that, Pothooks. Paul's my husband. If he's sick, I'm going to do whatever is necessary to help him—"

"Don't defend him, Gail," said Pothooks. "He isn't worth it. You were ashamed a minute ago. It wasn't for yourself. If you'd gotten that paregoric, you would have the courage of your convictions. It was Paul who got it. More for spite than anything else. Wasn't it?"

She faced him a moment longer, deep bosom filling the crinoline with the heavy breath she took in. Then all the sand drained out of her. Her eyes dropped from him. She made a small, choked sound, as if trying to keep from crying, and began to turn away. He caught her arm.

"Don't even be ashamed of him," said Pothooks. "You and I are the only ones who will ever know this." She turned back to him, eyes meeting his in a wide, stricken need for something. "It's been this way a long time, hasn't it?" he said. The unaffected simplicity of his sympathy must have been what broke through her last reserve. She leaned forward till her face almost touched his chest, speaking in a muffled, desperate way.

"Yes, Pothooks, and I don't think I can stand it much longer. Years of it. Like a child. Tantrums and drunks and dirty, sneaking, childish little tricks like this, anything to humiliate me or shame me or hurt me, accusing me of love affairs with every man on the trail, of stealing his pocket money, of trying to poison him.

"It isn't this sickness, these last years. No wife could complain of that. You couldn't even excuse him by saying the sickness had changed him, that he wasn't himself—half the time I don't think he's sick at all. You don't know how ghastly he makes it . . ."

Her voice faded out, and her hand closed on his arm, as if realizing the release she had allowed herself. She drew her head back, forcing her eyes to meet his, and he saw the shame start again.

"Now, don't be like that," he said, softly. "If I'd let my hair down with you, I wouldn't be ashamed of it afterwards. I'd know you understood. You've got to feel the same way with me. You wouldn't have got as personal in the first place if you hadn't felt some sympathy in me. You got to let the poison out sometime, Gail. You can't just let it fester and rot in there forever. If you had to get it off your chest, I consider it a privilege that it was with me."

Her mouth parted in a faint surprise. Then her head began moving from side to side in a faint motion, as if trying to understand something, her underlip glistening wetly. When she finally spoke, it was in a strange, husky voice.

"I can't reconcile it," she said.

"What?" he asked.

"In you," she said. "This kindness, this warmth . . . and . . ."

"And what?" His eyes were narrowing with the effort of trying to fathom her, and a sharp suspicion was forming in his mind.

"Do you know, Pothooks," she said, "that before we crossed the Red, I was going to fire you. And then, when you saved Sam's life like that—" she made a small, defeated gesture with her hand—"I—I just couldn't."

Before they could go on, Bob Slaughter lurched around the end of the chuck wagon, his yellow hair still dripping, to throw his cup in the wreck pan. It made a loud clatter in the abrupt silence. Marrs realized for the first time how close he had been holding Gail, with one arm about her waist. For a moment, just before Slaughter spoke, he was acutely aware of the scented softness of her body, and its effect on him. He pulled away.

"Having a little tete-a-tete?" asked Slaughter, sarcastically.

"That killing is going to cause Mrs.

Butler a lot of trouble," said Marrs. "I don't think you have a right to any sarcasm."

Slaughter's eyes were bloodshot, his face puffy. "That's just it, Mrs. Butler. Did you forget she was a married woman?"

"That sounds ironic, coming from you," Gail told him caustically. Then the tone of her voice changed. "Bob, you don't understand—"

"I think I do," he said, bitterly. "What I offered you was honest compared with—" his lips twisted on the word—"this."

Marrs let his head sink into his shoulders, lowering it slightly to stare at Slaughter. "Do you want to apologize to Gail?"

"I don't think it's necessary," said Slaughter.

"Maybe I better make it necessary," Marrs told him.

"POTHOOKS," cried Gail, and then Don Vargas stopped the whole thing by swinging in on his black and speaking loudly to Slaughter.

"What are you wasting time for, Roberto? If those soldiers don't hit our camp soon, Jared Thorne will."

Gail's head jerked upward. "*He* was there."

Marrs stared at Don Vargas, then snapped around to Slaughter again. "Why didn't you say so? If his jayhawkers are around here, this trail through the blackjack is the worst route in the world to follow.

"They can jump us from timber within fifty feet of the cattle on either side. Why don't you turn west along the river till the country opens up?"

"No cook is driving my cattle," said Slaughter.

Solo Sam had saddled his day horse and brought it over toward them. "He's right, Bob. No use taking more chances than need be."

"We're driving those cattle the way I started them," said Slaughter, his voice growing louder.

"And letting your men in for a nice ride to hell on a shutter, anytime Jared Thorne so chooses," said Pothooks. "Is that the way you figure?"

"I figure if a man hasn't got enough sand to follow where the boss leads, he shouldn't have signed up for a job like this in the first place."

"Yeah," said Pothooks. "I gathered that on the Red. It isn't the men that count. It's your reputation, most of all."

Slaughter's jaw muscles began to jump and bulge beneath the stubble of blonde hair. "You'd better get up on your chuck wagon, Pothooks, before I tromp on you."

"Or maybe it's more than your rep," said Pothooks. "This blackjack route heads eastward, don't it? Toward Ellsworth. Was Rickett there with Thibodaux? Did he want you to drive the cattle to Ellsworth instead of Dodge?"

Slaughter inclined his heavy torso forward in a sharp spasm. "Pothooks, I told you to—"

"Why should Rickett want that?" broke in Gail. "What is this, Pothooks?"

"The gambling faction in Ellsworth stands to go smash if no cattle go in there this year," said Pothooks. "What do you think would happen if Slaughter broke through the sodbusters and defied that quarantine law and eventually got to Ellsworth?"

Gail looked toward Slaughter with narrowing eyes. "Most of the other trail herders would follow his lead. They usually do." She shook her head vaguely, lines knitting into her brow. "You didn't, Slaughter. You wouldn't—"

"Nobody's ever questioned my loyalty to the brand I work for," said Slaughter, shaking with anger.

"Maybe it's about time they did," said Marrs.

Slaughter made a spasmodic shift toward Marrs, fists clamping shut. But something held him, perhaps a realization that this was something he could not remove by merely whipping Marrs. Slaughter was a man to stand on his own feet, and Marrs had never seen him look elsewhere for reassurance, before. But now, as if his direct, brutal nature were incapable of fully coping with this, he could not seem to help the movement of his eyes toward the others.

Windy met the gaze for a moment, then dropped his own eyes uncomfortably. The open animosity in Solo Sam's face caused Slaughter to drag in a deep breath. Pata

Pala's expression gave him no support; it held a blank reserve, as if the peglegged man were withholding a judgment.

"I'm not speaking for anything but the men," said Marrs. "If Thorne means to attack, you should move into open country for their sake."

"This blackjack route is shorter," said Slaughter. "No jayhawker is making me backtrack. Get on your horses and lift that herd off the bedground."

The men shifted uncertainly, none of them making a move to mount. Slaughter stared at their sullen suspicion, and his voice had raised to almost a shout. "You do think I sold out to Rickett. That's what's in your minds, isn't it?" He faced back toward Marrs, violently. "I didn't, damn you, I didn't."

"Prove it, then," said Marrs.

"I don't have to prove it," bawled Slaughter. He jumped for Solo Sam, catching his arm and spinning him toward his horse. "I gave an order. Get on your horse and ride those cattle."

It wheeled Sam in against his animal, and he had to grab a stirrup leather to keep from falling. He stood there, refusing to mount, a sullen defiance on his face.

"You can whip a crew all the way from the Gulf to Canada, Slaughter," he said. "But when the chips are down, it takes more than that to make them follow you."

SLAUGHTER whirled back to Marrs. "Tell them I didn't sell out. That's why I shot Thibodaux. Rickett was trying to force me into it. Tell them, damn you—"

"I wasn't there," said Marrs.

"You're the one causing this," said Slaughter. He had been shouting, and breathing so hard his whole torso pumped like a blowing horse. Now, suddenly, the movement of breath stopped lifting his great chest, and his voice lowered to an awesome guttural. There was murder in his eyes.

He moved to Marrs, taking three steps that put him close enough to reach out and grab the man. "Now tell them," he said. "Take that back, Pothooks. My guns are still with Pickle Bar and you know it. Take that back or I'll kill you."

"Bob," gasped Gail.

Anger lowered those thick lids over Marrs' black eyes, giving them that sulking sensuous look, and he contained himself with an effort so great his whole frame began trembling. "All you have to do is change the route, Slaughter."

"I'm not taking my orders from any greasy grub-spoiler!"

"Then take them from me," said Gail, in what was obviously a last effort to prevent what she saw coming. "I think Pothooks was right—"

"Take it back, Pothooks," said Slaughter, as if he hadn't even heard Gail, giving a vicious jerk on the cook's shirt that pulled Pothooks off-balance. "I didn't sell out to Rickett and you know—"

"I'm taking nothing back," Marrs bawled, grabbing Slaughter's hands and tearing them free. Slaughter shouted hoarsely, his whole massive body whipping around with the punch he threw at Marrs. The cook ducked in under the blow. He put his head into Slaughter's belly like a butting bull, knocking the big, blond trail boss back against the chuck wagon so hard the wreck pan slid off the lid and dirty dishes spilled their clatter all over the ground.

Slaughter caught Pothooks' chin with both hands and flipped him up with such force that the cook's feet came off the ground. While Marrs was still straightened up, Slaughter hit him in the stomach. This doubled Marrs over, blinding him for a moment with the intense pain. He felt a blow lift his head again, in a shocking, jarring way, and then there was a pounding force across his back, and he knew, in the dim recesses of his consciousness, that he had struck the ground.

He rolled over and came to his feet blindly. He sensed Slaughter's rush at him and dodged aside, taking a glancing blow on the head. He caught at Slaughter's arm before the man could pull it back. Realizing his grip was on the wrist, he put his other hand on the elbow. Slaughter tried to hit him with the other fist, but Marrs twisted the arm in a swift, vicious lever, swinging around Slaughter's side at the same time, and into his back, with a hammerlock.

Before Slaughter could break it, with his towering strength, Marrs jammed up on the arm, forcing him to bend over, and then

put all his weight against the man. Slaughter could not keep his face from going into the side of the chuck wagon. Gail let out a small scream at the sickening sound it made. The very intensity of the pain gave Slaughter's spasmodic struggle to free himself a violence that tore the arm from Marrs' hammerlock.

As Slaughter swung around, pawing blood from his face, Marrs hit him again. It knocked Slaughter's head aside with such a sharp jerk Pothooks thought the man's neck was broken.

Slaughter blocked the next blow with an upflung arm, and then threw himself at Pothooks. Pothooks blocked and counterpunched, catching Slaughter in the guts. Slaughter took it with a sick grunt, and caught Pothooks with a wild haymaker.

It put the cook off-balance enough for Slaughter to hit him full in the face. This knocked Marrs back, and Slaughter kept hitting him, keeping him off-balance, knocking him back and back and back. Few men could have remained erect under any one of the blows.

But with each one, Marrs let out a stubborn, grunting, animal sound of pain, stumbling back only so far as the blow knocked him, and there trying to regain enough balance to catch Slaughter.

Slaughter backed him all the way across camp, stumbling through gear and sougans, until Marrs finally reached him with a blind punch. It gave the cook time to set himself, and when Slaughter tried to return the blow, Marrs blocked it, and ducked in under, to start slugging. They stood toe to toe, meting out punishment that would have finished most men in a few seconds, slugging and grunting like a couple of bulls with locked horns.

"Stop them," sobbed Gail, "they'll kill each other."

SLAUGHTER was bigger and heavier than Marrs, possibly stronger, but in all the fights Pothooks had seen the man in, in all the battles he had heard about, the trail boss had never been forced to go his limit. Slaughter's immense, driving strength had always allowed him to finish it up quick and fast and flashy.

Now, in Pothooks' mind, was a grim, tenacious resolve to outlast Slaughter. Even now the flash was gone. It had settled down to the horse with the most bottom. It had become a terrible, awesome test of endurance. The very tenacity that Marrs had shown with the cattle mill on the Red was coming out in him again. Like a sullen, unyielding little bull he stood there, taking all Slaughter could dish out, and giving it right back.

As if sensing the man's intent, Slaughter made an effort to end it quickly, stepping back to draw in a great breath and force Marrs to take the offensive momentarily. Marrs did, with a stolid, unhurried eagerness, moving on it. Slaughter blocked his hook, stepping in to put all his weight and strength into the blow at Pothooks' guts. Pothooks could not avoid it, and the punch bent him over.

For one instant the back of Marrs' neck was exposed, Slaughter lifted his fist for that famous hammer blow that had ended his fights so many times before. But even as it came down, Marrs thrust his whole weight into Slaughter. His head was against Slaughter's belly and his arms about the man's hips when Slaughter's fist hit his neck. The gasp erupted from Marrs in a sick explosion, but he was already driving with his legs. It shoved Slaughter backward.

Stunned by the blow, Marrs nevertheless kept pushing. He felt another blow on his neck, but Slaughter was off-balance, stumbling backward, and it lacked its former force. Then they came up against the mess wagon again.

Marrs straightened, moving back far enough to slug Slaughter in the guts. Slaughter tried to keep himself straight and meet it. Again that awful slugging match began, Slaughter pinned in against the wagon, unable to avoid it. All he could do was meet Marrs blow for blow. He was tiring. His sounds, his movements, the ghastly, fixed, bloody expression on his face—all gave him away.

Marrs felt the slackening, and summoned the last concentrated force in him, catching Slaughter on the jaw with a vicious blow. It knocked Slaughter around till he was facing down the wagon. Marrs hit him again, solidly, terribly, grunting hoarsely with the awful effort. Slaughter slid down

the wagon box. He tried to keep his knees from buckling, tried to drive up again. Marrs hit him once more. Slaughter made a sick, defeated sound, and sank to the ground, rolling over on his belly.

Black hair down over his eyes, shirt torn from his heavy torso, blood and sweat dribbling off his face, Marrs took one step and caught the side of the wagon to keep himself from falling. Chest heaving, he stared dazedly down at the trail boss. Then a whooping roar filled his ears. The whole crew crowded around him, slapping him on the back, yelling and congratulating him.

They half-carried him to the water butt and soused it all over him, washing off the blood. Grinning feebly, he tried in a half-hearted way to shove them off. They would have none of it. Solo Sam tore the ruined shirt off and went and got one of his own. Windy pulled a bottle of rotgut from his sougan and tilted it up at Pothooks' mouth.

The fiery liquor cleared Pothooks' head. He realized he was trembling. Then the jubilance died down.

Slaughter had pulled himself erect. He looked them over, one by one, and on his face, Pothooks saw that it was not in the man to stay and rod a crew where he had been whipped by one of them. Finally, he turned his great bleeding frame and dragged it along the wagon to the end of the box. From there to his horse, he fell twice. It was painful, watching him drag himself onto the animal. Pothooks thought he had never seen such a defeated man.

But Slaughter reined the Quarter animal around and brought it back this way, sitting slack in the saddle, breathing in a shallow, sick way. His voice, when he spoke, was weak, but there was an undertone of vitriol that could not be missed.

"You'd better pack a gun from here on out," he told Pothooks, through split, puffy, bleeding lips. "We'll meet again, sooner or later. And when we do I'm shooting on sight!"

VIII

THERE were two or three fires winking through the velvety dusk of the timber, and fifteen or twenty men gathered around them. Here and there, tarnished buttons glinted brazenly on faded blue coats, or the brim of a forage cap cut its oblique, tight line across the side of a man's head.

There was a bobble among the picketed horses beyond the fire, a sudden stirring and whinnying that should have reached the men. But they were too busy laughing and talking and eating, and only when the rider appeared in the circle of firelight did they jump to their feet, scooping old Springfields off the ground or yanking Navy pistols from their belts.

Jared Thorne shouldered his heavy way to the front. He had not drawn his gun, but his scarred, calloused hand was on the butt of it, sticking from his belt. Rickett was at his side, and when he saw who was sitting the horse, a nasty smile fluttered his lips.

"Well, Bob. You get caught in a stampede?" Thorne started to pull his gun, but Rickett laid a restraining hand on his wrist. "Wait, Jared. I think our trail boss has finally come to talk business."

"You still want the Pickle Bar driven to Ellsworth?" Bob Slaughter asked him. There was a chill, ugly light in his eyes.

"Yes." Rickett nodded, smiling wryly. "Yes, I suppose so."

"My way?" said Slaughter.

"What is your way?" said Rickett.

"Leave my cattle and the girl alone," said Slaughter.

"*Your* cattle?"

"Yes," said Slaughter, something dogged entering his manner. "I've driven them clear from the Nueces, Rickett. I've bottle fed calves and coddled sick heifers. I've sung to them at night and fed them every day and fought with every trail boss along the Chisholm for the best bed grounds. And then what does she do?"

The focus of his eyes had changed, looking beyond the men, and he seemed to be talking to himself more than Rickett.

"She takes up with some damn cook they pull out of a greasy spoon in Dallas. She wouldn't even believe I hadn't sold out to you. None of them would. Well, now I don't give a damn. I've quit the Pickle Bar and I owe no allegiance to anybody but Bob Slaughter. And no damn grub-spoiling, pot-hooking coosie is taking over my cattle

halfway up the trial. I'm driving them through. Do you hear? I'm driving them through."

"All right, Bob, all right," laughed Rickett, placatingly. "Light down and we'll tak about it."

Slaughter stepped off stiffly. His face had not been washed, and formed a grisly mask of cut, bruised, puffy flesh crusted with dried blood. His shirt hung in tatters from his massive torso, and he walked with a decided limp.

He went over to a pail of water they had carried from the river and began sloshing his face. The jayhawkers spread around him cautiously, mistrustfully, but he went on with his ablutions, supremely indifferent to them. In his mind was but one driving thought. To get Pothooks Marrs. Even more humiliating to him than the beating was the thought that another man should finish his drive north. He would be laughed at from Fort Worth to Dodge. He tore his shirt off and wiped at his face.

"You got something for me to wear?" he asked.

"Sure, sure," said Rickett. "Get him a shirt, Jared. What's this about leaving the girl alone?"

"Just that," said Slaughter. "Those cattle are still Pickle Bar. All I want is to get rid of that crew." His lips flattened across his teeth. "And leave that cook to me."

"Then what?" said Rickett.

Slaughter's eyes roved over the men. "Jared's with you, isn't he? Any of these men ever punched cows?"

"They've done about everything," said Rickett.

"They can be my crew, then," said Slaughter. "If you want those cattle in Ellsworth, you can give me this bunch to do it with. Marrs was heading for open country. They'll have those cattle lie down the Red to the West. If we can hit them before they leave the blackjacks, it'll be easier."

"Tell your men we're riding, Jared," said Rickett. He slapped Slaughter on the back, chuckling. "This is what I like now, Bob, boy. We'll just forget about that little mistake at the Station House. If Thibodaux was too slow for you, that's his bad luck. I never thought anyone could edge him out."

Slaughter nodded, taking the shirt Thorne handed him. It was old denim, for a smaller man, and it split across the laced bulk of his shoulder muscles when he put it on, but that didn't matter. He got something to eat from the fire, and stepped back on his horse. The other men were mounting in a flurry of stamping, snorting animals, and Thorne quickly kicked out the fires. Then they left, riding the best of the night westward along the bottom trails.

Marrs had the head start of a day on them, but could be no more than ten or fifteen miles ahead. Near dawn they came across a Cheyenne camp. The Indians said Pickle Bar had passed further north late in the afternoon. Slaughter led out of the bottoms and struck the trail of cattle following the breaks through the blackjack. The howling of wolves from far off filled these parks with ghostly sound. This stopped an hour before dawn.

SLAUGHTER was beginning to feel the drain, now. He found himself dozing in the saddle, the cuts and bruises stiffened so painfully on his face that he could hardly move his mouth. Dawn light was seeping down through the timber when they came to another break, and started to cross the opening through buffalo grass wet with dew.

A startled movement from timber on the other side drew Slaughter's attention. Then a shout, and the detonation of a shot.

One of the horses beside Slaughter whinnyed and reared, and the rider kicked free and jumped before it went down. Slaughter could see the patches of a pinto horse over there now.

"It's Sam," he shouted. "They must have put him out to watch."

The deafening, rolling fire of Springfields filled his consciousness as Thorne's men began shooting. The pinto had been wheeling. It went down, and Sam with it. But he came to his feet, a long lean figure in the dim light. He backed into the tree, working his Henry with deadly effect.

Another horse went down behind Slaughter, and one of Thorne's men threw up his arms and pitched across the neck of his animal as it bolted across the timber.

It put the whole bunch of them in a wild, indecisive mill.

"Looks like that cook of yours is smarter than you give him credit for," shouted Rickett, fighting his spinning horse in beside Slaughter.

"Get him," Slaughter bawled at Thorne. "Get him before he reaches Marrs."

Thorne tried to rally a bunch, leading them across the clearing in a charge. But Sam halted in the cover of the trees to empty his Henry at them. It was a sixteen-shot gun, and when horses began to go down again, they couldn't face it, breaking and scattering, leaving a man lying in the grass out there, and a wounded horse kicking and rolling farther on.

"We'll have to scatter and get around him through that timber," Rickett shouted at Thorne.

Cursing, Slaughter pulled his roper into the trees. It was so thick here he could not ride fast. He knocked his hat off on a limb. All about him was the clattering and crashing of horses. Sam must have reloaded again, for the gun started up. *Damn him,* thought Slaughter, *that noise will bring Marrs and all the Pickle Bar.*

He veered toward the sound, Colt in his hand. He saw a jayhawker ahead of him. The man pitched sideways off his horse suddenly, shouting in pain, striking a tree trunk and flopping off to lie on his back. His eyes and mouth were gaping open and there was a wet red patch in the middle of his chest. Then Slaughter saw Pata Pala, and he must have been the one who had shot the jayhawker, for his gun was wreathing smoke.

Slaughter pulled his horse in to a rearing halt for a steady shot, and over the sights of the bucking Colt in his hand saw Pata Pala's figure crumple in the saddle. The peg leg pointed skyward as the man slid off, disappearing over the horse's rump.

"All right," said Waco Garrett, from Slaughter's flank, "now I'll send you to hell on the same shutter," and Slaughter wheeled to see the man standing between two stunted trees with a six-gun levelled.

GAIL was within the linchpin when the shooting started. She had already dressed and was doing up her hair. Paul stirred beside her, opening his eyes, as she started to climb out.

"Get me a drink of water, will you?" he said.

"Something's happening," she said. "Can't you hear the shooting?"

"I said I wanted a drink of water—"

"Paul," she said angrily. "Can't you get it through your head? Something's happening. We're being attacked or something."

She pulled the old double-barreled Greener out with her as she dropped off the seat onto a wheel, and, then to the ground. Men were scrambling out of their sougans and Windy was shouting for the Caverango Kid to bring in some horses. Pothooks Marrs ran by Gail, shouting at her over his shoulder.

"Sam had the backtrail guard for this morning. That must be him in the trees, Gail. We've got to back him up. I've left Guy Bedar and Windy on the herd. If we can't hold them, make for the river. Maybe we can prevent a stampede by putting them in the water. A mill's better than a run—"

And then he was gone, plunging into the trees. The Caverango Kid raced in bareback, pushing a cut of horses ahead of him.

Don Vargas swung aboard his black, and Kettle Corey dabbed a rope on his hairy little chopping pony, and tried to walk down the clothesline to the excited horse so he could throw a kack on.

The others hadn't bothered to mount, already disappearing into the trees after Marrs. Suddenly they were all gone, and the silence was shocking, after that noise and confusion. Only Kettle remained, still trying to get that saddle on. Gail leaned the shotgun against a wheel, and unhobbled her wagon team where they had grazed nearby, separated from the cavvy of cowhorses.

She hitched them up, then took the shotgun, and walked to a rise in the ground. From here, she could still hear the gunfire in the timber. She could look the other way down onto the herd. The animals made a peaceful picture, many of them still getting awkwardly onto their feet from where they had bedded down, as yet untroubled by the far-off shots.

Then Gail saw a rider line away from

the cattle and make for a cove in the timber. He skirted the hill upon which she stood, screened from him by buffalo brush, and she saw it was Guy Bedar. She dropped down the other side to meet him in a gully. He rounded a corner and brought his horse up in sharp surprise.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"Thought Marrs might need some help," he told her.

"Did you know?" She looked with frank disbelief up at his narrow, tight face, his eyes that finally dropped before hers. She raised the shotgun. "You turn right back and ride that herd. If you try to get away, I'll use this without compunction. And if anything happens to those cattle, I'll hold you personally responsible, and act accordingly."

He gave her a last, indecisive look, glanced at the shotgun, then wheeled and trotted back through the gully. She climbed the hill, placing herself where he could see her. Twice, he turned to look back, but didn't stop his horse till it was within a few feet of the herd again.

Renewed firing turned her attention the other way. A man in a blue army coat and striped pants came stumbling out of the trees, leading a horse. Kettle Corey turned from where he had finally managed to saddle his dancing pony, drawing his gun. But the man in striped trousers had already fallen on his face, releasing the horse. It tossed its head, whinnying, and broke in Gail's direction.

A pair of riders followed the first man, bursting from timber at full gallop. They reined in sharply when they saw Kettle. The fat man's gun racketed twice, and one of the riders pitched off his horse. The other man tried to swing his animal back into the trees, shooting wildly at Kettle. The animal stumbled and threw him.

He struggled to his hands and knees, shouting something after the fleeing animal, and then crawled the few feet into the trees. From there his gun began to go off. Kettle Corey was reluctant to let go his cowpony. He tried to pull it in behind the linchpin.

"You damn little biscuit cutter, get in behind here before I flay your hide right off your—"

His nasal voice broke off with a cry of pain, and he released the animal, running in a stumbling way to the linchpin, where he dropped into the cover of a wheel, holding his side. Gail flung a last glance at Guy Bedar, and ran down the hill toward the wagon. The man was still firing from timber, and she could see wood chipping off the box of the linchpin. When she was close enough, she stopped, and let both barrels of her shotgun go. When the deafening sound of that was over, she realized there was no more shooting from the trees.

She ran to Kettle, kneeling beside him, but he grinned up at her. "I'm all right. You'd need a howitzer to get through this tallow I pack. He just chipped a little of it off the side. Lord knows I can stand to lose some." He paused, squinting out at the body of the man he had shot off his horse. "Ever seen Harry Rickett before?"

"The man Marrs said Slaughter had sold out to," she muttered, staring at the body. "No."

"That's him," said Kettle. "Used to work for Boa Snyder down in Nueces County." He started edging from behind the wheel, and Gail cried out to him, trying to pull him back. He took her hand off. "I got something I want to see. You stay here. I think you cleaned the timber out good enough with that Greener of yours."

THE sweat bathed his fat face as he crawled to the body, holding his bloody side. He fished in Rickett's coat, pulled out something. She saw him nod in some satisfaction, and turn back this way. When he reached her, he was holding a short-barreled Derringer in his hand.

"I've waited a long time to find out what that man packed," he said, settling himself with a sigh against the wheel. "It's a Slotter Derringer, Gail. Caliber .47. You don't find that calibre very often." He fished a chunk of mashed lead out of his pocket, holding it up. "This bullet killed Gary Carson down in Nueces County."

"Then—" she looked out at Rickett, as the comprehension formed fully in her mind—"Lee Marrs Benton didn't murder Gary Carson?"

"Not according to this evidence," said

Kettle. "And I have every conviction that he had nothing to do with the man who was tortured to death near Corpus Christi. It could have been done by any one of a thousand rustlers or murderers along the border at that time. Carson's murder was just so brutal and pointless that it formed circumstantial evidence linking Benton with the other killing, and public opinion did the rest."

"Rickett was with you, then, when you surrounded Benton in the cabin?" she asked.

Kettle nodded. "Rickett was representing the Fort Worth Cattle Company. But I found out later he had been on Boa Snyder's payroll previous to working for Fort Worth. We were all scattered around the cabin when we trapped Benton, none of us very close to each other, and naturally took it to be Benton who shot Carson. But when I saw Carson's body, I didn't think such a long shot would make a hole that size in a man. I went back and looked around, and found this slug about halfway between timber and cabin. A Derringer don't carry very far anyway, and that's just about where it would have dropped after going through Carson, if Rickett had shot from the fringe of trees."

"But why should Rickett shoot Carson?"

"If Rickett was still working for Boa, it's obvious," said Kettle. "Boa Snyder, Curt Young, half a dozen others had gotten their start mavericking. By this time they were big men, sitting fancy saddles in state and county politics. With mavericking now in the same pen as rustling, it would have caused them no end of trouble to have their past operations uncovered. Which, apparently, the Nueces County investigation was well on the way to doing. They had to divert attention quick, and Lee Marrs Benton became the goat. They were successful enough. The murder focused so much attention on Lee Benton that the county investigation was forgotten."

"And you let them do it," she said, savagely.

He shook his gross head, smiling sadly. "I ain't no hero. With the meager evidence I had, the machine that made Benton a goat could have broke me like a matchstick if I'd so much as opened my mouth."

She studied him for a space, the savage expression fading from her face. "Why is it Lee Benton wasn't hanged?"

"Not till after Benton was in jail did Boa and Curt and the others find what a tiger they had by the tail," grinned Kettle. "Benton had mavericked with most of them in the early days, and seen what edgy operators they were. After a couple of minor doublecrosses, he figured he'd play it safe. He began to record the men he rode with, the territory they covered, the brand and earmarks put on the mavericks, and the probable outfit to which those mavericks really belonged.

"With mavericking now looked on as rustling, you can see what that kind of information would do to a man in politics. When Benton realized he was becoming the goat, he put this information in the hands of a lawyer, to be opened upon his death. Boa Snyder tried to locate the lawyer, but he realized what dynamite he had, and hid out. Finally Boa and his machine had to get busy and have Benton's sentence commuted to life. Apparently he got out on good behavior."

Renewed firing from the timber turned Gail in that direction, and the words left her in a husky, bitter way. "How ironic that you should prove his innocence now when already it may be too late."

IX

COTTONWOODS raised their white branches above the scruboak, and persimmons gleamed claret in their first full light of the rising sun. It had settled down to a stalk in the timber now, between the jayhawkers and the Pickle Bar men. Pothooks Marrs had been crawling through the scarlet mallow on his belly for the last few moments, stopping now and then to try and place one of Jared Thorne's men. From ahead came a shot, then silence. He had not yet come across Solo Sam, and he was beginning to feel an insidious fear for the boy. A swish of brush off to his flank caused him to flatten out, hooking a thumb over the hammer of his old Walker. An immense red-headed, red-bearded man appeared abruptly, farther down the avenue of stunted trees, bent forward to follow someone's

tracks, a Navy Colt in his hand.

Marrs was about to throw down on him when the man jumped back suddenly, taking cover behind a tree, and started firing. A sharp click came from his gun. He pulled the trigger again, with the same effect.

"Well, Senor," said Don Vargas, stepping into the open. "If I had known your gun was unloaded, I would have met you sooner. Let me show you how much better a saca tripas is. It never gets unloaded."

"I got something here to beat that," said the redhead, dropping the gun to pull a naked Bowie from his belt, and stepped out.

"Pah," spat Don Vargas, circling him for an opening. "Down in Mexico they give those to babies to play with. You haven't seen a knife till you've seen a gets-the-guts."

"Then let me see it," shouted the redhead, and jumped at him with a bestial snarl. Don Vargas dodged the overhand thrust and came in below with a typical Mexican underhand. The other man whirled violently so that his hip and back were in against the Mexican's stomach. Under any other cicumstances, turning his back that much would have been a fatal, foolish maneuver. But it took him aside from that underhand thrust for just an instant, putting him within the circle of Don Vargas' arms. And before the Mexican could shift, the redhead had brought his weapon down in a slash that ripped the Mexican's knife arm elbow to hand.

With a howl, Don Vargas dropped his knife, and tried to catch the redhead from behind. The man caught his bloody arm and threw him over his shoulder onto the ground. Pothooks Marrs jumped up, cocking his gun to throw down for good this time, because the redhead was springing onto Don Vargas with knife upraised for the finishing blow. But the shot came before Marrs could fire.

The redhead hovered above Don Vargas, as if suspended, then sprawled flat out on him. Don Vargas groaned with the weight, squirmed out from beneath.

"Gracias, Senor Marrs," he said.

"It wasn't me," said Marrs. "What are you doing here anyway? I thought you were Slaughter's man."

"I am my own man," said Don Vargas defensively. "And my allegiance to the Pickle Bar comes before any dubious friendship Slaughter may have offered me. If it was not you who shot . . ."

"It was me," Waco Garrett's vinegar voice finished for him. They turned to see the man lying back against a tree, saw the bloody mess of his belly. He grinned weakly up at Marrs.

"Slaughter let the daylight through. I had the drop on him, too. You got the ringiest bull in the pasture there, Pothooks. I never saw such sure death with a gun. I don't know how he got me first, but he did." He tried to laugh, and blood formed in mordant crimson froth on his lips.

His head dropped and the eyes rolled shut and he stopped talking, and breathing, and living. Staring at the dead man, a dogged, sullen expression filled Marrs' face.

"Slaughter," he said, in a flat, dead voice, "Slaughter . . ."

"Hey, compadre," called Don Vargas, "wait for me."

BUT Marrs was already over on the sign, and he left the Mexican behind fast. He found where the horse had been pulled to a halt in a small break. That was where Slaughter had stopped to shoot Waco. Farther on was a big patch of blood, and Marrs followed this in to a thicket of silver buffalo brush. Pata Pala reared up from the dense brushes, with the click of a cocked gun, then dropped the weapon when he saw who it was.

"You hit bad?" said Marrs.

"Just my leg," said the man. "You can get Slaughter if you high tail it. I nailed his horse as he went by. He's on foot, in toward the wagons."

Marrs plunged on through the trees, into a clearing and saw the immense, blond man across the way snapping back toward him.

"Slaughter?" he shouted and fired. Slaughter completed his half turn before the shock of the bullet overcame his own initial impetus, knocking him backward. He tried to stop himself, and pull up his gun. Still running forward, Marrs fired again. The blond man made a small, grunting sound. His knees doubled up.

Solo Sam appeared at the edge of the trees and came over to stare down at Slaughter.

"I guess they're broken up," he said, at last. "I saw about six of them heading back down the river."

"Waco nailed Jared Thorne back in the timber," said Marrs. "Pick up Pata Pala for me, will you? He's hit in the leg, I'm going to the wagons."

He went at a dog-trot back through the scruboak, reloading his gun mechanically. Coming into the open, he saw Rickett lying midway between timber and the wagons. He halted a moment, and a bitter, hollow expression lined his face, as the first emotion broke through since Waco had died, flooding him with a host of old memories, the old pains and hates and agonies of ten years before. Gail and Kettle were coming from the wagons, and not until she came up close did he see the strange set expression on her face.

"What is it?" he said.

Gail looked at him without answering, and Kettle spoke for her. "Paul Butler's dead in the wagon. One of Rickett's bullets must have gone through the sideboard."

Marrs looked sharply at Gail, lines of compassion cutting into his brow. She came into his arms and let her face touch his chest, unashamed of Kettle seeing it, speaking in a low, dead voice.

"I can't feel anything, Pothooks. Do you blame me? No sorrow or grief. No emotion of any kind. Is that wrong?"

"I understand," he said. "Don't try to feel anything. Just try to bury it all, here." She looked up quickly, as if remembering something, and he nodded. "Slaughter's dead."

She did not speak for a moment, studying his face. "I know who you are, Pothooks," she said at last, quietly.

"I figured you did, by now," he told her.

"She also knows you didn't kill Gary Carson," said Kettle, holding up the mashed slug. "This bullet nailed Carson, Pothooks, but it came from Harry Rickett's gun."

Marrs stared at him with a strange, fading expression on his face. "That's why you played cat and mouse all this time?"

"I had the bullet," grinned Kettle. "It wasn't complete proof that you were innocent, but it made me give you a little rope, Pothooks. When you pulled those cattle out at the Red River instead of drowning them for Rickett, I figured you were throwing a straight rope."

"That day we left Dallas," said Marrs, "I found a bit of red flannel in a tree in the Trinity bottoms, just after I parted with Rickett."

"That was me all right," said Kettle, with a sigh. "I was coming back from a night of revelry in Dallas, and overheard the bunch of you talking. A piece of my shirt must have ripped off when I went back to climb on my horse."

Marrs looked over Gail's shoulder at Rickett's body again, and a dark withdrawal tightened his face. Gail reached up impulsively, touching his lips with her fingers in a maternal, reassuring way.

"I know what you're thinking, Pothooks, but—"

"Maybe you don't, Gail," he said, through stiff lips. "Revenge isn't in my mind. It never was. I'm even glad it didn't have to be me who shot Rickett. I don't want to get Boa or Curt or any of them. In a sense, they weren't to blame, any more than I was. They started mavericking with as good faith as a thousand other Texans back from the war. They just had the sense or the luck to get out of it quicker than I did, and to hide their back trail better. I just want to be left alone, Gail, by all of them."

"Then you will be," she said. "When I married Paul, the Pickle Bar swung a bigger loop than Boa Snyder and Curt Young and all the rest of them put together. We had representatives in half a dozen cattle associations, and Paul's political connections went right up to Washington. If we get this herd through, it will put Pickle Bar on the way up there again. Snyder or Young wouldn't dare touch someone connected with us. If you drove this herd to Dodge, you'd be connected with us."

"I'll drive it to Dodge," he said quietly.

"And if you stayed on afterwards, to boss the crew . . ."

"I'll stay on as long as you want me, Gail."

Slow Elk on Alder Crick

By O. E. FRY

The Star-Bar was as cow-short as a buck Indian's whiskers. And old Ace and Caddo were knocked bowlegged when they savvied the whys and wherefores.

"STAR-BAR," says Ace, sort of cranky, "Star-Bar, . . . We sure misnamed this ranch. 'The Cream-puff' would be more like. I'm telling you, like I've done a thousand times a'ready; Old Chief Spotted Calf and his Arapahoes are Slow-Elkin us right into bankruptcy. Them bucks are livin' fat on our Whoa-Haws." Ace glared at me and saturates the side of our stove with tobacco juice.

"You got a filthy nature," I reprove him. "With the whole floor to spit on, you still splatter the stove."

"More sanitary to spit on the stove, sort of cauterizes th' germs," Ace disagrees, which is his natural inclination.

"Anyway you're wrong about Spotted Calf and his braves," I ignore the argument about the stove, knowing I can't win, anyway. "Spotted Calf is a good Indian."

"He ain't dead," Ace grunts. "Besides, even a good Indian would have to eat."

"We're riding out to Alder Crick, today, and having a look-see," I inform him, flipping another flapjack onto the stack. "Clean out your mouth and come eat."

Ace grunts his six-foot length offa his bunk and steps to the door. He sticks his head out, then pulls it in, quick. "Nu-huh," he says, rubbing his ear which the wind had bit into. "Must be ten below," he says, after awhile. "Only a fool would go sashaying around in this kinda weather lookin' for Slow-Elkin Indians. Don't you know that an Indian hibernates when the temperature hits zero?"

"And I tell you again," I says, exasperated, "that it isn't Indians stealing our cattle. We got to do something or we'll be back riding for old Charlie McCain, and taking his raw-hiding. You damn sure wouldn't sit in the bunkhouse this kind of weather if Old Charlie was paying your wages."

"Ah, hell!" Ace grumbles, "you win, like you allus do, but I'm a-tellin' you; you'll find a Buck chewin' on the hock bone of them missin' beeves."

"Well, if I do he'll be wearing chaps and spurs, which I haven't yet seen an Indian Buck do."

We eat in silence, after that, except for the "slurp, slurp" and "chomp, chomp" of my partner's mouth, which he makes more noise with than a stump-chewing horse. Ace finds a few hundred excuses for hanging around the fire, and it's doubtful if I ever get him away from the house until I empty our water-bucket into the stove. Ace sure can sling the lingo, but I get him onto his horse and we ride across the prairie toward Alder Crick, which is our winter holding-grounds.

Ace humps upon his horse, with his bandanna around his face, like a story-book badman and his sheepskin tight buttoned. He grunts every time I say anything, which after a while I begin to wonder, have I wandered into an Indian pow-wow, or somethin'.

Charlie McCain's O-O range runs right up to our Alder Crick range. The ridge which separates Alder Crick from Powderface Canyon is the line. It is ten-twelve miles from there to his ranch headquarters on the bank of the Canadian, close to where Skunkneck Canyon opens into the river bed. The Star-Bar ranchhouse is close to six miles the other way from Alder Crick, which makes it about sixteen-eighteen miles between the two houses. Chief Spotted Calf and his Arapahoes have a camp on the Canadian, at the mouth of Powderface Canyon. Which is about the whole layout,


VESTAL

at the time Ace and me take our little ride in the ten below weather. Of course there's a few nester families slow-starving in some of the grass swales, but they don't count, not being, as you might say, too human.

Alder Crick was so named on account of the cottonwoods which grew along it;—sort of like calling a fat man slim, and vice-versa. It is a long, deep swale in the prairie, with a buffalo-grass carpet and lots of bunch-grass. There is a little spring-fed stream of water flowing down it, crossing and twisting, until it is some sizeable when it finally reaches the river. I would have built the Star-Bar house in Alder Crick, only Ace says that it is too close to the O-O and he cannot stand the thought of looking at Old Charlie's puss every morning for breakfast. Well, I can understand that, so we built at the foot of the Red Hills and just winter-graze on the Crick.

Once down under the bank of the crick we were out of the cold wind, so Ace drops his bandanna from the bridge of his nose, and takes a bite from his plug of tobacco. We ride down toward the river, taking it slow, and cutting for sign. We don't have much luck, which isn't strange, since the ground is frozen solid and won't take tracks.

"Not a bit of use, Caddo," Ace says, pulling his piebald pacer to a halt. "Old Spotted Calf's braves could come in here riding barefoot ponies and chouse our stock off across the prairie and leave nary a sign. I vote we go a-callin' on the Chief with our Peacemakers out and our hair pants on. We'd scare a calf out of the Chief and his braves and maybe learn something. What say?"

"So we'd scare the Chief and his braves, eh?"

"Sure, a six-gun is bad medicine to an Indian."

"So? Aren't you forgetting what happened to Curly Vane in Reno that time he pulled his gun on the Chief's nephew, Charlie Step-and-a-half? Curly hasn't been feeling so good since."

"Yeah, that's right." Ace studies for a minute, then: "How about gettin' Charlie and the O-O boys to help?"

"No go," I refuse. "Old Charlie prophesied we'd be begging for help. We kill our own skunks, Ace."

"Well, let's call on the Chief, peaceable, just sort of looking around. We might pick up a lead or two."

"We'll look a while longer, first," I half agree.

We do, too, but it don't do us no manner of good. About the only thing we discover is that the Star-Bar's days as a cattle ranch are short, unless something is done pronto, if not before. It is a very gloomy discovery, and one which is not inclined to make for peace and contentment.

"You can waste your time if you want," says Ace. "Me, I'm calling on the Chief." He starts off toward the river, figuring on following the river bank up to the mouth of Powderface where the Indians are camped. I can't let him go alone, so I follow.

WE FOLLOW an old cattle trail down into the brakes of the river, and wind around through the thickets of willows and young cottonwoods. We were maybe half way to Powderface when we meet a horseman. It is Sheriff McKeown, from Reno. He pulls up his horse and cocks a knee over the horn of his saddle.

"Howdy, boys," he greets us. "Riding for your health?"

"Howdy, Sheriff," I answer, speaking very cordial, as McKeown is a very salty gent, and has been known to shoot to kill. "We are headed for Spotted Calf's camp for a confab with the Chief."

"Something special you wish to see the Chief about?" McKeown asks, a grin on his map which I don't like the looks of.

"Why, no, just gab a while, is all."

"Then I would advise you boys to pick some other time to call socially on the Chief. Believe me, I know whereof I speak." He sticks his cigarette in his mouth and lights it.

"The Chief sick?" Ace asks. I am surprised, as Ace is usually bashful when McKeown is around. McKeown chased Ace clear across the Caddo country one time, thinking he was a horsethief.

"No, I reckon I couldn't say that," the Sheriff replies. "He looked plenty healthy to me. I just came from there."

"I don't sabe, then," Ace grunts. Ace is a half-breed Cheyenne, which accounts for

the way he grunts.

"You will," McKeown flips, "you will!!" He swings his foot back to the stirrup and gigs his horse gently with his spurs. "So long, fellows, see you some more." He rides off following the same trail that Ace and me came over. I hear him laughing as he winds around behind a clump of willow trees.

"Now what do you think of that?" I ask Ace.

"How should I know what a crazy galoot, who would think I am a horsethief, has on his mind? To hell with him. Come on." Ace shakes his reins in a funny way he has of starting his horse, and rides off. I follow.

"We are damn near there," I remark, when I see the sandstone bluff that marks the mouth of Powderface. "Suppose we look around before we bust in on the Chief?" I am all for caution. I can't forget the funny way the sheriff acted.

"I am through lookin'," Ace allows. "Me an' the Chief are goin' diddy-wa-diddy. In fact I think I will just ride up and shoot him."

"Go ahead," I answer. "That will leave me sole owner of the Star-Bar, as Willie Skunkneck and Charlie Step-and-a-half will then lift your scalp." Ace wilts at that, not that he is afraid of Willie and Charlie, but because he does not like the idea of me owning the Star-Bar.

"I won't shoot him," he decides, "anyway not all at once."

There is a big spring up under the bluff, which is where the Chief has his lodge; we ride to it. We are still some distance away when a bunch of braves break out of the willows and surround us. They are nattily attired in plenty of paint and beaded breechclothes. I suspect that something is up. Ace pow-wows with them, him understanding the lingo. His face turns pale, which is some feat as he does not often wash. He makes a couple of tries before he can speak. "My Lord, Caddo!" he gasps. "We gotta make a break for it! Grab your guns an' start shootin'!"

"You," I say, sarcastic, "and the Chief, are going 'diddy-wa-diddy,' remember? Why the sudden itch to be somewhere else?"

"We've busted right into a dog-feast," he gasps, looking mighty sick. I am not feeling so good myself, either, by then, but I manage to jeer at him: "Impossible, it is the Star-Bar beef which the Chief eats, anyway that is what you claim."

"I must be wrong," he admits. "But how are we going to get out of this?" A couple of the braves have taken the reins of our horses from us and are leading them toward the camp.

"I will shoot you and you can shoot me," I suggest.

"No," he shakes his head, "I will even eat dog before I will do that."

"My mouth is not big enough," I protest.

"Why?" he asks. "I have never seen a bigger one."

"Maybe you don't know how 'dog' swells up in mouth," I suggest, at the same time not feeling too well.

"My mamma was a Cheyenne, but I still don't like dog," he groans.

"You will eat it and like it."

"Maybe I will eat it, but damned if I'm gonna like it," he comes back. By that time we are at the Indian camp and Chief Spotted Calf comes to greet us, but all I can see is a crowd of squaws ganged around a long bed of glowing embers.

"How?" says the Chief, holding up his hand in greeting.

"Not so good," I answer, likewise holding my hand up. "I am very sick, Chief. I think I will lie down somewhere." I see that he understands, as he looks sympathetic, then his eyes brighten. "Big feast," he says. "You feel better." I know I am sunk. An Indian is very hospitable—he will feed you if he has to clip you on the back of the head with a tommyhawk.

"I will gut-shoot you when we are out of this," I snarl at Ace. "If you had listened to me we would not be in this fix."

"If you are gonna shoot me, do it now, before I get a bunch of dog in my belly," he comes right back.

"What I want to know is: how did McKeown get out of staying for the feast?" I ask, although I know Ace is just as ignorant as me.

"Leave it to that ranny," Ace says. "He will talk out of anything."

IT IS soon evident that we are the guests of honor. We are led to a big cottonwood log and the Chief motions for us to sit down. We do. There is quite a powwow, then the feast begins. We begin it.

I am not talking much about that feast. In fact I wish I do not know about it. I am a long-suffering man, and boy, how I suffered. Ace also. We are very weak when it is over, hardly able to ride our horses, although we are well stuffed. I have often thought that an Indian lives the "only" life, but that dog-feast sure cures me of that. I decide that it is much better to wear pants and eat beef—which brings me back to the Star-Bar cows which are missing.

In a couple of days we are able to be up and around, although very weak and gaunt. We find that more Star-Bar cattle have disappeared. In fact there are very few left on Alder Crick. Ace blows up, but not enough to go back to the mouth of Powderface. We do a lot of riding but learn nothing. It seems strange, if not downright mysterious, how a full grown cow or steer can disappear without leaving a trace. Of course the ground is frozen, but there are lots of sandy washes along the crick bottoms, and in the canyons, that should take a track. I figure that the nesters are butchering a few of them, but that does not account for the amount of Star-Bar stock which have vanished.

"I am glad it is almost spring," I tell Ace, one day. "Charlie will probably give us our jobs back, then."

"Yeah," he says, gloomily. "I'm afraid he will."

Things drag along. It gets to the point where we have to still-hunt for days to kill enough of our own beef to keep us going. The ground thaws, but by that time there is not enough cattle left to track.

"I am going to Reno," I tell Ace, one day. "I am going to get very, very drunk and disorderly. I don't like to mislead you, but will you go along on this pilgrimage?"

"Hell" he exclaims, "that's what I've been trying to think of myself for a month. I have been practically a half wit since you got us into that dog-feed." How do you like that? I am so mad I am about to take a poke at him. Then I remember that Ace is a good rough-and-tumble fighter, so I go down to the corral and rope out my blue roan and saddle him. Ace ropes his piebald.

We ride along over the prairie, with a warm spring sun shining down, and the summer grass beginning to green up around the bunches of old bunch grass. A few quail whirr away as we ride along the lips of low swales, and the meadow larks sway in clumps of buck-brush. It is all very peaceful and romantic. I see a bunch of riders away over toward the North Fork and guess that it is probably Indians. I think that they lead a very nice life, then I remember that dog-feed. Disgusting.

Some of the O-O boys are in Reno liquoring up for the summer. Curly Vane and Big Ears O'Keefe are in Mike Malone's bar-and-dancehall. There are some others there, too, but Big Ears and Curly lead us right up to the bar for a drink—or two.

"Mike," says Big Ears, "fill up four glasses with that special hogwash of yours. The Star-Bar and the O-O are about to celebrate! Squawmen and nesters hit for the tall timber. Yippe-e-e, ride 'em cowboy!" Big Ears is away ahead of us with his drinking, but never let it be said that the Star-Bar lingers in the drag. We catch up, although it is quite a struggle, being, you might say, out of practice . . . It is early morning before we are even, and by that time we are sitting around a table singing some new songs which are just out, like "Oh, Susannah" and "Sam Bass." Then Ace begins to get confidential and tells about the time we helped Old Jim Reed sell his cavvy, only we had to do the work on account of Jim being gone on a buying trip into the Panhandle and not knowing anything about the deal. I don't like for Ace to grow so confidential, on account of there is some things which should be forgotten, or at least hardly ever mentioned. Then I remember that Ace is drunk and isn't noway accountable for what he says.

Big Ears laughs fit to kill, almost crying in my drink, he is so tickled. "Ace," he gurgled, "we are brothers," which I think is no compliment. "That is the funniest damn thing I ever listened to. It is even better than the time I helped steal all the Star-Bar cows. Haw! Haw! Haw!" Big Ears rolls his head around on the table and

yelps, but me, I am suddenly sober, leastways not so drunk.

"You did which?" I ask.

"I help steal the Bar-Star cows," he says, hiccuping.

"Oh," I answer, "that is different."

We are very merry, although we don't get out of order. Only Ace does a little target practice with his short guns. There isn't any harm in that, but Billy Kearns, the town marshal, throws us in the jug. Mike slips us a couple of quarts in through the bars from the alley and we go right on celebrating. In fact we pass out.

"My God!" says Ace. "Caddo, will you set my hat straight? I can't reach the top of my head." Of course I know he only thinks his head is that big but I straighten his hat up for him. We are on our way home, after Billy let us out of his jail.

Every time my blue roan takes a step it jars the top of my head and that makes thinking hard, but there is something churning around in my mind, crying for me to think. It sticks there the rest of the day, like a nagging woman, but I can't remember for the life of me, not until the next morning. Ace and I are eating breakfast when it comes to me.

"Ace," I said, "we rode this whole country looking for our cattle, didn't we?" Ace stops eating and looks at me. "Yeah," he admits.

"Like hell we did! Neither of us stepped a foot on Charlie's O-O range."

"Why should we go prowling around on the O-O?"

"Looking for our cattle," I come right back.

"Yet let Charlie hear you say that and you will be very dead, Caddo," he warns, staring at me like a broken-hearted brother.

"You heard what Big Ears said."

"Yeah, he said the Star-Bar cattle."

"Not the first time, he didn't."

"A drunk is liable to get his tongue twisted."

"Ahuh! That is what I was thinking. He sure is, Ace."

"Charlie wouldn't do a thing like that!" he protests, which I agree.

"He is not the only man on the O-O. Besides, Charlie has been practically leaving the ranch for his foreman to run. He probably hasn't been away from the house all winter."

"Joe Scott is a square shooter," Ace still protests. He is the protestingest man I ever knew when he don't want to believe a thing.

"Sure, the whole damn O-O is tops, but that wouldn't keep someone else from slipping cattle across the ranch, would it?"

"You win," he says, "we will take a ride over there. Only I hope Old Charlie don't see us sneaking around."

"We won't sneak. We will simply ride around, looking for a stray horse. He can't get sore about that."

"Charlie," Ace says, solemn, "can get sore about some damn small things. His temper is set on a hair-trigger."

"If you are afraid, I will go by myself."

"It ain't right to let an idiot run around by himself," Ace snaps.

"I didn't know you would talk that way about yourself," I answer. "You are the only idiot on the Star-Bar."

"We won't quarrel over who is the idiot, but I will admit that there is one, and say that my mamma never raised a fool."

"That is better," I agree. "I am glad that we see eye to eye the way we do." It is always like that on the Star-Bar. Ace usually agrees with me, knowing how much smarter I am than him. "Let's go saddle up and ride."

"It won't do us any good," Ace says. "Only make Charlie sore."

"Which he is sore all the time, anyway." We go down to the barn and throw our hulls on a couple of horses and ride off toward Alder Crick.

WE ARE riding along on the east side of Powderface, taking it easy when something hums by. An instant later there is the sound of a rifle from off across the canyon. "Come on," says Ace, "let's slope out of here."

"Not me," I snap, "I came here to look for cattle. I'm not the kind which can be bluffed into running away."

"I'm going," Ace says, and wheels his horse around. About that time there is another shot and the slug glances off the swell of my saddle.

"I will go with you," I yell. "That guy is not bluffing."

Afterward I am glad the gent shoots at us because that is the first time my blue roan outruns Ace's piebald. When we duck over the ridge into Alder Crick, Ace pulls up his horse and yells, "Hey, Caddo." I look back over my shoulder. "Don't you think this is far enough away?"

"Hell," I reply, "it is only three miles from here to Powderface." But I pull the blue roan down and circle back to Ace.

"I am beginning to think you had the right hunch, Caddo," Ace greets me. "It is very unusual for gents to shoot at folks unless they just do not want them around, or are trying to hide something. I suggest that we go back and give that gent some argument, lead argument.

"I don't like that kind of an argument," I tell him. "Someone is liable to get killed, if not seriously injured." But Ace is bull-headed and starts back over the ridge. There is nothing else to do so I follow him. When we top the ridge there is a rider going hell-for-leather out across the prairie toward the O-O headquarters.

"Come on," I tell Ace and hook my spurs in. Down through the swale that leads into Powderface we went, with Ace's horse running like mad to keep up. "We'll get him," I yell, "that is our man."

"Spi-in-ng" something whistles by my ear. It is a ricocheting bullet. The gent dashing across the prairie is evidently not the gunman. I see that we have made one hell of a mistake. Also I think it is apt to be the last one we will ever make, as the bushwacker is spilling plenty of lead around us. This time we go down into Powderface and wind up behind a cutbank. Unfortunately we have not thought to bring a rifle so we hunker down behind the bank and wait.

"I wish I had my Winchester," says Ace, spitting out a mouthful of dirt, he is hugging the bank so close.

"I wish I had Sheriff McKeown and a posse," I gave him right back.

"What are we going to do?" he asks.

"Stay right here until someone comes and rescues us, or that hairpin shoots this bank out from in front of us."

"I'm not in favor of it."

"Me neither, but I got religious scruples against going out in this kind of weather. Maybe the O-O boys will hear the shooting."

"Yeah, and come finish the job," Ace moans. He is very pessimistic.

"There is one nice thing," I say. "It is only six-eight hours until dark." After that there is a lot of silence, except for an occasional shot from the rifle. I figure it is about noon when we hear sounds of horses coming along the canyon bank.

"Hey! you fellows down there." It is Charlie McCain who shouts. "Come on up, the war's over."

I am glad to hear that. I start to stand up but Ace stops me. "Wait," he says, "there is something very funny about this."

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"How come Charlie rides right up and that quick-trigger gent doesn't take a shot at him. Unless he is one of Charlie's riders?"

"A gift horse is a gift horse, even if his teeth are rotten," I tell him. "I am not looking this gift horse in the mouth."

Ace stands up, then. "All right," he says, "but don't blame me if it don't turn out so good." He has a grim look on his face as we climb the side of the canyon.

Charlie McCain is waiting for us, also the whole O-O outfit. Charlie is grinning from ear to ear. "By damn, boys, look what I caught in my trap! Ha, ha, ha! I would invite you fellows to a dog feast, if I had a dog." Right away I know that Charlie has been talking to Chief Spotted Calf, or maybe McKeown.

"This ain't no joke, Charlie," Ace says. "Caddo has practically ran his blue roan horse to death."

"There has been some suspicious looking riders along Powderface," Charlie sobers. "That's the why of this gun-trap. I am sorry you fellows got caught in it. By the way, were you looking for something, or just riding around?"

"One of our horses strayed. We thought he might have come this direction," I inform him. "It is not nice to be shot at when you are looking for strays. Some folks might misunderstand and get mad, Charlie."

"Yeah? Well, I've apologized, that's as far as I can go," he says. "Come on over to the house and I'll see if I can't dig up a little something to drink. I sure wish you

boys would come back and ride for me, I'm mighty short of hands, right now."

"Is that so?" Ace breaks in. "Then how come this army is following you around instead of riding range?"

"We were over in the head of Skunkneck canyon doing a little early branding when we heard the shots. We came right on over."

"SKUNKNECK? First I knew you ever branded over there," Ace says. I see that Ace is doing some deep thinking. He is a gent which thinks with his face instead of his mind—judging by the faces he makes.

"This was a special little job," Charlie shrugs, carelessly. "Say, is there anything to the story that the Star-Bar has been rustled blind?"

"We have not been rustled blind," I tell him. "We have been rustled broke. We have about as many cows as a buck Indian has whiskers."

"That is too bad," he sympathizes. "Have you any idea who is stealing your stock?"

"Ace thinks it is Chief Spotted Calf."

"Nope," Charlie shakes his head, "the Chief might steal a few broomtails, or a fat dog," he grins, "but not cows. I reckon you boys will have to look elsewhere for your thief. It might be the riders that have been crossing the O-O. They could easy push them across the river into the Caddo country. Have you had a look over across the river?"

"No," I tell him. "A cow would leave tracks on the river bank. There just aren't any signs of cattle anywhere."

"It beats my time," he says.

The O-O riders branch off and head for Skunkneck. Ace, Charlie and I ride on into the O-O ranch-yard. Charlie breaks out a bottle and passes it around. We all take a drink, then we take a couple more. We sit on the ranch-house porch and Charlie tells us all his troubles. By 'n' by he starts in trying to get us to throw the Star-Bar range in with him and go back to work for him. He offers us a percentage of his calf crop if we take him up. He finds another bottle, thinking that we will grow mellow and take him up. But we are firm in refusing, then he gets mad. He grabs up an old double-barrel shotgun which is standing beside the fireplace. "Git!" he screams. "Shake the dust of the O-O off your feet and don't never come back, you dog-eaters." Which is no way to treat folks who are practically guests in your house, but old Charlie never did have any bringing-up. We leave.

As we go out the gate, Ace turns in his saddle and shakes a fist at Charlie. "Ba-r-r-r-oom!" the double-barrel cut loose. I see him turn a flip back against the wall; he is so mad he has turned both barrels loose at once. From the way our horses leave there I judge that a few shots have reached them. We are soon atop the ridge between Skunkneck and Powderface. Ace pulls his horse to a stop, I follow suit. He sits there thinking for so long that I am wondering if he is asleep, when he speaks.

"We are riding in to Reno," he says, shaking his bridle reins.

We do. The sheriff is some cranky about being called out of bed in the middle of the night, but Ace takes him to one side and talks to him. I notice the sheriff nodding as Ace talks, but I am too tired and sleepy to care or wonder what is up. By 'n' by Ace leaves the sheriff and we ride down to the livery barn, stabling our horses, then go to a hotel.

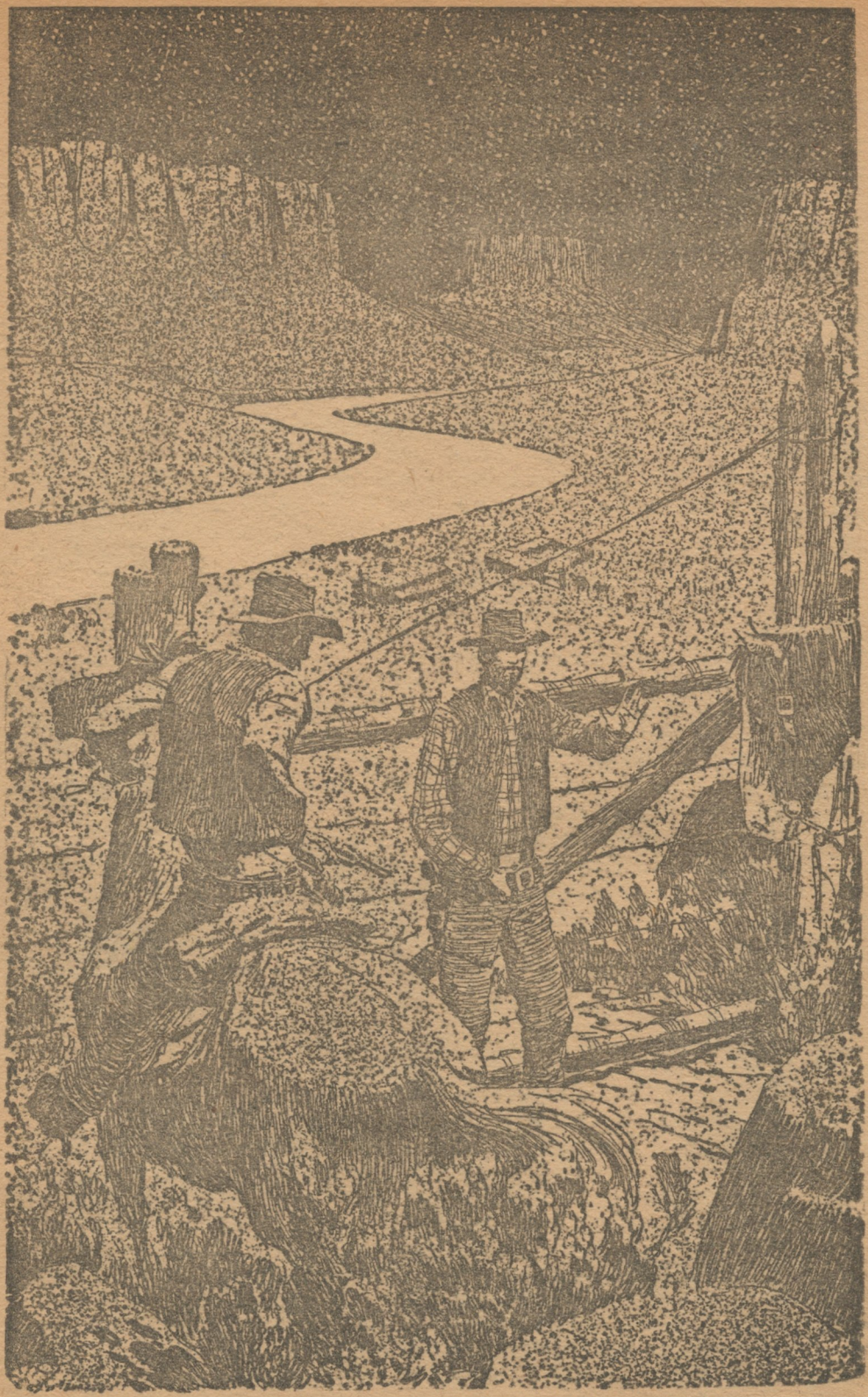
A knock on our door wakes us the next morning. It is McKeown, in person. "You fellows are wanted down at the jail," he says.

I wonder what McKeown has on us as I dress, but I am afraid to ask, for fear he will tell me. We walk the half-dozen blocks to the jail, in silence. McKeown opens the door and takes us back into the cell-block. The first person I see is Old Charlie McCain, chewing his mustache and trying to tear the bars down.

McCain settles down when he sees us. He leans against the bars and looks at us.

"Here are the boys," the sheriff says. "I will leave you fellows alone to talk this over." He walks back out into his office.

"I'm sorry, boys, I shouldn't 'a' done it. The only reason I steal your beef and hide them in Skunkneck Canyon, is to force you to come back and work for me." A couple of tears streak down Old Charlie's lean cheeks.



This hombre's Colt still rested in his holster, but he called out, "All right, gents, drop your guns."

Destiny Rides the Rio

By CURTIS BISHOP

Far from lawman's shackles, down where the Whisper Trail ends, three gun-swifts met to square a double-cross in lobo code. Red Tipton . . . Jim Lance . . . and Banjo. Each a dead-shot killer—each a spawn of the Owlhoot.

THE Tipton gang was running for the border. Red Tipton rode at their head, slouch hat pulled low over his bearded face, restless eyes studying the sloping hills ahead and peering beyond the rims of the canyons.

They were almost there. Somewhere behind was a New Mexico posse that had chased them all the way from Roswell. There they had left dead two stagecoach guards and a driver, and Red Tipton nursed bulging saddlebags that would keep him and his

three owlhoot compadres in blue chips for many mañanas.

The outlaw chief pulled up his paint for a breathing spell.

"Looks like we made it, boys," he chortled, and he pointed to a yawning canyon stretching out at their feet. "If my peepers ain't failing me in my old age, that's Paradise Canyon."

Paradise Canyon! A generation of owlhooters before Red Tipton had named it that. It was the end of the notorious Whisper Trail down which many a hunted man had galloped into Mexico—and freedom. The Whisper Trail was a long one. And dry. A man had to ride it hell-for-leather and choke back his thirst and his growling belly. But in Paradise Canyon, at the end of the trail, he found gurgling spring water and fat sleek deer and appetizing quail. The creek that wound along the sandy bottom of Paradise Canyon emptied into the Rio Grande, and the river here was so shallow that a man could ride his horse across it—to freedom.

"Ain't been here in a long time," smiled Red. "Five years anyhow."

"It shore looks good to me," grinned freckle-faced Pecos Slim.

The three hombres swung in behind their leader, who was spurring his paint down the twisting steep trail which led from the plains to the bottom of the Canyon, and then to the Rio Grande.

When Red's paint slid down the final shelf and was on the clear level sandy bottom of Paradise Canyon the outlaw chief threw back his head and laughed gleefully. The tension was over. A mile or so down this narrow canyon, protected from posses by the frowning walls which rose high on either side, far out of rifle range of their pursuers, and then to splash across the shallow waters of the Rio Grande.

Red waited for his men. Pecos Slim and his mustang came rolling to the bottom. The mustang limped as Pecos jerked it to its feet.

"Sprain," Red diagnosed from his saddle. "Good thing it didn't happen back up the trail."

The mustang, however, could carry the outlaw the rest of the way.

"Get you another horse in Hidalgo," said Red. "If I remember right, that ain't but three miles across the river."

"This damned horse will make it to Mexico if I hafta pull it every step of the way," promised Slim.

The four of them rode at a walk. Gone was the need for haste. They talked and joked and rolled smokes. Red regaled them with an account of his love affair with an Indian squaw. Then out of the dark, like the crack of a whip:

"All right, gents. Drop your guns."

Red pulled up his horse with a curse and his revolver leaped out. They had ridden too long and too hard to give up here. If they had to shoot their way out of Paradise Canyon, they were ready.

He looked around for a target. Here the sharp crags shut off the moonlight. Here there was a perfect ambush on all sides. Red cursed.

The canyon was shut off by barbed wire! Several strands thick! Heavy cedar posts!

Trapped!

THEN the voice came out of the blackness again: "Rest your trigger fingers, gents; I'm coming down for a palaver."

Loose gravel came rolling around the hoofs of their nervous horses. Red tightened his grip on his pistol. This man was afoot. And evidently unarmed.

He reached the sandy bottom and stood up. "No call for worry, gents," he said amiably. "It's just a custom around here to take a drink with Banjo before riding on."

"Who the hell is Banjo?" growled Red, his eyes searching the darkened bluffs. There were other men up there; he could hear them. And how to get around this damned barbed-wire fence!

Slim spurred his horse forward. "I've heard talk about this Banjo," he assured Red. "The guy owns a saloon right on the river bank. And everybody stops for a drink on their way over the river and on the way back."

"That's the ticket," nodded the stranger. He was hatless in the moonlight and Red could see a friendly grin on his face. "No harm to you, gents; Banjo ain't the law. We hafta keep this fence so boys wouldn't ride right by us in the dark."

"I don't need a drink," growled Red.

"Stand back, hombre, and pull down this fence. We're going through."

"Sure," nodded their grinning ambusher. "Everybody goes through. But a drink with Banjo first. On the house."

"I ain't drinking with nobody," Red snapped. "Don't crowd me, hombre; I got a nervous finger."

The stranger turned to the bluff. He started calling names. "Tex?" "Jack?" "Spider?" "Shorty?" "Smoke Eyes?"

Each time a voice sung out a reply from the darkness. Red Tipton scowled. Unquestionably each was a different voice. There was a quintet of sharpshooters hidden in the darkness. He and his three owlhooters were cinch targets in the moonlight.

"Don't be a damned fool," the stranger advised Tipton. "If you make a wrong play, my boys drop you. We ain't kidding, gents. It's the custom of the canyon that you take a drink with Banjo. And we don't like visitors who come into our country and try to change our ways."

"Let's string along with him, Red," argued Slim. "These boys I'm talking about went and drank with this Banjo and nothing happened."

"Nothing at all," assured the chairman of Banjo's welcoming committee.

"We'll go," Red said sullenly, "but we ain't giving up our hardware. And if anything looks funny, we're just the boys who can handle it."

"Follow me," said the stranger.

The barbed-wire fence-gate turned out to be heavily reenforced. The man on foot swung it open, waited for them to ride through; then carefully closed it behind them. Then, clomping down the sandy bottom of Paradise Canyon in his high-heeled boots, he led them through a small ravine which opened suddenly in their faces.

Red gasped. Here oil lanterns were swinging in front of an unpainted board saloon. From inside came the strains of guitar music and the laughter of men and the tinkling of glasses.

"Banjo's," announced the guide. "All of the boys come here, gents. You'll see compadres of yours before morning."

"I'll be in Mexico before morning," growled Tipton.

Their guide nodded. "Your privilege. One drink with Banjo and you're on your own. That water right behind the joint is the Rio, gents. Anytime you get restless just step out the back door and you're a hundred steps from Mexico."

Now they had hitched their horses to the rail and were clomping across the board porch. It was a big saloon as far as border places went. And neat. Decorated walls. Smooth floor. And a girl singing.

Their guide stopped them outside. "We gotta be careful when Rose is singing," he whispered. "The boys get mighty upset if somebody interrupts one of her songs."

They squinted through the open door, these four weary Whisper Trail riders, and nodded in quick assent. On a small stage stood a slim girl dressed in a low-cut crimson evening gown. Glorious brown hair tumbled down in a profusion of curls over her shoulders. And, beneath her, at round tables scattered over the saloon, sat tight-lipped men who hung upon every note of her song.

There were a dozen such men. Their pedigree was plainly written on their rough unshaven faces. Red Tipton looked at them and relaxed for the first time. There would be no danger for him and his men here.

The girl's song died away in a low-pitched note. The men pushed back their chairs and gave her a standing ovation. She smiled and disappeared with a wave of her hand.

"The Rose of Paradise Canyon," their guide said proudly. "You see, gents, you'll be back."

A long bar stretched across one end of the saloon. Behind it a Negro and a Mexican labored furiously as the guests called for drinks. Red licked his lips. Chilled beer and good whiskey were in evidence. But his guide pulled him on.

"Later if you like," he said. He was a slim youth who looked harmless enough but Red saw the way his gun holsters hung and knew this button could take care of himself. "First, that drink with Banjo."

"Let's see this Banjo," growled Tipton.

The youth led them across the room. Curious eyes turned their way, then looked off. It did not become the patrons of Banjo's Paradise Canyon bar to show too much curiosity about night-riding strangers.

The guide threw open a door and they saw a nicely funished office. Red gasped. Here was a fireplace. And a rug on the floor. And a steely-eyed man sitting in a comfortable chair reading a book.

Red gaped. It had been years since he had witnessed such a rare sight.

A man reading a book!

But this man stood up and the crack that Red started to make died on the outlaw's lips. This man came forward and Red noticed the single low gun and the man's long white fingers.

"Some visitors, Banjo," grinned the youth.

THE man addressed as Banjo nodded. "Have a seat gents. Wyoming, tell Pancho to bring us five whiskeys."

Red Tipton was still suspicious.

"You plant boys along the sides of Paradise Canyon. You fence it off with barbed wire so thick a herd of stampeding steers couldn't break through. Then, when you got the drop on us, you bring us here and all you want is for us to have a drink with you. Why?"

Banjo shrugged his shoulders. He was still a young man, and there wasn't the same hardness about him as about Red Tipton or the bearded men clanking their glasses in the saloon outside.

"That's it, amigo," he said pleasantly. "I run a place here on the border. The boys who ride the Whisper Trail are my friends. I want new customers. Sometimes I have to get a little rough to persuade suspicious parties I'm on the up and up."

Pancho interrupted, appearing with the drinks. Slim reached for his. Red held back, glaring at Pecos.

"Pull in your fangs, Red," grinned Pecos. "You're about the only Whisper rider who hasn't heard of Banjo's. Here's to you, Banjo."

"No, to you," Banjo smiled. "To you other gents, too."

Red Tipton gulped his whiskey.

"You remind me of someone I know," Banjo said slowly.

"This ain't a reunion," growled Red. "I don't know nobody you ever knew. You never saw me before and you won't know me again. See?"

"You wouldn't be Scar-face Craig," Banjo said softly. "You look a lot like him, not no scar."

Red's eyes thinned. "I've heard of Scar-face Craig," he admitted slowly. "Been told before I looked like him. But that ain't my name. I don't reckon it matters what my name is, does it?"

"Not to me," shrugged Banjo. He pointed back to the saloon. "Make yourselves at home if you feel like it. Your horses are outside, fed, watered and ready to ride. The only way into this place is through the front door and you can see how I keep that guarded. The back door is the Rio Grande. You can ride across the shallows any night and pay us a visit. Every now and then the Rangers pay me a visit. They don't understand how I can keep in business when they never find any customers in my saloon."

He walked with them to the door. "You'll find our prices high," he said with a faint smile. "A shot of whiskey costs a buck. The girl who sang is Rose—Rose of Paradise Canyon. It takes a hundred bucks to get her to sing. Usually the boys chip in. Unless you want her to sing a request of your own, then you pay the the bill yourself. The food is steep, too. But we offer you a drink in the United States without fear of the law. I pay the boys who watch the mouth of Paradise Canyon. It's worth it. And you'll come back."

He looked at Pecos Slim. "Your horse is lame, a strained muscle," he said quietly. "I had the stable boys change your saddle onto one of my broncs. Some night we'll change again. "Good evening, gents."

He turned his back on them and picked up a banjo lying on one of the overstuffed chairs. He was strumming it softly as Wyoming led them to the bar.

II

WYOMING declined to join them in a drink. "Gotta rustle up some more guards," he grinned.

"Yuh mean yuh guard Paradise Canyon all night?" blinked Tipton.

"Night and day. All of 'em gotta see Banjo."

"What's the deal?"

"No sabbe," shrugged the young gunman. "All we know is he pays well. And it ain't so dangerous any more. Most of the boys who ride the Whisper Trail know enough to stop here."

He went off with a nod, his guns swinging low at his hip. Red ordered Pancho to bring them a round of whiskeys, then he looked around him curiously. This was a better type of saloon than he and his kind usually frequented. Floors clean and painted, bar shining, glasses polished. And quiet. The men who came here were perfectly willing to be quiet. They sat at the widely scattered tables talking in hushed tones.

One of them was eyeing Tipton closely. Finally he sauntered over, an inquiring look in his eyes.

"Pardon me, gents," he murmured, speaking to them all but his eyes on Red, "but I got the chips for a drink if you'll be so obliging."

Red studied him coldly. He was an owlish sort of man with streaks of gray in his hair. His eyes kept turning back to Red.

"Yuh shore remind me of somebody I know," he said slowly. "For a moment, when yuh walked in, I thought yuh were the hombre I come here to meet."

Red's body went tense. His compadres of the trail sensed his reaction and they squared away from the table. Red always tipped off his hand when trouble was near.

"Reckon yuh were figuring on meeting Jim Lance?" he drawled. And when Red's voice was a slow drawl it meant his body, and his hands especially, was geared for fast action.

"The same," nodded the stranger. "Jim Lance oughta be betting here any night now."

"Shore of that?" Red asked.

"Shore. We rode together a piece in Oklahoma. We split up and Jim Lance went back to New Mex. Said he had to look a guy up."

"People have told me before that I look like Jim Lance," Red said slowly.

"Who is this Lance?" asked the curious Pecos. "Red, yuh shore look like a lot of people. Banjo now thought yuh looked like . . . who did he say, Scar-face Craig?"

"Yuh got too long a memory, Pecos," snarled Red. "It'll get yuh in trouble some day."

Now the girl in the crimson evening gown emerged from the door behind the small stage. There was a burst of applause. She dropped a graceful curtsey and motioned to the Mexican guitar player to give her a chord and opened her mouth as if to start a song. Then she saw the five men at a table in the corner. She stopped the music. She walked toward them, a queer look in her eyes, her gaze fixed intently on Red Tipton.

Red licked his lips. Never had he seen a lovelier girl. Her eyes were clear and her complexion soft; she had a freshness about her that was in sharp contrast with her surroundings. Red liked his women, and none in a long time had stirred him like this one. She came closer until she was standing right by the table, still staring at him as if unable to believe her own eyes. Red met her look boldly, a smirk forming on his thick lips. He prided himself on his ability with women. Plenty of 'em had fallen for him and fallen hard.

The girl suddenly held her hand before her eyes and swayed as if dizzy. Then she dropped her hand and there was a mechanical smile on her face.

"You're new, aren't you?" she smiled.

"Yeah, just got here," drawled Red. "But I'm beginning to like it. I may be around close for some time."

"Good," nodded the girl. "My name is Rose."

"We heard about yuh," put in Pecos. Red silenced the man with a glare.

"I always sing a song for every newcomer free of charge," smiled Rose. "Any preference?"

RED stirred. He looked askance at Pecos Slim. The truth was that Red didn't know much about songs. Offhand he couldn't think of a one he would like to hear.

"Make it your choice, baby," he grinned. "Anything yuh sing, and anyway yuh sing it, will be bueno with Red Tipton."

"Tipton, Red Tipton," she murmured, that far-off look in her eyes again. Then, with another smile, she turned and walked back to the small stage.

Red's eyes gleamed as they followed the

swaying motion of her slim hips. A real woman, this Rose. Enough to stir any man's blood, particularly a man who has spent long days and nights on hidden trails. The stranger who had bought them a drink took one look at Red's face and chuckled.

"She gets them all that way," he said. "But don't throw out your rope, hombre. It means trouble."

"Yeah?" snarled Red. "I can handle trouble."

"I ain't trying to be insulting," was the quiet answer, "but I reckon you ain't seen trouble yet. I've seen some gunplay myself, compadre. Some fast gunplay. But nothing like what yuh'll face if yuh get fresh with Rose."

"Yeah? Who is the waddy who's so tough?"

"Banjo," was the surprising answer.

"Banjo! The dude!"

"Ask any of the boys," shrugged the stranger.

Now Rose was singing "My Old Kentucky Home." Red wasn't particularly impressed by her voice but he studied her slim body restlessly.

When she had finished she gave a quick curtsey and ran from the stage. Her face was as white as a sheet.

Hesitantly, Rose knocked upon Banjo's door. "Yes?"

"It's I—Rose."

"Oh, come in," the voice answered in a different tone.

She flung open the door. Banjo was strumming his favorite instrument and staring into the blazing mesquite root fire.

"I need a brandy, Banjo," she faltered. "My nerves are shot."

He poured her the drink without question. She could never remember when Banjo had been curious about her. For two years now she had sung in this out-of-the-way saloon. Banjo had listened to her sing with half-closed eyes, then had accepted her offer to sing there for board and room—and protection. She got her money from the customers, and plenty of it. Her room was behind his in the sprawling frame building, and Banjo had sent to San Antone for the furnishings. Riders coming up from Mexico had brought her draperies and rugs and shawls by the armload; hers was a luxurious retreat. As was his.

But in two years little idle conversation had passed between Banjo and his singer.

"Silly of me to get that way," she said with an apologetic smile, "but I thought for a moment I had seen a ghost."

He nodded, his gentle eyes never leaving her face. She was always flustered before Banjo. He sat there so quietly, so gentle-eyed, but never missing anything. And she had seen enough action in the saloon to know that the gun he wore low at his side could be a flashing weapon of death. And she had heard the men talk around the bar. The stranger who had warned Red Tipton had expressed their general consensus of opinion. Banjo was the fastest man with a six-gun they had ever seen!

Where had he come from? A thousand times Rose wanted to ask him. Hundreds of men offered small fortunes in return for her affection. Greenbacks and bags of gold had been waved before her. Yet not one had even tempted her. But for over a year she had been in love with Banjo, the quiet mysterious man who treated her with casual politeness, who guarded her from pawing outlaws with a gun that now was a legend, but who never expressed anything but professional interest in her. A dozen times she had been tempted to blurt out the reason for her coming to Paradise Canyon, for her living at this saloon that was both the beginning and the end of the Owlhoot road. Perhaps if she told her story, then he would loosen up and tell his—why he had built this saloon, why he guarded the mouth of Paradise Canyon so closely, why every bandit and gunman fleeing to Mexico had to stop first for a drink with Banjo. But his expressionless face discouraged confidence. He was a man who kept his own secret, and encouraged others to keep theirs.

SHE sipped her brandy in silence. Banjo's fingers continued to gently coax a tune out of the instrument. She finished her drink and stood up, smoothing her hair. Was the man totally blind? Was her beauty wasted upon him?

She stood and looked down at him with a bitter smile. Rose had come to Paradise Canyon to find her brother. She had heard tales of this saloon where fleeing fugitives gath-

ered. She had reasoned that sooner or later her brother would find his way there. Or perhaps men who knew what had become of her brother. Then, realizing how free these outlaws were with their money, she had launched on an ambitious scheme. A ten-thousand-dollar bank robbery had caused her brother to take the wide-loop trail ten years before, when she had been only a stringy-legged girl. Now Rose almost had that ten thousand dollars. She would find her brother, repay the bank, and they would start over again, leaving Paradise Canyon far behind.

She would like to tell Banjo about that. She wanted him to know that she had never been a saloon girl until she had come here, and that no man's brand was upon her.

But he never gave her an opening.

Thus two things had to be accomplished before Rose could leave Paradise Canyon. One, find her brother. Two, penetrate Banjo's shell.

"Well, I guess I'll go sing the boys another song," she said finally. But her eyes and her legs were unwilling.

"Leave the door open," Banjo said with a faint smile. "I like to hear you sing."

Rose blushed. It was the nearest to a compliment she had ever heard from him.

As she went out, she almost collided with Red Tipton. The broad-shouldered outlaw grinned at her. "Thanks for the song, baby. It was swell."

She shrank away from the boldness of his gaze. "Thank you," she said.

"I'll see yuh later on," Red said carelessly. He took all of his women for granted. The kind he had known could be handled that way. "Right now I wanna talk to the boss."

"Banjo! He never talks with customers."

"He will with Red Tipton," grinned the outlaw. "Tell that Mex boy to bring us in a couple of drinks."

"He won't drink with you either."

"Oh, yeah?" Red said jauntily. He thrust his slouch hat back on his unruly red hair and knocked on the door.

"Banjo?" he called out.

"Yes."

Red thrust open the door and grinned at the man who still sat in his upholstered chair strumming his banjo. Banjo frowned.

"I drink once with a customer," he said icily, "and no more. Yuh do your visiting outside—with the other customers."

Red kicked the door shut behind him and swaggered toward a chair.

"Yuh might be interested in what I have to say," he said. "The Mex boy is bringing drinks."

"I told yuh I drink just once with a man."

Red chuckled. He reached in his pocket and pulled out a faded sheet of paper. There was no telling how long he had carried it around in the pocket of his worn dungarees. The printing on it was almost illegible. He unfolded it slowly and handed it to Banjo.

"Take a look at that," he advised. "Then mebbe yuh will change your mind."

Banjo studied the slip of paper. Then he nodded to the Mexican boy who thrust his head into the door. Pancho's eyes were frightened; he had been warned never to come into Banjo's room unless summoned by the boss himself.

But for Pancho there was no reprimand.

"A whiskey for Red," Banjo said slowly, "a brandy for me."

III

BANJO'S eyes returned to the sheet of paper. It was a reward notice. Worn to a faint etching by long years of rough handling, he could barely read it. On it was the picture of a man who might have been Red Tipton, but wasn't. Different eyes. Different mouth.

Underneath the picture, in bold black print: "WANTED FOR BANK ROBBERY. JIM LANCE. ALIAS SCARFACE CRAIG. Five feet eleven inches tall. Grey eyes. Red hair. Once reported to have a scar on his forehead. This may have been removed by an operation or treatment or it may have been a disguise. Noted for his gunplay."

"Gathered yuh were interested in a guy who looked like me," Red grinned. "Plenty of places I've been mistaken for this Lance bird."

"There is a remarkable resemblance," murmured Banjo. "Only the scar was missing. For a moment I thought you were my man."

Red nodded. "Gathered that. Yuh got some reason for wanting to see this Lance?"

"A good reason," murmured Banjo.

"I ain't so thick between my ears," went on Red. "This layout made me suspicious. Yuh had some reason for looking into all of the riders who cross the river. I figger it is because yuh knew sooner or later this Jim Lance would have to bolt into Mexico this way."

"Possibly," Banjo said shortly.

Now the Mexican boy was back with their drinks. Red raised his glass. "Here's hoping yuh meet Jim Lance right away," he said cheerfully. "And that yuh come out all right."

"I'll drink to that," Banjo said.

Red laid down his empty glass. A cunning gleam was in his narrow eyes.

"Yuh will be interested to know," he said softly, "that this guy is on his way here."

"I'm interested," admitted Banjo.

"One of the boys outside told me," explained Red. "He rode with Lance in Oklahoma. This hombre almost mistook me for Lance like yuh did. I guess it's a good thing that I don't have a scar. They tell me yuh know how to handle a six-gun."

"Some," admitted Banjo.

Red Tipton stood up. "Me and the boys are gonna stick around in Hidalgo a spell," he announced. "We'll be back to see yuh every now and then; nothing like a drink on American soil to warm a guy's heart. If yuh need any help with this Lance, let me know."

"I'll try to handle it."

"I bet yuh can," grinned Red as he closed the door behind him.

The outlaw returned to his table with a chuckle. It took a foxy man to get around Red Tipton. For two years now he had fled from Jim Lance, alias Scar-Face Craig. They had met once—in Wyoming. Lance had called him. Unafraid, sure of his own guns, Red had jerked leather. Lead tore into his shoulder before his gun was half-way out. He carried the slug a long time before his shoulder healed. His boys had come to his rescue, shooting Lance to the floor before a second bullet could get Red for keeps. Since then Red had ridden fast and long. Sometimes he had fled from the law, sometimes he had moseyed into another state to shake off Lance. Lance had recovered. Lance was always after him.

Well, Banjo would see Lance. Jim had been fast with a gun that day in Wyoming. But this man called Banjo had others singing his praises.

Red ordered another round of drinks. Then he stood up and ordered his boys to ride.

"We'll stay in Hidalgo a few days and rest up," he announced.

On the way out they passed Rose. Red caught the girl's arm and pushed a handful of gold pieces into her hand.

"I'll be back baby," he promised. "Yuh got what it takes. Yuh got what Red Tipton needs. Pretty up that face of yours and buy some new glad rags."

THIS man was riding for Mexico, also, He rode alone, hunched low in the saddle against the chill breeze of the early morning. He missed the trail down the rim of Paradise Canyon and had to dismount to locate it. For a moment he couldn't believe that men rode horses down such a steep twisting trail; then, with a shrug of his broad shoulders, he spurred his sorrel into the gravel and braced his feet in the stirrups.

He reached the bottom without mishap and trotted his mount down the sand. When the voice challenged him from the darkness, his gun leaped out in his hand and he fired a quick shot.

Now the voice was threatening. "One more shot, hombre, and yuh will be fed to the buzzards."

Like the Tipton gang, this lone rider realized his plight. He replaced his gun in its holster and waited with a crooked grin for his fate.

"Yuh got the drop on me," he admitted. "Come out and say your piece."

The same Wyoming youth scrambled down from the rocks into the moonlight. This man had never heard of Banjo either, and some explanation was required. When Wyoming told him he could keep his gun, he consented to accompany him.

He stepped into the lamplight and looked around him curiously. Gone was his fear. These watchmen had caught him off guard and had given him back his gun and now

they had melted away from him. The curious eyes turned toward him did not excite his suspicion; he could recognize them for what they were at a glance. Perhaps not friends, but certainly not enemies.

Wyoming was by his side again.

"Come on and meet the boss."

He hitched his guns low just to make sure. This looked like it was all on the up and up but a man couldn't be sure. A man who lived by those guns and expected to die by them wanted them low and ready.

Inside the comfortably furnished office the man called Banjo was strumming lightly on the instrument which had given him his name. His long legs were sprawled across the arm of the upholstered chair. He looked up at Wyoming and at the stranger behind, and the legs came to the floor in a quick cat-like gesture and the banjo dropped from his hands.

"Come in, Jim Lance," he said slowly, his eyes hardening to pin points.

The stranger nodded. "Glad to oblige. Yuh got the jump on me with that name. Didn't figger anybody this far south ever heard of me."

He pushed his hat back on his head. He was a big man, as big as Red Tipton. And his hair was as red.

When he pushed back his hat he showed his forehead. Banjo's eyes studied his face.

"How did you get rid of the scar, Lance?"

Lance's voice grated back. "Are we talking shop? This waddy said it was a custom of Paradise Canyon for all strangers to have a drink with a man named Banjo. I strung along with him. I'm ready for the drink if you are. Then I gotta ride."

"We'll have the drink. Send Pancho in with a double-whiskey and a brandy, Wyoming."

The young gunman slid away to obey his instructions. Banjo stood up. He wasn't as broad as Lance or as tall. Nor was the leather holster which packed his low-swinging gun as worn.

"I've been waiting a long time for yuh, Jim Lance. This layout here, this saloon at the mouth of Paradise Canyon, I built it just for your benefit."

"I don't get yuh," frowned Lance. He had sensed danger now; he stood with his shoulders drooped, hands low. Jim Lance had stood on the threshold between life and death before. He was not afraid. His narrow eyes saw that Banjo wore a gun like he knew how to use it. But as yet, he had made no motion toward it. Jim Lance, known along the Whisper Trail as one of the best, could afford to let the other man make the first move. Only one man had he sworn to shoot on sight. This wasn't that man.

Pancho slid in with the drinks. Banjo raised his glass.

"To the end of the trail, Lance," he said calmly, "for both of us."

"I'll drink to that when I get there." Lance said evenly. "Right now to Mexico—and what I hope to find there."

"It doesn't matter what we drink to," shrugged Banjo.

He merely sipped his brandy. Then he looked at Lance and the gunslick stopped gulping his whiskey.

"Take your time, Lance," Banjo murmured. "It's good likker. Make the most of it. Fer it's going to be your last drink this side of hell."

How was Lance to know that this man had an identical creed about his gunplay—to let the other fellow make the first move? Now the owlhooter read the cards. Banjo was out to get him. Why, Lance didn't know. He wouldn't ask. He wouldn't try to figure it out. Other men had entertained similar ideas. When they moved toward their leather, Lance had moved . . . quicker!

"I wouldn't say that," murmured Lance. "I like my likker. And I got a few things to attend to before I'm ready for hell."

Banjo took another sip of brandy. Lance took another sip of whiskey. Their glances clung across the few feet that separated them. Banjo waited like a cat waits before pouncing upon its victim, a cruel smile on his lips. Lance waited because the other man was dealing the cards; he was just sitting in.

FINALLY Jim Lance set down his glass, empty.

"It was good likker," he admitted. "If yuh ain't in such a helluva hurry, I'll stand a round."

"I'm in a hurry now," Banjo said hoarsely. "It's been lonesome down here in

Paradise Valley, Lance. It took yuh a long time to make your break for the border."

"Never had to before," shrugged the outlaw.

Then they were silent again, watching and waiting. A slight gesture from either and both guns would be out. Banjo hitched his shoulders. Lance stiffened. That was a sure-fire tipoff.

He licked his lips. He had been forced to kill other men without knowing the reason why. He didn't like it. But a man had to live. A man did live as long as he could.

He chuckled grimly. Might as well get it over with. Then a stiffer drink, several drinks, to wash out the memory.

He was sure that Banjo's hand was getting ready to dip.

But, just then came a voice from outside:

"Banjo? Can I come in?"

It was a woman's voice. A musical voice.

Banjo's eyes didn't leave Lance's face. "Not now, Rose. Got a little business to attend to right now."

But the calmness was gone from Lance's face. The red-head was no longer tense and strained. There was a puzzled gleam in his grey eyes, a frown on his bronzed face.

"My Gawd!" he gasped. "That voice?"

He turned and threw open the door in a swift, sudden gesture. Rose was standing there, a look of disappointment on her face. In her hand were two tumblers of brandy. She had come to Banjo with his favorite drink. Perhaps a stiff charge of brandy would make him into a human being.

She almost dropped the tumblers when the door was thrown open in her face and the unshaven man confronted her, a wild gleam in his eyes. She took a step backward in alarm, looking past him to the startled Banjo. Then she looked at the red-haired man again and the liquor went sparkling to the floor.

"Jim!" she cried.

And, before Banjo's surprised eyes, she threw both arms around the stranger's neck!

"Mary!" exclaimed Lance. "What in the name of Heaven . . . !"

Suddenly he thrust her from him and looked back to Banjo. His hand was closer to his gun than ever and his voice was an angry growl, his eyes twin pools of fury.

"If you've harmed my kid sister, Banjo, I'll break yuh in two. Talk fast, hombre, and give the right answers. How come her in this hell hole? If yuh brought her here, I'll make yuh wish yuh had never been born."

In between them rushed Rose.

"Don't, you fools!" she screamed.

"Stand back, Rose," Banjo said sharply. "I got a score to settle with this man. I've been waiting a long time."

"Yeah, get back," snarled Lance. "He has done a lot of talking for a thieving saloon owner. Let's see the color of his cards."

"I won't have it!" screamed Rose. "Not you two. Not the only two men I love."

It was Banjo's hand which left its holster first. He looked at Rose and there was amazement on his lean, grim face.

"The two men you love!" he gasped. "Rose, do you mean—!"

"Certainly, you blind, stupid idiot," sobbed the girl. "Anybody but you would have known it all along."

And she threw herself in her brother's arms and cried with her head on his shoulder.

For a long time Banjo was silent. When he spoke his voice had a strained tone, as if he was forcing each word.

"Get moving, Jim Lance," he ordered. "Because of Rose yuh get one more chance to live. But move fast. Don't let me ever see yuh again."

Lance pushed his sister aside. "I don't stand behind Mary's skirts," he growled. "Whatever yuh got against me can be settled here."

"No," Banjo said hoarsely. "Get moving."

And he turned his back upon Jim Lance. Lance spoke slowly, groping for the words to use.

"I'm glad of this, Banjo. I ain't afraid to stand up to what is coming, but I got a good reason for not wanting to shoot it out right now. I won't run from yuh and yuh can find me any time yuh want to. But there is a man ahead of me I wanna meet. When I finish with him I'll come back here."

"Don't worry," was the cold answer. "You'll get a brief start with a fresh horse, Jim Lance, that's all. I'm right on your trail and next time there won't be a Rose to rush between us."

"Don't find me too soon, Banjo," Lance advised. "I'm itching to get this other matter settled first."

He pulled his hat low over his eyebrows and smiled down at his sister, a wan smile.

"You heard the man, Mary?" he murmured. "This is his joint. He wants me out of it. Besides, I'm in a hurry. The man I wanna see ain't far—probably Hidalgo. When I finish with him I'll mosey back up this way and see what's going on."

"You'll never get back this far," promised Banjo.

IV

JIM LANCE bent and kissed her lightly on the cheek. "I'll finish my business in Mexico," he promised, "and I'll take yuh outa here. We'll go back home and buy the old ranch back and . . ."

"Use the dough you stole from the bank," Banjo said harshly, his back still turned.

Lance looked at Banjo and a queer smile came to his lips.

"I hope yuh get lost in Mexico, Banjo," he murmured.

Again he kissed his sister, and then he strode away, ignoring the offers to buy a drink from the boys in the bar, many of whom recognized him. His sorrel was waiting outside; he threw himself in the saddle and in a split second was fording the Rio Grande. Red Tipton first, then this other business. For a long time it had been that way with Jim Lance—Red Tipton first!

Behind him Banjo still stood with his back to the sobbing girl. Finally he spoke—in a voice that was harsh and grating.

"It's too bad he had to be your brother," he said. "I intend to kill Jim Lance, Rose. I came here and built this saloon for that. I knew he rode the owlhoot trail; sooner or later he would come here. I bought six-guns and I got the best gunmen on the Whisper road to teach me. They did a good job, Rose. Don't ever doubt it for a moment. I can kill your brother."

Rose nodded. She didn't doubt it. She had seen him use those six-guns.

"We grew up close together, Rose," Banjo went on. There was something about his tone which suggested that he was laughing to himself, but not pleasantly. "Yuh musta been a little girl in pigtails 'cause I was just a gawky button myself. Mebbe yuh were too young to remember my Dad. He was cashier of the Ranchmen's Bank and Trust Company in Panhandle. A small bank and didn't pay him much. But he owned some stock and we made a living. He had to come west for his health, Rose. Lungs bad. Panhandle was just the place for him. Rough, yes, and untamed, but he was a gentle man; nobody would ever bother him. And my mother was a gentle woman."

He was silent a moment, then continued in that same odd tone: "Dad was working late at the bank one night. It was a one-man staff; old Carstairs put up most of the cash and Dad did all the work. When a man came to the back door Dad let him in. He was always doing things like that. He was never suspicious of his fellow men, any of 'em. He never harmed a soul in his life and didn't expect anybody to harm him."

Banjo choked slightly. "This man was masked," he went on. "He shot my dad down in cold blood and emptied the bank. My dad lived a while—long enough to whisper that the man who shot him had a scar on his forehead and had red hair. He lived long enough to tell the sheriff those things, and to know that a reward was put on the head of one Jim Lance. Your brother, Rose."

A sob was the girl's only answer. Well she knew about that bank robbery. Ten thousand dollars taken from the Ranchmen's Bank and Trust Company. She had practically saved that much from her tips here in Paradise Canyon.

"My mother died soon after that," Banjo went on tonelessly. "I saw 'em buried there in the wild plains country they both hated until their dying day. I rode away about that time so I guess yuh never heard of me. Nobody mourned for Pop Warren very long. Plenty of gentle men die in this country because they don't know better than to trust their fellow man."

He turned now and looked at her and his eyes were grim and hard.

"I'm Tom Warren, Rose," he said hoarsely. "I picked up enough dough to start this saloon knowing that if I worked it right I could make it the hangout of all owlhooters going in and out of Mexico. For years I've been waiting for Jim Lance to ride this way. I didn't know his name until last night. Red Tipton showed me the reward notice which explained the absence of a scar. For a moment I was ready to pull on Red, they look so much alike."

He waved his hands. "That's it, Rose. If I had figgered yuh would give me a tumble, mebbe I wouldn't have waited here this long. But I have. And I've looked into the eyes of Jim Lance, the man who killed my dad. I've followed his trail this far, too long to look back."

He reached for his hat over the mantel.

"Yuh can have this place," he said grimly. "Your voice and your looks have made it pay anyhow. But I wouldn't keep waiting here for Jim Lance. He ain't coming back."

And he strode past her, through the bar, out to the hitching rack. Wyoming appeared at his side.

"The black hoss," Banjo said curtly.

While he waited he stared across the shallow river. The canebrakes on the other side were clearly visible in the moonlight.

Now Wyoming came up leading the horse. Two horses.

"What's the second one for?" demanded Banjo.

"Ain't I going with yuh?"

"No," was the curt answer. Then, more gently: "Yuh gotta stick around, Wyoming. Somebody has to look after Miss Rose."

And Tom Warren, the man called Banjo, spurred his horse into the peaceful current of the Rio Grande River.

HIDALGO was a sleepy little town in the early morning sun. Some of the peons were up and there was a Mexican stable boy feeding the horses in the livery stable back of the small hotel. Banjo rode to the stable and studied the horses. One of them was the mount he had lent Pecos Slim. He tossed the reins to the stable boy and strode into the hotel. If Red Tipton was here, Jim Lance would not be far off.

He ordered breakfast. The café also served as a bar. He ordered a brandy with his second cup of coffee and waited patiently. This was the only place to eat in Hidalgo. Sooner or later Lance would have to show up.

Pecos Slim sauntered in a few moments later and recognized Banjo. The freckle-faced owlhooter offered to buy a drink and Banjo accepted.

"Where's your boss?" grunted Banjo.

"He'll be down in a minute," grinned Pecos. "I come along first to see if the coast is clear."

"Coast clear? This is Mexico, podner. There ain't even a Mexican law here."

"Yeah, but a guy name Lance is in town," grinned Pecos. He was like an innocent tow-headed kid. Hard to believe he had ridden the Whisper Trail for a long time. "Lance is after the boss. I come down and look around. If Lance is about, I go back and warn Red. Otherwise he follows me on down. He'll be here in a minute."

"Didn't figger Red was that yellow."

"Beats me," shrugged Pecos. "He has stood up to some pretty fair men before. But this Lance guy has his number."

In came Red Tipton, his eyes bleary and bloodshot. He downed two double whiskeys before he ordered breakfast.

"Looking for somebody, Banjo?" he asked with a cagey gleam in his eyes.

"Yeah, Lance," Banjo answered readily enough.

"He's in town," mused Red, who wasn't aware that Pecos had blabbed concerning his fear of the grey-eyed gunman. He ordered another drink and sipped it slowly. A cagey one, Red Tipton. Quick to figger his way out of holes.

He was in a hole now. Jim Lance had trailed him this far, even across the border. There was no more running; the open desert lay around Hidalgo, grim and forbidding. Red wouldn't risk a death from thirst and starvation by running further.

"They tell yuh are fast with a gun," he murmured. "Yuh need to be if yuh go after Lance. He's a six-gun devil. I faced him once and I didn't have a chance."

"I think I can handle him," Banjo promised.

Red leaned over until his unshaven face was close to Banjo's. "I did yuh a favor when I told yuh about Lance. Now I'll do

yuh another favor. In return, yuh get Lance for me. The guy is hounding me. I don't wanna bushwhack a man. But I gotta get rid of Lance."

"If I meet him first," Banjo said quietly, "yuh will be rid of him."

Red motioned to the Mexican waiter and handed him a five-dollar gold piece.

"Gringo sleeping in room over livery stable," he said. "Go tell him Señor Tipton in hotel bar. Tell him Señor Tipton waiting for him."

The Mexican repeated the message, then went trotting off on his errand.

"That will bring him here running," Red grinned. "He tried to find me last night but I ducked him all right."

"Yuh are kinda yellow, aren't yuh?" Banjo growled, disgust in his tone.

Red's eyes narrowed. "Call it what yuh like," he shrugged. "I play to win, Banjo, and I ain't particular how. I faced this Lance once; it was a close call. I ain't looking into the barrel of his gun again."

"What does he have against yuh anyhow?" Banjo asked curiously.

"We ain't reading the family albums," shrugged Red. "Better down yuh a drink podner. Mister Lance will be here pretty pronto."

Red stopped and nodded to Pecos Slim. "Excuse me if I ain't around when he comes," he grinned. "Don't want to interfere with your business."

Banjo nodded. He was staring at the door; he didn't notice that instead of leaving the bar that Red and Slim tip-toed into the kitchen and stood watching through the half-opened door.

"What's up?" barked Slim.

The outlaw chief frowned his gunman into silence. "I ain't taking chances," he growled. "This time Lance goes down. If Banjo don't get him, I will."

"From the door?" asked Slim, his lip curling. He had ridden the Whisper Trail, freckle-faced Pecos Slim, but he had never bushwhacked a man. He had done his killing face to face.

"I'm getting him," Tipton snapped. "Any objections?"

Pecos thought a moment. He didn't like it. But this was Mexico. It was none of his business.

"Do your own killing," he drawled, turning on his heel. "I ain't butting in. But we ain't riding together from now on."

And he stalked out of the back door of the kitchen. Red didn't hear his last words. Red was suddenly tense and had his gun in his hand. Something happened to his face as he stared at the red-haired broad-shouldered man who was walking into the restaurant. Blood boiled up into it until it was as red as his hair. No, a darker red. And above his nose it. . . .

BANJO stood up. Jim Lance had been looking over the restaurant but not until Warren stood up did he recognize the man called Banjo.

"So it's yuh?" he said gently.

"Yeah, Lance. Me."

"I'm sorry," Lance said in that same gentle tone. "I wanted to meet Tipton first."

"Me first," Banjo insisted. "I get first call, Lance. Tipton after me, if it's necessary."

"As yuh say," Lance sighed.

He straightened up. It was Banjo who stood with shoulders low and forward.

"What are yuh waiting on, Banjo? Yuh have tracked me down. Go on."

"Make the first move," Banjo said hoarsely. "Yuh didn't give my dad a break like that, but yuh can move first."

"I'm not moving, Banjo."

"Then I'll shoot yuh down in cold blood. Yuh don't leave here alive, Lance. Now make your play."

"I told yuh, I ain't making it."

Banjo slowly drew his gun. It was a deliberate insulting gesture. Any second Lance could have whipped out his own. But he did not move. He stood like a motionless statue, his lips parted in something akin to a smile.

"Well?" he asked finally, folding his arms. "This is Mexico, Banjo. Nobody will ask questions."

"What's the idea?" snapped Banjo. "I told yuh I was after yuh. Where are your guts, Lance? Make your play."

"And kill the man my sister loves?" shot back Lance. "Go ahead, Banjo, get it over with. There ain't much reason for living on anyhow. Do your shooting and go back and take care of Mary."

Banjo nodded, his eyes as hard as steel. "If that is what yuh want," he said slowly, "we'll make it that way."

His gun came up closely. Lance waited calmly.

Then Banjo's hand fell.

"I can't do it," he choked. "I swore I would track yuh to hell and back. But I can't."

Neither spoke for a second. The first sound was a snarling laugh from behind Banjo. Both men whirled. There in the doorway of the kitchen stood Red Tipton, both guns in his hands.

"By Gawd, I can," roared the outlaw. "Lance, yuh have chased me a long time. This time yuh get it."

And one of his guns barked.

Banjo whirled back to Lance. It was well that he whirled rapidly; else he wouldn't have seen the motion of the red-haired man's hands. The eye could scarcely follow the movement of his gun hand. There was an answering boom, and Red Tipton's triumphant laugh.

"Too quick, damn yuh! You're finished, Lance."

Again Banjo turned. And his eyes almost popped out of their sockets.

A shot from Tipton's gun hit Lance's gun hand and sent his weapon clattering to the floor. Rep Tipton came forward slowly —for the kill.

Banjo watched him with horrified fascination. He clawed for the gun he had replaced in its holster but his muscles refused to move.

Tipton's face! My God, Tipton's face!

It was a sight Tom Warren would remember to his dying day. The black blood hammering in Red Tipton's face and on that forehead—the forehead which had been unmarked—was a white, wavy scar-like line, brought out by the rushing blood!

"That scar!" snarled Banjo. "Yuh are the man!"

The truth flashed in Tipton's eyes as he turned from Lance with a curse.

His gun was already up. It spoke first, but Banjo had dived to the floor in that split second and was yanking out his weapon as he fell. He shot from the floor. It was a wild chance, but he had to take it. A groan told him he had hit Tipton. But now a bolt of searing flame was pinning him to the floor of the restaurant.

For a moment all was black before him. Jet black. He struggled to push aside the waves of darkness. He staggered to his feet. A hand gripped his shoulder.

"Steady, Banjo," said a voice in his ear, "It's all over."

"He's dead?"

"We both got our wish," Lance said softly. "Yuh got him in the heart and I got him in the head. He hit yuh as he fell with a lucky shot. Either one of our shots would have killed him."

Now the sea was ebbing away and Banjo's eyes could make out daylight.

"Good thing I saw the scar," he panted. "I thought it was yuh all the time."

"So did the law," Jim said bitterly. "Yuh must be Pop Warren's son. I was told yuh were coming after me."

"Yeah, I swore to get even."

"Tipton framed me," Lance explained. "The sheriff came and arrested me for killing your dad and robbing the bank. Tipton promoted a lynching party and I just barely got away. I've been hunting him for a long time, Banjo. I wanted to get a confession out of him before I let him have it. But now—well, it's been such a long time. I don't suppose it matters."

Banjo gulped down the brandy which the solicitous Mexican waiter had brought him.

"Sure it matters," he grinned. "I can't have an outlaw for a brother-in-law, Lance. I saw the truth in Tipton's eyes. And who makes a better witness than the son of the man who was murdered?"

Jim suddenly shivered. "Save the gab for later," he ordered curtly. "Tipton had three hellions with him. We had better ride while the riding's good. Can you sit a saddle?"

Banjo staggered for the door. "Shore."

But Lance had to help him. "Where to?" demanded Jim as they galloped out of Hidalgo.

"Paradise Canyon," grinned Banjo, biting his lips against the pain of his wounded shoulder. "A drink there. Always stop there for a drink. Those going down. And those going back."

BEGINNER'S LUCK

By BENNETT FOSTER

Men who live by the speed of their guns know that Death is the leader of the Fast-Draw Legion.

DUTCH BERWYNT stood at the end of the bar of the Bank Saloon and stared with blank blue eyes at the dark doorway. There was no front door listed among the Bank's appurtenances; the place never closed. Outside, on Sarasota's dusty street, the life of the little cowtown passed and repassed.

The Bank was Dutch Berwynt's office, his center of gravity. From it he went forth as duty called. A squat man, Berwynt, a little heavy as to abdomen and jowl, a little thin as to hair. For twelve hours, from eight at night until eight in the morning, he was the law in Sarasota, his court in a leathern holster on his hip, and sentence suspended between the thumb and forefinger of his right hand. It spoke well for Dutch Berwynt that, except on pay nights, he could for the most part remain in the Bank Saloon.

Halfway up the bar, elbow cocked atop the polished wood, glass before him and bottle at hand, Arlie Pierce, D cowpuncher, surveyed his reflection in the back bar mirror and found it good. A drink warmed Arlie's belly and a recollection warmed his mind. He had but recently returned from a D camp close by the Rio Grande. There was money in his pocket, and in his brain the commendation of Old Man Devore who owned the million and a half acres that was the D ranch, and whose big brand graced the ribs of thirty-thousand steers, cows, calves.

More than the commendation, Arlie remembered the occasion that had caused it. His brown eyes were bright with the recollection, for Arlie, along the river, had indulged in that most fascinating of all occupations: He had hunted men, a rifle in his hands, a good horse between his legs, and riders at his back. More than this, his hunt had been successful.

At Willow Bend he had come upon his quarry, Leandro Piaz and his gang of swarthy-skinned gentry from south of the river. Shots had been exchanged and Leandro would no more prey upon the D cattle. Arlie Pierce was firm in his belief that his thirty-thirty had put the final period to Leandro's career. The thrill of the chase still tingled in his brain and the flare of the sudden fight still warmed his mind. Arlie Pierce called for his second drink.

It is good to be young and keen and alive, and to have proved yourself a man among men.

At a poker table, somewhat to Dutch Berwynt's left and behind him, Honey Cartwright ruffled the cards that were his living, and spoke from the side of his mouth to Deuce Fletcher who capped his game: "D puncher," said Honey in the noiseless tone he had learned in Leavenworth. "Got his roll on him. I wonder—"

"There'll be more of 'em in," prophesied Deuce. "Wait. It's payday."

Content with that, Honey again sent the deck spinning through his fingers.

With his second drink in his hand Arlie paused. There was a stamp of booted feet, drawling Texas voices spoke his name, and through the door came three D cowpunchers. They clustered around Arlie, grinning slow grins, naming their drinks to the bartender who hovered attentively. With a meaning glance at Honey Cartwright, Deuce Fletcher arose from the table and moved purposefully toward the bar. Dutch Berwynt shifted his position, drew a big gold-cased watch from his pocket and examined its face. Returning the watch he stepped away from the bar and toward the door.

It was ten o'clock; time for Berwynt's customary round of the places that catered to range bred thirsts and pleasures in Sarasota . . .

AT ELEVEN o'clock Dutch Berwynt returned to his station in the Bank Saloon. The crowd was thicker; the air was blue with smoke and filled with voices. Pay night in Sarasota was progressing nicely. At the table beyond the bar end Arlie Pierce, three D cowboys, Deuce Fletcher and Honey Cartwright were playing draw poker. Berwynt shook his head at the bartender and, alone for all the crowd, watched the door, his ears attuned to the hum of Sarasota. Presently his eyes lighted momentarily. A small nondescript man, a somewhat battered felt hat atop his head, came through the crowd and approached the night marshal. He stopped at Berwynt's side.

The two faced each other for a moment, neither speaking. Standing there, side by side, they offered a striking study in contrasts, and yet they were also strikingly similar: Where Berwynt was squat and heavy, the other was thin and lean; where Berwynt's face was fairly clear of tan, the complexion of the other was that of a well worn saddle. Yet both had blue eyes, wrin-

kled at the corners and expressionless-tired eyes, weary from looking at life but more weary from looking at death. About both men hung a sort of aura, a chill, a feeling as though a skeleton had stretched forth a bony finger and placed it on the onlooker. For this small man was Smith, the trouble-shooter for Old Man Devore.

"Business, Smith?" questioned Dutch.

The small man shook his head.

"You been gone a long time," Berwynt said casually.

"North. In Dodge City," answered Smith as though that explained everything. Apparently it did, for Sarasota's night marshal nodded.

From the poker table voices flared up and the two men at the bar turned. The motion was catlike, swift and sudden. With his back to the bar Smith looked at the poker table and then at Berwynt, lifting his eyebrows in interrogation.

"Arlie Pierce," said Berwynt, answering the questioning eyebrows. "Old Man Devore had him down at Willow Bend. Lookin' after Leandro Piaz. From what I hear, Arlie settled with Piaz. You was gone, of course."

Smith nodded. "I heard," he said. "Who's the blond hombre?"

"Honey Cartwright. Gambler. Drifted in from Kansas. Have another drink? It ain't often that you an' me—"

"No," said Smith.

Berwynt nodded. "I see," he said.

"He's a D man." Smith's voice was apologetic.

"I see," Berwynt said again.

THERE was tension at the poker table. Poker, as a rule, is a silent contest but this game had degenerated into a noisy battle. It was being played more with money and voices than with cards. The stack of chips in front of Deuce Fletcher was tall and grew taller. The stack of chips in front of Honey Cartwright was small but stayed about the same size. The D cowpunchers had tapped reserves in their pockets and Arlie Pierce had dug deep. With impassive faces Smith and Berwynt watched the game.

It may have been that Honey Cartwright counted too much on the procession of drinks that had come to the table. It may have been that his recent sojourn in Leavenworth had dulled his ordinary nimble fingers. It may have been a mere slip—but suddenly, as though from a spring, Arlie Pierce came up from his chair.

"You're dealin' seconds!" he challenged. "That last card—!"

Of all the men about the table only Honey Cartwright and Deuce Fletcher had been steadily aware of those two cold-eyed onlookers at the bar. Neither Smith nor Berwynt made a move at Pierce's declaration, but for a flickering instant Cartwright looked from Arlie toward the bar. Even in that instant, while his eyes were removed from his challenger he spoke two cold, swift words:

"You lie!" he spat—and smooth fingers dipped into his vest pocket.

Fingers and wrist functioned as training had dictated. The little double-barreled .41 derringer that came from the vest pocket was no less deadly than the gun on Arlie Pierce's hip. It was the eyes that counted. Honey Cartwright had looked away for one fatal fractional second. His derringer was out and up before the gun had left Arlie's holster. It spoke a blaring message which missed delivery by a hair and shattered a bottle and glasses on the Bank's back bar. Before the gambling man could fire again his luck was finished. The big gun in Arlie Pierce's hand sent poker chips flying—sent a slug straight into Cartwright's heart.

The man went back and down out of his chair.

Before the crowd in the Bank Saloon could form for its rush, before the echoes of the shots had died, Dutch Berwynt and the man named Smith had swung into action. Moving out from the bar they presented their backs to the curious. When men tried to push past, Dutch Berwynt's elbows or the outstretched arms of Smith stopped them. There were exclamations from the crowd, questions and answers flung back from those who could see to those who could not.

"What happened?"

"Who is it?"

"Honey Cartwright."

"Arlie Pierce."

"Usin' a holdout—"

These flew back and forth, and then

Dutch Berwynt's booming drone stopped the gabble. The law of Sarasota was about to pronounce judgment.

"Hand over yore gun, Pierce," said Berwynt.

ARLIE PIERCE faced the officer. He knew Dutch Berwynt, knew him for what he was—an efficient, ruthless killing-machine that had been hired by the city fathers of Sarasota to enforce the peace. For an instant Arlie Pierce hesitated. He had killed a man, killed another man! Might he not also kill this one? Why not? Men are not hard creatures; they die easily. Leandro Piaz had dropped from a single slug, and this blond headed gambler . . .

"Hand it over!" commanded Berwynt.

Arlie Pierce extended his gun, butt foremost. There was a swagger in the movement and in his eyes. It was almost as though Arlie Pierce had said: "I will humor this man. I need not do as he says but for the time I will humor him." In actual fact Arlie Pierce spoke hastily:

"You seen it, Dutch," he said, a great man addressing a familiar. "He drawed first an' I had to let him have it."

"I seen it," said Dutch Berwynt stolidly. "He drawed first."

Behind Berwynt and Smith a sigh went up. There was a relief of tension in the Bank Saloon. Judgment had been pronounced. The prisoner at the bar had been found not guilty.

"You was that quick, Arlie!" said a D cowboy admiringly. "I thought—"

"Cash in yore chips," ordered Berwynt heavily. "The game is over. You, Pierce!"

Arlie turned from his admirer to face the officer again.

"There'll be an inquest in the mornin'," informed Berwynt heavily. "I'll want you there. You an' these others." He included the three D cowboys in his glance.

"We'll be here, Dutch." Arlie Pierce's voice was light, with only a little tremor to show the strain. "What time?"

"Early," answered Dutch Berwynt. "I got to get my sleep." He turned to the crowd, his blank blue stare impinging upon it. "Go on, now!" he commanded. "The excitement's over."

Under that impelling stare men pushed back and away. There was nothing more to see. Berwynt singled out a bartender.

"Have him took over to Hendry's barber shop, Bob," said Dutch Berwynt.

The bartender nodded. Already a bleary-eyed saloon swamper was hovering beyond the poker table, a bucket and a mop in his hands. Bob, the bartender spoke to other men as he moved along the bar, and these, nothing loath, went out the front door, presently to return carrying a long white-painted shutter. There were dark splotches on the shutter, mute testimony that it had been used on other occasions. Dutch Berwynt looked at Deuce Fletcher, singling him out with uncanny accuracy.

"You," said Dutch Berwynt, "count the bank an' split it up. Yore partner's dead."

Fletcher moved forward slowly, reached the edge of the poker table and lifted the currency from the box that served to bank it. The D cowboys pushed forward.

"How much did you lose?" asked Deuce Fletcher, wetting his lips.

Quiet voices answered.

The currency fell into piles as Fletcher counted it. Dutch Berwynt stood by, remote, silent. When the bills and coin were counted he reached over with one big hand, selected a single bill and held it out to Fletcher.

"Get out of town," said Dutch Berwynt.

Fletcher took the bill. He looked at Berwynt's eyes, wet his lips and voiced a protest. "It was half my roll," said Deuce Fletcher. "We—"

"The rest will bury him," said Berwynt flatly. "Get out of town."

"You want me for anythin' more, Dutch?" asked Arlie Pierce.

Berwynt looked down at the man named Smith. He looked up again at Arlie Pierce. "No," he said heavily. "Be around tomorrow."

The laden shutter was carried out. Arlie Pierce, his shoulders swaying with a little swagger, walked through the ever-open door of the Bank Saloon with the three D cowboys. The swamper dabbed the mop at the dark splotches under the poker table. Along the long bar of the Bank Saloon men drank and spoke through the corners of mouths to those close by:

"Devore's sure got a drag here!"

"Them D's can get away with murder."

"Dutch is slippin'. He's sure softenin' up."

Dutch Berwynt looked down at the man named Smith. As one professional to another he had conferred a favor.

"He's yore man, Smith," said Dutch Berwynt.

"He's my man," Smith replied. "Let me have that gun, Dutch."

Without question Berwynt slipped Arlie Pierce's gun from his waistband and handed it over. Smith took it, put it in his own waistband and turned away.

"See you," he said casually, and walked toward the door.

ON SARASOTA'S dark street, Smith paused. Arlie Pierce was a D man as were the other three punchers. Old Man Devore set a store by his riders. Smith knew that. He had stood by tonight as a protector. Now he had another duty to perform.

Arlie Pierce did not know Smith. The little man's duties took him far afield, up and down the trails where traveled the Devore herds; into waste places where lurked the men who preyed upon the branded cattle. Still Arlie Pierce had swaggered. He had killed a man and walked out with rolling stride and swinging shoulders. The D puncher had said: "You was *that* quick, Arlie," with admiration in his voice. The man named Smith shook his head and started up the street.

He found Arlie Pierce and the three D men at the Crystal Palace. The news of events in the Bank had preceded the four, and in the Crystal Palace the barman, with an eye to future business, had bought a drink. Smith went straight to Arlie's side.

"I'm Smith," he said when the brown-eyed man looked down. "Got a message for you from Old Man Devore."

The cowpuncher's lean and boyish face considered him. A tone of impatience, of self-importance was in Arlie's voice:

"Message—?"

"It's private," Smith said. "See you alone outside."

Arlie Pierce tossed down his drink. "Old Man Devore wants me to kill another rustler, boys," he said to the men about him. "I'll be right back."

The small man, Smith, pulled at his sleeve. "Come on," he commanded. Already the yeast was fomenting in Arlie Pierce. Smith saw his task plainly now.

Oustide the Crystal Palace, Smith led the way up the street. Arlie Pierce followed, albeit unwillingly. He did not want to leave the lights and the companionship. Back in the Crystal Palace one man looked at another.

"I don't like that," said a D puncher. "Arlie goin' out like that. He just shot a man an'—"

The bartender laughed. It was his business to know everyone and he knew his business: "That was Smith," he said. "Old Man Devore's trouble-shooter. He's just come back from Dodge City. Likely he wants Arlie to help him do a chore. What'll you boys have?"

The anxious D cowboys subsided.

Well up the street, in the light that came from the windows of a little restaurant, Smith paused. Beside him Arlie Pierce spoke impatiently.

"What does the Old Man want?" snapped Arlie. "You walked me 'way up here—"

Smith slid the gun from his waistband and placed it in Arlie's holster. He stepped back and faced the tall youngster. "There's yore gun," said Smith. "Old Man Devore don't want a thing of you, but I do!"

Bewilderment flickered in Pierce's eyes. "You—?" he began.

"You pore damned fool," said Smith coldly. "You killed a man an' now you think yo're bad!"

The bewilderment in Arlie's eyes lessened. "So that tinhorn was a friend of yores?" he snapped. "Take to it, mister! I'm ready for you!"

But Smith was not yet ready. Coldly, his voice a lash that cut and burned, he read an indictment of Arlie Pierce: "You kid!" snarled Smith. "You fool! You killed a man. Now yo're a ring tailed terror. Yo're a curly wolf an' howlin'. You'll set yorese'f up for a gun man. You—!"

There was anger in the brown eyes now, anger mixed with bewilderment. Arlie Pierce could not understand. Still that biting voice went on, stripping Arlie Pierce

of self-respect, lashing almost physically against the youngster's brain, cutting the last shreds of sanity from his mind until finally anger alone flamed in his eyes.

"Damn you!" snarled Arlie Pierce. "Pull!" And with the word his hand swept down toward his restored weapon.

There in the light from the little restaurant was a flurry of movement. Blue steel gleamed momentarily and red flame streaked across the yellow light. A gun thudded upon the boards of the sidewalks. Arlie Pierce, his left hand clutching his right forearm, staggered back a step. His lips were parted as though to scream and there was blank and dreadful terror in his eyes. Arlie Pierce faced death.

For a moment he stood so, confronted by the man named Smith. Then with a forward step the toe of Smith's boot sent the fallen gun spinning into the dust of the street. Smith's voice, every word delivered like a blow, smote upon Arlie Pierce.

"A gunman!" said Smith, and there was utter contempt in the words. "You fool kid! You had beginner's luck. Don't never think yo're a gunman."

The small man turned on his heels and his boots clumped on the sidewalk. Arlie Pierce, his head hanging forward on his breast, watched him go. Then, shaken in every fiber of his body, he turned and ran madly, without any sense of direction.

Figures had rushed from the restaurant. Faces peered after him and voices shouted. But all Arlie knew was that instinct to seek the dark. He stumbled into an alley mouth, lurched against a wall, sprawled down. He couldn't think. His legs had no strength to lift him up again . . .

IN THE Bank Saloon, Dutch Berwynt stood at his favorite station. He heard a shot and paid no heed. The men at the bar and the bartenders looked curiously in his direction, but Dutch Berwynt stood stolidly, facing the door.

Presently there appeared through that door a small man wearing a battered felt hat. Straight through the parting crowd he came to Dutch Berwynt's side.

He stood there for a moment, not speaking, and Dutch Berwynt looked down into the age-old blue eyes, his own asking a question. Somehow that question was answered and Dutch Berwynt spoke.

"Business?" Berwynt questioned.

"Finished," said the man Smith.

"Then," said Berwynt, "let's have a drink."

Smith nodded. With their glasses filled they stood facing the bar. For a moment neither moved. Then as though stirred by some common impulse they turned, glasses in hand, and looked at the deserted poker table and the freshly mopped floor. The blue eyes of both were blank; both men had retreated into their minds.

Dutch Berwynt was thinking of a town's dusty street, ten years ago. Of a man lying in the dust, and of a blond youth, even then a little heavy, squatly built and stolid, looking down at that prone figure. How many miles lay between that street and the Bank Saloon in Sarasota? How many years lay between the Dutch Berwynt of that dusty street and Dutch Berwynt, night marshal? It had been a long trail, and a bitter one. It went on. How far Dutch Berwynt did not know, nor did he care to guess.

Smith, staring at that mopped floor, was thinking of a tow-headed boy who lay in Dodge City's windswept Boot Hill, his luck run out. He was thinking of another boy, brown eyes filled with pain, who clasped his forearm with a desperate grip to keep the blood from dripping, and who listened while a cold voice said: "You had beginner's luck. Don't never think yo're a gunman." That dripping arm should force home the lesson. Some day Arlie Pierce, old and gray, would look back and remember this night with thanks.

Smith's blue eyes met the blue eyes of Sarasota's marshal. Some day, some time, in some far-flung outland or crowded street, by some lonely corral or in some packed saloon, those blue eyes, sightless, would stare up, nor would they be more expressionless than they now were. A man who lives by the gun lives on borrowed time. Somewhere ahead that long-due note would be called, the end of the trail reached.

"Here's how!" said Smith suddenly. And, nodding slightly to each other, the two drank to that time.

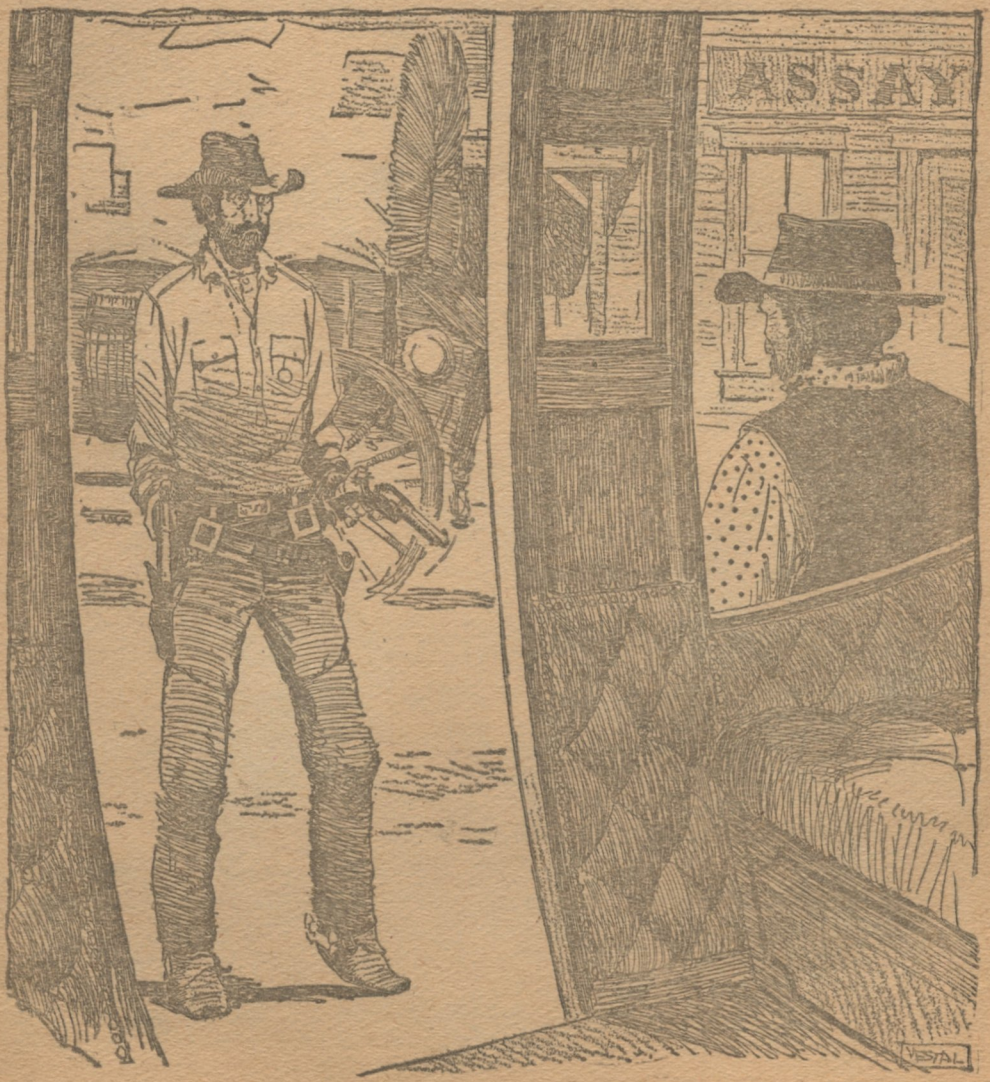
THE LAUGHING TOWN

By STEWART TOLAND

This is a tale of how one badman was born, and how he died.... And why you've never heard of Tiger John. He was buried in the wrong cemetery.

IT ALL come about over the camp fire at trail's end. The trail's end being Dodge City and the camp fire hot and bright, smelling sweet of wood smoke and sizzling meat. There was eight of us cowboys pulling at what was left of half a buffalo. We was some hungry and stripping the carcass quick, down to bones and

Alf Poude spoke up. "Were you lookin' to kill me, Tiger John?"



memory.

Dodge City was a place to see. At night especially, with hundreds of camp fires dotting all the ground as far as eye could squint. To each fire was some men, and close by, at least one wagon and horses. There was a lot of drinking in that camp town and quite a bit of shooting but mostly just plain living . . . sights to see, and music to hear, and a saloon roof to put over your head anytime you pleased. And streets so crowded with wagons and sweat and men it was a joy to battle through. A crowd was what you wanted after driving herd of hill steers all the dangerous, lonely way from Texas.

So, like I said, there were eight of us cowboys already paid off with money in our jeans, only waiting long enough to spend it until we got our bellies full. Which in Tiger John's case meant having to take his gun belt off and sling it over his shoulder.

Tiger John was thin as a drouth bean, tall as a bean pole, and white as a skinned onion. He never did brown up, day after day under a Texas sun and he still looked like he'd just come out of somebody's jail. We called him Tiger because he had yellow eyes.

He was a fair to middling shot and a fair to middling roper but mostly he stayed with the outfit because he was always good for a laugh. If there was a wrong way to do a thing, it'd just come natural to him to do it so and he never seemed to bother when we pointed fingers at him.

Tiger John was the first to leave the fire. "Well, boys," he drawled. "I'm goin' in an' shoot up the town. Anyone care to sling bullets with me?"

I looked at him over a white knuckle bone I was licking clean of gravy. "I've heard folks has been gettin' riled at cowboys comin' in an' takin' over like they owned the place."

"Well we do, don't we? Where'd Dodge City be without the cattle drives?"

"Right where it is, with the buffalo hunters kings on earth, pocketing a hundred dollars a day."

"If there's anyone I hate it's a damn buffalo skinner!"

Stinky spat through brown, snag teeth. "Now you're talkin' like a man, like a Dodge man, for that's what this place is. Dodge, the city of brotherly hate. With the freighters hating the railroad graders, the cowboys hating the buffalo hunters and the soldiers at the fort makin' it plain we're all dirt under their feet."

I shook my head. "Stinky, and you, too, Tiger, you've got this place sized up wrong. I been here before an' I know. Dodge is the laughin' town. It just sits here howling night after night, waitin' for a joke. It has the gol dangest sense of humor of any place in the west."

I wiped the grease off my fingers onto my pants, took a look at my guns. "Come on, Tiger, I betcha I hit twelve lights to your ten."

I would have, too, if I ever got the chance. We no sooner struck the main stem than the stage rolled in with four dead men in it. I didn't know whether the stage was due then or not but I knew for sure it wasn't supposed to come loaded like that.

The lines was dragging and the driver was in his seat with two holes in his head and a rope cutting deep into his neck an' keeping him from bouncing off. Inside, riding like gentlemen, was the guard and two passengers. All shot between the eyes except one who must have been screaming when he got his because the ball went clean through his mouth and the lips weren't even burnt. None of these gents was a very pretty sight to see.

BUT the thing that slapped Dodge City's ears back flat was a note pinned inside the carriage door.

Thanks for the gold.
Alf Poude.

It was written in blood.

I touched Tiger John on the shoulder. "Come on, let's get a drink . . . I feel kind of sick."

Tiger moved away though I could see he didn't want to. I could also see he wasn't any more disturbed than if the stage had come loaded with sugar candy.

"Tell me about Alf Poude." He nodded over the whiskey he wasn't tasting.

"Ain't much to tell except he's worse than bad. He'll kill a man because he don't like the way he yawns or because his hair ain't parted straight or as in this case, because the stage was carrying gold."

"How much gold?"

"No one seems to know, but enough to spend."

"If he's so bad why ain't he caught and hung till he's dead as death?"

"Because who's to catch him . . . who's to beat him to the draw? Who here ain't afeared of him clean down to his guts?"

I slapped another drink down my throat and stared at those yellow eyes. There was something new in them. Just tonight they had begun to burn. Yesterday Tiger John had been a kid. Now I wasn't sure what he was. I couldn't read what those yellow eyes held.

They turned, staring at the door and it was then I realized all sound had died. The talking and the swearing and the slap of glasses on the wide, wet counter. I turned to the door, too, and saw a short, stocky gent with the palest blue eyes this side of hades.

He had stubble on his chin and thick red lips and long thin legs with heavy guns buckled low.

He walked over, laid his foot on the brass rail that had become empty by just his approaching it, and tossed a gold coin on the walnut slab. The man who kept bar didn't touch the money, he stood there looking at it as he set the drinks out.

The gent scowled, saw the spot of red the bar keep was staring at. "What's the matter, afraid of a little blood!" He laughed and throttled the mirth in it quick. "Pick it up!"

The bar keep palmed the money and smiled. "Don't get sore, Alf, you know you can have anything in town you want."

"Sure I know it." He swept the room with the coldness of his glance, singled out a prosperous looking gent against the back wall. "Hello, Sam, when are you gettin' up a posse?"

The gent sidled up importantly yet cautiously, like a man trying to make friends with a she-bear. "We ain't thinkin' of takin' to the road, Alf. Maybe those boys had a difference of opinion an' shot each other up. We got no proof of murder."

Alf shrugged. "It wasn't rightful murder. I was provoked into it seein' as how they didn't pass the gold over peaceful like." A fly lighted on the tip of his nose. Alf looked into the long mirror, drew his gun and blew that buzzing devil to kingdom come and never even laid a welt on the taut, bone ribbed skin. That was when Dodge City took its tongue out of its cheek and laughed.

It rocked with mirth as it crowded about Alf Poude with his pockets full of gold and his hands never empty of a gun. He stood there by the bar, carrying four new notches in the handle, calm as though he were whittling a toy whistle. Other men came to join him, men who were known almost as well as he. They were free to go and come as they pleased in this wild, frontier town. There was no one dared pull a gun on them, no one even to shoot them in the back as they drank and caroused and threw their gold and their night away.

And the fires in the yellow eyes grew hotter and brighter till I almost was afraid . . . and told Tiger John maybe we'd best get back to camp for a little sleep.

He came willingly enough, though mighty silent. The night was cold and our breath hung like small clouds before us, and the dotting camp fires were a thousand red stars. Tiger John spoke to me only once before he rolled into his blankets.

"Bill," he said, "did you notice the respect the town gave Alf Poude? Did you notice the awe, the way they admired him?"

"Fear is the word you're huntin' for boy. They feared him."

"No, they admired him. Look at the way they laughed when he shot that fly off his nose!"

"Sure they laughed. I told you, Dodge City likes a laugh."

"But it was the right kind of laughter, not the kind I get. They were laughing with him, not at him."

"Listen, boy, what's the matter? What's got under your skin?"

"I went out to shoot up the town tonight, Bill. I was plannin' on bein' just another fool cowboy. Now I don't want that. I want

respect and admiration. How do you get that out here in the west?"

"I'm a lot older than you, Tiger, an' I've found only three ways. And it's the same three ways all over the world. You either got to be rich or smart or tough."

"Which is the easiest to begin on?"

"Being tough."

And that was the whole trouble with Tiger John. He took the easy way. And the first thing he tried getting tough on was a skunk.

WE HAD got to bed about three and like I said, it was a real cold night. One of those nights when the skunks come out of the wilderness hunting up men and their warm blankets. There was a lot of skunks around Dodge City, pretty smart they was, wanting human comforts . . . knowing a wool blanket was something nice to tie to on a cold night.

A sensible hombre would share when he felt one of the little creatures crawling in by his side. After all they'd be gone by dawn and most didn't smell anymore than they should. Only Tiger John wasn't sensible, he had just made up his mind to learn to be really tough, so he kicked the little wood kitty out of his blankets and then he shot him, and in between the shooting and the kicking, the skunk bit him.

Right then I knew it was the end, because "Hydrophobia Skunks" is what we called them and well, that's enough said, I guess.

First thing in the morning the grave digger called on Tiger John. He squatted down beside the pile of buffalo bones. "I've come about your casket."

The fever had already taken hold, red and swelling. His voice was thick, unruly. "I didn't know Dodge City bothered about caskets in Boot Hill."

"Not in Boot Hill, but I wasn't talkin' of Boot Hill. That's for outlaws. Dodge City has two cemeteries, one for those who die by lead and the other for those who are bitten by skunks." He smiled with just pride. "Our town is so healthy there's not much else you can die of. Now for five dollars I'll see you get dug in deeper than most, with good drainage . . ."

"Get out!" Tiger John had stumbled to his feet. Screaming. "Get out . . . get out before I kill you! An' if ever you come back, you won't live to go away!"

And when Tiger John sat down and could stop the trembling of his hands, he began carving notches on his gun. Six of them, then rubbing them with dirt so they looked old. I didn't see him because I'd gone hunting a doctor, crawling through the hundreds of wagons blocking the street, looking for a man who knew more about curing than the message in a whiskey keg.

The old Chinese cook in a wagon next to ours kept an eye on Tiger John and he said by sundown the boy was raving. He lay there in his blankets, whispering . . . to himself, or maybe to his God.

"I'm goin' to die and I don't care. I'd rather do that than set fiction. But I'm not goin' to die a nobody and be buried in that worthless cemetery filled with cripples who couldn't find no better way than bein' bit by skunks."

He sat up, shrieking into the wild, starred night. "I want respect an' I'm goin' to have it in my grave. I'm goin' to be buried in Boot Hill with a name and a memory to leave behind. He stopped there, peering into the future. "A name and a memory to leave behind."

"I'm goin' to kill every man I see between now an' when I drop, so long as I can lift a gun I'm shooting. Sooner or later one'll get me first but by then I'll be fitting for Boot Hill. I've got six notches on my gun an' I plan they won't be no lie, I mean to kill two for every notch."

It was near morning before Tiger John made town, but his threats were there before him.

Tiger John, the baby faced gent, out to be a killer! Folks remembered those yellow eyes of his as they were when first he came to Dodge City, mild and soft as corn silk. Like I said, Dodge is a laughing town. It loves its little joke and it was Alf Poude who said wouldn't it be fun to see a man die of fright. Because that's what Tiger John would do if he tried matching guns with the worst killer in the west.

Tiger John was walking slow when he hit the main street. He was looking pretty bewildered because as yet he hadn't met a man. Not one man to send to hell. The

town was deserted, he didn't see the figures hiding behind wagons, and peering out of darkened doors. He stood unsteadily in the very heart of town, with the guns in his hands hanging low and heavy. Up ahead, just in nice range, a man stepped out of the stage coach, still sitting in front of the saloon. The stranger had his back to Tiger John so he didn't see the guns start raising.

IT WAS slow work. And terrible, to watch death come like that. I saw it, peering out of the back of a wagon. I saw the fire burning in the yellow eyes and I saw the swollen fingers tighten against the triggers and then the stranger turned and it was Alf Poude, like everybody knew. Everybody but Tiger John.

Tiger's fingers stopped moving, and maybe his heart, too, for all I know and from the way his lips got pale as ghosts.

Alf Poude came closer. "Were you lookin' to kill me, Tiger John?"

Tiger stood still, sagging a mite like a hunk of winter ice beneath a summer's sun.

"Because if you hanker to match guns with me . . ." All this time Alf had been mocking, his lips wide and grinning as a jackass. When suddenly they changed. Just at the moment he looked square into Tiger John's eyes. I don't know for sure what he saw there but I'm guessing it was those new kindled fires that had warned me to be afraid of my best friend.

They were killer's eyes . . . something I had known and hadn't wanted to put into words. Killer's eyes . . . and once a man looks out of killer's eyes, he never changes.

Anyway Alf Poude went for his guns. He treated the watching Dodge City to some of the nicest, fastest shooting in a century.

Only Tiger John's bullet tasted blood first. It ploughed straight into as cold a heart as the west had yet known. Twenty-two men Alf Poude had killed, and now he lay in the dirt, harmless as only the dead can be. And standing over him with Poude's last bullet in his lungs, was Tiger John.

And he was smiling.

We carried them both to Boot Hill come sunup and buried Alf Poude first. A big crowd had gathered to see him meet dirt and most in that crowd were pretty sore at Tiger John. There was jealousy in it of course, that he had got the credit of matching guns with Alf and winning. But there was also a sense of being cheated. Dodge City had set out to have a laugh last night when Tiger John died of fright. And he hadn't obliged.

"Yuh know," the gravedigger grinned. "Tiger John was so hell set on bein' buried in Boot Hill it'd be a good laugh on him if we buried him in the other cemetery!"

So they did. They carried him over and dug a new grave and laid him in it neat and proper and sat back and laughed. It sure was a joke on Tiger John. And the gravedigger howled the loudest when he remembered how Tiger John had cursed him from the camp when he had tried to sell him a coffin and see him buried like a gentleman.

"Gents," he chuckled, "he swore he'd kill me!"

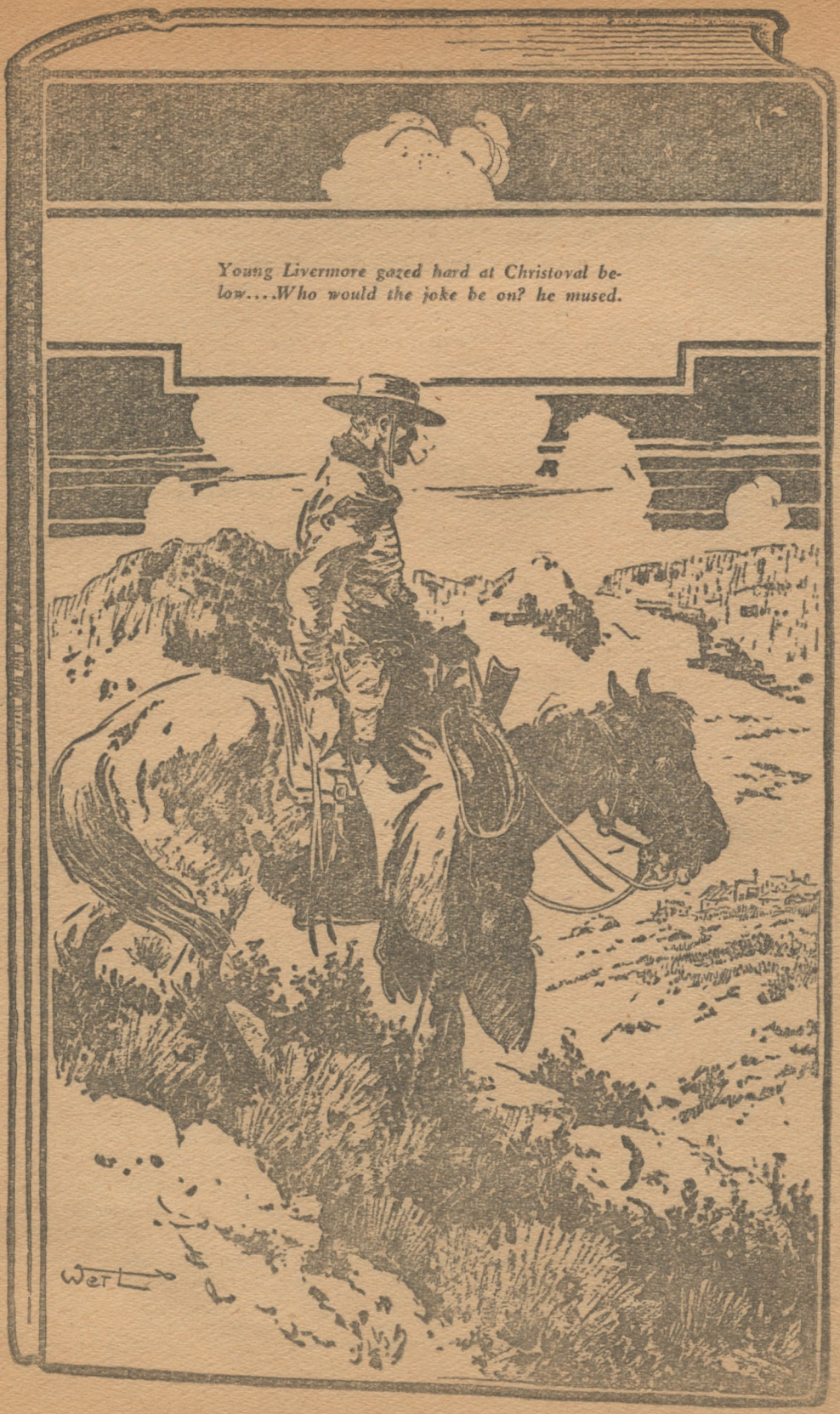
He dropped a clod of earth on the still body and right then a roar came from out the grave, and a bullet, and the gravedigger met his Maker.

There are those that swear a rock in the clod of earth hit the trigger of a gun hidden in Tiger John's pocket and made it go off. Maybe that would be possible. I don't know. But if you take it from me, I'd been watching Tiger John's eyes and the fires was still burning in them. He knew what he was doing when he shot the gravedigger.

But whichever way you look at it, the town had its laugh. It chuckled a whole day and night after they'd tossed the gravedigger in on top of Tiger John and closed the grave forever.

That's how one bad man was born and how he died. And why you've never heard of Tiger John.

He was buried in the wrong cemetery to be remembered.



Young Livermore gazed hard at Christoval below....Who would the joke be on? he mused.

TRIGGER TRIAL

By EDGAR L. COOPER

Swaggering, cocky, unwary, Young Bart Livermore asked for it. He riled the Rangers, and Rangers like their little joke. They sent him to Christoval, the Southwest's wild, uncurried neck of hell.

CAPTAIN WARREN SHUFORD, of Company E, Pecos Battalion, Texas Rangers, swung a fancily balanced pen, affixed his signature with a flourish to a sheet of tan paper, sealed a neat envelope and handed the envelope over his desk to the lean, raw-boned young man who stood before him. Bart Livermore shoved it deep into his inside coat pocket.

"You are to deliver this to Sergeant Clint Searles," the captain said brusquely. "At Christoval, forty miles west of the Pecos. Your instructions are in the letter, and you will place yourself under command of Sergeant Searles until further orders. He will be at the Old Homestead Hotel. That's all."

Bart Livermore saluted awkwardly, a tiny spark lighting in his cool gray eyes. With something of a swagger he left the headquarters room in Sonora's courthouse, and clumped down the stairs.

The door had no sooner closed behind him than Captain Warren Shuford, Company E, Pecos Battalion, winked and smiled significantly at Sergeant Nate Patton, sitting indolently with his chair propped back against the wall. The smile was more than significant. The noncom grinned understandingly back at his superior. This was going to be good.

Outside, Bart Livermore strode toward his quarters through the bright llano sunshine of a west Texas morning, whistling contentedly with all the enthusiasm of a young recruit en route to his first important mission. He noted but subconsciously the life of the thriving prairie county seat, with its brick bank, filled store windows and numerous saloons; his mind ranged ahead to the assignment the captain had given him. Christoval, across the Pecos! In as wild and uncurried a neck of hell as could be found in the whole Southwest—a region where it was said God and the Law had never gone! And he, Bart Livermore, just turned twenty-one and late of the Kentucky Cumberlands, was bound there!

But if Bart Livermore, as he eagerly packed his war-bag and saddled his hammer-headed sorrel, could have seen and heard what was taking place back in headquarters room in Sonora's courthouse, his bubbling spirits would have deflated like a pricked balloon. Captain Warren Shuford was chuckling to himself and grinning like a fox in anticipation of the entertainment forthcoming from one rookie recruit named Bart Livermore, who had been a member of Company E some two weeks, and had applied for the job garbed in brogans and homespuns, carrying a henskin blanket and brown tow sack across his shoulders.

It happened that there was a vacancy in the company at the time, and Ranger captains hired and fired their men the same as a ranch boss would. And from the first the Kentucky youth had been a fillip of fun and entertainment to the hard-bitten crowd comprising the roster of Company E. He wasn't their kind, and they didn't understand his ways; hence they made him the butt of many a rough and practical joke.

Captain Shuford—himself a dandified self-admiring man—had signed on the Kentuckian solely as a matter of jest, intending to fire him when the first likely aspirant for the job came along. And now, as a little diversion from a garrison routine that was growing rather monotonous, he was sending the recruit over to Christoval for "the cure."

And that, he mused, would be the finishing touch for young Bart.

The cure, in other words, being a wild-goose chase on a supposedly perilous mission to a bitter-creek town, where outlawry and crime ran rampant and bounty was offered for every Ranger scalp. In the last outpost of law and order, on the fringe of hell! So Livermore's fellow members had primed him. The grizzled veteran, Searles, would see to it that the Kentucky mountaineer got all the "excitement" and "adventure" that he was "honing" for, Shuford reflected gleefully. And when he'd finished the cure, Searles would haze him back to Sonora, the target of much ribald horseplay and the sheepish victim of the frontier sense of humor.

But Bart Livermore was happily ignorant of all that as he rode jauntily out of Sonora at a brisk trot, chewing twist tobacco and whistling tunelessly between his teeth. A .30-30 Winchester lay scabbarded in front of his Padgett saddle, a long-barreled Bisley .44 six-shooter was holstered in a worn belt at his waist, and in his tarp roll behind the cantle snugged four hundred rounds of cartridges. Clad in broad-brimmed hat, flannel shirt and corduroys, range boots and forged spurs, he headed southwest toward his great adventure.

Shuford and Sergeant Patton watched him go. Both were grinning widely. "Let's take a drink," said the captain, "to the education of a damned hillbilly."

AFTERNOON of the following day saw Livermore well west of the Pecos, jogging through the cactus and mesquite country along the thread of trail winding to Christoval.

In spite of the long ride he bore scant evidence of fatigue, and the sorrel gelding easily maintained its mile-eating pace. Since the country he traversed was sparsely populated, he'd scarcely seen anyone all day save an occasional Mexican and his burro. Prickly pear, creosote bush, bunch grass; spiny ridges, rolling hills and brush-choked swales; flash of gliding deer, squawk of chaparral cock, Mex eagles soaring high in the blue. A grim and savage land, yet queerly appealing and fascinating to the youngster in years and tenderfoot in experience who was invading its reaches for the first time.

His thoughts were peaceful and untroubled as he crossed a wide, low swale and dipped into a high-walled cut matted on both sides by thickets of brush, leading to a rising slope beyond. He entered the arroyo —and ran head on into disaster.

A smarting sensation on his right ear, the flat cracking spang of a rifle, the whiplash split of air from a bullet grazing his head turned his sinewy body to woven wire. And even as he threw himself against the off side of his sorrel, a second report went racketing through the coulee and his horse screamed and reared, stumbling as it came down. Bart had his own six-shooter out and his feet clear of the stirrups before the staggering gelding collapsed. He dove behind a clump of chaparral beside the trail before the gulcher could get in a third shot.

Crouching there, his nostrils quivering, his face bleak and metallic, he searched the shallow wash opposite with red fury in his slitted eyes. The shots had come from there. And as he studied the brush-choked gash a third bullet sped from its recesses, slashing through the chaparral leaves above his head. A wispy blue vapor of smokeless powder threaded from the busher's rifle and Bart Livermore, steadying the heavy Bisley with both hands, sent six bullets smashing into the covert in a bracketing hail of death, spacing them with intent expertness. His answer to the treachery.

Came a choky cry, a thud, a threshing, flailing noise in the brush that gradually lessened. Silence once more settled over the canyon as the Kentuckian still held his crouch, watching the spot intently, a crooked smile on his lips, his thin features flint hard. Somewhere a road-runner cried raucously in the hot stillness.

After a few minutes Bart, his pistol reloaded, got up and walked slowly across the gully. He swabbed his nicked and bloody ear with a bandanna handkerchief. The hammerhead sorrel was finished, with a bullet through its neck, and the youth's mouth tightened as he continued up the slope. There was a dark huddle at the edge of the wash, and Livermore regarded the dead man with no emotion more than a grim satisfaction.

A fellow of some thirty years, in nondescript range garb and unshaven, with a

livid scar snaking from his sightless left eye to the corner of his distorted mouth. One bullet had caught him in the throat—a second went through his chest. He wasn't a pretty sight. Farther on and a bit above, his mount stood in a thicket, a wiry, dun cowpony.

Bart went up to it, swung into the saddle, rode down to where his dead gelding lay, exchanging saddle and gear, throwing the dead man's hull into the brush. Then with a final hawk-eyed survey of the scene, he left the grisly remains of the encounter to the coyotes and buzzards who would gather as soon as he was out of sight.

He rode slowly toward Christoval.

THE sun's last slanting rays were shining through the west windows of the hotel barroom, and the fanged outline of the distant San Miguel hills was a violet and crimson stain on the skyline when Sergeant Clint Searles took his booted feet from the open window, spat a stub of quirly from his lips, and eased his gun belt forward. He was a small man, nearing sixty, every inch grizzled rawhide and whalebone, and tough as jerky. His slaty eyes were squinted thoughtfully as they surveyed the main street of Christoval.

He smiled without mirth. Searles, scarred veteran of the law trail, was under no illusions as to his and Tobe Odom's status in this vicious little settlement. They had been sent there by the adjutant-general for the sole purpose of keeping a narrowed eye on the natives. And their position was just about as secure as that of a man standing on the scaffold with a rope around his neck. Two men against a mob, to hold them off! For Searles knew that the henchmen of Pecos Mike Brill and Mex Larned would sooner or later strike. It might be an hour, might be a week. But it was inevitable.

Captain Shuford, back at headquarters in Sonora town, was ignorant of the true situation. A week or a month later—or whenever it dawned upon him that no reports had come through from across the river for some time—he would maybe send someone to investigate. And that one would find Christoval in outlaw hands—and never return to tell his story. But none of those grim thoughts were visible upon Searles' visage as he sat at the window of that two-story frame hostelry ironically called The Old Homestead, and watched the sly, quietly deceptive skein of intrigue weave and unravel itself along Christoval's main drag.

Tarco Catlan, the blocky-faced proprietor of The Old Homestead, ceased his nervous swabbing of his bar and edged around to one side of Searles, hunkering down so he couldn't be seen by the men at the combination pool-hall and barber-shop across the street.

"My Gawd, Searles!" he mumbled hoarsely. "They air cookin' up sumpin', shore as the devil's got horns. Yuh ain't got the chanct of uh fiddler in hell amongst these hairpins. Not even a chanct to ride outa town!"

The Ranger rubbed the gray stubble on his chin, thoughtfully twisting a brown paper quirly. "It does look a leetle badder from here than from up at the county seat," he said slowly. "But I reckon me'n Tobe will hang on a mite longer, anyhow. Can't never tell—"

A tattoo of pistol shots broke off the Ranger's words and shattered the evening silence abruptly. Searles left the chair and sidled away from the open window just as a group of men erupted from the pool-hall doorway, shouting and cursing. Nor was he a moment too soon in his move, for a jagged hole suddenly appeared in the window screen and thudded against the rear wall of the barroom on a bee line from where he'd been seated.

Searles jerked his hat brim over one eye, viewing the bullet's course with bleak regard. Then, with a curious crablike motion, he started for the lobby door, just as a second bullet ripped through the screen and whanged by less than a foot from the Ranger's grizzled head. Drawing the long-barreled six-shooter from its holster, he passed through the deserted lobby with that same deceptive, limping pace and reached the front door.

Tobe Odom, raw-boned, red-faced and fiery-haired, bounded down the stairs to join him, his blue eyes snapping, his pistol drawn. Sergeant Clint waved him back sardonically, as, halted beside the hotel entrance, he stared across the street.

"Come here, Tobe," he chuckled, "an' git a good laff."

A lank, sandy-haired, droopy-mustached man with a star on his vest was herding a couple of seemingly drunken fellows down the street toward the local calabozo, his drawn gun prodding their cruppers. As they passed the hotel porch the two Rangers watched with knowing grins, thumbs thrust in their cartridge belts. The man with the star glanced toward them, scowling darkly, as his charges stumbled and weaved and swore obscenely.

"Walkin' these jaspers to the lock-up," he volunteered harshly. "Shootin' up the barber-shop, they was—full uh Paso Kate's likker. New pilgrims in Christoval is apt to make the mistake they ain't no law here."

"Do tell," grinned Searles. "Which only goes to show how deceivin' appearances c'n be, Liggett."

The town marshal gave them a venomous look, then kept on, cursing under his breath. He knew that neither Searles nor Odom was taken in by the late gun-play which had been especially staged in the expectation of knocking off the sergeant "accidentally." Stray shots—deftly aimed!—had a habit of hitting innocent bystanders. And as soon as it got dark the marshal would release the two men, if he locked them up at all. And the only result of the scheme had been damage to Catlan's barroom screen and wall.

"Give us a drink," Searles told the jittery proprietor. "We ain't eatin' sand for supper *—yet.*"

The glass halfway to his mouth, he paused, peering squint-eyed up the main street. In the red light of the sinking sun a horseman was riding into Christoval—a horseman little more than a kid, with a scabbard rifle on his saddle and six-shooter buckled around his waist. Straight along the main street toward the livery stable and corral at its far end he rode, his wiry dun cowpony at a walk, he erect in the hull, right hand resting lightly on his hip.

Searles downed his drink, rolled a cigarette.

"Another shorthorn enterin' the corral for ropin' and brandin'," he commented drily. "Drink up, Tobe."

AND as Bart Livermore rode along the main street there was that ineffable tang of trouble in the air that quickened his senses, made his eyes watch everything in sight and his ears listen to each least sound that broke the unnatural quiet. He rode slowly and very, very warily, every sense at feather edge.

The denizens on the street, those in store and saloon, watched him with speculative eyes, their faces impassive, uninviting, unfriendly.

The citizens of Christoval did not welcome or trust strangers, or encourage their remaining in their midst. And as Bart Livermore's gaze took in the score of buildings comprising the town, false front and adobe, sun-warped and unpainted, flanking both sides of the rutted, sandy street—when he saw the furtive, cold-eyed hard-faced inhabitants who watched him so narrowly, his own hatchet-face grew bleak as a Texas norther. The boys back at Sonora certainly hadn't lied about this settlement.

He turned into the livery barn, and a man standing near the front of a Mexican chili joint watched him disappear. He smiled crookedly and a faint smile crossed his wolfish face as he turned abruptly and walked up the street toward the Hell's Bells saloon and dance hall, headquarters of Pecos Mike Brill and his lieutenant, Mex Larned.

Little took place in Christoval that did not sooner or later come to the ears of the big boss. And tonight, as on most occasions, it would be sooner than later. That pilgrim was riding a livery stable horse which Scar Dudley had forked out of town that afternoon. Which was news richly deserving Pecos Mike's immediate attention.

Bart let the dun drink at the water trough, then rode into the stable's runway and dismounted. A hostler with bulbous, beet-red nose and bloodshot eyes advanced from the tack room.

"Grain him," said Bart, "then turn him loose in the c'ral."

The hostler showed black teeth in a snarl. "Whaddaya doin' with that stable jughead?" he demanded. "How come?"

"You air askin' a question, friend, that does its own answerin'," Bart drawled. "I been sittin' him."

"Yeh? Where'd yuh git that hoss, stranger?"

"Inherited him up the road a ways."

The hostler's face darkened, but he said

nothing else aloud as he led the dun rearward. Bart, hanging up his saddle and bridle, shouldered his war-bag and Winchester, and strode with his awkward gait down the main street toward The Old Homestead, the only two-storied building in town.

Behind him, a second man who had been loafing in the tack-room hurriedly quitted the stable and went toward the Hell's Bells, to report to Pecos Mike Brill that this maverick pilgrim not only rode Scar Dudley's cayuse but was acting like a Bitter Creeker in the bargain.

SERGEANT CLINT SEARLES, seated with Odom at a table in the barroom eating a mess of ham and eggs, looked up as Bart Livermore entered the hostelry and inquired of Tarco Catlan where he could find the Ranger. And when the youth walked over to their table the grizzled officer quickly sized him up from the crown of his weather-stained hat to the toes of his scuffed boots.

"Well, son," he said amiably, "yuh lookin' for me? I'm Searles."

"My name's Bart Livermore," said the newcomer, in a soft drawl. "From headquarters at Sonora, suh. With a letter from Cap'n Shuford for you, suh."

Searles grunted, and the tan envelope given Bart many hours before changed hands. The sergeant put on his spectacles, and read the message slowly; then raised his eyes and stared intently at Livermore with a peculiar, probing look. An explosive grunt erupted from his lips as he said suddenly, "Sit down, son. Tarco's Mexican can cook ham an' aigs good as any Chinaman, an' I reckon you're plumb hungry. While yuh eat you c'n tell me all about it. And—oh, yeah. This red-headed pardner of mine is known as Tobe Odom."

The hard-bitten old-timer, picking his teeth with a sharpened goose-quill, watched Bart Livermore's tanned, hatchet face as the youngster ate a hearty meal and between bites recounted recent happenings. Watched his curious bluish-gray eyes, sharp as a cactus spike, and the lantern jaw; listened to that soft, drawling voice as it recounted the wild tales told him of Christoval, and of the important mission entrusted him by Cap'n Shuford. Bart finished by telling of the unexpected attempt to drygulch him that late afternoon en route, and of riding the bushwhacker's horse to town.

Sergeant Searles stroked his stubby, sun-bleached mustache and snorted—once. "Shuford!" he muttered under his breath. "Damned young whipper-snapper wearin' Ranger uniform! I'm gonna let him know, sometime maybe, just what I think of his damned kangaroo-court order. Hell an' hominy!" But aloud he said to Livermore: "Son, yuh blew in here at the worst minit yuh could of. Me'n Tobe here are sittin' on a powder keg which is liable to blow up any tick uh a watch. Hell's due to spout fire at both ends an' buckle all outa shape in the middle."

Bart's eyes glinted. "I was afeerd I'd git heah at the tail end o' trouble, suh—that's the reason I shoved ahead so peert like."

"Tail end?" snorted Searles. "Hell, younker, this is only the beginnin'. We're buckin' a pat hand here in Christoval, ag'in a stacked an' marked deck. When the boys tole you they was a bounty on Ranger scalps in this neck uh hell they didn't state far wrong, kid. Brill an' Larned have got this dump of the devil sewed up tighter'n Dick's hat-band, an' blue sky's the limit. Christoval's always been tough, but it's skunk rotten now—"

He broke off as a party of men entered the barroom from the hotel lobby. The town marshal, Hogg Liggett, was in the lead. Lank, horse-faced, he glanced around the room and then made straight for the table where the three Rangers sat, his half-dozen coterie of tough-looking specimens following watchfully. Nodding shortly to Searles, the town marshal fixed Bart Livermore with a bleak and narrowed eye.

"Young feller," he said raspily, "you're under arrest. My prisoner, savvy? Charges include murder an' robbery, as well as hoss theft. Git up."

Bart Livermore's eyes had suddenly become tinged with red. He made no motion to obey the officer's command. As Liggett's hand crept toward his gun-belt, old "Sidewinder" Searles spoke, and his voice was like the crack of a bullwhip. "Easy, Marshal," he snapped. "Plumb easy-like. You ain't takin' this younker to yore chicken-wire

hogan—not any yuh ain't. Not for crolin' airy stinkin' drygulchin' spawn uh hell that tried to bush him a while ago in uh arroyo. Mix that with yore Bull Durham, Liggett."

"What—whaddaya mean?" blustered the marshal.

"You savvy what I mean, you hoss-faced bullbat! This younker happens to be a State Ranger, mister, an' *I'm* answerin' for him."

"But the danged young squirt kilt Scar Dudley an' stole his cayuse—"

"Scar Dudley, eh? One uh Mex Larned's pilot-fish." Searles' face was flint hard. Unhurriedly he drew his old bone-handled .45 and tapped slowly, deliberately with it on the table.

"Marshal," he drawled, "I'm all bluff. Yuh don't have to mind me or this gun. But damn yore ugly soul," he suddenly rasped, "I'd advise you to git to hell out uh here! Start steppin'!"

The three Rangers were like coiled springs, waiting for Liggett's play. But there was none. The red-faced marshal and his henchmen left rather hurriedly and without more talk, but with many a black look toward the trio. And as the party clumped outside, one of them snarled: "You'll sing another tune outa the other side of yore mouth *muy pronto*, you limpin' lobo!"

Searles grinned wryly and reholstered his gun. "Yuh begin to see how the wind blows, now?" he asked sardonically. "They don't aim for *you* to ride outa Christoval alive—now. They've put the tag on yuh."

Bart Livermore nodded slowly. Above his hard, sharp jaw his mouth was narrowed to a knife-edged line. "I think, suh," he said quietly, "that I'll kinda look ovah this town a spell, tonight."

The veteran sergeant scowled and shook his grizzled head. "Nope yuh won't," he said with blunt finality. "This ain't no time to poke around an' wade into trouble up to yore belly-band. They's *paisanos* out there who would put a knife or bullet where yore suspenders cross quicker'n yuh could say Jack Robinson. Nosiree, son. You rate a night's sleep, an' such you're goin' to git. Better pound yore ear while you're able."

HE LED the way upstairs to a long hall, where doors flanked it on each side. Stopped, and pushed open a door. "Yore room, kid," Searles said. "Better keep the screen locked, as well as the door. Can't tell jest which way the cat's gonna jump, but jump it will, sooner or later. *'Noches.*"

It was a small room, bare walled and wooden floored, with a single window overlooking an alleyway between the hotel and general store, an easy drop to the ground. There was a rickety washstand and water pitcher, an iron cot with blankets, and a wooden hat-tree crowned with stag antlers. For a long time Bart Livermore sat in the darkness beside the window, chewing tobacco thoughtfully, gazing out and listening to all the loose-lawed hilarity of that cold-deck town. An endless jangling of shouts, discordant music and ribaldry—

After a while he shucked off his boots, draped his Stetson on the wooden clothes tree above his coat, and struck a match to the smoky kerosene lamp on the table. He wanted light to breach his tarp roll and warbag, and to clean and oil his gun. Stooping over to lift the roll on the bunk, his shoulder touched the clothes tree and rocked it, moving his hat and coat.

And at that exact second several things happened simultaneously.

Came a rippy tear at the screen, a dull thud, and the wooden tree swayed and danced like a sapling in a sandstorm. The loud, flat smash of a high-powered rifle blended with that queer antic, shattering the near stillness. And even as Bart snatched his six-shooter and flattened himself against the wall a second shot cracked from the alley. The teetering tree toppled to the floor, spilling hat and coat. Came the faint sound of running feet—then silence.

Moving like a panther, Bart blew out the lamp and sprang to the window, looking out. But the alley seemed deserted, with no sign of life.

The hombre who had shot from the dark with a high-powered rifle had vamoosed, evidently thinking his slugs had found their mark when the tree holding the hat and coat was knocked over. A gulching hombre who had seen the moving shadow of the jostled tree, and thought it Bart. As the Kentuckian lit a match and surveyed the fallen stand, his jaw tightened. Two slugs were imbedded in the wooden tree, and both had gone through his coat.

Came a hammering upon the hall door, and the Sidewinder's grim voice calling: "Bart? Son—are yuh all right? Open up."

Bart opened and said he was all right. And when he told the sergeant and Odom what had happened, Searles took the boy's arm and piloted him out into the hall and down to his own room. And his harsh voice contained a peculiar quality, a tenseness, that made Odom look at his noncom sharply.

"Listen, son," he said. "They're after yore scalp, good an' plenty. Damn that snooty-nosed, stuck-up tin-soldier Shuford, with his political pull, who sent you here! The damn, blind fool! If he's a Texas Ranger then I'm a stinkin' carpetbag Republican! You seen what's happened here tonight, kid. Bounty's on our scalps. This Christoval gang's jest been waitin', with black murder in their dirty hearts, for a chance to sand us out. They hate the Rangers an' all that we stand for. Now—their time has come, an' they know it. If they c'n git shet of me'n Tobe, anarchy will reign in the Trans-Pecos, with no more law than's in the devil's sulphur pit. Sabe?"

He gripped Bart's shoulder with a lean, gnarled hand, looking straight into blue-gray eyes that returned his scrutiny unblinkingly. Then his sun-seamed face wrinkled in a half-grin as he groped in his pocket and took out a sheet of tan paper.

"Son, this is the message you brought from Captain Shuford," he said quietly.

Bart Livermore took the paper, read it slowly, laboriously. His hatchet face darkened, then grew stony hard and set. The missive read:

> Sergeant, I'm sending this damn' fool young hillbilly to you for a working over. He is always spouting off about adventure, glory and the like, and chafing at the bit because garrison life is too tame. He needs the "cure" to tone him down, so we've decided to send him along to you for a whole bellyful of thrilling hair-raisers. You know how to manage it, of course; a revolt, plenty of gunplay, etc., faked by some of your hard-boiled pals down in Christoval. When you have made a Christian out of the young guntoter, send him back for the verdict of Company E's "Kangaroo Court."
>
> CAPTAIN WARREN SHUFORD,
> Commanding.

He passed the paper back, and his voice was brittle and hard. "So that is the game, suh? I was afeered of a catch in this, sometimes—Cap'n Shuford an' some uh the boys don't 'pear to like me overmuch. Well, suh?"

"Well, hell!" snapped Searles. "Shuford's crazier'n a dang bullbat, that's what. Got no more idee uh conditions over here than they got up in Austin, where likely they'll post us up as blasted heroes an' a lot of other tripe when the smoke's cleared away—only we won't know it. That, nor nothin' else."

"Then—then—" began the puzzled youth. "That hombre I kilt didn't nick my ear an' down my hoss, an' that feller shoot inter the room tonight—jest playful like? Yuh mean the Cap'n ain't writ yuh before to plan this—yuh mean it's *true*—?"

Searles was watching him with narrowed eyes. "I mean it's so true, son," he said slowly, "that I'm going to send you back to Sonora before daylight. To Company E, for reinforcements. If yuh fail, me'n Tobe here are gone goslin's. Even if yuh don't make it hell for leather, yuh c'n bring back a couple uh markers for Christoval's Boot Hill. Mine an' Tobe's."

Bart Livermore looked at the old sergeant, his mouth twisted queerly. He gripped Searles' hand. "I'll cut her, suh," he said. "Git through in spite uh the whole danged town."

The old Ranger nodded. As Bart turned to go, Searles touched his arm again, and handed him the tan sheet of paper.

"Jest tear this up, son," he said. "It ain't worth savin'."

BART LIVERMORE slipped noiselessly from the kitchen door of The Old Homestead into the inky darkness of predawn. A light pack was slung across his shoulders; he carried rifle and pistol and boots. On his feet were deerhide moccasins. Jaw set like a clamp, he hugged the shadows and weaved his way toward the livery stable, every line of his body and face bent on grim purpose. He was the essence of deadliness, chill and inexorable. Old Searles had seen him off with a handclasp more expressive than any words.

From some of the saloons and honkytonks music and voices still sounded, but at the hour most of Christoval was asleep. He reached the stable without discovery, but as he turned into the dark runway a rising

shadow met him.

"Whaddaya want?" The shadow's voice was gruff, surly.

Bart's answer was swift—a cutting smash with the Bisley's barrel that dropped the man with no more than a choky gasp. Strident snores from the tack room advertised the presence of a second party, and softly opening the door, the youth tiptoed over to a cot and administered another lusty whack across the tousled head of the bulbous-nosed Quag Kimbro, proprietor.

It was but the work of a moment to securely hogtie and gag both men and shut them in the tack room. Lighting a lantern, Bart narrowly inspected the horses in the stable stalls, quickly selecting a couple of wiry, sturdy-looking mounts, a dun and sorrel, and putting his own blanket and saddle upon the latter. He was in the saddle and swinging through the rear doorway inside of ten minutes after his arrival.

Cool and taut, he rode across the baked corral area and out of the darkened town into the 'squite, leaving the drunken shouts and jangle of tinny music behind him. Ahead lay open country, to the west the jagged silhouette of the San Juan hills. Overhead the black velvet of the sky was set with diamond points of starlight. And Bart Livermore, stiffly pushing his commandeered pony, galloped away toward the Pecos, with the paling moon for a beacon.

Searles' last words kept dinning in his ears to the thud of those flying hoofs. "Remember, son—*git there*. An'—come back!"

It was ten o'clock that night when Bart Livermore rode into Sonora and wearily threw himself from an exhausted pony. His face was grimed with alkali dust, his eyes bloodshot and haggard, but he wasted scant time in locating the whereabouts of Captain Warren Shuford, who was attending a dance in town.

The dapper officer, called from his partner, was frowning annoyedly when he confronted the disheveled youth. "What the devil are you doing back here?" he snapped at the weary recruit.

"Listen, suh," Bart blurted out hurriedly. "There's trouble a-simmerin' in Christoval—jest ready to blow the lid uh hell plumb off—an' Sergeant Searles sent me back heah—"

Shuford burst into a roar of laughter. "Sent you back for the whole company, I suppose! Uprising, bloody murder, etc., with all the trimmings, eh? Gad, this is rich! I guess Searles and his pardner are about to get their throats cut, are they? And the whole town has gone rabies, eh?"

"Cap'n, I tell you, suh," Bart countered hoarsely, "that they *is* bad trouble down yander. Sergeant Searles an' Odom want help. The sergeant said to come a-hellin' quick as the Lord'll let yuh, or else he couldn't account—"

Once again Shuford's laugh of mockery shut him off. "That will be all, Livermore," he chuckled. "Get back to your quarters. I'll hear the rest of your blood-and-thunder yarn in the morning, some time. Searles sure is one quick wonder!"

And he hurried back inside, still grinning, leaving Bart standing at the steps, his knobby hands clenched in impotent fury, his face working. Shuford had taken his words as part of the "cure"—ridiculed and laughed at him—secure and safe in Sonora and civilization. Damn him to hell! Down there in Christoval, at that very minute, Searles and Odom were facing death, waiting—waiting . . .

With a choky curse, Bart Livermore wheeled and started running toward the Ranger barracks and corral, tears of impotent fury stinging his eyes. Snubbing two fresh mounts, so he could ride in relays like he did coming, he forced the locked door of the supply room and disappeared into its dark interior. In no time he was out again, with a couple of sawed-off, full-choke Greener shotguns and a sackful of buckshot-loaded shells. And in a glazed leather pouch he carried five sticks of dynamite, with their fuses.

Sergeant Monte Clark of Company E watched him saddle up and ride out of town like the devil was in tow. Bound for Christoval, seventy miles away across the Pecos. Like the rest of the Sonora Rangers, he was wise to the kangaroo court and the Kentuckian's "cure," but he was also a border veteran and wise to the Southwest's ways. Monte Clark's eyes were narrowed very thoughtfully as he abruptly wheeled about and went looking for First-Sergeant Nate Patton.

DOWN in Christoval, old Clint Searles, Tobe Odom and Tarco Catlan kept grim watch in the barroom of The Old Homestead House. Dusk was creeping into town from the western hills, and an unnatural quiet cloaked the main street, almost as if Christoval was shrinking within itself in dread of impending calamity. The very air smacked of danger, as if it feared the slightest movement would trip the hair-trigger of tension.

There had not been the least growl of complaint to the sergeant about the pistol-whipping and horse-swiping at the livery stable, which was ominous enough of itself. All the night before, that day itself, mounted men had been riding into Christoval, armed to the teeth, going about their business with sinister purposefulness. And now, at dusk, they tramped the board sidewalks, milled in groups, poured in and out of the swinging doors of the Hell's Bells.

The trio in The Old Homestead watched —and waited.

Inside the Hell's Bells, two men were deftly inciting their cohorts to violence. One was a big man, six feet and more in height, burly and broad-shouldered, with square face, yellowish eyes and flattened nose. A man of tremendous strength—and lust for power. He was Pecos Mike Brill, boss of Christoval, and he assayed pure snake blood. With him was Mex Larned, his lieutenant and right bower. Swarthy of skin, inky of eye and hair, a lithe, well-built hombre, wearing fancy boots, brocaded vest and pearl-handled pistols in hand-tooled holster. A pair of the coldest-blooded killers that ever squeezed trigger, and backed by as ornery a gang of coyotes as ever ran in a pack.

Brill was winding up his tirade.

"It's our night to howl, compadres. These damned vinegaroon Rangers have whistled their last tune down here. That young squirt who sanded Scar got scared and hightailed after those bullets fanned his ears, and tonight we take Searles and Odom. Git Searles first—the damned old windbroke, spavined, distempered cripple! And I don't care if Tarco gits his in the shuffle, either. He's been puttin' up those John Laws an' feeding 'em."

He was master of the mob, completely. Had roused his cohorts to a fighting, bloodlust pitch, and fed the fire with rotgut liquor. And as darkness fell, the noise and furor increased tenfold. Searles, looking from the window of the lightless barroom, saw the weaving mob spew from the saloon and start down the street in a bedlam of clamor. Primed for trouble, and led by Brill and Larned themselves. Old Searles looked to his pair of six-shooters. He grinned crookedly at the grim-faced Odom and the stiff-lipped Catlan.

"We're gonna have to fight," he said evenly. "Looks like the lad is gonna need them Boot Hill markers after all. Mud in your eyes, *compañeros.*"

Tarco hefted his shotgun and crouched at a window. He was casting his lot with the two doomed Rangers—all his servants, knowing what was coming, had deserted him that late afternoon. And the roar of the mob was coming closer.

Searles and Odom had slipped to the front door. Now, suddenly and unexpectedly, they swung the oak panel wide and stepped out onto the porch, spraddle-legged and with drawn guns. On their vests gleamed the gold star of the Service.

"Whoa up there a minnit, boys," called Searles coldly. "Yuh better call this a night, for you're wadin' into trouble over yore hocks if yuh come any closer."

Their sudden appearance with drawn six-shooters, their calmly aggressive attitude, those Texas stars on their chests, brought the mob up to a halt. But only for a moment. Men in their state of mind were berserk, would do anything. Just a weaving, stampeding herd of crazed brutes, blood-hungry from whiplash words and raving mad from rotten whiskey. Somebody bawled out an order; a roaring bellow of oaths followed. The men behind surged forward.

"Kill 'em!" came the chant. "Tuh hell with the law!"

A gun cracked; two more. Lint flew from Searles' vest as he staggered against the wall, and bullets thudded into the woodwork. The sergeant and Odom returned the fire as fast as three practiced hands could squeeze trigger, then ducked inside the lobby and bolted the door behind them. The roar of Tarco's scatter-gun bellowed from the barroom, answered by yells.

Searles was cursing steadily, between set teeth. A bullet had caught him high in the left shoulder, incapacitating his left arm. And the retreat inside the hotel spurred the attackers to cries of derision and triumph.

"Got 'em on the run!" came the roar.

"Bust in that door! Let 'em have it!"

Window glass tinkled and shattered as a hail of bullets spewed into lobby and bar, showering the rooms with splinters and ricocheting crazily. The three defenders, sheltered behind the desk counter, holding their fire, heard the battering-ram hit the door a terrific thud. Timbers groaned under the impact. The Rangers drummed a salvo through the portal, but despite curses and groans of hit men the heavy ram kept up its hammering.

Tarco knocked a man out of a barroom window with a roaring blast, but a moment later a ball of kerosene-soaked rags looped through the bar window, followed by three more. They spouted flame—filled the hotel's interior with light.

Firing, cursing, the three trapped men retreated to the stairs and turned at bay. Smoke filled the lower floor as tongues of flame licked upward. The sun-baked hotel would burn like tinder. The ram still banged against the front door, and a plank splintered. Through the narrow opening Searles and Odom and Tarco could see and hear the milling men plainer as their guns hurled vicious lead through every aperture.

"Reckon we'd as well shag out, hombres," said the sergeant. "There ain't no use waitin' longer. She looks like a quick, hot blaze."

"You're right," growled Odom, wiping blood from his face. "Here's luck."

With handkerchiefs over their faces to slightly protect smarting eyes and burning throats, the three defenders started down the stairs. But before they'd negotiated the last step a blinding flash lit up the area before the hotel porch, followed by a tearing explosion that made The Old Homestead shiver in every aged timber.

BART LIVERMORE, reeling in his saddle, plying quirt and spur to his sweat- and foam-lathered horse, tore through the mesquite fringe and into Christoval's backyard, his eyes red cored as a jaguar's at night and his teeth bared in a wolfish snarl. He could see the crimson splash of light playing about the hotel; could hear the rolling tattoo of gunfire, the strident and triumphant howls of the mob.

"God on the mountain!" his breath sobbed through dust-caked lips.

Tumbling from his played-out pony in the alley behind the line of buildings across from the hotel, he ran at a staggering gait toward the rear of the saddle-and-boot shop, a low 'dobe shack next to the pool hall.

The shotguns, his rifle and pistol, the sack of cartridges and the dynamite were all grasped in his arms.

A shadowy figure carrying a short ladder appeared behind a store, cried out and snatched for a holstered pistol. Bart shot him in the belly, cracked his skull with the Bisley barrel, jerked up the ladder and placed it against an adobe wall. A minute later he was on the roof, the ladder pulled up behind him, and crouching back of the adobe parapet.

Panting between clenched teeth, he fused and lighted the first stick of dynamite, his eyes fixed upon the maddened men scrambled before the burning hotel. It was the stick's explosion, bursting in their very midst, that almost knocked Searles and Odom and Tarco off their feet.

Before the dazed attackers realized what was happening a second stick arched into their midst and went off with a red fan of light, knocking men over like ninepins. While hard on its heels came the bellowing reports of shotguns, spraying death in the shape of lead buckshot into the paralyzed men below. In the space of half a minute the street resembled a shambles. And then the uproar of firing and yelling became a tornado of wrath as the renegades discovered Bart's covert.

Bullets sang about him like hornets; shadowy figures darted through the smoke. Hurling bullets and dynamite, Bart wheeled as on a pivot, dealing death to those wavering outlines, sending them sprawling as they met his unerring greetings. But a dozen swearing, snarling madmen were scaling the roofs of adjacent buildings. It would be only a matter of time before he'd glimpse their rage-distorted faces and flaming eyes.

But he had temporarily broken the attack, anyhow. And he didn't aim to stay on that roof and be trapped like a rabbit by a hound pack.

At a crouch he weaved toward the alley edge of the parapet, and staggered to his knees as something that felt like a hard yet oozy hunk of ice plowed along his ribs and sent his vision wavering. But he only snarled savagely, and throwing his knobby knees over the edge, jumped. He fell flat and rolled as he hit the hardpan, but snapped to his knees and blazed two shots from his pistol at figures in the alley mouth. One tumbled; the other staggered out of sight with a cry.

Bart Livermore started walking forward stiffly, pistol thrust ahead of him, every instinct and sense aroused to murder pitch. About him all was a swimming, swirling maze of powder and wood smoke, shouts and hoarse curses, grunts, confusion. A section of his hat brim dangled in a ragged, bullet-slashed strip—his shirt was a wet gory rag. But still he came on.

Mex Larned, his swarthy face ghastly with rage and defeat, saw him and threw down a rattler-quick gun. But quick as he was, death was already flaming into the groove as he got his Colt to rolling. Larned shuddered, bent and buckled, arms hooked across his perforated belly, as he pitched downward.

But the world was cut away beneath Bart Livermore's feet in a blinding flash of fire that seared his eyeballs. His last coherent memory was of frenzied shouts and an inferno of sound that trembled the very earth east of the blazing hotel.

Firing as they came, Company E rode hell-for-leather into Christoval, led by Sergeants Monte Clark and Nate Patton. In less time than it takes to tell they were in full possession of the town, with very few prisoners under herd. And old Clint Searles was bending over Bart Livermore, forcing raw whiskey between his lips, while Clark bathed a scalp wound in his carroty hair and inspected a ragged gouge along his ribs. Bart came to, blinking, coughing, trying to sit up.

"Take her easy, yuh danged wildcat!" said Searles. "You been blooded plenty, son. And've done plenty. Got Mex Larned—an' Pecos Brill deader'n Moses over yonder. But for you, the boys woulda come just a leetle too late. Monte 'n' Nate been tellin' me how they followed yuh, killin' their hosses. Told me what you done, too. Cum back by yoreself, because Shuford wouldn't lissen to you—damn the swivel-chair, stuck-up shorthorn! Ranger—hell! I've got plenty to say to that so-and-so when we go back to Sonora—plenty to spout up in Austin to that adjutant-general, too." He finished in a reckless snarl.

Bart Livermore spat out his cud of tobacco, wiping a grimy hand across his haggard face. "I—I didn't hafta tote back no tombstones, nohow," he grinned thickly. "An'—kin I join up with yore company, sergeant? I'd kinda like . . ."

Pain drove vision from him again, but as if from a distance he heard old Searles say in a voice gruff with emotion: "I'll tell the danged West yuh c'n join, son. You've done joined now. You filled a straight at both ends and in the middle of this night—stacked up man-size in a man's country."

"And," added the sidewinder, with a hard grin, "not to speak of boomeranging Shuford's kangaroo-court into somethin' he won't fergit to his dyin' day, by Godfrey damn!"

The Yaquis charged up the hill . . . a yelling, shrieking, marijuana-crazed rabble.

PAYOFF IN MEX

By WALT COBURN

WHEN, or when ain't a man got nerve? Gimme a answer tuh that an' I'll th'ow in with yuh, stranger. I'm sixty-three come July, er mebby it's August, danged if I recollect, off-hand. I punched cows since I was hock high to a horned toad, seen a heap uh human stock durin' them years that's bin spent here and

A hundred a month and cartridges free! The Circle-C hired 'em rough, tough and nasty, for in that God-forgotten strip below the Rio the deck was stacked and the take was death.

there between the Canady line an' the Rio, an' I'll tell a man I've looked on some shore odd speciments uh nerve.

Take Bogus Lang, him as'd forked hosses most bronk peelers wouldn't go into the same corral with. I seen a speckled-faced kid run Bogus outa camp with a empty gun.

An' there was Whitey, who fit the three

Jackson boys at Laramie. Single-handed, his hide punctured in so many places he looked like a sponge when we buried him, he shot it out with them three gun toters an' killed all three afore he laid down fer keeps there in the street an' swaps his six-gun fer a pretty gold harp.

Yet I seen this same Whitey, not more'n three months afore that when he was night-hawkin' fer the Turkey Track, give up head like a roped yearlin' when a pack rat run acrost his sleepin' tarp.

Nerve? Jest what is it, anyhow, and who's a fit gent tuh qualify fer judgin' if a man's got it er ain't he? Me, I dunno. An' jest tuh prove my ignerance on the aforesaid subject, lemme spill yuh a windy concernin' one Jess Hardy and the boy we calls Adobe Smith.

I'm jiggerin' a cow spread on the off side uh what we calls the International Border separatin' the United States an' Texas from that strip uh Mexico where Pancho Villa usta ride. Meanin' Chihuahua, where any trouble-huntin' gent of any size, color, er nationality kin git a belly full uh scrappin' fer the askin' er sometimes without even biddin' fer it.

My outfit is payin' a hundred a month, grub an' ca'tridges, fer top cow hands tuh he'p gather slick-ear cattle acrost the border. Our owners, bein' a combine uh American an' Mexicans that's bin run outa their ranches acrost yonder, pays top wages but no ransom money. Onct we're acrost the border, we're standin' on nothin' but our own two laigs, trustin' to luck, our guns, an' the Señor Dios.

It's a pack spread, the country bein' too rough tuh run a wagon. Our grub ain't noways fancy, fer we aims tuh travel fast an' light at times. But Nigger Bob, who stands six foot two in his bare feet, claims a personal record uh twenty-three greasers, an' kin shoe the oneriest mule in the outfit without tyin' a foot up on 'im, kin sling some shore appetizin' meals from frijole beanses, beef, an' flour. An' his coffee has whiskers.

Pelon, the hoss jingler, is part Yaqui, part Mex, an' all devil, an' has a sweet habit uh scalpin' his victims. It's a toss-up which he hates most, his mother's side, the Yaquis, er his ol' man's Mexican folks. But he's the best hoss wrangler I ever laid eyes on.

There's three-four Mormon boys from Arizona, some long-geared Texicans that kin make a hand in any man's country, Jess Hardy, an' the boy we calls 'Dobe Smith.

From foretop tuh hocks, they're as fast a crew as a boss cud ask fer. I mighta hand picked the State uh Texas an' done no better. When we've rid off the effects uh the last drink we had taken at the Yellow Kid in Juarez, when Nigger Bob's got his kitchen mules strung out in the dust kicked up by Pelon's remuda, I rolls me a smoke an' tells myse'f that I'm roddin' a spread that kin give half uh Mexico cards an' spades, then lick 'em with a barlow knife.

BUT that was afore I'd met up with El Toro—an' his bunch uh marijuana-doped renegades. I'd heered rumors about this Señor El Toro, The Bull. But I never took no stock in 'em. Since Villa had laid down his hand an' let Chihuahua git a night's sleep, there'd bin a dozen er more mescal drunk, four-flushin' gents that's tried tuh build a bad rep. But they all gits picked up by a rurale er two, their paddle-footed army scattered like quail, an' gits stood up ag'in' o 'dobe wall while some bum shots pecks away at 'em until death do thee part. We've had a half dozen "Butchers," "Bulls," an' a "Eagle" er two th'owed in fer good measure. The jefe, who is a kinda cross between a state senator, general, an' Rooshian king, is tryin' tuh make suthin' outa his state uh Chihuahua an' does his dangdest tuh cut down the two-bit tequilla generals that start a revolution every time they take on too much bad licker. The rurales is plumb hard on rebels an' there's more than some uh these chili-eatin' generals as never lives long enough tuh ever stand trial.

But somehow or other in the shuffle, this El Toro builds hiss'f a marijuana army back in the hills where us boys is bound fer. Somewheres in the rough country, they 'stills their own tequilla, grows their own hop, an' eats plumb maverick beef.

Now, if I'd took much notice tuh what I'd heered in El Paso an' Juarez, concernin' El Toro, I'd uh took more men. But I'd never met up with Mister Toro ner had

Nigger Bob ner Pelon nor the others. That is, except Jess Hardy who I ain't got tuh know much yet.

This Jess Hardy feller, when he tackles me fer a job at the Paso del Norte Hotel in El Paso, is wearin' of soldier clothes. A big, grinnin' young feller who 'lows he's jest outa the army, havin' bin acrost in France fer a spell dealin' out hell to the German warriors. He's bin a sergeant an' has papers tuh prove it. Acrost his chest is some medals fer bein' a fightin' fool. He's jest off a jamboree in Juarez, busted flat, an' rearin' tuh work.

"I'm a five-minute egg," says he, "If I can't outride, outfight, outdrink, outcuss, an' outshoot any man in yore outfit, I'll work fer nothin'."

"Got a outfit?" says I, not exactly likin' his braggin'.

"I'll have one by the time I show up. Advance me jest one dollar." An' he brings out a pair uh dice. "These babies will buy papa his outfit."

Which they shore does, I reckon, fer when he shows up fer work, he's draggin' along a silver-mounted saddle an' bridle that's worth five hundred dollars if it's worth a cent. Likewise he's wearin' shop boots an' overalls an' a beaver hat like show cowboys wears.

"Had hell findin' some hombre that wore the same size hat an' boots as me, Cap," he grins. "But I finally managed to cut the mustard. Let's take on a light 'un."

An' he pulls out a roll that'd choke a cow. I reckon my eyes musta bin boogerin' outa my head, fer he laughs plenty. Then he points out a sad lookin' jasper settin' at a empty poker table in his sock feet an' no hat. Jess holds out a couple uh twenties, then walkin' over to the gent, shoves him the roll uh dough.

"This'll buy yuh a better layout than yuh had buddy," he grins. "Don't never gamble no more with strangers. You bin playin' Africy golf with the best little New Orleans domino player in the world."

"A man that kin make a livin' like that," says I, when me an' Jess is splittin' a bottle uh wine, "ain't got no business whatever punchin' cows in Chihuahua."

"Cap," says he, an' while he's grinnin', his gray eyes is cold as ice, "I got my reasons fer signin' up fer a hitch with yore spread. Nuf said, eh, compadre?"

"Make it easy on yourse'f, son," I tells him, beginnin' tuh like the dang young hellion fer all his loud-mouthed braggin'.

IT'S ABOUT then that I notices a short complexioned feller with faded blue eyes that's the same color as his wore out jumper an' overalls. He's standin' at the bar on my right, fondlin' of a glass uh the Yellow Kid's worst and powerfullest licker.

"Are you Buck Bell?" he asks in a soft, slow voice, "the boss uh the spread that's workin' acrost the Palomas country?"

"I am," I admits. "Lookin' fer a punchin' job?"

"I'd like tuh take a little whirl at it," says he.

"Know what yo're up ag'in?" questions him, not wantin' some dang pilgrim along.

"I reckon I do, Bell." He smiles a little but I kin see with one eye that he ain't recallin' nothin' comical when he does it.

"I bin all over Chihuahua," he goes on. "It was Pelon as told me you was lookin' fer cow hands."

"Yuh know Pelon?" I asks kinda surprised.

"Yes," says he, an' I somehow git the idee that he don't want tuh be asked too many questions.

"Yo're hired," I tells him. "What's yore handle?"

"Call me Smith." He's lookin' out the doorway toward the adobe wall at the cuartel. "'Dobe Smith," he smiles again, like a joke's bin played on him.

Well 'Dobe an' Jess shakes hands an' the rest uh the boys who has bin he'pin' Nigger Bob load the grub an' git strung out, drifts in. We has a few rounds uv drinks, picks up Pelon an' the remuda, and' goes yonderly.

Ridin' along the trail, we don't do much augerin'. The Texas boys kinda herds tuh theirselves, likewise the Mormon punchers. Which leaves me an' Jess an' 'Dobe together.

Jess does enough talkin' fer the three of us while me an' 'Dobe holds up the listenin' end. Most uh Jess's talkin' concerns hisself. Bad hosses he's rid, men he's whupped, an' so on. Then he starts fightin' over the war oncet more from the day he

goes in till Armistice Day. Girls he met, cognac he's drunk, M.P.'s he's licked, an' how he gits decorated. All the while me an' 'Dobe listens.

"What outfit was you in, buddy?" he asks 'Dobe.

'Dobe kinda pauses a second afore he answers. Jess, bein' putty well drunk, don't notice like I does. Then comes 'Dobe's soft answer.

"The Ninety-first Division."

But when Jess tries tuh drag him back into the trenches, 'Dobe bogs down on him an' talks cows. Which should uh bin a big enough hint that so far as 'Dobe Smith was concerned, the war was over.

Jess declares war oncet more an' brags a plenty about Sergeant Jess Hardy.

"What outfit was you in, Pecos?" he asks a long-built Texas boy.

"Air Service," 'lows Pecos.

"Flyin'?"

"Yeah. Plenty," Pecos tells him. "Flyin' aroun' the mess hall waitin' on table. When the personnel officer asks me what kin I do, I tells him I kin ride a hoss. So he puts me on K. P. an' there I stays. That there war I heered was goin' on somewheres was shore a disappointment tuh me."

"An' me," adds a boy from Dallas. "I'd never got enough dough in my jeans tuh git outa my home state. Figgered I'd git sent as fur as Noo York, anyhow. Does I git outa Texas? I does not. An' all the hoss I sees is a wooden carpenter's hoss. I built a heap uh barracks durin' the war."

Well it turns out that two uh the Mormon boys had bin in the navy. Gits as far as San Diego. Jess an' 'Dobe is all that's seen overseas service. Which swells Jess's head all the bigger but 'Dobe don't say much. Jest listens.

It's then I sees that 'Dobe is eatin' up every word Jess let go of. Dang me fer a sheepherder if he ain't listenin' with both eyes an' ears. He's still listenin' an' Jess is still talkin when the rest of us beds down.

As we ain't begun gatherin' cattle yet, us boys take turns about standin' night guard on the hosses. Each feller standin' a two-hour watch. The night is split into four guards, two men on each watch, an' as there's ten of us, not countin' Nigger Bob an' Pelon which neither of 'em don't stand guard, it leaves two men extry. We're standin' what cow hands calls "runnin' guard." Which means that them as stands fust guard tonight goes on second tomorrow night, an' so on till they've stood last guard. Then they gits a night off afore they starts over oncet more. Which gives all hands a even break.

There's bosses a plenty as don't stand no night guard but I ain't amongst 'em. We'd drawed straws fer guards an' guard pardners. Jess an' 'Dobe is together on last guard. Me an' a towheaded Mormon boy named Cotton Top on account uh his hair, draws third guard.

Pecos an' Bert Bingham, a Mormon boy, is off at midnight an' we goes out. There's a moon an' it's fair tuh middlin' warmish. The remuda is grazin' quiet an' some of 'em's bedded down or dozin' on their laigs. We're holdin' 'em in a wide arroyo an' it looks like our only job'll be tuh keep awake. Even the bell hosses, which is apt tuh drag it fer home till they've had the edge rode offen 'em, is actin' good.

I meets Bert who has stayed with the hosses while Pecos wakes me'n Cotton Top. He gives me the guard watch an' we rolls a smoke. Seems like Bert has suthin' on his mind. Directly he spits 'er out.

"Buck," says he, grinnin' kinda sheepish, "Don't figger me out as bein' boogery er scairt, fer I ain't. I jest want tuh give yuh warnin' that somebody's sneakin' aroun' this bunch uh hosses."

"How many of 'em, Bert?" Somehow the news didn't su'prise me much. Them pisanos likes good hosses.

"That's the funny part uh it, Buck," he tells me. "I ain't seen a soul. Nor a bush wiggle. But Calico, here, hates Mexicans an' he smells 'em. I bought him off a pisano at Tucson when he was a skinny, sore-backed two-year-old colt. The Mex was beatin' him over the head. I give him ten dollars fer Calico, then put him in the hospital fer a long rest when I'd got his John Henry on the bill uh sale. Calico kin smell one uh them chili chawers a mile off, an' I'm tellin' you, Buck, he's smelt several during the past two hours. Be keerful. I told Pecos but he jest hoorawed me fer bein' spooky."

"Pecos," I tells Bert, "ain't spent as

many years along the border as I have. We kin look fer trouble anytime from now on. I reckon the Calico hoss is right. That's why yuh wanted tuh ride yore private fer a night hoss?"

"It is," says Bert. "Calico's got a heap uh sense. I think dang nigh as much uh this pony as I does my best gal." And him an' his spotted pony fades into the night, Bert a singin' quiet to hisse'f.

BUT as the two hours drags along, it looks like Calico has done made a mistake. While I rides with my carbine acrost my saddle, I don't see so much as a single Mex tuh shoot at. When the guard time is up, I sends Cotton Top in tuh wake Jess an' 'Dobe.

My guard pardner ain't hardly outa sight when my hoss shies off at suthin', snortin' as I spurs him past an' covers the spot with my Winchester. But nothin' stirs in the mesquite brush we jest passed. Not so much as a quail. But I ain't noways satisfied.

Slippin' to the ground, I crawls closter. Then I sees suthin' dark kinda crouched at the foot of a bush. Without wastin' no more time, I'm on it like a cat a jumpin' a mouse. But when my left hand grabs the flesh of a man's neck, I knows I've got there too late. The gent is dead. My hand comes away from his neck sticky.

I'm too old a hand tuh go strikin' a match, but I drags the body which is still warm, into the moonlight. In spite uh the blood that smears his hair an' face, I knows it's a Mexican. He's bin knifed. I tosses the carcass back in the brush an' rides to meet Jess an' 'Dobe who is comin' by now. I kin hear Jess warblin' some soldier tune.

He laughs when I tells him about the dead pisano. Laughs an' pats his gun.

"Me'n 'Dobe'll have every hoss, come daylight, Buck," he tells me. "An' we're takin' care uh ary gent that aims tuh start anything. Go tuh camp an' sleep easy. Them babies is pickin's fer us boys that's knowed real fightin'."

I rides off in a huff, fergetin' tuh give Jess the guard watch. I'm part way tuh camp when 'Dobe ketches up with me tuh git it.

"Don't be too hard on Jess," says 'Dobe afore he rides back. "He's bin through hell acrost the pond an' it'll take a good many years tuh git over it. Some uh the boys comes back like that."

"You didn't," I snaps, kinda short like.

"No," says he, quiet as hell, "No, Buck, I didn't." An' with that he rides back to the hosses.

I sleep fitful till breakfast time. Pelon relieves Jess an' 'Dobe an' brings in the hosses jest before sunup. I meets him as he hazes 'em into the rope corral. When I've pulled the rope gate up and fastened it, I looks Pelon an' his outfit over keerful. Tied to his ca'tridge belt is suthin' that gives me the shivers, fer all that I ain't what yuh might call chicken-hearted. What I'm lookin' at is some human scalps. It's Pelon, the half-breed Yaqui, that killed the Mexican I'd found in the brush.

There's no use givin' Pelon hell, fer he's bin brung up to his own ways uh doin' things.

"How many?" I asks him in Mex.

"Cinco," he grins, his face crackin' into ten thousand wrinkles till them red-black eyes uh his'n looks like needle points uh fire.

Five Mexicans that Yaqui breed had got hisse'f.

"How many left outa that hoss stealin' party?" I goes on, knowin' that he musta put in the better part uh the night collectin' them scary little hunks uh hair.

"No mas," he tells me. He's done a clean job of it. Got all of 'em.

Now I've knowed ol' Pelon which means "bald one" in Mex, fer some fifteen years, off an' on. He's wrangled hosses fer me on both sides uh the border an' he's one uh the damn few from yonder side that I'd trust around the next bend in the trail. Pelon's on the level. He's makin' funny motions with his ears now that, onless I'm bad mistook, means that he's got suthin' on his mind besides his sombrero which he's took off one of them dead fellers.

"Y que mas?" I asks him. "What else señor?"

His ears wiggles faster. I've learnt that ear business from playin' poker with him. Them ears signals no less than four of a kind right now. But till that Injun gits ready tuh cut loose the foot rope on his conversation, he's about as gabby as a corpse.

Directly he cuts loose with both barrels.

"The Señor Jess Hardy," says Pelon speakin' Mex, "is tell me about the El Toro. He is a brave hombre, that Señor Hardy, but poco loco, no? It is not well to follow one like this El Toro who is a wolf."

NOW, perhaps if El Toro was Mexican, it would not be so bad. But El Toro is worse than a hundred Mexicans. He is pure Yaqui for all that he gets born in Texas. Here and there I have heard men talk of El Toro but I do not listen long. Men's talk is like the bleating of goats when they speak of revolutions and so on and so on. He lights a cigareet an' goes on again.

"Even when the Señor Jess Hardy talks of El Toro, I do not pay so much attention. It is only when I talk with that thrice cursed devil of a Pasqual that I open both ears."

"Who the dad burned hell is Pasqual?"

Pelon shows me one uh them scalps, fer all the world like some kid showin' off his best agate marble.

"Pasqual's hair," he explains. "Yaqui. A very wicked man, that Pasqual. Did he not kill my very own son and leave the body for the coyotes and buzzards to fight about? A wicked man. Señor Bell, but yor Dios he did pay the price of his wickedness by dying slowly with my knife in his belly. It was then that he told me of El Toro. That Pasqual would not lie. He say that El Toro is Yaqui. That his men are also Yaquis and all the soldiers and rurales in Mexico could not drive them from Black Besa where they live. Even as the death rattle choked in his throat, that Pasqual taunted me and laughed. He says, Señor, that we are all to die soon. Those Yaquis of the Mormon church, the Tejanos, el Negro Bob, Señor Smith, you and me. The Señor Jess Hardy who he has known before El Toro saves till the last."

"An' what the hell d'yuh reckon we'll be doin' all this time?" I asks, gittin' hot under the collar when I sees Pelon half believes what this Pasqual injun has told him.

"Quien sabe?" Pelon looks worried.

"Then lemme tell yuh what'll be goin' on, pardner," I lays down the law. "We're gonna be showin' a gang uh lousy two-bit 'breeds how a gringo makes a greaser play coyote. I'll give Nigger Bob a mesquite stick an' turn him loose on 'em. He'll run 'em into their holes an' plug the hole up after 'em. If yo're scairt uh this Toro four-flusher, quit an' go back."

And leavin' him with that tuh think over, I gits my rope an' steps in the corral tuh ketch my hoss. I knows now that no matter how bad Pelon wants tuh lay down his hand, he ain't gonna do it.

Yuh see, there's a sort uh rivalry betwixt Bob an' Pelon over who is the toughest. That crack about Bob whuppin' El Toro with a club shore gits Pelon below the belt.

But as I builds a loop tuh ketch High Ball I gives thought to this sit'ation. Fer I sabes Yaquis a plenty an' I knows that it's taken a heap tuh put the fear uh any man in the heart uh Pelon. I'm so bogged down in them thoughts that I miss High Ball an' my loop gits filled with a hoss we calls Jack Pot. Right then an' there me an' Jack Pot opens up a game called "pop the whip," me doin' most uh the poppin'. I've et a pound er so uh corral dust when Pecos, 'Dobe, an Jess swings onto the line an' we brings mister grulla hoss to a whistlin', strikin' standstill.

Now this Jack Pot outlaw is a renegade, spoilt critter that's busted so many top riders that I've condemned him an' jest brung him along hopin' tuh swap him off tuh some pisano fer a mule er two. He's as purty a lookin' chunk uh hossflesh as ever a man'd jump in a week's ride. A mouse colored hoss with black tail an' mane an' yaller eyes. A show hoss if there ever was one an' outa a blue-blooded quarter mare an' a Arabian stud. But he's got the disposition of a bobcat.

"Ketchin' this pony fer me?" grins Jess when Jack Pot is choked tuh where he's standin' spraddle legged, whistlin' hell an' damnation at us an' his yallar eyes spittin' fire.

"I'd sorter give him to yuh," says I. "But I ain't hankerin' tuh dig no feller's grave this mornin'. This hoss is a man killer."

"Man killers is my pickin's," brags this big, boastin' idjit. "I bet a new hat he turns

pussy cat afore a week's passed. How's chances tuh fork this crowbait?"

"Hop to it," I tells him, "but mind yuh, we knocks all cripples in the head. We don't carry no wagon along tuh pack busted up bronk peelers."

Which I'm lyin', uh course, jest hoorawin' him.

"Buck," he grins, "if this grulla cayuse piles me, I'll shoot myse'f tuh save yuh the trouble."

And with his hackamore hid beyond his back, he goes down the rope toward that whistlin', strikin' outlaw. Jess is bigger'n a skinned mule, an' judgin' from what we now sees, he ain't bothered none by gettin' in his own way. He ears that devil down by hisse'f. We sees them wicked hoofs a whammin' at where Jess's head was jest a split-second before. Dust, Jess's grin, hoofs, an' snappin' teeth. Jack Pot squealin' like a hog, he's that mad. But outa that whirl uh dust an' hoofs comes Jess a grinnin' wide an' Jack Pot wearin' the hackamore.

We has tuh th'ow an' blindfold Jack Pot tuh saddle him. Jess stands spraddled over him where he lays, still squealin'. When we lets go the foot ropes an' that hoss gits his laigs, Jess is settin' in the saddle, a wide grin a splittin' his face. 'Dobe swings aboard his pony tuh haze fer him.

"Yippeeee!" yells Jess, an' slams his hat ag'n' that hoss's head as he jerks off the blindfold.

Then the show is on. When I says show, I takes in the whole works from perade tuh side shows an' free tickets to the concert. Gentle Rannies, that hoss is buckin'. The second jump lands him amongst Bob's kitchen an' there's a scatterment uh Dutch ovens, pot hooks, coffee an' biscuits. Bob's tryin' tuh be in ten places tuh onct, sayin' "Gawdamights!" every jump.

It'd taken two men tuh watch Jack Pot. One tuh say "Here he comes," another tuh sing out, "Yonder he goes." That hoss is givin' Jess all he's got an' I'm tellin' a green hand he's got a plenty. He pitches against 'Dobe an' his hoss, knocks 'em down, an' tromps on 'em as he goes yonderly in three directions tuh oncet. He's across between a buzz saw, strychnine, lightnin' an' a hydrophoby skunk. Each jump he takes is different from the last.

He's swappin' ends so fast that it looks like his tail grows outa his briskit. He rolls like a hoop snake an' twists like a pig's tail. A weavin' an' a windin' an' a snortin' every jump, he leaves Cheyenne. Has he swallered his head? He has, gentlemen, an' all that's left is a hump an' four laigs, each one uh 'em goin' a differ'nt direction. He's a wampus cat an' a wowser, a side hill gouger an' a whiffle ditty. He claws like a cat, strikes like a mule, bawls like a bull, an' all we sees is a blue-colored ball uh suthin' with a man on top him. For Jess still has that critter between his laigs an' is still a fannin' him.

We're all trailin' behind by now, about as helpful as a bunch uh deer flies. But Jess ain't needin' no he'p, 'pears like. All he needs is room an' we're givin' him plenty uh that. All uh Mexico.

Twicet, that hoss bucks hisse'f plumb off his feet, rollin' over in a cloud uh dust. But when we looks on the ground fer a busted rider, he ain't there. He's back on the hurricane deck, like a sand burr in a blanket.

When Jack Pot th'ows up his head an' stampedes, we knows that Jess Hardy, fer all his danged braggin', is about the neatest rider that ever warmed a saddle. Jack Pot's whupped an' our sombreros is off to the boy that done the trick.

That evenin', when Jess fills the air with stories uh how he's rode hosses that makes Jack Pot look like a ladies' pony, we swallers it without ary word.

'Dobe's more quiet than ever. Jest sets there, not missin' a word. Even when Jess tells it so danged scary that it's nigh sickenin'. It's plain as a fresh brand that 'Dobe has made a hero outa big Jess. He all but rolls Jess's cigareets fer him. Even Pelon takes notice of it an' cusses into his serape, as he sits off to hisse'f by his own fire.

II

I'M on last guard that night an' I reckon I'm kinda jumpy fer when Bert Bingham pulls the tarp offen my head tuh wake me, I wakes up holdin' my .45 in my hand an' the end uh the barrel is jammed in Bert's briskit.

"Easy boss," grunts Bert, as I bats my eyes plumb ashamed.

"Nightmare," I tells him, lyin'. "Et too much grub fer supper."

But I've done told the boys about them Mexican Yaquis Pelon assinates the night before an' I ain't foolin' Bert none.

"I bin seein' the same boogers, Buck," says he solemn. "An I wa'n't sleepin' neither. Onless I'm guessin' bad, Pelon'll have a fresh batch uh scalps, comin' mornin'."

"See anybody out yonder?" I asks, as I pulls on my boots.

"Wisht I had," he tells me. "I'd feel better about it."

As me an' Cotton rides out to the herd, I sabes what Bert means. There's jest enough moon tuh make the shadows blacker than they should be an' every bush seems like, is hidin' a Injun. But when I looks, there ain't nobody there. Pecos looks solemn when he hands me the guard watch.

"Yuh jest got here in time tuh keep me from makin' a plumb fool outa myse'f" says he, grinnin' foolish. "My trigger finger was gittin' shore itchy."

"Why didn't yuh cut loose at whatever yuh seen?" say I.

"That's the hell of it, Buck," he tells me. I don't *see* nothin'. And I ain't goin' tuh make a damn fool out uh myse'f talkin' about it. It'd sound loco."

"Tell me about it," I urges him.

"I'll whup you if yuh laugh, dang yur," says Pecos.

"I ain't got so much as a snicker in my system, son," I tells him, "slip yore pack."

"Supposin', Buck, that I tell yuh that I hears a bullet whistle past my head in the dark so clost that I feels the wind of it passin'. But I don't see a soul ner hear the pop of the gun that fires the bullet?"

He spits this out defiant like.

"Sounds silly, don't it, boss? A kid seein' spooks. But I'll swear to it. It happened jest after Bert went to camp to wake you boys. I bin ridin' with a cocked gun ever since. Now laugh, doggone yuh."

"Nary a laugh, son. Did you see the flash uh the gun?"

"The shot come from behind me."

"Ever hear of a silencer on a gun?" I asks him, not more'n half grabbin' what he thinks happened to him.

But there's jest a bare chance that this El Toro might have a rifle that's equipped with one uh these silencers. A Texas Ranger showed me one oncet. It ain't noways likely this Toro hombre has one but it's always the most unlikely things that a man's gotta expect acrost the border.

I seen a captured rebel outfit oncet that was outfitted with everything from hand grenades tuh Lewis guns. That was Colonel Joe Heitmann's army. They lined Heitmann up with his back to the 'dobe wall at Agua Negro and after three volleys still finds that big gent on his feet, bleedin' from a dozen bullet holes, swayin' dizzy like but with his cigareet still in his mouth that's tellin' them Federal soldiers what bum shots they are, the officer in charge walks up to him.

"It is my honor, Señor Colonel Heitmann," says the officer, "to salute one hell of a brave man." And with that he throws Joe a salute, then kills him with his own Luger pistol.

Yeah, Heitmann's men was dang well outfitted. He had guns an' stores cached all over Chihuahua, too. Mebby, thinks I, this El Toro has located one uh these caches which has a gun er two equipped with silencers. They'd be right handy fer snipin' guards of a night.

"Like as not, Pecos," I tells the boy, "the gun that feller fired had a silencer attached. Ride on in an' if Pelon is anywhere aroun', send him out. Like as not, though, that scalp liftin' devil is already out here somewheres."

Pecos seems tuh feel easier in his mind as he heads fer camp. When I meets Cotton Top, I tells him what Pecos said an' warns him tuh keep his eyes peeled.

But 'pears like the bushwhackin' gent has gone home fer when daybreak comes we ain't seen, heard, ner smelt nothin'. Ner has Pelon showed up.

NOW Pelon is supposed tuh take the hosses at daylight, but nary sign uh him. I kin see the smoke from the cook's fire now so me an' Cotton starts in with the hosses. As we're crossin' a little arroyo that lays between us an' camp, I sees the leaders split as they pass a certain spot. Cotton likewise notices the way the hosses is actin'

an' we hazes the drags to a stiff trot. Together we rides up on what's spookin' the ponies. It's Pecos. He's layin' in a heap, jest as he's fell from the saddle. Even before I slides to the ground, I knows he's dead. There's a hole clean through his neck at the base uh the skull. The shot's a clean one, like a steel jacket bullet's make. It's come from behind and tuh one side. Pecos never knowed what hit him.

Tellin' Cotton tuh stand in his tracks, I looks fer sign. Off to one side is a brush patch. Not a twig is busted but there in the sand is tracks made by some feller that's wore rope soled sandals. Not bein' much of a tracker, I loses the sign where it passes up the hill onto hard ground. Then I goes back with where Cotton's settin' his hoss, lookin' down kinda white like at what was Pecos.

That little pasear I taken was more tuh corral my scattered wits than anything else, but I'm still all mixed up in my mind when I gits back tuh where Cotton's holdin' my hoss an' starin' hard at pore ol' Pecos.

"Don't let this th'ow too much of a scare into yuh, son," I tells him, misreadin' that white look aroun' his mouth.

"Scare?" says Cotton, slow like, an' looks at me, with his eyes. They're blue. The coldest, hardest blue I ever seen. "Did yur say *'scare,'* Buck?" And he grins sorter crooked.

"If I did, Cotton," says I, "I shore made a big mistake. Let's load Pecos on my hoss an' git him tuh camp."

I knows I got one man that ain't quittin' the game till he lines his sights on the Yaqui that killed Pecos.

'Dobe an' another one uh the boys, gittin' a hunch suthin's wrong, meets us.

"Seen Pelon?" I asks.

"Not since last evenin'," 'Dobe tells me, "when him an' Jess had the run-in an' Pelon drug it outa camp."

"What run-in?" says I.

"It was after you had gone tuh bed. Better git Jess tuh tell yuh about it." 'Dobe, I kin see, don't want tuh be carryin' no tales behind Jess's back.

WELL, I'm purty much on the prod by the time I gits tuh camp. That danged, big-mouthed Jess, with his hoorawin' an' braggin', has picked on Pelon an' I've lost my hoss wrangler. Hoss wranglers is scarce as fleas on a fish an' I ain't thankin' Jess fer runnin' off the Yaqui. The sight uh that big windjammer squattin' by the fire with a cup uh coffee an' a cigareet, a grin spread all over his red face, is like wavin' a red rag in a bull's face.

"What the hell's all this about you an' Pelon?" I growls.

"It was after you'd bedded down last evenin', Buck," he 'lows.

"Yo're damn right it was," I snaps, hot as a griddle cake. "Ain't we got trouble enough without you sheep-brained boneheads janglin' amongst yoreselves?"

"Don't blame yuh fer gittin' ringy," nods Jess. "An' so he'p me, Buck, I'll do my dangdest tuh make it up someway. It was my doggoned talkin' as got me into it an' onct I'd begun, I had tuh go through er be hoorawed outa camp.

"All hands except you was settin' aroun' the fire, swappin' lies. We got tuh talkin' about how most fellers is scairt of a knife. Men that's face half a dozen guns, quittin' when a knife flickered, an' such talk. You know how boys'll argue about some fool thing like that.

"One uh the gang, Nigger Bob er one uh them Texas boys, I dunno which, it bein' sorta dark an' them all talkin' with the same Texas lingo, 'lows that no man'll go up ag'in' a knife, bare handed."

"So you up an' says how many knives you've tuk off men, I suppose?" says I, when he stops talkin, tuh swaller some coffee. "Over in France?"

"Suthin' like that," Jess admits. "I don't know at the time that them boys is kinda jobbin' me. I tells 'em that I took a German oncet that come at me with a knife a foot long. Which gits a rise outa one uh the boys.

" 'I'll bet a week's pay,' says this Texan, 'that you won't tackle a man that's comin' at yuh with a knife.'

" 'I take the bet,' I tells him. 'Likewise I'm coverin' all other bets uh the same kind.'

"When I covered all bets," Jess goes on, "I'm stuck tuh work fer six months tuh pay 'em off. Them boys shore trapped me purty."

Jess's face wears a stupid grin.

"Serves yuh right," I tells him. He jest grins.

"Now," Jess goes on, "is where Pelon come into the play. When I tells them tuh trot out their knife man, they fetches Pelon. The Injun is in on the game from the start an' I kin tell by the way he's grinnin' that he's shore enjoyin' it. So I figgers tuh make it worth his while. I knows he'd taken a fancy tuh that silver rig uh mine.

" 'Pelon,' I tells him, playin' my string out. 'If yuh win, my outfit is yourn. But yuh gotta make a good job uh whuppin' me, mind? If yur lose, I'm claimin' them scalps uh yourn.'

" 'Si, si, grunts Mister Injun, thinkin' uh that saddle. So I sheds my gun belt, peels my shirt off, an' me an Pelon goes at it."

"Yuh mean tuh tell me, Jess," says I, knowin' Pelon is as wicked a knife man as ever I'd seen, an' I've met a plenty that was shore fast, "That yuh tackled Pelon bare handed an' him with a knife in his hand? After yur told him he'd win that fancy saddle? Pelon's a good hoss wrangler but he'd go out tuh win that bet if he had tuh kill yuh!"

"You ain't tellin me no news, Buck," grins Jess. "That's why I made the game worth his while. Between me'n you, I hate greasers an' Injuns."

"But gashamighty, feller, Pelon's greased lightnin' with a knife!" I'm fergittin' that I'm sore at this big, grinnin' over-growed kid.

"That ain't nothin' new tuh me neither," Jess says, "He's shore handy with his barlow, that baby. It'd taken me all uh ten minutes tuh wean it off him when I sees he's goin out fer real blood."

"An' then," cuts in one uh the Mormon boys who is coolin' a cup uh coffee, damned if he don't offer Pelon back the knife an' tell him tuh try again."

"Jest tuh show off a little," I'm suprised tuh hear Jess admit. "I knowed the fight was done took outa Mister Injun when I takes his Bowie away from him. Injuns can't stand bein' showed up. When the joke's on a Injun, he'll fade outa the picture right away. Ain't I right, Buck?"

"Pelon'll never show up here no more," I guess, not knowin' whether tuh kick his pants er raise his pay er both.

I'm out a hoss wrangler but if this young ox kin whup Pelon's knife bare handed, he's wuth more'n the hundred he's drawin'. Then I recollects Pecos an' springs it on the boys as is still at breakfast an' ain't heered the news. 'Dobe comes up while I'm a talkin'. I tells 'em the whole works. How Pecos had told me uh bein' shot at an' no noise comin' from the gun.

"Now if Pelon was here, mebbe he cud tell us suthin' about this here El Toro," I growls. "But he ain't here, dang it."

"What is it about El Toro, Buck," says Jess kinda quiet fer oncet, instead uh loud spoke, "that yuh'd like tuh know?"

"A hell of a lot," says I, "that yuh ain't able tuh tell me." I'm kinda hot oncet more, thinkin' uh how much good Pelon'd be now. "What d'you know about El Toro, anyway?"

"Plenty, Buck," grins Jess "More'n Pelon'd find out in ten years. That El Toro's a danged false alarm. El Toro means The Bull, eh? Bull is right. That bird's full of it, I'm tellin' yuh. I cud run him all over camp with a ramrod. Him an' his yella bellies th'owed in. Soldiers? Bad actors? Horseradish, Cap. El Toro was plain Juan Herrera when I knowed him. Yella? You tell 'em. The sneakin' coyote. He was a buck private in my company an' I had tuh keep a two-man detail after we left Brest, tuh keep Mister Juan Herrera from goin' A. W. O. L. fer the rest uh the war. He tried stealin' an' gittin' caught at it so he'd go to the hoosegow but I shook him down fer what he stole, bocoo francs besides, an' kicked his pants ahead tuh where we was goin' tuh look clost at the war we heard was bein' fought up ahead. Yeah. Then he tries shootin hisse'f in the leg but I ties a rag on a ramrod, soaks mister rag in iodine, an swabs out the hole. He don't even whimper, I'll say that fer him, when I gives him that first aid attention. Do I know El Toro? Do I know that lousy bum? I know that bird like a school kid sabes his A B C's. El Toro is Juan Herrera an' Juan Herrera is wanted right now fer desertion."

"What about his army?" I asks Jess,

"His army? Dunno, Cap. Only what Pelon tells me. Some Mex. Mostly Yaquis."

"Equipment?"

"Quien sabe?" shrugs Jess. "Not me. A

good man with a double bitted ax cud go through his black an' tan warriors like a sharp knife through lard, and them armed with machine guns."

"Yuh-all ain' never fit many Yaquis, Jess," grins Nigger Bob, "when they's all loaded up on marijuana weed."

"Which ain't gettin' us nowheres, you two arguin'," I cuts that rag chawin' short right now. "What I want tuh know is how good El Toro's men is equipped. Pecos was shot by a bullet which don't make a noise."

"Silencer, huh?" nods Jess. "I've heered of 'em. But it ain't likely this Injun's got nothin' but a few blunderbusses."

"Unless he's located Heitmann's caches," says 'Dobe, quiet, sorter.

Now I've learnt this much about 'Dobe. He don't never open his mouth without sayin' suthin' worth listenin' to. I knows without askin' that he ain't passin' on no second-hand information. All of a sudden I'm connectin' up Pelon an' 'Dobe who has knowed each other before, accordin' tuh what 'Dobe tell me that day I hires him. Pelon was captain of Colonel Joe Heitmann's Yaqui scouts.

"What d' you know about Heitmann's caches, 'Dobe?" I asks.

HE GIVES me a quick look an' his eyes looks at me suspicious. Yuh see, it ain't exactly healthy down in Mexico fer them as was in any way connected with Joe Heitmann. Fer barrin' a stroke of bad luck an' bein' double-crossed by a certain man Joe trusted, that big soldier uh fortune would uh changed the gover'ment uh Mexico. He'd uh took Mexico in six months.

The gent that double-crossed Joe Heitmann was paid big dough. But he never lived tuh spend so much as a peso of it afore one uh Heitmann's friends cut him down, in spite of the bodyguard that herded him night an' day. Yep, a certain faction in Mexico was shore after Heitmann's scalp. Likewise they've put a fancy price on the heads uh certain ones that was mixed up with the colonel. How does I know all this? Because I'd bin sent tuh Mexico to verify Colonel Joe Heitmann's capture, that's why, an' that's how come I'm in Agua Negro when this rebel chief is shot.

An' while the thing has bin squashed, I'm still kinda interested concernin' parts uh the deal. Not too danged interested, sabe, fer that ain't healthy neither. But all of a sudden I'm shore curious regardin' one 'Dobe Smith an' how much he knows about Joe Heitmann. Mexico politics, some few years ago, was a plumb interestin' study. I'm lookin' at 'Dobe now as I asks him about them hidden guns. An' jest as plain as if he told me that he was leary of me, he shakes his head, grinnin' kinda.

"What does I know about Colonel Joe Heitmann an' them guns he hid?" He breaks a kinda awkward silence. "Not a damn thing, Buck Bell." He's speakin' loud enough tuh be heard by every man there.

"Uh course he don't know nothin', Buck," laughs Jess. "Him bein' somewheres in the Argonne about the time that Heitmann plants the guns."

Does 'Dobe git kinda white around the face? Mebby it's jest the half-light uh dawn. But the terbaccer he's pourin' from a sack into a brown cigareet paper is spillin' all over. I has enough sense tuh change the subject an' we lays over that mornin' tuh plant pore Pecos an' hunt aroun' fer signs.

There's hoss tracks a plenty, about two miles from camp. El Toro an' his men has done drug it, though. Of Pelon, not a track. He's took the fastest horse in the remuda an' gone yonderly. But tied tuh Jess Hardy's saddle is three fresh scalps. Pelon, havin' lost his bet, is payin' it, an' givin' some extra scalps fer good measure. Er mebbyso he misunderstands an' thinks he's bound tur turn over all the hair he lifts while us boys is workin' in Mexico an' Jess is alive tuh drag down his end uh the bet. Anyhow, when Jess goes tuh saddle his hoss, there's them scalps. Injuns is shore queer folks, any way yuh take 'em.

III

WE'RE gittin' clost tuh where the cattle is numerous an' plenty now. Movin' camp tuh Apache Springs, we gits ready tuh work the country. From that one center, we kin work the country fer what cattle we kin handle. That means no more camp movin' an' Nigger Bob agrees tuh jingle the remuda an' cook besides when I tells him he kin have Pelon's pay fer the work.

I ain't standin' no guard that night, but I don't lay good on the bed ground. I'm wide awake when Jess an' 'Dobe comes in off fust guard. The fire's died down an' I sees 'Dobe throw some mesquite sticks on the coals.

"Damn it," snaps Jess, "Don't do that." An' I sees him kick away the wood afore it blazes up.

"Why, Jess, what ails yuh?" I hears 'Dobe sayin', kinda hurt like.

"I ain't aimin' tuh make myse'f a target, that's all," growls Jess, cranky, sorter. "Yuh know what happened tuh Pecos. No use in a man givin' them bushwhackers a chanct tuh git him from the dark."

"Never thought uh that," says 'Dobe, keerless. "Yuh didn't see nothin' while we was on guard, did yur, Jess?"

"Hell, no!" snaps Jess, an' somehow I gits the hunch that the big feller's lyin'.

Directly they've et a cold biscuit an' a cup uh cold coffee, they goes tuh bed. I takes special notice that Jess is bedded down betwixt Cotton an' another boy.

I lays there in bed as long as I kin stand it. I'm jumpy as a dang cat, waitin' fer suthin', I dunno what, tuh happen. I'm wearin' a new wool underclothes an' they're itchin' in fifty places tuh oncet. A cow bawls an' I find myse'f settin' up in bed, my gun in my hand. An' I ain't the only one that's woke up thataway. Yonder's big Jess, on his laigs, crouchin'-like with a six-gun in his hand. I lays down afore he sees me an' watches.

"That you, Jess?" I hears Cotton Top askin', his voice thick with sleep. Jess hides his gun an' sets down.

"It shore is, boy," he tells Cotton, an' seems like his voice is kinda funny soundin', "jest come in off guard."

"How's everything?" grunts Cotton.

"Finer'n frog's hair, boy," Jess tells him, crawlin' under his blankets oncet more. Fer the second time since he got in off guard, Jess has lied.

Them wool underwear is itchin' onct more. Directly I slips outa bed an' pulls on my boots an' overalls. But afore I moves off the bed ground, I takes off my spurs. Likewise I leaves my hat. Afoot, I slides into the brush quiet as I kin travel. Thinks I as I slips along like a dang coyote, I'm gittin' as boogery as the rest uh the outfit.

I reckon I've bin gone nigh half an hour an' I've circled the camp an' took off in the direction uh the mesa where the hosses is bedded, when suthin' pulls me up short. Somewheres ahead I hears voices, talkin' low. Jest a sorter murmur that I wouldn't uh heered if my ears hadn't bin listenin' keerful. I squats low alongside the twistin' cow trail, my gun shore handy.

The voices has stopped. Thinks I, mebby so they've heered me comin'. Still, I ain't made no noise tuh speak of. I waits, undecided as tuh stay put er go ahead. Then I hears a hoss's hoofs crunch gravel where the trail crosses the crick.

I'm squattin' low, sabe? Two hundred feet away is a little rise. I waits, my eyes fixed on the rim uh that hill which shows ag'in' the sky. I ain't got long tuh wait. There, plumb clear ag'in' the moonlight, a hossbacker is skylighted. Even if I didn't recognize that big sombrero an' the way the feller sets his hoss, I'd know the hoss amongst a thousand. It's the Gila Roan an' the man's that's forkin' him is Pelon. Then he drops out sight beyond the rim.

A snappin' branch brings me outa my speculatin'. A man is comin' along the trail to'rds camp an' he's comin' cautious.

Thinks I, here's where I gits myse'f a Yaqui. But I don't. Not by a damn sight. Fer when that hombre passes me so close I could uh knocked his ears off with my gun barrel, I sees that it ain't no Yaqui. It's the gent that calls hisse'f 'Dobe Smith!

My fust hunch is tuh shove my gun in his belly and find out what the hell's the idee in sneakin' off in the night tuh powwow with Pelon who has stole the best hoss in the remuda. Then suthin' tells me tuh play fox an' lay low. Follerin' out this second idee, I lets 'Dobe go past me an' on to camp. Later thinkin' like hell, but gittin' nowheres' I follers him an' goes back tuh bed.

I lays there in bed, thinkin' till my skull aches. I'm like a kid tryin' tuh put together bits of a puzzle with some uh the pieces missin'. I'm still all bawled up when I drop off tuh sleep.

Then somebody's shakin' me gentle.

"Shhhh, Buck. Don't make no noise," somebody whispers. It's Bert Bingham, him as was Pecos's guard pardner.

"What's the rip?" I whispers back, pullin' on my boots.

"Slim Warner, one uh the Texas boys," he tells me, still whisperin'. "Dead."

And I recollects that I'd put Slim an' Bert on third guard together. I gits my hoss an' follers Bert off into the dark.

There clost tuh where I last seen Pelon ride over the hill, Bert points out Slim, layin' face down on the trail. When I examines him I sees he's bin shot in the neck, the same as Pecos. The same man has murdered both them boys an' whoever he is he's a crack shot. Jest a clean hole drilled plumb through the neck at the base uh the skull.

"Slim had rode back tuh camp fer terbacc-er," Bert explains. "When a half hour went by an' he didn't come back, I loped over thisaway tuh see what had 'come uh him. I finds him like this."

"Who's stayin' with the hosses?" I asks.

"Why—why nobody, Buck. I'd clean fergot the remuda, thinkin' uh Slim bein' killed, an' Calico smellin' Injuns continual."

"Stay here with Slim," I tells him, feelin' sickish inside, fer I know without lookin' that we ain't got no more remuda left than a jackrabbit. Them Yaquis out-foxed Bert, that's all an' the outfit's set afoot except fer our night hosses.

I SPURS my hoss to a run an' toppin' the mesa beyond, takes a quick pasear aroun' the place where our hosses should uh bin. Not a hoss.

Jerkin' out my six-shooter, I empties her in the air. It's the alarm signal that'll bring every man in camp on a keen run. Directly they swarm up over the skyline hell bent fer election an' it's Nigger Bob, forkin' a white mule which is his favorite pet, that's leadin' the perade. His eyes is rollin' like white marbles an' he's in his sock feet, but each uh them big paws uh hisn holds a long-barreled Colt's gun.

"What at is them El Toro pole cats, Mista Buck?" says Bob. "Is yuh-all hurt bad?"

"Not yet," I tells him, an' turns to the boys.

"They've headed south toward Black Mesa. Scatter out till yuh kin barely make out one another's hats in the moonlight. Jess, you take the left end uh the line. Bob, you take the right end. Kill everything that looks like a man. Travel at a stiff trot. Is Bert with yuh?"

"Right here, Buck," Bert sings out. "Didn't figger I cud he'p Slim none by stayin' with him. It was my fault that the hosses—"

"Yuh done what any man 'ud uh done, son," I lies tuh him, knowin' he feels like a sheep stealin' dog fer losin' the remuda. It ain't he'pin' none tuh bawl him out.

"You go with Bob, Bert. Cotton, you go with Jess. Where's 'Dobe Smith?"

Nary answer. 'Dobe ain't with the rest. Ner has any man seen him. Then I remembers what my own eyes has seen just a couple uh hours afore Slim gits killed an' the hosses run off.

Pelon an' 'Dobe Smith holdin' a confidential talk off in the brush. Right then an' there I adds two an' two an' makes a army. Joe Heitmann's army. Pelon who was a captain uh his Yaquis. 'Dobe who has knowed Pelon before an' knows the country. 'Dobe Smith whose name never was Smith. Who is 'Dobe Smith?

"Jess," I asks that big feller point blank, "what happened out here tonight when you an' 'Dobe was on guard?"

"Huh?" he grunts.

"You know what I'm drivin' at," I tells him. "What happened?"

"Not a damn thing, Buck. That's the hell of it. It's the waitin' that gits a man's goat. Waitin' for a shot in the back. When I gits my night hoss, there's a note on my saddle horn which says I'm goin' on a long trip soon. A friend uh mine claims he's got a bullet with my name on it. Juan Herrera 'lows he's about tuh square an old grudge, that's all. It's got me jumpy, Cap. The damn coward won't fight a man in the open. Pelon's throwed in with him, bet on that. Same breed uh skunks, both of 'em.

"Hmm. Got ary idee what 'come uh 'Dobe?"

"No more'n you have, Cap. Don't even know he'd gone anywheres." I kin tell by his voice that he ain't lyin'. More than that, I knows that Jess Hardy is scairt. Yes, sir, he's plumb scairt. I tries one las' chance at findin' out if what I suspect is true.

"Bob," I asks that black feller who knows his Mexico plenty, "did yuh ever git a look at a gent named Jim Gilbert?"

"Captain Jim Gilbert uh Heitmann's layout? Gent dat bumped off that Mexican dat double-crossed Heitmann?"

"Same gent, Bob. Ever see him?"

"Ain't never laid an eye on him, Mista Buck. Folks says he ain't a big feller. Man about 'Dobe Smith's size. Quiet, but a fightin' fool. He was killed by rurales below Torreon."

"Sure uh that, Bob?"

"Mista Buck," Bob tells me solemn, "I ain't noways sure uh nothin' in Mexico. I bin dead a few times myse'f. I bin sizin' up Mista 'Dobe on my own accord. He sho' tallies up with what folks says about this here Captain Gilbert. Me, I dunno. Dunno nothin', Mista Buck."

"Don't blame yur, Bob. Well, hit the trail, boys. I'll be in the middle uh the line, sabe? Let's go!" And we swings down the wide mesa at a long trot.

IT'S one uh them Southwestern nights when the stars hang low in a silver-white sky. Yonder, like they're cut from purple-black cardboard, is the jagged peaks that stand between Apache Springs an' Black Mesa.

The hoofs of our horses strike the lava beds an' sparks shoot out like from under a blacksmith's hammer. Where the moonlight hits the black lava spots that lay like blots between the grass clumps, they takes on the appearance uh little lakes after a rainstorm. The moon is a white ball, cut in half. A lovers' night if ever there was one. Yet we're about tuh splatter it with human blood.

Fer a hundred a month an' ammunition, we're killin' men that's jest as human as we are. Men that loves life the same as us boys. They kill because they're ignorant, but how about us fellers? Nary one of us belongs down here in Chihuahua. We're gatherin' cattle fer a big concern that don't even know us by name. They don't think enough of our lives tuh put up ransom money if we're took by some outlaw gang. A hundred a month an' ca'tridges.

Then I thinks uh Slim layin' back yonder, an' I quits speculatin' on the why an' wherefor uh life. Then suthin' whistles past my head. A bullet? Dunno. Yonder's a fast movin' blot slippin' into the night acrost the mesa. Spurrin' my hoss to a run, I cuts down on mister rider with my Winchester.

But it's like shootin' at a ghost. I'm ridin' my hoss at a run when outa the night, headed straight for me, comes a bigger blot. I pulls up sudden, shootin' three times in quick succession which is the signal for the boys tuh come to me on a run. As the echoes uh my last shot dies away. I hears the jingle uh hoss bells. That blot is the remuda, comin' our way.

"Hallooo, Buck!" calls a voice t'other side uh the hosses.

It's 'Dobe Smith's voice. I hollers back, quick enough an' my boys comes lopin' up tuh he'p me wonder how come 'Dobe is hazin' that remuda back home. We circles the bunch uh scairt hosses an' meets 'Dobe.

"Them Injuns like tuh set us afoot, eh, Buck?" says he. "I had tuh nigh ride my hoss down ketchin' up to 'em. Got any cigareet makin's on yuh?"

Jess an' the other boys asks 'Dobe a hundred questions but he jest grins some an' shakes his head.

"Nuthin' mysterious about it, boys," he says. "I gits sorter restless like an' rid out tuh auger a while with the boys on guard. Finds the remuda movin' yonderly shore fast an' suspicious, so I falls in behind an' fetches 'em back.

"What about them gents that was doin' the hoss rustlin'?" I asks. "They turned them ponies over to yuh fer the askin', I reckon?"

"Suthin' like that, Buck," he grins. "There was only four in the party. They wa'n't hard tuh convince, oncet they seen I aimed tuh take the hosses away from 'em. Pecos' hoss an' Slim's is in the bunch. Two uh the Yaquis had claimed 'em but they've gone where they won't need hosses no more. How about that cigareet, Buck?"

I DON'T find out till we've hit camp that 'Dobe is packin' three ugly lookin' knife slits in his hide. None of 'em dangerous, but plenty painful. He sips his coffee as I bandage him up. Sometimes I ketches him lookin' at me, half smilin' outa his eyes. The boys has brung in Slim's body an' we're gonna plant him after breakfast which Bob is th'owin' together.

Jess Hardy is settin' on his bed roll, quiet

as a rock. Danged if he don't look like he's lost twenty pounds. His face is a sorter gray color an' there's a long scratch along his neck. Not exactly a scratch, neither. More like a burn. It comes to me that I ain't heered him say more'n a dozen words since he got it.

As I'm lookin' at him, he looks up. He tries tuh grin but it makes him look all the more sickly. Then he tosses a buckskin pouch into the brush near by.

"That damn Injun," he says, comin' over an' pourin' hisse'f a cup uh coffee, "musta bin here in camp while we was gone. That damn sack had three fresh scalps in it. Found it layin' on my bed." And as he lifts his coffee cup, the stuff spills down his shirt front, his hand is that shaky.

Now don't git the idee that I'm blamin' this Jess boy fer bein' spooky. From cook tuh boss, we're shore jumpy. Nigger Bob's fondlin' of his rabbit's foot an' workin' a voodoo charm he gits offen his brother-in-law's brother who is a herb docter er suthin'. The Mormon boys is fallin' back on their bishop's teachin's an' doin' it in a quiet, unashamed way that is shore calm an' convincin'. The Texas boys, who had kin-folks at the Alamo, gits more quiet an' their eyes is shore hard an' dangerous. My nerves is scraped to the quick an' I don't enjoy my grub none.

Nope, I ain't blamin' Jess Hardy fer bein' scairt, but every man there seems tuh kinda enjoy seein' him squirm. He's so danged big an' has bin travelin' fer so long on his toughness, sabe? I'm gittin' right curious about that red welt along his neck.

DID I say we was all of us spooky? Not quite all. 'Dobe Smith, so he'p me, Hiram, is as perky as a dad-gummed fightin' rooster. Yeah. Chipper as a medder lark, squattin' there with a cigareet an' a cup uh java, wiser'n a hoot owl an' cool as a watermelon on ice. He waves his hand toward a high peak where a tall, thin smoke is risin' skyward.

"Yaqui smoke signal, Buck," he says keerless. "Injuns is like rattlers, thataway. Warnin' afore they strike. Directly yuh'll see more smokes. We're plumb surrounded. We couldn't run if we wanted tuh."

"Nobody said nothin' about runnin'," I tells him. "But if yuh knowed so much about El Toro, yuh picked a hell of a time fer spillin' the news."

'Dobe nods, thoughtful.

"Looks thataway, boss, don't it? But I didn't know myse'f till I seen them smokes. El Toro's a foxy proposition."

"Hell!" snorts Jess. "That dirty faced Injun foxy? He's about the dumbest buck that ever mishandled a rifle in the rear ranks."

"Yuh fergit, Jess," said 'Dobe, soft like, "that El Toro is in his own back yard right now. Amongst his own people, fightin' the only way he knows how tuh fight. Put him in uniform, where big shells is bustin' around him, where he has tuh hide his face in a gas mask, an' he's not much account. Kinda bewildered. But here in the open, fightin' with his own methods, he's a snake an' them as figgers he ain't has got a hard lesson comin'. He ain't Juan Herrera, buck private, no longer. He's General El Toro an' his medicine is shore strong."

"Gimme my old company, a machine gun an' a sack full uh grenades, an' I'll clean up on that gang."

'Dobe kinda smiles an' borrows another smoke.

"Why damn it all, 'Dobe, *you* was over there!" blusters Jess, "*you* sabe what I mean."

'Dobe twists his cigareet into shape an' lights it. Then, kinda white around his lips, his eyes hard as glass with a sorter defiant look, he stands up facin' Jess an' me an' the other boys who quits eatin' when they sees the look on 'Dobe Smith's face.

"Jess," says he, but his words is meant for every man there, "when I said I was in the Ninety-first Division, I lied. If I'd uh gone when my name was called, I'd uh bin in that outfit. But I didn't go. Back in Douglas, Arizona, my home town, my name is posted on the slacker list. I'm a damned slacker, get that? A damned slacker!" And his fist closes over his cigareet, the lighted end burnin', unfelt into the palm uh his hand.

Nobody speaks. What was there tuh say, anyhow? There stands 'Dobe, white as a hunk uh chalk, his eyes burnin' like two hot coals. Me and Nigger Bob swaps a quick look. There's a sneer on Jess Hardy's face

that I felt like wipin' off with a machete. Like a hell of a lot us other folks, Jess is condemnin' 'Dobe Smith without givin' him a chanct. But I swallers that cravin' tuh smash that big windjammer.

" 'Dobe," I asks, quiet as I kin make my voice sound, "what was yore name, back there in Douglas?"

"I went tuh jail under my right name uh Gilbert," says he. "James Gilbert. They was arrestin' draft dodgers them days." Then he kinda smiles with his mouth, but his eyes is still hard, "I broke jail under the same name."

Now the name "Jim Gilbert" don't mean nothin' tuh nobody but me an' Nigger Bob. But us two knows that standin' there is one uh the bravest men that ever kept his mouth shet about. Not James Gilbert, slacker, but Captain Jim Gilbert uh Heitmann's Rebels. Single-handed, with a price on his head that run into five figgers, Captain Jim Gilbert had rode alone down the main street uh Agua Negro till he found the man who had bin Heitmann's traitor. Without drawin' his gun he puts the skids under that hombre's bodyguard uh ten soldiers, gives this double-crossin' dog a chanct tuh go fer his gun, then shoots him down an' rides over his body an' outa town. If he'd uh let his hoss break into a trot, he'd uh bin drilled by fifty bullets. But his hoss goes down the street at a pacin' walk while this Captain Jim Gilbert uh Heitmann's Rebels, rolls hisse'f a husk cigareet an' don't so much as look back over his shoulder.

I got that yarn straight, from the Federal captain hisse'f who seen it with his own eyes.

When I asks him why he don't shoot Gilbert, he shrugs them slim shoulders uh his, flicks at some dust on a pair uh ninety dollar cavalry boots, an' shows a set uh white teeth under his mustache, which is waxed to needle points.

"Does one kill a hell of a brave man, Señor Bell, because that brave one has exterminated a reptile snake? Besides, that money which the reptile snake is carry in that money belt of his around the belly, will now go back to the government."

But because that Federal captain is a gentleman an' soldier an' has a level head for business, ain't sayin' that them paddle foot soldiers is anyways under orders not tuh down Gilbert. Not by a brown jug full.

NOW I knows about that deal. Likewise, Jim Gilbert knows that I know. He's givin' me a sharp look warnin' me tuh keep my mouth shet, but I ain't gonna sit there an' let a man like Jim Gilbert git branded fer a yaller coward. I'm on my laigs an' talkin' afore he kin stop me.

"Boys," I tells 'em, "I fit fer Uncle Sam afore any uh you was old enough tuh own a pair uh boots. I dunno how come 'Dobe Smith, whose name in Agua Negro is Captain Jim Gilbert, missed out on goin' with his Ninety-first Division. But I knows this much. It wa'n't because he was yaller. Them as has any queer idees, had better swaller the same an' don't go coughin' 'em up."

Then I turns tuh 'Dobe.

"Yo're Jim Gilbert from now on, pardner. Captain Jim Gilbert. If you'll take charge uh this outfit, it's yourn. You sabe the country an' them Yaquis. Will yuh take command here?"

Gilbert's face, white a minute before gits kinda red.

"That's white uh you, Buck," says he. "But I don't think Jess er the other boys'd want a slacker fer leader here."

"Go 'long, white boy!" Bob busts out, grinnin' like a big black ape. "We all got puss'nal reasons fer things. Dat wah was kinda bawled up anyways. Me, ah was in jail at El Paso when we-all declah's in. Sheriff 'lows immunity fer me an' fo' mo' crap shootin' gen'lmen as is layin' in his hoosegow, does we 'list up an' go oveh yondor to mix up in 'at scrap wif dem German boys. Facin' tuhty days at hahd labah, I does so. Does I bettah myse'f? Man, I'm out to loadin' trucks at El Paso. I'm still loadin' 'em when de wah shets down. My idee uh the American soldier's uniform is fatigue ovahalls. Cap'n Jim Gilbert, ah salutes a hones' to Gawd fightin' man."

Which he does. Them Texas boys knows Negroes. They knows Bob is what we calls a "bad" Negro. Which means that his brand uh toughness is plumb leak proof. When Bob 'lows a man has guts there ain't no further use fer argument. They sides with Bob, loud an' profane, as the feller says.

The Mormon fellers foller suit. To a

man, they like this quiet mannered feller.

Jess Hardy grins crooked like. Mebbyso he's kinda jealous. Er it might be that he's so choke full uh patriotism that he's hidebound. But he sees he's licked an' admits it.

"I was top kick," says Jess, "under the hardest boiled skipper that ever wore a Sam Browne. Yuh got a mark tuh shoot at. Do yore stuff, Cap'n."

He snaps to attention an' throws Gilbert a trick salute that carries jest a hint uh insult. Gilbert ignores the last named part as he returns it.

Somehow, afore we knows it, that cow spread is turned into a little two-bit army.

"SERGEANT HARDY," snaps Gilbert, an' damned if his clothes don't seem tuh hang on him like a uniform, "count off a detail uh three men."

Jess does so. He's a soldier again. A hard-boiled, swaggerin' top sergeant. His scaredness uh the night before is gone. He lines up Cotton an' two other boys.

"Yo'll go a hundred yards down the wash from the spring, Sergeant," says Gilbert. "Take a shovel an' dig under the rimrock there. Bring back what yuh find."

Jess an' his men trot off down the wash. Gilbert turns to me.

"You wished this on me, Buck, darn yuh. Now lend me a hand. Where's a good spot, in yore estimation, tuh make a stand?"

I points to a high knoll that's all cluttered with granite boulders. He nods, grinnin'. Then he points to a black spot up among the gray rocks.

"Pelon," he says. "Watchin' El Toro's smokes with glasses. God only knows what odds we're buckin' here. They're out tuh clean us up. And may the good Señor Dios have mercy on one Sergeant Jess Hardy, fer Juan Herrera wants him alive. Yuh know what that means, Buck."

Knowin' Yaquis an' Injuns in general, I does. It'll be torture fer Jess. Staked out naked on a big ant hill, mebby, his body smeared with some sticky sweet stuff. Er whittled on with knives that ain't too sharp. An' while Jim Gilbert is too much of a white man tuh say so, sabes that Jess Hardy has brung this on us with his bullyin' of buck private Juan Herrera in the big war.

"What brung Jess into Chihuahua?" I asks.

"I reckon El Toro sent him word that Juan Herrera dared him tuh come down here an' fight. Suthin' like that. The big idiot didn't know what he was runnin' into. Don't be too hard on him, Buck, he didn't sabe."

"But he's beginnin' tuh sabe."

"Exactly," smiled Gilbert. "Last night got him thinkin'. That scar on his neck kinda shocked him."

"One uh them silent bullets?" I makes a guess.

"Bullets?" Gilbert chuckles soft like. "Bullets, nothin'. Arrows, Buck. Injun arrows. Pelon knowed all the time. Fact is, it was Pelon that creased Jess with the bow an' arrow he taken off one uh them Yaqui hoss stealers. He told me about it when I met him after me'n Jess come in off guard. It was me that laid Pelon's scalps on Jess' bed, when we all got back tuh camp after the hoss stealin' party was over. Jess was so damned cocky, Buck, I never told him it was a arrow. The scalps scare 'im, too, an' I owed that much tuh Pelon fer past favors."

I agrees with him.

"Pelon aimed tuh kill Jess with that arrow?"

"The next time," says Gilbert. "I had tuh talk some tuh explain tuh Pelon that Jess was jest a big, overgrowed kid. It was shore hard tuh make that Yaqui see it my way. Only fer the fact that he knowed me when we both soldiered under Heitmann, I'd never uh bin able tuh do it."

"Any man that kin convince Pelon uh anything, is a world beater. He must think yo're a tin god on wheels, mister."

"I jerked him out from in front of a rurale firin' squad onct," Gilbert admits, kinda like he's ashamed uh it. "Injuns don't fergit things like that."

He has Bert and the other boys bury pore Slim afore we moves camp up the knoll. Pelon's taken charge uh the remuda now an' he's keepin' 'em clost bunched.

"There's a stone corral up yonder," says Jim Gilbert. "Barrin' one item, she's a humdinger of a place tuh stand a siege.

"What's that one thing?" says I, "water?"

"Water," he tells me. "An' this El Toro is jest enough Americanized tuh play on our

weak spot, Buck."

Which makes us feel like a man holdin' four cards of a bob-tail royal flush, in a game where the pot is a shore big 'un. If we kin figger out the water proposition, we got those Yaquis whupped.

"By fillin' the canteens, goin' easy on the water, an' pumpin' plenty uh hot lead into them pisanos," I tells Gilbert, "we'd orter hang an' rattle till we bust the backbone uh their fightin' speerit."

"We're gonna have tuh kill off a few uh them pore ignerant devils," he says, thoughtful. "They'll be drunk an' full uh hop, plumb loco. We'll be slaughterin' men that ain't in their right minds, Buck. Hell, ain't it?"

JESS an' his men is comin' back now. That big gent is grinnin' wide an' I sees the reason. They're packin' two Lewis machine guns wrapped in water proof sacks.

"Heitmann's cache, Jim?" says I. I'm callin' him Jim now. He nods his head, his eyes sorter broodin'.

"Joe Heitmann's cache, Buck. The only one uh five caches that the rurales never found. There's plenty uh ammunition planted there, too." He gives me a funny look an' kinda laughs.

"Recollect the night, Buck, that you an' yore boys laid along the north bank uh the Rio, waitin' tuh ketch Joe Heitmann's gun runners?"

"You knowed about that?" I asks.

"I shore did, pardner," he chuckles. "It was me as was crossin' them guns an' ammunition. The same as Jess is fetchin' now. Ain't yuh glad now that I out-foxed yuh that night an' run them guns acrost another route?"

As I he'ps pack that precious store uh ca'tridges up the slope, I shore am glad I got out-figgered that night that seemed such a long time ago. Likewise, it sets me thinkin' about how ol' man Fate takes a hand in things. At the time I missed out on that load uh smuggled guns, I was shore cussin' my luck. I was so danged disgusted at bein' outguessed, I th'owed up my job. No, it weren't a gover'ment job. Yuh might call it hi-jackin'. A cattlemen's pool that was on t'other side uh the fence from Joe Heitmann. Border politics, yuh might say. More'n that, I ain't doin' any talkin' on that subject. It ain't healthy, even now. Not by a brown jug full.

Me an' Heitmann an' Jim Gilbert an' the rest of us that played hide an' find along the border, all tarred with the same brush, yuh might say. Nothin' tuh hang yore head about. On the other hand, nothin' tuh be proud over. Local politics. Border feuds. Both sides out tuh win. Both payin' top wages tuh boys that was handy with a rope an' shootin' iron. Top wages an' free ammunition. No holts barred on either side. Nobody hollerin' fer mercy neither. Both sides dodgin' gover'ment men on either side uh the border. Risky? I'll tell a man.

Fate had kept me an' Jim Gilbert from th'owing hot lead at one another that night. Now here we are, fightin' side by side, yuh might say, with them same guns. Huh? Heitmann's guns? Quien sabe, friend? It was a gamblin' an' saloon syndicate as laid fer 'em in the fust place fer some Mex rebel leader that'd play with them if he won. Some Mexican named Ortega. The guns was planted in a dry wash between Bisbee an' Naco. Then the Mexican governor gits wise an' Ortega is brung up fer trial.

Ley del Fuego, it's called. The Law of Fire. Fire, meanin' the command tuh shoot. Ortega, the prisoner waitin' trial, is "shot while attempting to escape." Git the idee?

Bein' a rebel general down yonder has its drawbacks. Ortega's soul ain't no more'n got tuh wherever it went, afore there's half a dozen scoutin' parties huntin' them buried guns. The ground gits dug up a-plenty aroun' there. Heitmann gits a hot tip where the stuff is hid, calls "keno," an' the rest of us quits diggin' an' goes home tuh figger out how tuh hi-jack Heitmann outa the guns. Yeah, it's a great game. Hundred a month an' ammunition free. A big gamblin' game an' ol' man Fate dealin' from a cold deck.

So we drags the guns an' ammunition cases up the hill an' rips off the waterproofin'. Sergeant Jess is as tickled as a kid with his fust pair uh brass-toed, red-topped boots.

The guns is mounted on their tripods, magazines is shoved full uh .30 shells, an' Jess lectures his gun crews regardin' stoppages, jams, burst uh fives, an' so on. He

sabes the gun backwards an' blindfolded and he's got a plumb interested class uh gunners listenin' with everything they got.

Yonder's Pelon on a pinnacle, watchin' the remuda an' keepin' tabs on El Toro's smokes. Barrin' our short supply uh water, we're settin' shore purty.

IV

WE NONE of us slept heavy that night. Up on our knoll, our hosses restless in their stone corral, we stares out acrost that black darkness below. Darkness that's swarmin' with men we can't see ner hear ner smell. But we knows they're down yonder. Like as not some uh the bolder 'uns is creepin' up the hill amongst the boulders. We all takes care tuh keep our heads below the rock wall we've th'owed up fer a fort. Onct in a while one uh the boys puts his hat on a gun barrel an' shoves it above the wall. It brings three or four shots an' we keeps awake takin' snapshots at their gun flashes. That night lasts a long time.

Then dawn busts over the skyline an' the show opens. Like a swarm uh ants, they're up an' at us. From then on we're busier'n a bunch uh small boys that's busted open a hornet's nest.

Up they come. Some drunk on tequila, the rest crazy mad with that marijuana weed that's wuss'n loco. Red ants. Hundreds of 'em. Cotton breeches, straw sombreros, loose mouths yellin' as they jerk the levers uh their guns. Some has Springfields er Krags. Others is shootin' Winchesters er Mauser rifles. Now an' then the pop of a shotgun roars amongst the ping uh rifles. A shootin', yellin,' crazy mob, half-dressed, half-starved, half-drunk.

Rat-rat-tat-tat! rattles the machine guns an' brown faces goes down in a red smear. Like brown weeds cut by a mower. Brown weeds with scarlet red leaves. Goin' down tuh be tromped on. Others growin' up faster'n a dozen men kin count. Growin' up an' within', white eyes rollin' in black sockets.

"Marijuana por me! Marijuana 'sta bueno por me!" comes the song from below as the loco fools crowd one another like cattle tuh git mowed down at the top uh the hill.

"Fite low, boys!" calls Captain Jim Gilbert's voice, like a hunk uh ice growin' up outa a bonfire. "Low. Keep yore heads!"

"Steddy as she goes!" barks a Mormon boy that was in the navy. And we turns loose a lot uh loose boulders we got waitin' there.

Then I takes notice uh Jess, standin' above us on his two laigs, smoke a-curlin' up from his hot gun barrel, makin' a target outa hisse'f. There's a red stain on his left shirt sleeve an' his lips is drawed back from his teeth in a dead man's grin. He's knockin' down them that tries tuh climb the wall. Crackin' 'em acrost the head an' grinnin'!

When I tries tuh pull him down, he shakes me off like I was a hoss fly.

"Come on an' fight, Herrera!" he's bawlin' at the top uh his lungs. "Come an' get it, ya yaller bellied son of a coyote! Come up an' fight!"

I pulls him down with a flyin' tackle.

"Quit it, yuh dang fool!" I bellers at him. "Use some sense."

"He's scairt tuh come up!" sobs Jess, breathin' hard through his nose. "The damn coward."

"Fergit him fer a while. Quit playin' target."

When he gits his senses back, I lets go my holt. Just in time, too, fer a wild-eyed, jabberin' Yaqui is on my back with a knife. As I squirms under his weight, suthin' roars in my ears an' he falls atop uh me, dead. Jess's .45 bullet has jest nacherally tore the top uh his head off.

"That's one yuh owe me, Buck," he grunts, an' we faces them ugly brown faces that pops above the wall like jack-in-the-boxes.

From somewheres below comes the notes of a bugle. El Toro is havin' his bugler blow retreat. But there's some uh them locoed Injuns that ain't stoppin' fer no bugle. Crazy as hell, they keep comin'. Jim gives orders tuh cease firin' an' beat 'em back with clubbed guns.

UP THEY come, pore devils. They ain't fightin' fer liberty, ner love, ner money, ner their homes. They're fightin' fer marijuana.

"Marijuana por me!" they croak, their eyes white like chiny marbles as they charge up the hill. "Marijuana 'sta bueno por me!"

And we puts 'em to sleep with our rifle barrels as they come at us like ravin', killin' maniacs.

You've heered the song, no? Well, if yuh never, yuh shouldn't, fer it's as foul as the breath uh its singers. Now I kin stand by an' listen to good, clean, upstandin' cussin', by some red muzzled cow hand er mule skinner, an' enjoy it. But we ain't got the words in our language tuh translate the words in that song that carries the stench uh a bear hole in early spring.

As the filthy words uh that song, comin' from them crazy loco peons, comes driftin' up in the powder smoke, it's purty sickenin'. Even Nigger Bob, who's got a stummick like a ostrich bird, tells me later that his appetite left him.

But we're fightin' fer our lives, gun barrels crackin' skulls like coconuts an' no time tuh light a smoke.

I draws back tuh smash in a blood-smeared face with my carbine when it croaks out, "Amigo, Amigo!" an' grins sickening. It's Pelon that's climbin' over, callin' that he's a friend.

Pelon, who is part Injun, part Mex, an' all devil, blood from head tuh foot, his hide slit like he'd bin through a choppin' machine, his belt foul with fresh scalps. He's bin doin' his fightin' hand tuh hand, down there amongst them that he hates with all the devilish, cold-blooded, bottled-up hate that's shriveled up his half-breed heart.

"Pelon pays his bets, Señor Jess," he snarls, an' th'owin' them bloody chunks uh scalps square at the big sergeant, he crumples up like a rag. He's dead afore I kin put the canteen to his mouth. Hatin' with his last breath, he died like he lived, without a friend. Pelon, the bald one, who hated everything except a hoss. It was Jim Gilbert that covered the bloody body with a tarp, then passed his canteen tuh big Jess who stands there wipin' Yaqui blood from his cheek. One uh them scalps had struck him square in the face, leavin' a red smear that stands out on his gray face like a birthmark. He's sick an' nobody blames him.

Fer the time bein', the fightin's over. I hears Jess cuss when he's took a swaller uh water an' passed the canteen tuh Bert. Fer the fust time, I takes notice that the sun is nigh an hour high.

One uh the boys is dead. Two others has light wounds. Jess's left arm is soggy with blood from a bullet that scraped the bone. Yonder's Nigger Bob, heavin' dead Yaquis over the wall tuh clear a place fer his breakfast fire. The hillside is dotted with wounded men crawlin' back amongst the boulders to the brush below. Them huddled things that don't move is dead 'uns. There's more'n a plenty of 'em, too. Not a single shot busts the quiet uh the mornin' an' we kin hear groans comin' up from amongst the rocks down yonder.

"Marijuana por—" But the song gits choked off by the death rattle in the man's throat. Breakfast? Not fer me.

V

I FELT better when we'd got the place policed up some. But we're savin' water, sabe, an' it's a powder-blacked, blood-spattered bunch that squats there behind the wall, smokin' cigareets that ain't got any taste. The sun hits the litter uh empty shells an' th'ows light into our eyes. A wounded hoss in the corral is makin' a fuss an' it's Cotton Top that risks the Yaqui bullets tuh put the pore critter outa his misery.

"It was Calico," he tells Bert.

I'd uh felt better if the boy had cussed er busted down an' cried over that hoss he loved better'n lots uh men love their wives. But he don't. Jest sets there, a dead cigareet between his teeth, like a man made uh sandstone. Bob shoves a cup uh coffee into his hand an' tells him tuh drink it. Bert does as he's told an' don't even show no sign when the steamin' stuff burns his lips. Fer onct it's a relief when Big Jess Hardy starts talkin' about the war.

He turn tuh Jim Gilbert who's bin listenin' like he always done when Jess talked war.

"I got a belly-full of that man's war," he concluded finally, "An' I got all I want uh this scrap, too." And he wasn't grinnin' when he said it. "Killin' cattle, that's what it is. Cattle."

"Yuh ain't seen nothin' yet," says Jim sorter quiet. "Wait'll we run outa water." An' with that he turns his back on Jess.

"Cattle," says Bert Bingham out loud. "I reckon yo're right, Jess. We brung it on

ourselves. I'm willin' tuh call it a day."

Which goes fer us all, but we ain't got no say-so in the matter. It's up tuh Mister El Toro, settin' in the shade somewheres down below with his belly full uh chili beans an' tequila. El Toro, whose name is Juan Herrera an' who has enough American sabe an' Injun patience tuh keep settin' there till our tongues swell up an' git black fer lack uh water. Jim's shore right. We ain't seen nothin' yet.

"Man comin' up the hill with a white rag on a stick. No, it ain't a man, it's a woman. Woman with a white rag on a stick."

Jim's on his feet, wavin' a white rag. El Toro's sendin' a message uh some kind. We waits, anxious, while our cigareets goes out. All except Jim Gilbert's. He's smilin' soft like, watchin' that white flag that's comin' up the hill so danged slow. Reckon the woman thinks she's li'ble tuh git shot any second. Pore ignerant devil. She's shakin' like she's took with a chill when me'n Jim lift her over the wall.

"Don't be scairt," Jim tells her in Mex. "We ain't hurtin' yuh." An' he talks to her till she quiets down.

"Now, what does El Toro want?" asks Jim, talkin' easy so's not tuh scare her.

"EL TORO says," she tells Jim, "that if you will surrender to him a man named Sergeant Jess Hardy he will take his soldiers and go away."

Jim turns tuh Jess, smilin' that quiet smile uh his. Every man there is watchin' Jess Hardy's face. Red, then white, then red again except aroun' his nostrils an' the corners uh his mouth.

"Well, Sergeant," says Jim Gilbert, like he was askin' the time uh day, "how about it?"

"Looky here, Jim," I cuts in. "I don't give a—"

He whirls on me like a snappin' wolf. "I'm in command here. Don't let it slip yore memory." And he turns again tuh Jess. "I'm waitin' yore answer, Sergeant."

"You got it, Captain," says Jess, an' the grin comes back to his lips as he ignores Jim an' speaks to the woman in Mex.

"Tell El Toro that Sergeant Jess Hardy will surrender to him whenever Captain Jim Gilbert sees fit tuh let him go. Tell El Toro for me that he is a sneakin', gutless coward an' it will be my greatest pleasure tuh show him how a real soldier kin die. You'll tell him them exact words?"

"Si, señor."

"Satisfied, Captain Gilbert?" says Jess, sneerin' like.

"Perfectly," says Gilbert. "You may go now, señora. Be sure to get the message right. Also, for me, Captain Gilbert, tell El Toro this. That when a white flag shows from the wall, Sergeant Jess Hardy will be on his way down." He bows. Then as the woman starts away, he calls to her.

"One minute, señora." He turns tuh Jess. "Yuh know," he's still speakin' Mex, "yuh know what surrender to El Toro means, Sergeant? Not a firin' squad. Nothin' so merciful. It'll be slow torture. I don't want tuh be unfair, yuh sabe?"

"Thanks," grins Jess, rollin' a smoke. "I reckon I know what sort uh medicine I got comin'. Let the woman go, she's in a hurry."

"That is all, señora," says Gilbert, bowin' again. "You know what to tell El Toro?"

"Si, si," she calls back as she goes over the wall.

Nobody says a word as she picks her way down the hill, careful as hell tuh keep that dirty white rag in sight.

"Have a match, Sergeant?" Gilbert hands Jess his matchbox.

I notice that the big feller's hands is plumb steddy when he lights the match give him by the man that jest signed what's wuss than Jess's death warrant.

VI

SOMEHOW it didn't surprise me much when this pisano woman brings that message from El Toro. I bin suspectin' suthin' uh the kind. But I didn't like tuh think that Jess Hardy had brung this trouble on us apurpose. He'd come down tuh Chihuahua tur call El Toro's bluff, thinkin', like the dang fool he was, that it'd be a man tuh man scrap an' jest the two of 'em swappin' bullets.

Jess has made a mistake, that's all. A bad 'un, fer shore, but he never done it deliberate. Comin' right down to it, he's bin the cause uh three good men bein'

killed, he's th'owed haywire into our cattle gatherin' and' I stand tuh git fired if I git back. Not that I gives a damn about the job fer I done made up my mind last evenin' that I've turned my last cow in Chihuahua fer a hundred a month an' ca'tridges. But what I'm gittin' at, is this. Jess, with his pers'nal feud with this El Toro, has brung this on us, an' nacherally, we ain't none of us thankin' him fer so doin'.

But by the long-named, eternal an' everlastin' snow-hatted mountains uh Greenland's pinnacles, we're white men an' we ain't givin' that boy up tuh no torturin' Yaqui devils. Not by a brown jugfull, we ain't.

"Have yuh gone loco, Jim Gilbert?" says I.

"Hope not, Buck," he tells me.

"Yuh meant what yuh told that squaw? Yuh aim tuh give Jess up tuh that Yaqui?"

"Why not?" says Jim. "I leave it tuh Jess hiss'f if I ain't doin' the right thing by you boys. You know what this place'll be twenty-four hours from now. A sun blisterin,' waterless hell, Buck."

"I'd ruther go through it an' die at the end, like a man orter, than tuh buy my life like you aim tuh do."

"Mista Buck's sho' right," Nigger Bob puts in. "Us is white folks, Cap'n Gilbert." An' nobody even grins, fer we knows that Bob ain't talkin' about the color of a man's hide.

"Well," says Gilbert, quiet an' calm as a Sunday shirt, "it's still up tuh Jess Hardy tuh take it er leave it."

"She goes as she lays an' you know it, yuh damn slacker!" says Jess. "Don't think fer a cockeyed minute that I'd do anything else, *Captain* Gilbert."

"Captain Gilbert," I tells Jess, "ain't speakin' fer the rest of us. You ain't goin' nowheres, son. How about it, boys?"

"All damn foolishness," says Bert. "If Jess goes, we all go with him. We goes a fightin', too. Captain be damned, we ain't needin' nobody tuh learn us fightin' manners."

"Boys," says Jess, "yuh don't think I cud stay as long as there was a chance uh any more boys bein' killed on my account? El Toro gits his chanct at me. Gilbert is plumb right. I can't stay here now. Not now. Knowin' what I know, I'd be shore low down tuh do it. My big mouthed bullyin' got you boys into this tight. I'm takin' the only way uh gittin' yuh out."

Seein' he feels like that about it, an' knowin' that nothin' kin keep that big boy from doin' what he aims tuh, I tackles the job from another side.

"Suppose yuh do go down there an' give yorese'f up? Do yuh think fer one second that this El Toro half-breed is gonna keep his end uh the bargain? Not while he's got a chance uh wipin' us out. He won't go home with his men. He'll set right there till he starves us out. We'll be losers one good fightin' man an' wuss off than we are now. That drunken Injun ain't keepin' no bargain with nobody."

"Oh, yes, he will," grins Gilbert. Damned if I ain't gitten sick every time that feller grins.

"What makes yuh think so?" I can't he'p askin'.

"I'm goin' along with Jess Hardy tuh see that El Toro plays the game on the square."

"Now I know yo're loco. Crazy as hell, Gilbert," I busts out.

Gilbert, with a pair uh binoculars, has bin watchin' the mesa down below, off an' on since the fightin' has quit. Now he hands the glasses over tuh me, careful like.

"The one in white clothes, ridin' a bay hoss," he says. "Yuh can't miss him. Only clean 'un in the outfit. See what yuh make uh him.

The glasses ain't quite focused fer my eyes an' it takes mebbyso half a minute afore I spots the man in white clothes. I almost drops the glasses. I'm that shocked. For jest as I looks, the gent in white drill ridin' britches an' coat takes off his hat. It's a white man. Blonde as a Swede with one uh these hides that gits red an' peels but never gits brown. He's a big brute an' near as I kin tell, a ugly lookin' hombre with pig eyes.

I lowers the glasses an' turns tuh Jim who is smilin' with his mouth, his eyes colder'n a winter mornin'.

"Know him, Buck?" he asks me.

"Never seen him till now. Now why should I know a big white skunk that lives with Injuns?"

"Yuh should know him, though. Yuh really should know the feller, Buck. Fact is, Buck, I'm gonna make arrangements fer yuh to see him right close. Mebby talk with him. Hard man tuh talk to, Buck. Devilish hard. I bin tryin' tuh corner him fer quite a spell. An' even then, onless yuh sabe German talk, yuh'll not git far with him."

"What the hell yuh drivin' at? Who is that man?"

"That man," says Jim Gilbert, "is Colonel Joe Heitmann."

"Good gosh, man, yo're loco!" I snorts. "Heitmann's dead. I seen the body with my own eyes. Went tuh Agua Negro a-purpose tuh make sure. Got the story uh his execution from the Federal captain hisse'f."

"Uh huh," agrees Gilbert, takin' the glasses outa my hands onct more an' as if he's forgot what we're talkin' about, he sights them binoculars onct more. Grinnin' still, he hands 'em over again.

"He needs a shave an' his purty clothes is kinda mussed up, Buck," says he, "but I think you'll recognize him."

"Who?" says I, takin' the glasses.

"Captain Aluino Vasquez, once of the Federal army. Him that told yuh how Joe Heitmann died so brave."

JIM GILBERT was right. It's the same gent, fer that he ain't looking quite so chipper. Him an' Heitmann is talkin' together like they was excited. Now an' then one of 'em points up our direction. Then a third 'un joins 'em. Middle-sized jasper in what was onct a O. D. uniform. I makes a guess that this gent is El Toro. All three of 'em yippy yappin' an' pointin' now. Fer the fust time I takes notice uh the woman, still packin' her white rag in a stick, standin' alongside 'em.

"They're havin' a medicine talk," grins Jim Gilbert. "All three of 'em, by this time, Buck?"

"All three," says I.

"There was a dead Yaqui layin' jest outside the wall where yo're standin', Buck," says Gilbert. "Would yuh mind seein' if he's still there?"

Kinda dazed like, I looks. Now I had seen that dead feller layin' there covered with blood, face down amongst the rocks, when we he'ped that squaw over the wall. But so he'p me Hiram, he's gone now. Plumb vanished. Jim Gilbert points tuh what looks like another dead 'un.

He's layin' between two granite boulders, head down an' kinda in a ball, about half way down the hill.

"Watch," says Jim, pickin' up a rifle. He sights quick an' pulls the trigger. A puff uh dust comes from the granite boulder. Jim jerks the Winchester lever an' another puff uh dust kicks over that corpse that now jumps on his laigs an' runs hell bent down the hill, Jim's bullets th'owin' granite chips at him every jump.

"When he gits down with his earful uh news, they'll shore pow-wow plenty more."

"It may be danged smart an' all that, Jim Gilbert," I growls, somehow gittin' the idee that he's bin makin' damn fools uh all of us, "but it's low down. Onct or twict I've had danged good reason tuh think you was some way mixed up with that El Toro. I ain't so dad gummed sure uh not bein' right in that guess. You know them gents down there a leetle too good, tuh be a honest man."

"I thought you knew I soldiered with Joe Heitmann?" says he.

"If that big bald faced gent down there is Joe Heitmann, who was it that got shot by this Vasquez firin' squard in Agua Negro?" I barks.

"His name was Warren Tully," says Gilbert, "but there's few men in Mexico that ever knew he had any name except me an' the jefe an' Joe Heitmann, an' none of us ever took the trouble tuh see if it was his real name. I don't even know where he come from, Buck, ner why he left there. Didn't give a hang. That was his business. You know how it is.

"IT was in 1911 that he hit my ranch. I had a ranch in this flea bit country then. Not more'n half a day's ride from where we sit. Fifty year lease, a nice bunch uh white face cows, an' a few steel dust hosses that was fit mounts fer any man. Me'n another cow hand was pardners.

"Funny part of it was, gents, I was honest them days. My neighbors, all Mexicans, was darn fine folks, too. We was doin' fine, me an' my pard, bankin' a little money an'

workin' hard. We trail a bunch uh yearlin's tuh El Paso an' I stays there tuh sell 'em. Got top price fer them yearlin's an' rides back from El Paso feelin' like a king. But that feelin' don't last long. I finds our little ranch burned to the ground. In front uh the ashes is my pardner layin' with a empty six-shooter in his hand, riddled with bullets. He's got five Mexicans. One fer each ca'tridge.

"That's in the evenin'. I buries my pard by moonlight an' early next mornin' I takes a look aroun'. Our hosses is stole. There's dead cattle layin' all over the range, killed wanton by that rebel outfit. My neighbors, good class Mexicans, is killed off an' their women stole. Hungry, disgusted, fightin' mad, I rides back tuh what had bin my ranch. There's five hundred pesos buried in a safety box under the ashes an' I'm digging up that money when a horsebacker lopes into sight. I'm hid in some manzanita bushes when he pulls up his hoss by the stockade corral. Then I sees he's a white man an' steps out tuh meet him. But my gun is where I kin git it quick. But I don't need no gun on this feller. He's peaceable. More'n that he's got a bullet hole in his shoulder an' sits his hoss like a drunk man. He tells me his name is Warren Tully.

"Declarin' him in on a new pardnership, I starts onct more in the cow business. But we begins on a different basis. Our home ranch is wherever we spread our beds. Our only law is our guns. We eats brown beans, tortillas, an' maverick beef an' we're brandin' plenty uh cattle.

"Brandin' 'em, sabe, but we ain't sellin' any. Border regulations gits shore strict, an' the inspectors is onery. Them dogies is plenty wild an' me'n Warren is worked tuh hide an' bones every time we gits a herd rounded up. Two men doin' the work uh ten. Hosses leg weary an' feed scarce. We own poco plenty cattle but our bank balance gits lower every week. Can't hire cow hands from acrost the line an' can't trust the Mex vaqueros. We ain't no better off than forty a month cow hands. Fact is, we're wuss off, fer we're dodgin' them hills like coyotes. Rebel armies thicker'n the cattle onct was. We're about ready tuh call off the deal when we meets up with Joe Heitmann.

"He needs a couple uh good white men. Men that kin shoot straight an' handle pisanos. He'll make us each captain an' our wages is plenty big. Likewise he'll pay a big bonus fer runnin' guns an' ammunition acrost the border.

"Up till now, I've kept outa Mexico border politics but me'n Warren is desperate. More'n that, I've had a bad deal down here. My rights as a Mexico land leaser an' as a United States citizen has bin stomped on plenty. Presidents down here is changin' so fast that yuh don't never know who's a rebel an' who ain't. When I appeals tuh my own country, seems like they ain't got much time tuh waste on me. I ain't got no business bein' down in Mexico, sabe? So when Heitmann propositions me'n Warren Tully, we signs up with him.

"We runs guns, drills them 'dobe soldiers, an' lives good. That's when I meets Pelon.

"Heitmann had sent me into a little town tuh recruit soldiers from the mines. I'm wise enough by now tuh savvy how tuh play their game down here. Crooked? I'm all twisted outa shape by then. An' wiser'n a horned owl. In a year's time I've bribed half the state an' swapped shot with the other half. I pack upwards of a thousand dollars in my money belt an' two guns tuh pertect it. Bodyguards is more dangerous than rurales, I finds out purty early in the game. So I'm all alone when I rides into this little 'dobe town tuh hire soldiers fer Heitmann who is puttin' in most uh his time in El Paso under another name, lettin' me an' Tully do the work.

"I'm ridin' along the street when I hears some Federal officer bark out a command. You know how them fool officers bawl out, Buck. Like a machine gun rattlin'. Hear 'em half a mile off. Comin' so clost, jest the other side of a six-foot adobe wall, it makes me jump. Before he's finished the full command, I've filled both hands with a six-gun apiece. Then I sees the command tuh 'Load!' ain't meant fer me. Yonder side uh the wall, standin' with his back to a buildin' that I takes tuh be the cuartel, is a feller in cotton pants an' shirt. He ain't blindfolded an' I kin see he's standin' straight as he faces that firin' squad.

"I gits a quick idee. Quick thinkin' has got tuh be part uh my business, sabe. Whirlin' my hoss, I runs him at the wall.

Mebby he'll clear it. Most mebby he won't. Anyhow, it's worth a try. I hear his back hoofs click as we goes over like a man divin' off a springboard.

"The firin' squad an' the lousy little officer in command has their backs to me. It's like swipin' marbles off a kid. As my hoss jumps past mister officer, I lays him down tuh sleep with my gun barrel, rides through them ragged peon soldiers, an' grabs up the prisoner. I'm around the corner an' outa sight afore they know what's happened. That's the way I meets up with Pelon, fer it's him that I picked up. When me'n him leaves there next mornin' we've recruited the hull danged army, includin' the officer, an' all that's left in the town is some old men an' women an' kids who is trailin' behind hollerin' 'Viva.'

"An' that's the way things went fer a while. Heitmann in El Paso. Tully runnin' guns, me recruitin' troops. Then this big Joe Heitmann shows up at daybreak one mornin' lookin' like he's seen a ghost. He's covered with dried mud an' some blood spattered. Suthin', it seems like, has went wrong in El Paso an' Mister Heitmann ain't no longer welcome in the United States. He ain't sayin' what has gone haywire an' I don't know till some time later that the United States had declared war an' they've tried tuh th'ow Heitmann in prison fer a spy.

"Yuh see we don't git no news down here in the hills. Jest rumors that nobody with sense takes stock in. Tully an' me has bin separated fer months. Yeah, Heitmann was foxy. Foxy as hell. Tully was hearin' things an' Heitmann didn't aim that me'n him should git together tuh talk things over. He had men interceptin' any letters Tully wrote me. I finds that out later, along with a lot uh other stuff.

" 'Captain Gilbert,' says Heitmann, 'you will take what men we have an' move south to Black Mesa where you will establish permanent camp. Git fer me the best horse you have an' ten good fighters, for bodyguard. There are some schweinhunds who would like to bump off your Colonel Joe Heitmann, vershtein sie?' And he cusses in German for ten minutes without stoppin'.

"I picks him a good hoss an' a bodyguard. Damn him, if I'd knowed then what he was up to, I'd uh killed him in his tracks. Seems like, back in that short roached head uh hisn, he'd always kep' that idee. Sorter hole card, sabe?

"Fer build an' colorin', Heitmann an' Warren Tully is about the same. Both big, blonde headed. Few men in Mexico knew Joe Heitmann when they seen him. Likewise, because uh his line uh business, Tully has kept purty much under cover. Which is jest duck soup fer Joe Heitmann.

"He's wanted in the United States fer a spy. The Mexican gover'ment has put a big price on his head because they know he's a revolutionist. Git the idee, Buck? If Joe Heitmann kin convince both gover'ments that he's *dead,* he's safe tuh carry on with his business down here. A business that's got beyond border politics by this time, though I'm too danged dumb tuh see it at the time. Heitmann, the big cheese, has a bigger game than me er Warren Tully ever suspected. But that ain't what I want tuh tell yuh now.

"Heitmann wants tuh play dead. By plumb accident, Warren Tully has played into his hand. Fer one uh Heitmann's spies has intercepted a letter from Tully tellin' me that the United States has declared war an' we'd orter go on up tuh Douglas an' join up. He wants me tuh meet him at a water hole north uh Agua Negro. We'll go together from there, back to the States where we belong."

JIM GILBERT quit talkin' fer a minute an' stares hard at the ground. Nobody says a word. Then Jim goes on with his story.

"So I done as Heitmann said. I took our rag-tag army tuh that Black Mesa yonder. Heitmann, the dirty skunk, meets Tully at the water hole. One uh them low down pisanos slips up an' cracks him on the head as he's sleepin'. He wakes up a prisoner at Agua Negro.

"On his clothes is papers that identifies him as Joe Heitmann. The Mexican that brung him in is wearin' a rurale's uniform. Heitmann, uh course, don't show up at all in the town. Leastways, not then. An' all that time I'm settin' on Black Mesa not even knowin' that my country is belly deep in the big war. Comical, eh?" An' Jim

Gilbert's laugh makes me shiver, although the sun is blazin' hot.

"So that' how Warren Tully gits shot fer Joe Heitmann an' the low-lived rebel lieutenant that turned him over tuh the Federal officer, Aluino Vasquez, who sees himse'f being promoted fer that execution. Oh, yeah, Vasquez figgered he was killin' Heitmann. Why not? An' he splits the reward money with this damned Mexican.

"But Heitmann ain't satisfied with that. He wants me put outa the way now. Scared I'll kill him when I find out about Tully. So he makes the big mistake uh hirin' Pelon tuh do the job. Give him a hundred pesos tuh stick a knife in my back. Pelon takes the money then tells me about it.

"But Heitmann's hid out on me. Foxy? I'll tell a man. I chokes the story uh Tully's murder outa one uh them bodyguard jaspers, then rides tuh Agua Negro. I'm after that lieutenant that turned Tully over to the Federal officer. I found him. Shot him down like he was a mad dog, then rode north acrost the border. It was then that Joe Heitmann come tuh Agua Negro, told Aluino Vasquez that he'd made the hell of a bad mistake of killin' a United States citizen in good standin', an' scared this same Vasquez into joinin' him in his conquest uh Mexico. That musta bin about a week after you was in Agua Negro, Buck. Too bad yuh didn't stay there a few days longer.

"So I goes tuh Douglas to join up with a real army an' see the war folks is talkin' about. But it seems like I'm kinda late. I bin notified tuh register fer the draft an' ain't done it. I'm posted as a slacker. Likewise there's some nasty talk goin' on about Heitmann an' them that was connected with Heitmann. I'm th'owed in jail fer dodgin' the draft. If I began talkin', they'll connect me up with Heitmann an' my name will be plain mud. Yella mud at that. So that's why I busted jail that night, stole a hoss, an' come back into Mexico.

"I didn't give a damn much what happened to me. I wanted tuh git my hands on Joe Heitmann's neck afore I died. But it was like gettin' at a man behind a stone wall. He kept hisse'f surrounded with men that'd shoot me on sight. They captured me finally an' had me stripped fer torture. But they should uh knowed I had friends in that outfit. One of 'em cut me loose an' give me a six-shooter an' a pair uh pants. I got shoes an' shirt offen the first 'un that tried tuh stop me.

"But I like tuh died afore I got to the hacienda of a friend. Some kind uh fever, sabe? I'd been standin' naked in broilin' sun, from sun-up till dark, every day fer five days. My skin come off in long strips. An' only enough water an' grub tuh keep me alive so's I cud feel the pain uh the burnin' Heitmann settin' in the shade smokin' cigars an' callin' me all the names he cud lay his dirty tongue to. Yeah, I reckon it was some sorter fever. Anyhow I was outa my head fer a long spell. Then I was too weak tuh move. Them Mexican folks treated me like a son. Riskin' their lives every minute I stayed there, too. There's good an' bad in every race. Them was good Mexican people. They're in El Paso now.

"I made 'em take what money I had in the bank. More they'd ever dreamed uh havin'. They cried all over the place when I left El Paso tuh come back here after Heitmann. They'd had quite a time gittin' me tuh El Paso an' I felt kinda low down comin' back here. But I wanted Joe Heitmann. I'd jest come back from a trip plumb all over the state when I met you at the saloon in Juarez, Buck. I came along with yuh to find Joe Heitmann. Yonder he is an' I cud pick him off from here. But I'm takin' him back alive, boys. Takin' him tuh Douglas where my name is posted as a damned slacker."

An' with that he grins at us, his eyes glitterin' like a wolf's.

"Heitmann's army all quit him, fellers," he tells us. "Him an' Vasquez is th'owin' in with this El Toro fer safety. Jess, this is yore scrap an' mine. You an' me, when the times comes, is goin' down there an' settle our private affairs like we orter. Buck an' these boys kin go right ahead now an' gather their cattle without bein' bothered by Yaquis er Mexican bandits. You an' me, Jess. Is it a go?"

"Sake, yuh damned slacker!" grins Jess, an' it ain't hard tuh tell that Jess Hardy ain't tho'win' out no insults when he calls Jim a slacker. When they lets go hands, they're pardners.

VII

WHILE me an' Jim an' Jess takes turns watchin' the pow-wowin' below, the boys buries Pelon an' the white boy.

The sun's gittin' higher an' hotter. By goin' easy on the water, givin' the bulk of it tuh them that's got wounds, we kin make the supply last till evenin'. Nobody complains ner cusses their luck. They joshes one another an' Nigger Bob drags out a mouth harp an' gits some tunes out it.

"Boys," says Jim, handin' the glasses tuh Jess, "looks like my plans was workin'. While a man can't tell what them three jaspers is sayin', they act like they figgered Christmas was comin'. Heitmann, yuh sabe, figgers I'm walkin' into his trap. He don't know that Pelon tipped me off that him an' Vasquez was with El Toro. He's waitin' fer me like a spider waitin' fer a fly tuh walk into his web. El Toro is waitin' the same way for Jess. Yep, we got 'em in a shore sweet temper. That "dead" feller that laid by the wall pickin' up what news we'd spill when the squaw left, will tell 'em how Jess is gonna give hisse'f up an' I'm goin' along tuh see that El Toro carries out his end uh the deal. Uh course, this El Toro, jest exactly like Buck says, don't noways figger on playin' the game on the square.

"Then what's the sense, Jim Gilbert, in you two boys goin' down there?" I asks.

"We're goin' down, Buck, tuh settle our arguments with them two men that we come down here tuh find."

"Hell of a way yuh take tuh do it, son. Givin' yourselves up," I tells him.

"Nobody's givin' up nothin', Buck," he grins. "That's where the ketch is. That talk I made about Jess givin' hisse'f up, was jest a stall. With that feller layin' by the wall, listenin', it was the only thing tuh do, sabe. I never meant a word of it, darn yuh."

An' he sits back chucklin' while me an' Jess an' the boys cusses him out a plenty fer trickin' us thataway.

"They'll be off their guard now," Jim explains. "Directly they'll be sendin' up another white flag tuh hold a medicine talk."

Jim is right. There's the squaw with the white rag comin' up the hill onct more. We lets her come, leavin' it tuh Jim tuh do the necessary talkin' with her.

"Well, señor," says Jim, smilin' easy, "what is it this time?"

"If the Señor Jim Gilbert will meet El Toro at the big rock where I shall leave the white flag on the way down, then he will make arrangements for surrending the Señor Jess Hardy an' moving away all his army."

"'Sta bueno, señora, I will meet your El Toro at the rock," says Jim. An' bows stiff as a undertaker layin' out a corpse.

An' holdin' a white rag, he climbs over the wall an' walks down the hill, a cigareet in the corner uh his mouth. Every man there, in spite uh what Jim has told us about El Toro wantin' Jess, knows that Jim Gilbert's life ain't worth a 'dobe dollar. We're all at our guns, watchin' clost. When I tries tuh locate this Joe Heitmann with the glasses, he ain't nowhere in sight. Worried, I watches that white flag that's comin' up the hill tuh meet Jim. It's this El Toro feller, all right. Jess identifies him, too.

We sees Jim an' this El Toro makin' motions with their arms as they talk. Bimeby they don't wave so many hands aroun' an' each of 'em rolls a smoke. When they lights off the same match I knows they've about come tuh some decision. They talks some more, then salute an' Jim comes on up the hill. El Toro don't lose no time gettin' back tuh his camp, but Jim seems to jest crawl up the slope. That's the way it seems tuh us fellers that's watchin', anyhow.

But it's a heap easier goin' down a hill than it is tuh climb up. When he climbs over the wall, he's grinnin' like a bartender at a wine buyin' prospector.

"El Toro," he tells us, "is orderin' his men tuh move comp. Things is goin nice, Buck."

"Jest what do yuh mean, nice?" says I.

"He's takin' his men into that box canyon yonder. Every man, hoss, woman an' kid in the outfit. All except him an' Joe Heitmann an' Vasquez is tuh ride in there. We kin see from here that they all go. It's gonna be a shore awful jolt tuh Heitmann, knowin' I've found out he's with El Toro," Jim chuckles, then mumbles some cuss word as he can't find his smokin'. "I musta let

that damn Yaqui git off with my last sack. Hell."

"Take mine." I hands him a sack uh terbaccer, impatient as the devil.

Right then, I wouldn't uh put it past that dang fool tuh walk on down there after that sack uh smokin'. Seems like he's more worried about losin' that sack uh Durham than he is about gittin' killed.

"Here's a match," I snaps, short like. "Light up an' spill the rest uh the plan."

He grins through the smoke an' nods.

"When El Toro has herded his men into yonder canyon, we will meet him an' Heitmann an' Vasquez at the rock yonder. Vasquez will take charge uh me'n Jess. Heitmann an' El Toro will go with you boys. When you've gone, say, ten miles, El Toro an' Heitmann will come back tuh torture me'n Jess, sabe? But so long as them two gents is with you boys, you'll have the drop on 'em. That's fer a sorter guarantee that yuh'll not be shot at while yo're gittin' outa here. I'm swappin' Jess fer Heitmann, git the idea, an' each of us goes to the other's outfit tuh see that all goes as is agreed."

"Is that all?" I asks, sarcastic. "Is that all there is tuh this idee uh yourn?"

"Not quite all, Buck," grins Jim, "When you boys has gone beyond yellin' an' rifle distance, I want yuh to take Joe Heitmann an' this El Toro prisner. It'll be easy enough, won't it, Buck?"

"Bein' as we outnumber Heitmann an' this El Toro gent about three tuh one, I reckon that cud be arranged," I growls. "But it don't look tuh me like that'd be he'pin' you an' Jess any. You two boys'll be corralled in that canyon with Yaquis."

"Don't worry none about that, Buck," says Jim, grinnin' an' winkin'. "I got a joker fer a hole card, pardner. Me'n Jess'll be ketchin' up tuh you boys about dark. Make camp at the 'dobe corrals on the Verde, about twenty-five miles north uh here. Know where I mean? Good. Me'n Jess'll be along about moonrise."

VIII

I AIN'T likely tuh fergit that mornin' as we rode down that rocky hill, our hosses snortin' an' shyin' off from the dead bodies tuh them Yaquis that lay like barley sacks in the sun.

Jess an' Jim in the lead, the rest of us follerin', all of us play-actin' parts like Jim told us. We was supposed tuh be shore ringy at Jim fer givin' Jess up, sabe? Yet, kinda glad tuh save our skins. Like Jim told us, Heitmann an' El Toro 'ud sabe better if we seemed half glad we was gittin' off so easy.

Back in the canyon was El Toro's ragged army, hid from sight by the steep canyon walls that nothin' but a bird cud climb. Bottled up there with Vasquez at the narrow mouth, keepin' 'em in there. Not that they could uh done much, if they did start out. We was all better mounted. All except Jess an' Jim who, accordin' tuh agreement, left their hosses at the rock an' with their hands in the air, walked up the wash tuh where Heitmann an' El Toro waited.

But if Jim Gilbert is scairt any, he shore hides it good, fer he grins up at this big Heitmann like he ain't got a care in the world.

"Vie gehts, yuh big stiff," Jim calls out, "thought the buzzards had yuh by now."

"Schweinhund!" says Heitmann, his red face kinda mottled with white spots.

He's scairt uh Jim, that's plain, but he feels like he's holdin' the winnin' hand an' his grin is shore nasty. Then Vasquez rides up an' takes charge uh the two pris'ners who unbuckles their gun belts an' lets 'em drop in the sand. I sees Jim toss away the gun in his shoulder scabbard too. I looks as Jess who now stands there, shet uh his guns. His face is the color uh fresh putty. No two ways to it, Jess Hardy's scairt.

Heitmann an' El Toro rides up an' salutes but I ain't returnin' no damned would-be murderer's salute. Not Buck Bell. Not if I'm shot down on the spot. Which I won't be fer my right hand stays shore clost tuh my gun.

"It is my great pleasure, señors," says this two-bit Injun in dirty uniform, "to escort you to safety."

"Then git goin'," I growls at him. "An' keep that big pole cat in the white pants tuh windward. Bob, keep a eye on the big Injun lovin' son of a prairie dog owl."

An' we goes yonderly. Lookin' over my shoulder, I sees Jess standin' there, watchin'

us as we drop over the ridge outa sight. He stands fer all the world like a man that's about tuh be hung. Jim waves his hat by way of sayin' good-bye an' while we're some distance off, I thinks I see him grin. We stops long enough tuh water our hosses an' fill the canteens. Then, me an' El Toro in the lead, we hits the trail at a long trot.

WE'RE safe enough now, but somehow I feel like a sheep killin' dog. Jim's cocksureness don't seem tuh lighten the burden none. I tries tuh see it from Jim's viewpoint. He's bin all over that country. Like as not a lot uh them Yaquis served under him. Then Injuns shore does admire a brave man an' Jim has hinted more than once to us that he's got a tremendous scheme under his hat.

Mebbyso he aims tuh talk hisse'f an' Jess outa the tight. I make up my mind then an' there that if them two boys is killed, I'll get a bunch uh white men an' clean them hills right. By now we're outa shoutin' an' rifle range an' givin' Nigger Bob the signal, we proceeds tuh vi'late our truce. Jammin' our six-shooter barrels under the ribs uh them two blackbirds, we talks to 'em in good, plain, easy understood American. They sees our side uh the question, an' their paws goes up tuh grab air.

"You have bust the truce," sputters this El Toro party. "For this, that Jess Hardy shall die the hell of a slow death. And the Captain Jeem Gilbert will be tied naked on the ant hill."

Jim tells me tuh be sure them pris'ners has their arms up all the way acrost the two mile stretch uh open sand that lays ahead on the trail. He tells me he'll be watchin' our party with the glasses. Part uh his plan, he says. It's sundown when we makes camp at the 'dobe corrals on the Verde.

I aim tuh pow-wow with this El Toro hombre who is lyin' under guard by a hackberry tree. He ain't said a word for hours. Jest swole up an' sullen, his black eyes spittin' hate at us. He has plenty nerve, this Yaqui, an' when his time comes, he'll go out game. Somehow, I dunno why, I feels kinda sorry fer the pore devil. I gives him a smoke an' a drink uh water an' sets down when I've undid his arm ropes.

"Now, mister," I says, friendly enough, "lemme git yore side uh this argument. There's bin a heap uh yore men killed an' we can't bring 'em tuh life. But I dunno as that's any reason why any more men orter be shot down. Tell me about that war acrost yonder an' how you an' Jess Hardy got tuh be sech bad friends. If Jess an' Jim gits back here alive, an' if I think yuh got the wust uh that deal acrost the ocean, I'll see that Jess ner nobody else will hurt yuh."

His eyes bores into me like two black spots uh fire. There's hate in 'em but likewise there's suthin' else. He looks like a vicious dog that's bin beat with a club, whupped till he can't fight no more, but not whimperin' none. A dog that mighta amounted tuh suthin' if he'd bin treated differ'nt.

THEN he uncorks what's bin bottled up inside him fer months. He talks in American sometimes, but mostly in Mex which I sabe plenty. He tells me how he was drafted into a war he didn't know nothin' about. Sent over on a big boat. Seasick all the way. Then shoved on up to the trenches. It was hell fer him, I reckon. He turned kinda green as he told me about the big guns an' the noise an' the gas an' so on. When he tried tuh slip off an' go back, Jess Hardy, his sergeant, kicked him back into the fight.

"That, señor, is why I say to myself that I shall die quick an' make the end to it. So I jump up an' run, not back, but ahead, where those Germans are. I am so scared that I do not feel it when their bullets hit me. I have no gun. Just a long knife that I steal from the cook to someday kill that Sergeant Hardy with when he turn his back.

"There are men in that trench ditch into which I fall. Men in gray uniforms the color of the mud an' their faces. When they come at me, I forget the thunder. Por Dios, to fight like this is something that a Yaqui sabes. When one is quick, señor, it is not so hard to stick a knife into those who have so little room to use a bayonet on a gun.

"Some had knives, like me, señor. But diablo, they are clumsy with the knife, those German soldiers. When the officer, whose Luger jams, goes down with my knife between his ribs, those others do not want any

more of it. But even as those others, who work the machine gun, cry that 'Kamerad,' one of those thunder shells hits right there. When I open the eyes the next time, I am in a hospital. Someone tell me that the gringo war is over. There is no more thunder. But it is many weeks before they put me with some more hombres an' send me home."

He fishes down into the pocket uh that greasy army blouse an' pulls out a hunk uh soiled ribbon with the Croix de Guerre hung on it.

"This, señor, they give me to help me remember about that gringo war."

"Did Jess Hardy ever see this?" I asks him. He shakes his head, his black eyes burnin' onct more.

"No. He think that I run back, not ahead, that day. When the doctor tell me about the gas in my lung an' send me to Camp Kearny, I run away from that hospital an' come to El Paso where I think I might find that sergeant who call me the dog with a yellow belly. In Juarez I find him an' tell him he is scare to come to the hills an' fight. Then I go out of that town quick before some rurale see me an' shoot me for a revolutionist.

"Only for you, I should now be back there with my men, showing that Sergeant Jess Hardy this paper which is sign by General Pershing an' which say that Juan Herrera is not the dog with that yellow belly. For each kick that Jess Hardy has give me, I should give him one in the pants. I should call him each of those names he say I am. An' when I show him I am not scare to stand with him an' fight with the knife, an' cut him till he yells, then I would have the squaws whip him back home with rawhide quirts."

"Yuh mean," says I, "that all this killin' has bin fer that? That yuh jest wanted tuh show Jess Hardy yuh wan't a coward, then send him home?" Dang me if I cud believe it, yet I knowed Injuns, too.

"Si," he snarls at me, "that is all. By now, that Vasquez has kill him an' that Captain Jim Gilbert who is the brave man an' does not talk loud."

"Heitmann would uh killed Jim Gilbert," I says, beginnin' tuh think this Yaqui wan't the only fool livin'.

Why the hell hadn't we talked tuh this El Toro before an' let him show his cross tuh Jess?

El Toro shrugs his shoulders.

"I did not know about the señor. That Señor Heitmann is perhaps one of those cursed dogs with that yellow belly?"

"Yuh guessed it, son," I tells him, takin' a squint at the sky.

IT'LL be a hour till moonrise. I takes a drink uh that tequila tuh quiet me down, but it don't. Reachin' over, I cuts El Toro's foot ropes.

"Come on, feller," I tells him. "Me'n you is gonna kill two good hosses gittin' back as fast as we kin to where we come from."

"What's wrong, Mistah Buck?" calls Bob, fussin' over his Dutch ovens.

"Everything," I tells the whole bunch. "Me'n El Toro's goin' back. There ain't gonna be no shootin' neither. Like as not, Jim an' Jess is both dead an' all because none of us has got the sense of a horny toad. Jim Gilbert lied tuh us, boys, shore as—"

Then, ridin' out of nowhere into the rim uh firelight comes that Jim Gilbert hisse'f.

"Keep yore shirts on, Buck, she's a cool evenin'," he calls.

Then, grinnin' kinda tired like, he says, "Caballeros!" greetin' us after the Mex custom.

"Where's Jess?" I asks, not seein' him with Jim.

"Right here, skipper," calls Jess, comin' up outa the dark. "Come on, Vasquez, yuh won't git bit."

An' Aluino Vasquez lets his hoss come into the firelight.

"Grub ready, Buck?" asks Jim, sniffin'. "I cud eat a raw buzzard." An' while we're all dyin' from curiosity, somethin' in the way Jim an' Jess acts, keeps our mouths shet.

There we sits, the light of our campfire th'owin' shadders acrost the faces uh the men that sets aroun' squat legged on the ground. Cotton Top, Jim Gilbert, El Toro, Jess, Vasquez, the Mormon punchers, an' the Texicans. Heitmann, his hands free now but Nigger Bob ridin' clost herd on him. Every gent there, even Heitmann, is a brave man in his own way. Pick Heitmann up an' set him down amongst his own kind, with one uh them sabers in his hand, an' I ain't

got much doubt but what he'd put up a game fight.

I makes El Toro tell Jess Hardy what he told me. I sees Jess git on his laigs an' shove a big paw toward the Yaqui he'd bin onery to. Jess, a foot an' six inches taller, heavier by eighty pounds, smilin' understandin' like into El Toro's black eyes.

"Put 'er there, buddy," says Jess, "an' call it a day. Mebby yuh don't know it, boy, but yuh showed up a yaller streak today in Jess Hardy."

Then he turns to the rest of us. All the braggin' toughness is gone outa Jess, seems like.

"Boys," he tells us, "I bin a plumb damn fool. Today, Jim Gilbert showed me up fer what I am."

He pauses a second, an' I knows we're gonna git the story uh what happened at the mouth uh the box canyon where we left Jess an' Jim with that Aluino Vasquez.

"Seems like Jim had kinda beat around the truth some, Buck, when he tells yuh he had it fixed fer him an' me tuh come free. As we leaves you boys, he tells me what we're up against, him an' me. Seems like he figgers it was us two that gits you boys into this mess an' it's up tuh us tuh take the fall. Fair enough, too."

" 'Jess," he tells me, 'We got one chanct in a million. Leave all the talkin' an' such, tuh me.'

"Then, there's Jim, hob-nobbin' with Vasquez like we was jest payin' him a friendly visit. An' all the time Vasquez is herdin' us toward that bunch uh ugly lookin' faces that fills the canyon. Jim stops tuh point out you boys as yuh cross the open stretch uh sand.

" 'Take a look at 'em with my glasses, Vasquez,' says Jim. 'Don't be scairt we'll jump yuh. Yore men has us covered an' we ain't neither of us armed. Take a look. I bet a hat Buck's took El Toro an' Heitmann prisoner.'

"Well, Vasquez looks with the glasses. I sees him change expression like he'd pulled off a mask. He ain't smilin' so much when he hands the glasses back tuh Jim.

" 'That is most unfortunate for you, señors,' he tells us. 'I have orders to shoot you if your friends act treacherous.' He cocks his gun like he means business. But Jim, settin' on a rock, smokin', jest nods keerless.

" 'One moment, Señor Lieutenant,' says Jim. 'Consider this very careful from all sides. Already, you have made one very bad mistake when you killed my pardner, Warren Tully, a citizen of the United States. Do not enlarge upon that one mistake, señor, by wantonly killing two more unarmed citizens of the state of Texas.' "

"This seems tuh set Vasquez thinkin' an' he uncocks his gun. I feel better but I don't let go my derringer which I've slipped outa my boot leg.

" 'Señor Lieutenant,' says Jim, 'you would like once more to be lieutenant of the Federal army, no?'

" 'More than anything else,' says Vasquez, an' he looks like he means it.

" 'You do not think so much of that Colonel Joe Heitmann, eh?'

" 'A cowardly butcher, Señor Gilbert,' he snaps. 'But what else can one do but stick by him?'

" 'Heitmann,' says Jim, chucklin' like he's springin' a new joke, 'is on his way to prison. Supposing, Señor Vasquez, that the glory of that Heitmann outlaw's capture should be given to a certain Lieutenant Aluino Vasquez of the Federal army? I can arrange that. I an' the Señor Jess Hardy.'

"Fer a minute it looks like Jim's got him goin'. Then Vasquez recollects the killin' uh Warren Tully. He shrugs his shoulders an' cocks his gun.

" 'I am very sorry, señor, to kill two such brave men,' says he. 'But it is now too late in this game to do otherwise. It is for you to say who shall be shot first. I am a crack shot, an' will not let you suffer.'

"I'm jest about tuh let him have the first uh them two derringer slugs when Jim kicks me on the shin. I reckon I was yaller white an' shakin', fer Jim grins.

" 'One thing more, Señor Vasquez,' says he, kinda kickin' at some sand between his feet, like he's studyin' some problem, 'Did Heitmann not tell you that it was Captain Gilbert who established that base camp on Black Mesa?'

"Vasquez nods, kinda impatient. He's anxious tuh git shet of a nasty job.

" 'Did he not speak of some high explosive bombs an' T. N. T. that I had Tully

smuggle across the border?' Onct more Vasquez nods, this time with more interest.

" 'Heitmann does not know where that high explosive is buried, Señor Vasquez. Only one other besides myself, knew. That one was Pelon an' Pelon is dead. I alone know where there is enough powder buried to blow ten armies to bits. I, the Señor Captain Gilbert, sabe?'

"Jim's eyes, hard an' narrow, stares so at Vasquez that he steps back a couple uh paces. Then Jim, still holdin' Vasquez' eyes with that hard stare, says to me in a ordinary tone, like he's askin' the time uh day:

" 'Jess, have you got the Señor Vasquez covered?'

" 'Yore damn right,' I grunts, glad fer a chanct at action.

"My gun comes into sight an' Vasquez looks like a cat that's bin soused with a bucket uh water.

" 'Keep the little gat outa sight afore them pore Yaquis sees it an' git nervous, Jess,' Jim tells me, then turns tuh kick some more sand.

"TAN' Vasquez sees a sorter box with a rod an' a handle on the end uh the rod, stickin' outa the box. Jim laughs sorter tickled.

" 'I wasn't quite sure this was the rock where I buried it,' says Jim. 'This, you sabe, señor, is the little switch that will set off that high explosive which is planted in a series uh mines in that box canyon. That is why I insisted that El Toro send his men in there. Señor Vasquez, they are like so many rats caught in the trap. I have tried to convince you by argument. Now it becomes my unwilling but extremely necessary duty to blow them Yaqui men, women, an' kids, into small bits.'

"An' he grabs the handle uh the box. But before he can shove down the handle, Vasquez is on his knees, beggin' fer their lives. He tells Jim tuh shoot him, er torture him, er do what he damn pleases, but fer the love he bears his mother an' the Señor Dios, spare his people in that box canyon. He says they are all sick of fighting under El Toro, that for many days they have begged to go back to their homes. They will throw away every gun, every bullet, every machete, if the Señor Captain Gilbert will but spare them. It was the speech of a brave man, boys. A braver man than me, I'll tell the world."

But as I see Jess standin' there, big, young, with a fine soldier record behind him, I can't keep from smilin' tuh myse'f as Jess blackguards hisse'f afore us all.

"So," Jess finishes up, "us two white men stands there as Vasquez marches his men out one by one while they piles guns at our feet. When the last 'un has passed in review, me friskin' 'em as they shed their guns, Jim holds up his hand.

"It's then, boys, that I listen to a speech that was a speech. He tells 'em tuh go home an' raise their goats an' corn an' kids. No more marijuana an' not too much tequila. A peace talk that carried a punch in every word. Boys, my hat's off tuh Captain Jim Gilbert, the bravest man I ever knowed. I'm gonna be with him at Douglas when his name gits whitewashed uh the dirty charges ag'in it. How about three hell whoopin' cheers fer the bravest man on two legs."

I reckon we shore puts the howlin' wolves tuh shame as we hollers our heads off cheerin' Jim, who squirms an' gits red as a Injun blanket. Then he kinda grins at Heitmann, who's settin' there, sullen an' glum.

"This is the fust time, Heitmann," says he, "that I've had the chance tuh explain about that high explosive. Yuh shore got gypped outa some good cash on that powder. The gent yuh buys it from substituted white sand an' sawdust."

"Yuh mean," gasps Jess, pop eyed, "that you was bluffin'?"

I see Jim's grin vanish sudden like. He's gray white an' shakin' like he's took with a chill.

Horror is writ on his face. The face of a man that's scairt so bad his heart's scarce beatin'. Then gradual like, as we stares at him, the color comes back into his face. He grins, sheepish, but his hands still shake some as he rolls a smoke.

"A danged horned toad run acrost my hand," he explains. "I know they're harmless as a frog but when I was a little shaver, my big brother usta tease me into spasm by puttin' 'em on me. To this day, I'm dead scairt uh one of 'em."

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