

CLARENCE E. MULFORD... BLACK BUTTES

WESTERN

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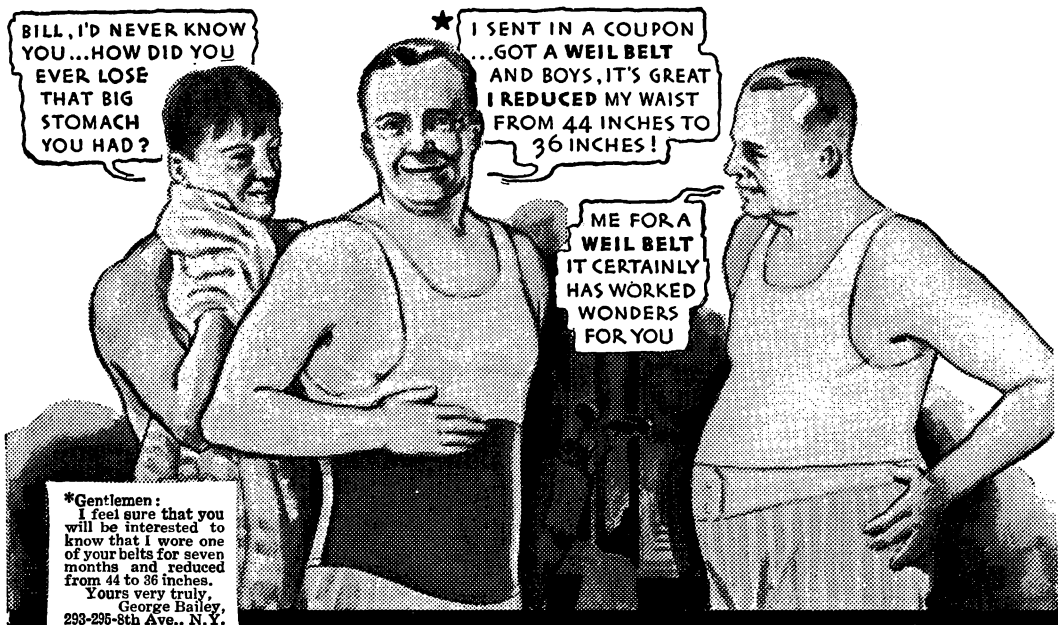
Novel and Short Stories

August

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WESTERN

Novel and Short Stories

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AUGUST, 1934, ISSUE

CONTENTS

COMPLETE 75,000-WORD NOVEL

BLACK BUTTES *Clarence E. Mulford* 4

A thrilling novel of the sinister Black Buttes country, where trail herds were mysteriously stampeded and swallowed up in the maze of hidden valleys—where Duncan with the fastest two guns in local memory comes in his relentless hunt for a man named Hepburn—where Lefty Joe and his outlaw brigands ravage the range. An amazingly swift interwoven tale of adventure, romance and excitement.

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NOVELETTE

THOROUGH-BRACE THUNDER *Raymond W. Porter* 102

When love struck deep at the Whip, it gave him a grand run for his money—and the best stage coach driver in nine counties dropped his reins and became a two-gun, hard-fighting old son-of-a-gun.

SHORT STORY

THE SLIP-UP *James Corson* 120

There was a five-year smoldering hatred between the "Bobcat" and "Montana," even though the outlaw creed kept them riding saddle to saddle—and then a woman entered—lighted dynamite that wrecked the outlaw band.

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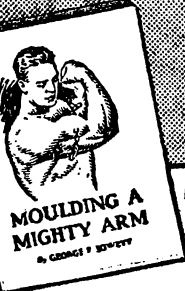
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Black Buttes

By CLARENCE E. MULFORD

CHAPTER I

THE STAMPEDE

THE T Bar trail-boss swore steadily, monotonously, his rain-drenched face ghastly in the incessant play of the lightning. The disagreeable odor of the cook's drowned fire stung his nostrils; the wrecked wagon, its contents scattered over the trampled, muddy ground, deepened the frown on his face. He was afoot with these few remaining men of the trail outfit; God only knew where the others were or what had happened to them. All their efforts had

been unavailing, all their experienced art futile in the face of madness. Even their saddle horses were gone; but worse than their own misery, their own misfortunes, reaching its grisly arm out of the fiendish night into their very souls and quickening their superstitious fears, was Death. Lying somewhat apart from the débris of the ruined wagon, under which he had crawled with his blanket to escape the storm which he felt would burst before morning, lay what remained of the cook, a muddy, sodden tarpaulin around him to keep out the rain. Grim humor in that kindly, reverent thoughtfulness—a tarpaulin to save Cookie from the



rain! What rain could harm him now?

They were near the Black Buttes country trailing north toward the Colorado range, but they did not know it by name; and to them the name would have meant nothing. They had crossed and passed all sorts of country with all kinds of names since they had quitted the range lying close to the gulf coast. They were strangers from the south, heading up over a cattle trail not familiar to them, driving a herd of two thousand selected head on government contract to an army post and Indian agency in the north. Up to now the trip had been uneventful, offering only those minor troubles incidental to the drive trail, until they had bedded down the herd in this little pasture on the hills.

They had eaten a hasty supper, three or four men at a time as they could be spared from the restless herd. As darkness fell the lying moon bathed

the plain with its pale light, under which each reclining animal stood out like a jet cameo against the silvered ground. Around and around the herd the night guard rode, made up of every man in the outfit except the lucky cook. As the twos and threes had left the hasty supper to join their fellows with the herd the cook had jeered them and laughed at the sullen rejoinders.

Almost without warning the treacherous moon was blotted out and a burst of hail, followed by a deluge of rain, roared down upon them. The terrific flashes of the lightning seemed to be continuous and it threw its uncanny light over everything, while the crashing of the thunder deafened them and shook the earth. Not a man at the fire heard the hooved avalanche that bore down upon them, or even felt the quiver of the ground. A sudden heaving mass of wild-eyed, long-horned cattle burst through the thick curtain of

the rain, split narrowly to pass the struggling fire, and after a few moments of chaos and turmoil, which seemed hours long, was gone in the night without a sound of a hoof or the rattling of horns heard above the steady crashing of the thunder to say it was not a horrible dream. It was gone as it had come, leaving behind it the wreckage of the camp, a man trampled into the sand and mud, lifeless and shapeless; three dazed men on foot, instinctively bent against the furious driving of the triumphant storm. One of them groped at his thigh and fired an almost silent shot into the air, the thin, lurid stiletto of flame incapable of being seen a dozen feet away. He listened hopelessly for an answering shot, knowing that he would not hear one.

The rain ceased as abruptly as it had begun; the clouds passed from in front of the moon as if a blanket had been whipped aside; high up in the rain-washed sky myriads of stars glittered like lighted jewels and a soft, warm wind followed the chilling blasts of only a moment before.

The foreman shook his head savagely, as if to clear it, and stared unbelievably about him. "Christ!" he whispered, and then removed his dripping sombrero in the presence of his dead.

DAWN. It crept over the eastern horizon to find three quiet men seated around a sputtering, smoking fire. Close to them was a pile of provisions salvaged from the mud and from the wreckage of the wagon. Beyond lay the remains of the vehicle, covered with a sticky white paste which had been flour. A dirty white path, soon fading out, lay toward the north and told them the way the herd had gone, as if memory and the puddled earth were not enough for that. Even the tarpaulin, covering a figure like that of a man, was smeared with it, and streaks of it were on the faces and hands and clothing of the three silent watchers. Shapeless lumps were scattered along that puddled northern trail at varying intervals, making a straggling line of carcasses leading toward the chaotic roughness of the Black Buttes country.

The steady gaze of the three men was focussed along that line of dead cattle, each man hoping to catch sight of some

of their missing friends. Their hopes were realized, for over a rise far off a man and horse pushed up against the background of buttes, hills, and ridges. Behind him four other riders straggled into view, a sombrero waved, and the little group moved more rapidly. It suddenly faced sidewise and two of its number rode off a short way to meet a man who had hobbled up out of a ravine on foot and clung to his saddle and rifle in dogged determination and sullen anger. He handed the equipment to one of his friends, scrambled up behind the other, and then the three went back to the rest of the group, which now jogged raggedly on again.

The three dismounted men at the fire were on their eager, anxious way to meet the riders, stepping awkwardly through the sand and mud in their tight, high-heeled boots.

The foremost rider, a quiet man, wearing two guns, raised his hand in salutation and called to the leader of the hurrying three.

"All us fellers are all right, barrin' soreness an' a few limps. The rest are roundin' up some cayuses an' will be along soon. Cavy run off by itself an' we can round up most of 'em, though there's some that'll have to be shot."

His nearest companion leaned forward. "Great mavericks! Did you ever see anythin' like it?"

"You say all the boys are safe, Duncan?" incredulously demanded the trail-boss, doubting his ears. He sighed with relief and glanced at the other speaker. "No, Smith, I never did; not never!"

"Jim an' Charley was plumb in front of 'em when they started," eagerly said a rider, grinning through as dirty a face as a man ever had. "Lucky for them they was on their best cayuses. Scared cows can run, but I reckon there ain't nothin' on legs could 'a' caught them two cayuses last night after they got a-goin'. Jim says hisn was a e-quine jack-rabbit."

The trail-boss turned and looked back at the wrecked camp. "My news ain't so pleasant," he slowly said. "Smalley's dead. They wrecked the wagon an' trampled him under. It's a howlin' wonder half of us ain't dead. Come on, we'll bury him decent, pick up what's left of the supplies, an' comb the coun-

try for the cattle. I'd 'a' stampeded, myself, if I'd 'a' been able to move!"

When the rest of the outfit arrived they drove before them the remains of the cavy, and a few hours later the outfit took a last look at the long, narrow heap of fresh earth, swore under their breaths, and rode northward at a lope, following the plainly marked course of the stampeded herd. By nightfall the outfit had split, the larger section following the diverging hoof-marks over the more open country, while the smaller portion went ahead into the draws, canyons, and steep-walled pastures of the Black Buttes.

They searched the hard, rocky bottoms of the canyons, through the brush of the draws, and over every pasture they could find. A mile or more from the first split in the towering mass of rock which wound in a serpentine course nearly east and west, they had come to a clean rock plain, scoured by the recent downpour. Here all hoof-marks abruptly ceased, but they kept on toward the buttes and entered a great, bare canyon. Here and there as they went along it they came to branching canyons, and searched each one before going on again, finding each to end in a blank wall. There were two exceptions, however.

The first, a blind canyon, showed not a break in its perpendicular walls and from its mouth they could see the end wall. As they drew up before it Duncan pushed into it for a short distance, saw no cattle signs, scrutinized the sombre walls with a critical eye, and rejoined his companions. The second canyon over which they did not waste any time, was another blind gorge just beyond the first one, and across its mouth lay a drift of sand whose smooth, unbroken surface was guiltless of hoof marks. The tentative explorer of the first canyon waved his hands expressively and pushed past the opening, the others following as a matter of course.

THEY spent two days in a perfect labyrinth of canyons and valleys and were forced to leave because of the scantiness of their supplies.

"Takes fools to go on a fool's errand," growled the trail-boss. "We ain't got grub enough as it is, without wastin' what we has got, an' precious

time, ridin' through a devil's hole like this. The herd wouldn't pile in here, anyhow. We'll find 'em scattered far an' wide over the plain outside. Reckon I'm still a little loco from the other night. Come on; we'll get out o' here."

"There shore is some fine grazin' back in them cliff-fenced pastures," said one of his companions. "If they'd 'a' gone through the canyon we'd 'a' found 'em feedin' in the first valley like a lot of hawgs. They never would 'a' passed it; and we've passed a score."

Rejoining their companions of the open they found about half of the cattle in a herd grazing peacefully over the plain. Three more days were spent in searching every possible place for the remainder, but when the work was finished there still remained about two hundred head to be accounted for.

The trail-boss rearranged the fire to suit him and looked around the circle, his expression bespeaking a vast and troubled curiosity.

"Two hundred long-horns don't fly away an' they don't melt; but where the devil our two hundred went to shore makes my head ache. I'm plumb dizzy from guessin'. It just don't stand ter reason, that's all!" He slammed a stick into the fire, dodged the flying sparks, and continued. "Our grub is gettin' low, we got a long ways ahead of us, an' I reckon we might just as well make the best of it. If anybody ever told me that I'd go on an' leave that many T Bar cattle behind me I'd shore 'a' gone to ground with him. Any you boys got any bright an' shinin' new idears?"

He waited a moment, received no answer, and then shook his head in disgust.

"Neither have I. If there was any use of looking any more we'd stay and look, but we've hunted till we're near loco an' cross-eyed. Bill, you an' Duncan hit the saddle early in the mornin' an' raise some dust toward Sheridan. That's supposed to be the next town on this trail. Take a couple of lead hosses, an' fill the list I'll give you. Then raise more dust gettin' back ag'in before we all starve. I'll pick up a wagon an' a cook when I hit the town. As for me, I'm rollin' up in my blankets right now; we've got some hard days ahead of us. Good-night."

Bill tossed his half smoked cigarette

into the fire and followed his foreman's example, while Duncan, gently rubbing his two guns, sauntered away from the fire and looked through the night toward Sheridan, one more town for him to visit in his endless search. He looked forward to it pessimistically and without hope, but the search would be made, for while he had come to despair of ever finding his man, nevertheless the spirit of vengeance in him, having long ago lost its hot and eager impetuosity, still possessed him in an unloosened grip. The fire had gone out of it, but it lived on unimpaired and still was the dominating influence of his life, subordinating all else to its pressure. In a few minutes he wheeled and strode back to the fire, to roll up at Bill's side and join him in sleep.

CHAPTER II

THE SECOND STAMPEDE

A YEAR later, almost to the week, another trail herd had reached the tempting little pasture in front of the Black Buttes country and the trail-boss signalled the point and swing men to check the cattle. There was plenty of good water here, excellent grass for that country, and the ground which surrounded the little pasture sloped gently from it until checked by the first hills and gave an elevation which meant that the bedded cattle would be fanned by whatever breezes were blowing. The day had been hot, but not uncomfortably so; the cattle were tired and after watering and grazing would bed down and be content to stay down until dawn; and as the evening shadows stretched out from the scrawny, stunted brush which here and there could be seen, the heat of the day died into a pleasing coolness.

The chuck wagon had stopped, the horses had been unhitched and driven off to join the lazy, hungry cavvy, and its boss sang shrilly as he built the fire and laid out his pots and pans. He busied himself mixing dough on the tail-board of the wagon as the wrangler drove in the night horses and corralled them in a ridiculously flimsy rope enclosure. He picketed the trail-boss's night horse to a forty-foot rope and tossed the maul toward the wagon, bursting into song as he watched it plough through the light dust.

The boss wrangler watched his two assistants squat on the ground for a game of craps, and then he idly glanced at a quiet man wearing two guns who had ridden up from the herd and was now sitting motionless in his saddle, gazing at the distant buttes. For a stranger the two-gunman was rather well liked by the rest of the outfit and he had taken their rough familiarity and mild horseplay in good part. No one knew much about him, but about ten days back he unwillingly had given an exhibition of the quality of his gun-play which had taken most of the edge from the subsequent horsing that had been directed at him.

"It's shore tough to be a cowboy an' have to leave yer gal so fur behind you," the wrangler said loudly, addressing the busy cook.

The cook glanced around, smiled, and went on cutting biscuits. "I see where there's goin' to be a love letter writ plumb soon, Ben," he said. "Too bad we ain't passin' clost to Sheridan, for I done had some of my letters sent there, too."

The quiet horseman came out of his reverie, swung around in the saddle, and regarded the two. "You go to hell," he said pleasantly as he dismounted. He stripped the horse and slapped it on the rump, and it trotted off to join the others. He dumped the riding equipment close to the front wheel of the wagon and straightened up. "I was just settin' there thinkin' about somethin' that happened right here a year ago," he explained, his searching eyes finding and resting on a long hole in the ground not far away.

"Wolves an' coyotes done dug him out," he muttered, frowning. "You wouldn't think this was the same spot. Tell you all about it after we feed."

"That's the time to spin 'em," said the wrangler approvingly, eyeing one of his assistants who was disconsolately rambling toward him.

The cook climbed up on the spokes of a wheel, which gave him the great elevation of about eighteen inches, faced the herders and raised his voice from this vantage point. The voice nearly raised the wagon. "Hi! Hi! Come an' get it!" he bellowed.

His authority to order his companions around seemed to be unquestioned, for they came in a bunch, racing to see who would get there first.

One of them turned in the saddle and jeered at the squad riding around the contented herd. Then his horse stepped into a depression, stumbled, and sent the careless rider sailing through the air. Luckily he landed on a patch of soft sand which he plowed up without serious results. His companions, laughing uproariously, wheeled and offered grave and deferential sympathy and help; and after baiting their unfortunate friend, dashed on again for the chuck wagon, leaving him to chase his horse on foot. But after a few steps he turned toward the wagon, for the animal was trotting toward the others and he knew where it would be when he wanted it.

From the envious riders with the herd came a triumphant jeer. "I told you you oughta carry one of them parrychutes! You ride like a keg of water!"

After more or less confusion the supper was over and the first night shift had ridden out to the herd, the second shift rolled cigarettes for a final smoke and short chat before turning in, and the third shift settled comfortably back, the question of time not being of such moment to them. The cook, his dishes washed and the wagon tidied up, joined the cheerful circle around the fire.

"Who's got any smokin'?" asked Ben, fixing his eyes upon his good-natured assistant, who grinned impudently in his revered chief's face and elaborately removed the sack of tobacco from his shirt to his left hip pocket. The boss wrangler looked at him reproachfully and then turned expectantly to his other assistant. "Got the makin's, Red?"

"Reckon I can afford to be generous, 'though it ain't goin' to get to be no habit with me," said Red, tossing his sack across the fire. "They've got lots of smokin' up to Sheridan. Too bad you was so busy at McLeod that you couldn't buy none."

"You young fellers are allus hopeful," said the cook, glancing out toward the despoiled grave in the faint darkness. His face grew quickly serious and he turned to the quiet two-gun man. "Duncan, you was sayin' you knowed a story about that—that out there," he remarked. "Is it fit for these here boys to hear?"

"I never heard no story that wasn't," came the smiling reply as the stranger

settled back against his saddle and gazed off into the night toward the hidden buttes. Little persuasion was needed, and he swung into the story. As he went along the trail-boss glanced up at the star-riddled sky, considered the force and direction of the gentle wind and listened to the songs and chants of the distant night guard.

At length the narrator wound up, "This is the spot, an' that's the cook's grave, out yonder."

The trail-boss of the 110 outfit loaded his pipe anew, lit it with a brand dexterously picked out of the fire, got it going good and then snorted.

"Two hundred head! An' he went off without findin' 'em!" He spat disgustfully into the fire. "Hell! What kind of a trail-boss was he? I wouldn't go on an' leave a twentieth of that number behind me, not if I had to turn the country upside down. They was somewhere, wasn't they?"

"We all put in 'most a week of hard ridin' an' couldn't find 'em," replied Duncan. "Looked for 'em good, everywhere."

"But they was somewhere, wasn't they? They didn't blow away, nor 'vaporate, did they? All you had to do was find 'em."

THE two-gun man tossed the soggy cigarette into the fire and turned to the man next to him. "Got a paper, Larry? I got the makin's, if yo're short. Shore, that's all. Just find 'em!" He paused a moment and then glanced over the circle. "Any of you boys know anyone by the name of Hepburn?" he asked. "I reckoned not, but I thought I'd ask anyhow."

"Two hundred head, an' couldn't find em! Judas Priest!" exploded the trail-boss, shaking his head in disgust. "He was a hell of a trail-boss, an' he had a hell of an outfit, if you leave it to me!"

Duncan ignored the thrust and joined in the talk concerning stampedes, and time crept softly past. Finally the trail-boss peered off in the direction of the peaceful herd, held his big silver watch close to the fire and then sat back, stiffly erect.

"Who'd 'a' thought it! Here comes the first man off watch already! I'm rollin' up for a good night's sleep. Mebby I can find them cattle in my

dreams—two hundred head, an' the fool went on without 'em! Judas Priest!"

He reached behind him, spread his blanket by a dexterous flip, pulled off his boots and rolled up, feet to the fire. Before the second watch grudgingly had turned out he was asleep, snoring softly. One by one the men around the fire followed his example and in a few minutes the only sounds were the crackling of the fire.

* * * * *

They all seemed to awaken on their feet, some tightly clutching their blankets. Another shot flashed into the air from the direction of the rumbling and clicking which set the ground aquiver. Then there came another shot from the desperate second watch, riding knee to knee with death.

"Good Gawd!" shouted the trail-boss unbelievably. "They've went an' gone!"

The amazed group shook themselves into action, ran to their ready night horses, and soon were pounding over the plain in the direction of the low rumble which was coming back to them from the north. Their jerky conversation was emphatic and profane as they galloped down the wind, and after they had covered several miles their keen ears caught the faint rattle of horns on horns and the softer sound of many moving hoofs. After a last listening spell they changed their course again and suddenly split to pass on both sides of a lowing, milling mass which had been checked and held by the hard-riding second shift. When the cattle showed further unmistakable signs of reasonable behaviour, the trail-boss relieved the swearing second shift from duty and questioned them singly and in toto. Their answers were general and vague and varied according to the men.

"Them two bummers was raisin' more of a ruckus than usual tonight," said one disgusted puncher. "They was startin' to stir things up a little, but not near enough to make 'em bolt the way they did."

"I saw three bummers," declared another. "I was wonderin' if another yearlin' had joined up with us an' got the cussed habit of disturbin' his betters, as if the other two wasn't enough. I was on the south side an' things was lookin' peaceful enough, till, all at

onct, my Nigger boy snorts, rears up, turns his fool back to the herd an' started to climb. An' when he come down ag'in, cussed if the whole caboodle hadn't started, an' Nigger was as bad as any of 'em. Hey, Boss, what day is this, anyhow?"

The trail-boss swore suddenly under his breath, and for him a great deal of the mystery was explained away. "Friday!" he snorted. "No wonder! 'Member last Friday, how that crick rose durin' the night an' held us up for two days? Serves me right for not bein' more careful, an' for tryin' to git a whole night's sleep!" A sound suspiciously like a snicker struck his ears and he peered quickly toward the man from whom it seemed to come. "What's so funny, Duncan?" he demanded truculently.

"Friday, an' thirteen, an' black cats," answered the two-gunman easily. "What's the day of the week got to do with this mess? You don't reckon them cows carry calendars an' knowed it was Friday, do you?"

"Seems to me you said somethin' about a stampede last year right here," said the trail-boss, with no friendliness in his voice. "Since it ain't Friday that's got anythin' to do with it, an' it ain't the Thirteenth, an' there ain't no black cats around, mebby you got some idear about what done it?"

"I don't just get yore meanin'," replied the other quietly.

"Why, since you know all about what didn't do it, I was figgerin' mebby you might guess what did do it," retorted the trail-boss. "I allus like to see a smart Aleck wade right into it, clean up to his neck."

"Shucks!" soothingly interposed the night wrangler. "He didn't say nothin' about knowin' what started it. I don't take much stock in this here Friday idear, myself; not as much as some might."

"Well, I don't know nothin' about that," said another puncher, uneasily, "but I do know that cows is cows, which ain't leavin' nothin' more to be said."

"Yo're shore right," spoke up the red-head with the lucky dice. "I shore enough growed up with 'em, an' they still fool me. They're worse than wimmin, every way from th' Jack."

"Mebby," grunted the trail-boss

without conviction. "You boys git what sleep you can. We'll round 'em up at the crack of dawn. The 110 ain't leavin' no two hundred head behind, no matter what the fashion is in this part of the country. Of all the damned, ornery livin' animals——" his profane monologue trailed off into silence as he started away to ride around the herd once more before turning in.

"Sorta rowelled him, you did," said Ben, grinning. "If you had as much religion in yore carcass as he's got superstition in hisn, you'd be wearin' a long, black coat an' a long, pious face, an' be hog-tying sinners with yore hands an' feet."

"An' this shore would be a fine place to start in," growled the gunman. "If my old ranch was still a ranch I'd go back there; take my time an' quit him at the 'crack of dawn'."

"Ain't it?" asked Ben.

"No. After we delivered the trail herd last year I went back to the old ranch to get me a job as a common puncher, for old time's sake, with the best crowd of saddle straddlers that ever cussed a cow. I'd been away near ten years. Don't you never do that, Ben; don't you never go back to some place that you've been dreamin' about for years. Remember it like it was when you left it. Ranch? Hell!"

"Turn into drug store?" asked Ben innocently.

"RAILROAD cuts her three ways," disgustedly growled his companion. "There's houses, streets, two churches, a schoolhouse, miles of barb wire an' irrigatin' ditches; there's yellin' kids an' fadin' wimmin. The cows are in cow-yards an' the crops are on the range. Everythin's fenced they could get a fence around. After the first half-dozen drinks I got to feelin' so mournful an' sorta riled that they was gettin' all set to fence me in the calabozo, only I saw it comin' in time an' beat 'em to the skyline."

"Wasn't none of the old outfit hangin' 'round?" questioned Ben.

"Huh!" retorted the other. "If you'd knowed that bunch like I did you'd never asked me that. Couldn't get a track of 'em, no-how. Heard they went north, most of 'em—an' that's a big place, 'though I've rode over most of it." He listened to the herd

noises, glanced up at the starry sky and wheeled abruptly. "Everythin's sugar candy now. I'm rollin' up till Old Man Friday wakes me at his crack of dawn. Comin', Ben?"

With the graying of the sky preparations were made to hold the nucleus of the herd and to comb the surrounding country for strays. Three days passed in hard and earnest search, each man's remuda pretty well tired out before the work was finished. At first the herd had grown rapidly, but it was only a spurt, and the additions soon became few and far between. At last, the open country, the draws and the side hills combed clean, the trail-boss sullenly counted the cattle again, cursed the stubborn total of the tally, and then led half of the outfit toward the buttes and into the great, narrow canyon which split the towering ramparts asunder. They searched the grassy pastures and the bushy draws; they followed along the bottoms of the diverging fissures which rent the great plateau, ignoring only those which even a casual glance gave assurance that time spent in them would be wasted.

From the time the stampede had been checked until the trail-boss had ridden toward the line of buttes he had relieved his feelings at the expense of those of Duncan, seeming to hold the latter in some way responsible for the misfortune. The gunman took it quietly, realizing the frame of mind of the other. At no time did the trail-boss become definite. When the men were being picked to ride into the butte country the boss contemptuously had waved aside the willing Duncan, saying that if he had not been able to find the missing cattle of a year before he certainly could not be expected materially to help the finding of the cattle which were missing now. Duncan held down his temper and rode off around the herd, and he would have deserted the outfit then and there except that he felt that such an act would only tend to give weight and point to the suspicions which he felt were alive in the head of the boss.

Two days passed, the herd drifting slowly onward a few miles a day as the grazing gave out around it, and in the afternoon of the last day the herd crew caught sight of their friends riding dejectedly toward them over

the low hills along the back trail. The meeting of the two crews was a sullen and nearly a silent one. The trail-boss glared at the quiet cattle, ordered another count, and strode off to the chuck wagon. After the herd had been compacted and counted and the tally taken in to the boss, the chief night wrangler rode carelessly up to the quiet Duncan, who again was lost in contemplation of the distant buttes.

"Old Man's ridin' you a-plenty, Duncan," he said awkwardly, "but I don't reckon he means much of what he says. He's got to take it out on somebody, that bein' his nature; an' yo're the only stranger with the outfit. He's sore as a stung pup. After roastin' you fellers of last year for losin' two hundred head, an' goin' on without 'em, he's done lost forty head more'n that, an' he can't do nothin' else but go on an' leave 'em."

At dawn the herd went on again at a twenty-mile-a-day clip, the dust soaring high into the heated air, the point men having nothing much to do and the swing men having less. Noon came, and with it half of the men rode back to the chuck wagon to eat their dinner, which a savage cook had prepared while on the move. Nearly a week had been lost and must be made up if possible, and the comfort of no one was to be considered until that was done.

"Here it is, cold as hell," growled the cook, in no way abashed by the presence of the trail-boss, who had just ridden up. "Been cold since breakfast, too, when it was cooked. Grab yore holts, an' look out you don't burn yoreselves." He was a privileged character and he banked on it.

The trail-boss scowled at the autocrat of the chuck-wagon. "If the grub's too cold for you, cook. I'll shore warm it for you, an' mebbe you with it."

This seemed to put an end to any conversation which might have tried to get under way while the men were wolfing their food, but at the conclusion of the meal the two-gunman wiped his mouth on the back of a hand and looked steadily at the boss of the outfit.

"Quittin' you at Sheridan," he carelessly remarked, and turned to go to his horse.

"Don't let me take you out of yore way none, or too far from yore friends,"

said the trail-boss, digging a roll of bills out of his pocket.

The other turned and looked deep into the cold and hostile eyes. "You've been doin' a lot of circlin'," he retorted. "The center of every circle is a point. If you'n has got any point, why don't you ride straight acrost, an' get to it?"

"I never cut acrost lessn I'm dead shore where I'm goin'," rejoined the trail-boss sharply. "There's a lot of things I don't know, an' yo're among 'em. I ain't even shore about yore name, or where you come from. There ain't no use quarrellin', an' bad feelin's in an outfit never did help it none. Here's yore half month's pay. Yore cayuse will be glad to see you, an' mebbe you can find that Hepburn friend of you'n, round here some'rs. Good-bye."

DUNCAN took the money and smiled ironically. "Much obliged for savin' me the ride to Sheridan an' back. I got a good notion to hang around these parts an' see what happened to them missin' cattle that yo're leavin' behind—two hundred an' forty, nearly."

"Mebbe you can go straight to 'em!" snapped the trail-boss recklessly, and then found himself staring into the muzzle of a magic gun. While his face went white and red the owner of the weapon considered him, remembered what the boss wrangler had said, and then slipped the gun back into its holster.

"Before this drive's over you mebbe won't have no sense at all, the way yo're headin'," he said. "Just for that, if I do locate them, you won't hear nothin' about it. Reckon yo're just a pore, damn fool." He turned and nodded to the others, and, mounting, rode off toward the drifting horse herd to cut out his own animal and to leave the drive.

CHAPTER III

"GREAT OAKS—"

MCLEOD had two streets, both ugly and short. They bisected each other at right angles, and the street running east and west appeared to run smash into the

middle of the Black Buttes country if it were prolonged that far. Its other end followed the line of least resistance and greatest traction over a good if much-broken cattle range. Along both its sides were saloons and gambling hells, the more pretentious being at the center of the cross. The second and less important street had two general stores, two harness shops, a combination barber shop and pool room, and a score of small frame houses, all in need of paint.

For so small a town it had a surprisingly large population, most of it, however, being transient, and a large part very transient—with the habit of glancing behind and looking up quickly at sudden sounds. The cattle ranges which bounded it on three sides provided an exuberant and cheerful influx, whose ebb often was noisy and sodden. The other side did not send in many riders, but the few which occasionally appeared in town from that direction were not exuberant, not cheerful, and seldom made a noisy exit.

Horsemen came and went! a rough-and-ready quartet from the Circle N—the Circle N was located on this side of the butte country—being properly inspired, stepped widely down the street and sang its favorite songs; two horses at a tie rack bit each other and squealed, and from several doors near the intersection of the two streets a piano, two fiddles, an accordion, and a cornet vied for dominance. Had the cornetist been anywhere near sober he would have won in a walk, but his efforts were not continuous and he seemed to have a great deal of trouble with saliva. Over all a gentle rain was falling, but so far only had served to pock-mark the deep and dry dust.

From the south whirled a group of riders, bunched leg to leg and moving almost as one. From the east loped a solitary horseman, scorning his slicker, his face upturned to catch what drops it could. The group rode heedlessly, intent on their conversation and careless of the rights of others; the solitary rider, sky-gazing, was equally careless. A collision averted only by superb horsemanship and the trained intelligence of the animals, the two sides to it drew back and silently regarded each other. A smile might lead to quick,

careless friendships; a curse to other things. One of the group smiled. He was a young man who had been blessed by Nature with a smile which begat smiles; one of those rare characters whose good nature is infectious and makes friends almost in an instant.

"Prayin'?" he inquired.

It was an inquiry which the intonation of the voice, the veriest change in facial expression was sufficient to make impudent and imprudent.

The lone rider grinned and relaxed. "Tryin' to git me some freckles," he answered, pointedly, his eyes on the other's face.

The group chuckled, the first speaker a little self-consciously. He spoke hurriedly to bridge over his embarrassment. "Stranger hereabouts?"

The other nodded. "Very much so. Don't know a soul, 'less my friend Hepburn has wandered into these diggin's. Anybody 'round here with that name?"

"Nope; nobody at all," answered the young man, glancing at the stranger's two, low-hung guns. "Better throw in with us, Rain-in-the-Face," he invited, grinning.

"All right, Freckles," acquiesced the lone horseman, alone no longer.

"Everybody knows yore name first crack," laughed one of the group, looking at the cheery young man and crowding against a companion to make room for Rain-in-the-Face. "We ain't goin' fur, but this here's a sudden town an' you might as well have our valuable pertection. Lead the way, Tommy, an' show the gent where they keep the best."

AS they rode forward at a walk a stage-coach clattered in from the East, the driver and the guard shouting excitedly and waving their hands. It was surprising how quickly the crowd formed and how swiftly the word spread over town. The details seemed to be spontaneously known almost as soon as the vehicle stopped.

"Crossin' the Blacktail Creek," said a voice. "Last time it happened on Antelope."

"Same feller, too, I reckon," said another. "Same man, Baldy?" he shouted.

"Same two-gun coyote," replied the guard. "Least-awise, looked like him."

"Took everythin' but their clothes,

an' even some of them," laughed a puncher.

The little group with the stranger in it pressed forward and stopped near the boot of the coach, their restless horses clearing a small place in the crowd.

"Got you ag'in, Baldy!" jeered Freckles.

The guard scowled, and then a sheepish grin swept over his dusty face.

"Yes, but not in the same place, you grinnin' monkey!" he retorted.

"Purty soon you won't be able to sleep nowhere along the route," shouted Tommy. "I bet you was wide awake crossin' Antelope!"

THE passengers, grouped miserably at the stage door, were making a good deal of noise, considering that they numbered only three. Their lamentations and curses did not arouse much sympathy, and with an angry look around, they hurried into the hotel to try to establish credit pending their getting in touch with their distant sources of supply.

A huge, quiet man on whose open vest was pinned a tarnished star, pushed through the crowd and interrogated the driver and the guard. Fragments of the conversation drifted to the rest during lulls in the noise. "Middle-sized feller with two guns," said the guard. "Rose up out of that clump of brush clost to where the trail leaves the crick. . . . Ivory gun handles . . . blue handkerchief with eye-holes in it, an' the pitchure of a peacock over his nose. . . . No coat, black vest plumb dusty. . . . Blue shirt like most of us wears. . . . Didn't see his cayuse."

The driver spat fiercely and edged into the talk. "Took Baldy's coat an' gun . . . my gun an' . . . fat drummer . . . like a baby. . . . You ought to, Rufe . . . reckon it'll lead you to the Buttes."

The big man pushed out of the crowd, called loudly to a group of eager horsemen, climbed ponderously into his saddle and led the way east, the posse close to his heels.

Inside the hotel the three travelers were all speaking at once to an interested audience, which was increased by the addition of Freckles and his companions.

"Wife's watch . . . our baby cuts his teeth on it. You can see the dents on the case. My initials, 'G. H. D.' are on. . . . Every cent I had. Didn't leave me a nickel. He . . ." ". . . my jewelery samples an' threw the valise into the crick. I hope they . . ." "Big tall man, with red hair I hope they . . . No: black hair. I saw it plain. Fat, about my height, an . . ." ". . . short an' lean, with gray hair. I know, 'cause when——"

The clerk waved them aside and motioned for the crowd to get out.

"Shore," he said with withering irony. "Yo're all right. You all saw him, so you all oughter know. Mebbe it was a woman! Supper'll be ready at six. G'wan, get out, you fellers!" he yelled at the crowd. "Bath? Shore. Hey, Squint! Take a wash tub an' a pail of water up to Number Eighty-four. No, sir; you'll have to double up. Only got six rooms, an' they're all full. Put you in with a Christian? Hey, Squint! Is Red Bill a Christian? Sir, yo're lucky to get in with a hoss! Take it or leave it!" He glared at Freckles and his party. "Go on; get out, you fellers. Go find the gent's watch with the baby's tooth marks on the case. Get out! What's that?" he looked at the two-gun man. "I just said we was full up. Take you in with me, but I ain't no Christian."

The stranger nodded. "Christian or boss, it's all th' same to me. Freckles, I reckon it's my treat; lead the way."

The next hour passed pleasantly and most auspiciously for the new friendships, which grew rapidly. Then came a good supper with its beneficent influence and at its close a more closely knit group sallied forth to see what sights the town afforded as the lights were lit and another side of life moved out onto the stage. They moved restlessly from faro table to dance hall, mildly participating in the excitement found in each and then found themselves sauntering down the dark street toward the hotel, tacitly, silently eager to form their own circle in quieter surroundings and provide their own entertainment. Nodding to the bartender they went on to the rear table and took chairs around it, discussing idly the meaningless things they had seen

"The T 40 ain't losin' none. Tupper's

got funny idears, but he ain't losin' no cattle. Mebby it's because he's got them Texas punchers workin' for him," Tommy was saying. He had become sarcastic. "Mebbe the T 40 is a charm. 'Tain't no harder to change than the Star X, an' we're losin' some."

"Dan Willoughby's his name," Freckles was saying. "Best faro dealer for miles an' miles. Straight, too, far's anybody knows."

"That was 'Paso Annie. She was Thatford's woman before he got killed," remarked Tommy. "Left her the whole place, lock, stock an' bar'l. She can hold her own ag'in any man, an' has, more'n onct."

"**T**HOUGHT of gettin' a job with the Bar O when I crossed it on my way here," the stranger was telling another member of the group. "Looked purty good, but bein' a stranger sorta held me back. Anyhow, I ain't busted, so I don't have to worry for a few days."

Tommy grinned expansively. "You saved yore breath, Rain-in-the-Face. They ain't hirin' strangers, nohow."

The bartender cut into the conversation. "Stickin' up the stage is gettin' to be a habit," he said.

"Shore," said the oldest member of the Star X contingent, a man usually taciturn, but now thawing under the influence of good fellowship. Last time it was on Antelope; now it's on Blacktail. Most folks reckon it's the same man. He'll ride circles, Rufe will, stick to the trail like a hound, foller them tracks inter town, here, an' lose 'em, like he done before. Blames it on the Buttes, overlookin' the thiev-in' coyotes hangin' out 'round here."

The fourth member of the ranch contingent, who seldom spoke more than three or four words an hour, and therefore was known as Windy, looked up.

"I'm bettin' it's the Buttes," he said.

"Allus blamin' it on Black Buttes," said a querulous, unsteady voice from the door, and they looked up to see a pitiful figure dressed in an old black suit, his coat tightly buttoned about him despite the oppressive warmth of the night. "Allus blamin' it on the Buttes," he repeated sorrowfully. "Twenty to one on it. Every time there's a stick-up, or a little rustlin',

it's Black Buttes. It makes me sick! Betcha that coyote's here in town! Take ten to one he's right here in this ho-tel. Take twenty to one he's right here in this room. Bet anythin' you wants any way you wants if the odds are right. You can't beat the odds if you know how to figger 'em. Ain't that right, Artie?"

The bartender, six feet four, and half as broad, answered to his name by leveling a huge, crooked finger at the newcomer. He spoke with that mixture of sternness and affection with which a parent might chide an unruly child.

"Look ahere, Lafe. What I told you goes. Coupla more peeps outa you an' you'll find yoreself in the street. I'll throw you out."

"Take twenty to one you won't!" clamored the other, leering at the huge man behind the bar. "You know me, Artie! Mean what I say, twenty to one you won't. Listen to me, Artie. I'm talkin' to you. Twenty to one I won't land in the street!" He leered around the room and his gaze settled on the quiet stranger with two guns. "Bet any way, at all, if the odds are right. You can't beat the odds in the long run. Take twenty to one that there two-gun feller did it. Now, Artie! You know I ain't! I ain't pesterin' nobody. I——"

He stopped, his loose jaw dropping as the blue-shirted stranger arose and walked toward him, the fingers of one hand thrust into a pocket of his dusty black vest. The newcomer edged fearfully toward the door. "Wasn't meanin' no 'fense, stranger. Jest tryin' to git up a bet. I——"

He ceased and shrank back as the stranger swiftly reached out a hand and caught his own. His lean fingers automatically closed over the object thrust into his palm and he stared timidly at the giver. "I—I——"

"You take a good look at that," said the stranger quietly, tapping the stained ivory handles of his guns to give weight to his command, and then he wheeled and went back to the table.

The gaping recipient of the gift opened his fingers and stared at the object, let it fall to the floor and then whimpered a little as he groped for a chair. His apologetic mutterings grew softer and, watching his chance, he

sprang from the chair and dashed for the door like a frightened dog, vociferously offering twenty to one that the newcomer did it.

"Bad time for any loose talk," complained the stranger in repressed vexation. "Nobody knows me, nor nothin' about me. If he'd 'a' been sober he'd 'a' got that cat'ridge somewhere else!"

"Tain't liquor," explained Artie, tapping his forehead. "Little loco, an' three drinks allus start him goin' like a squirrel in a cage. Makes him real talkative. Nobody pays no 'tention to him. He pokes around all over, offerin' bets with no takers. Folks don't hardly see him no more, though there was a time when they'd come a-runnin' when he come to town."

"That's all right, far's it concerns him," replied the stranger with a growl, "but what about me? Great oaks from little acorns grow. Who is he, anyhow?"

"Lafe Pettigrew, from up Black Buttes way," answered Artie. "Got the purtiest darter a man ever had. Every feller in town has had a busted heart. I've cured lots of 'em right here in front of this bar. The old man used to be a rancher, game an' square as they come, but he lost everythin' he had, one night, settin' where yo're settin' now.

"**M**ORTGAGED his ranch to git the money, an' George Tupper bought the mortgage five months later, foreclosed at the first default in the interest, an' then bought the ranch in. He's a big man, now, Tupper is, but I hope he roasts in hell. Lafe claimed it was crooked dealin' an' it sorta turned his mind a little, for he was aimin' to send his gal East an' make a lady outa her. That was all he thought about, all he lived for: to make a lady outa her, back East. Just as if the East could improve what the Lord had already made. Well, the man that cleaned him out was found dead the next mornin', with a knife in his back. Suspicion pointed strong to Lafe, but there wasn't no proof, an' the dead man had more enemies than a dog has fleas."

"Yo're forgettin' that there wasn't no money found on the dead man; not a cent," offered Freckles. "Twenty thousand he'd won, an' not a cent in

his clothes when they found him. An' it was the dead man's own knife stickin' in his back, which ain't usual, nohow."

"Hey, Artie!" called a voice from the office. "Eighty-four wants to know if you'll trust him for the drinks. He's the feller that lost the watch an' the baby's tooth marks."

Freckles answered for the bartender. "Squint, you round up them busted hombres an' herd 'em down here. This country's got a bad name now, but it ain't goin' to git one as bad as that. The drinks are theirs as long as they can hold 'em, or till my money an' credit runs out." He turned to his companions appealingly. "Can you fellers imagine bein' thirsty an' clean busted in a strange town?"

"Terrible thing!" muttered Tommy, apparently appalled by the inhuman thought.

Squint soon appeared with a smiling trio in tow, and he waved his hands at the group gathered around the table.

"Gents, meet yore new friends from the Star X. They're all good boys. Call me, Artie, when you want Tommy drug out an' put to bed."

"I didn't catch your name friend," said the drummer to the stranger wearing the two guns. "Mine is Effingham Lowell, of Albany, the rising sun of the Empire State."

"Blubble!" said Tommy, the liquor flowing down his face. He coughed and cleared his throat. "This here's terrible likker, Artie!" he said accusingly. "Near choked me to death, it did."

"Glad to meet up with you, Mr. Lowell," responded the stranger, smiling. "Folks here-about call me Rain-in-the-Face, though I'm generally known as Duncan."

"I trust the Indian relationship is very remote, Mr. Duncan," replied the drummer, clearing his throat. "This is, indeed, a pleasure. I trust that I will be able to reciprocate in due time. My pecuniary embarrassment, although only temporary, is most distressing."

"Call Squint," begged Tommy in a hoarse whisper. "Something's wrong with me already. I can see all right; but my hearin's sure loco!" He dropped his head on his arms and mourned the passing of a valuable sense.

CHAPTER IV

TRACKS

THROBBING heads and dark-brown taste, short tempers and peevish dispositions, a readiness to find fault and a general perverseness spoiled the fresh beauty of the sunlit morn. Their breakfasts picked at and sworn at, the clerk heckled and the waiter cursed, the remorseful group from the Star X started to go out on the porch, but one painful squint at the bright sunlight was enough and they backed away from it with bedeviled optic nerves and sought the darkest corner of the darkened barroom just as the three hold-up victims straggled down to their own belated breakfasts. The greetings exchanged between the incomers and the outgoers lacked the jovial friendliness of the night before and there was noticeable a marked touchiness and chill.

The Star X contingent and its new friend, the two-gun stranger, shuffled toward the rear table and dropped onto their chairs.

"Whisky, for all hands," growled Freckles, glaring at the placid bartender. "An' you needn't be so cussed slow, neither. Wonder when we're ever goin' to learn any sense?" he asked his dispirited companions. "Look at Rain-in-the-Face, fresh and chipper as a swallow."

"Because he didn't swallow," grunted Jake. "Goin' to give us a preachin'? Gettin' ready to swear off ag'in?"

"Huh!" said Windy.

"When th' Lord made the snails, He didn't overlook Artie," growled Tommy. "How can a man be that slow an' live?"

The bartender was accustomed to such a morning atmosphere and he calmly ignored the fault-finding group. Failing to arouse him the quarrelsome crowd looked around for some other victim and were about to take it out on each other when at the important moment the sheriff most auspiciously crossed the street toward the front door.

"There's Rufe," said Tommy, brightening. "Reckon him an' the boys didn't have no luck. Let's ride 'em with spurs on. Here he comes now. Oh, my head; my pore old head!"

Jake snickered, but it was not a pleasant one. "You never oughta take more'n

four, nohow, Tommy. Freckles is th' boy that can ride 'em. Rufe never did have no luck, did he? What you expect when him an' his gang won't never pass the mouth of the canyon? Did he ever git back any cattle for anybody? Hell!"

"Huh!" said Windy.

The sheriff changed his course when opposite the door and passed on to the one leading into the hotel office and dining-room. Two of his deputies stopped in the barroom door and grinned provokingly at the heavy-headed group in the rear of the room.

"Shore, grin!" said Freckles. "That's just what that hold-up feller is doin'. He's grinnin', too. Bet you didn't come within gunshot of the canyon."

"Right," said Jake, rubbing his hands.

"Well, I never heard tell of no Star X gang gettin' much closter," retorted one of the pair in the door, slowly walking toward the bar and nodding at Artie. "What's the matter, Freckles? Some-thin' bite you?"

"If it did it'll die before night," said the second deputy. He went to the rear window, glanced idly out of it and then draped himself against the bar in solitary grandeur. "Tommy, you should 'a' got all through with bottles when you was weaned."

"You make me sick!" rejoined Tommy heatedly. "Just after you fellows left town yesterday to ketch that hold-up fellar, Lefty Joe was seen ridin' hard through the south end of town. Don't you never guess right, you fellers?"

The indolent deputy smiled. "Any of them Easterners showed up yet?" he asked.

"If you listen good you can hear 'em squabblin' about the breakfast. Nothin' tastes right this mornin' an' they're blamin' it on the cook," said Freckles. "Think they did it?"

The deputy ignored this insult. "Want to show 'em somethin'," he replied. "Here comes Rufe. Hey, Rufe, look at this sick little party. Cheerful, they are."

The sheriff paused in the middle of the room, looked over the Star X group, and laughed. "You-all must 'a' had one hard night!" he jeered.

"Oh, shut up," growled Freckles. "You needn't put on no airs; you was campin' on that feller's trail all night. What did you find this time?"

"Nothin'."

"JUST the same as last time," said Tommy, letting loose of his throbbing head. "Same old story. As if a cayuse don't make tracks! Bet you ten dollars you never even see that feller."

The sheriff colored and a disagreeable expression passed over his face. "I'll take that bet to teach you manners. You shouldn't blame other folks for yore own foolishness; either that or quit drinkin'. I found nothin', nothin' but tracks. Yo're shore right there, Thomas, for a cayuse does make 'em."

There was a few minutes more of bantering conversation and then a deputy, with three grouchy Easterners in tow, entered the room. All eyes met them, and while the attention was thus held for a moment, the deputy who had questioned the trailing ability of the Star X outfit, moved quickly and quietly. His gun swung up and covered Duncan from the rear.

"Put 'em up, high an' quick!" came the snapped command, and with the words his assistants added their own guns to his.

The group gaped, looking from the tense deputy to Duncan and back again; the three Easterners gloated as the stranger's hands went slowly upward. Unless he wished to commit suicide he could do nothing else but obey. The attitudes of the characters in this little drama were set and strained, the silence broken only by soft breathing until Windy broke the spell.

"Huh!" he said.

"Tommy was right, dead right," said the sheriff slowly. "Cayuses make 'em. The ones I'm talkin' about went south from the ford a few miles an' then come straight to town along the reg'lar trail from Pike. I lost 'em in town this mornin', but picked 'em up out back, at the stable. The only hoss that's been in there recent is this feller's. All the others are in the barn. The hoss was shod, an' there wasn't nothin' unusual about the tracks. There seldom is, in most cases, but just the same there ain't never two tracks *just* alike. No two blacksmiths make just the same shoes, seein' they hammer 'em out an' shape 'em themselves, each feller for hisself. If the shoes was alike, no two cayuses, hardly, have the same gait. They all put their feet down a little different.

"Mebbe nobody on the Star X can tell

the difference," he remarked, glaring at Tommy, "but readin' tracks an' remem-berin' 'em is my business. Has been for years. I live with tracks, wakin' an' sleepin'. I don't need no cub puncher to tell me anythin' about 'em. This hold-up feller had ivory handled gun-handles; two of 'em; black vest, blue shirt—it all fits." While he talked he eyed the prisoner, paying especial attention to his eyes and to the faded blue 'kerchief around his neck. The intricate design of this by no stretch of the imagination showed the remotest suggestion of a peacock; but this was a minor consideration.

Suddenly he barked out of the corner of his mouth, watching the stranger even more closely, "Frank, take his guns, an' then go tell the clerk you want to find this feller's belongings to look at 'em. Of course, he might 'a' cached the stuff."

"He nat'rally would," snapped Tommy. "Long as you been sleepin' with tracks an' God only knows what else, for all these years, you ought to know if he cached anythin', or not. Couldn't hardly cache it on the trail without leavin' signs; an' if he left the trail to cache it, there'd be tracks. Mebbe you never lived with just them kind, though?"

Here was a fine opportunity to be disagreeable to their hearts' content, and the Star X contingent brightened visibly.

"He could heave 'em into the brush without slowin' up or leavin' the trail," retorted the sheriff.

"Mebbe that was what Lefty Joe did while you was takin' a long-range look at the Buttes," sneered Jake. "He rode plumb through this here town, comin' in on the Pike trail, not long after you left to go lookin' for the hold-up feller. Seems sorta like he figgered you wouldn't be here. No stranger would know you wouldn't."

"I heard he was here," replied the sheriff, his anger making him a little reckless in his next remark. "I know his tracks, too!"

"A man settin' on a cayuse don't make none," retorted Jake. "Don't hardly seem reasonable that a man life Lefty Joe, with all his cayuses, would ride the same one every time; specially when he knows, too, that they all make tracks." He chuckled. "Of course, he's got a whole slew of friends, in town an' out of it, an' they're mostly bad an' ornery.

Well, so has Rain-in-the-Face! We're all wearin' black vests, an' three of us has on blue shirts. "There's a hunk of gristle for you to chaw on!"

"I DON'T see no gristle in this room," rejoined the sheriff. "Frank, take them guns, an' then go through his belongin's."

Duncan smiled. "Tommy, you better take 'em before that coyote puts his paws on 'em, or gets what's in 'em. I'm the most particular man you ever knowed. You keep 'em for me till they turn me loose ag'in. They'll do that, too. The great oaks are growin', an' growin' rapid. Sheriff, yo're a bunglin', windy nincompoop."

Freckles burst into laughter as he appropriated one of the prisoner's guns for himself.

"Tommy might drop it an' bust the important ivory, he's that shaky," he explained, pushing the deputy back "It ain't none too heavy for me, Frank." He burst out laughing again, out of all proportion to any humor to be found in the word he fondly mouthed. "Nincompoop! Nincompoop! Got to remember that. Come on, boys, we'll rastle this thing out right here an' now. Then I'll speak my little piece. Lafe does a lot of talkin', but he ain't the only locoed fool in this part of the country. Not by a damned sight, he ain't. Nincompoop! Just wait till I see if I can find Lafe. We'll get him blind drunk an' listen to things that'll shore surprise a lot of folks hereabouts. Blind drunk, Rufe! Blind drunk, Artie! He knows things, Lafe does; only he won't tell. What's the matter, Artie? You look like you had a cramp!"

"Huh!" said Windy.

"Lafe's loco!" snapped the sheriff angrily. "An' when he's drunk he's worse!"

"Then you must be one of the very few that's seen him real drunk," retorted Freckles. "None of us ever has, but we will. Curious to know why Tupper's never lost no cattle when every other ranch hereabout has lost plenty. There's other things, too. Let's see if I can find him. Be right back," and he hurried from the room. When he had returned the arguments had begun. Effingham Lowell was now certain that the prisoner strongly resembled the hold-up man.

"Lafe has gone," Freckles reported as he entered and seated himself at Tommy's side, and took possession of the other surrendered gun. "Shut up!" he whispered at Tommy was about to object. He looked coldly and with frank hostility at the Easterner. "Lowell, yesterday you said that feller was short an' lean, with gray hair. I heard you. Was yo lyin' then, or are you lyin' now?"

A low and familiar sound outside the window caught the prisoner's ear and he stiffened slightly and after a moment glanced covertly out of the corner of his eye at the intent Freckles.

"Sir!" exploded Mr. Lowell, red and indignant. "Sir!"

"Oh, shut up!" snapped Freckles, and turned to the next one. "What you got to say about the looks of that hold-up feller? Does this man look like him? Think careful, you better!"

"Yes, he shore does. In fact, I'd even go so far——"

"You ain't got no idear of just how far yo're goin' if you don't look out," interrupted Freckles. "Yo're another liar. Keep still, Rufe. I'm runnin' this an' my language suits me an' this here occasion, so it ought to suit you. Everybody'll get a shot at this before we're through, but the shootin' is goin' to be plumb straight!" He turned back to the second witness. "Yesterday you said he was sorta fat an' about yore height. Didn't you?"

"No, I didn't! What I said yesterday——"

"Yo're swallerin' today," cut in Jake, who now was feeling immeasurably better. "I heard what you said yesterday. So did the rest of us. So did Jonesy. Ain't that right, Jones?"

The clerk, thus appealed to, welcomed his opportunity. He had recently spent one miserable day and a more miserable night in the local jail because of misdirected energies while on a very successful spree. The sheriff had put him there. This did not warp his testimony, but only made him eager to volunteer his entire knowledge of the affair.

"HE shore did," emphatically answered Mr. Jones, worried because he might forget something. "An' that other chump said it was a tall, big man with red hair. I heard 'em all, an' I remember every word they said. They

all was so uncertain about what he looked like that I says, in a joke, that mebbe it was a woman done it. They none of 'em saw alike. They're better liars than they are lookers."

"I don't see what all this nonsense has got to do with it," said the sheriff with pardonable heat. "Here comes Frank. Find anythin'?"

The deputy shook his head and leaned against the bar.

"Not no more'n you did," said Jake happily. "Go ahead, Freckles, anywhere you wants. Yo're ridin' strong, an' you ain't alone."

Freckles was idly drumming on the table, and across his knees lay the two Colts, their muzzles pointing at Duncan. He tried to kick his friend Tommy, who sat between him and the calm prisoner, without spilling the weapons to the floor, or to call any unnecessary attention to them, now that they had been forgotten. At last he succeeded, and his aggrieved friend glared at him as he rubbed a quivering shin.

"Tommy, see if you can find the driver an' the guard," Freckles ordered, frowning severely as his friend angrily pushed back his chair. "If you can't find 'em, bring me a horseshoe, or a drink of water, or somethin' like that," he whispered in his friend's ear. He whispered a little more, and Tommy repeated the signal for his reappearance, and what he was to say. "Git a rustle on you, Thomas, my boy."

Tommy did not like to miss anything, but he was a Star X man and he knew that his freckled friend was no fool. Therefore a strong sense of duty overcame his rampant curiosity to see what was going to be the finish of this interesting business, and he went. He pushed his chair farther back at the silent behest of his friend and passed the window in the rear wall. His careless glance out of it brought a momentary look of surprise to his face, and when he passed through the front door he was going strong, hoping that he would not miss the finish.

"Rufe," said Freckles, again turning to the sheriff, "these fellers are lyin'. Even you can see that, though you ain't lived an' slept with 'em. Somethin' has changed 'em from last night, when they set right here at this table for near six hours with Rain-in-the-Face an' was plumb friendly with him, while they

drank up a chunk of his an' our money."

"Mebbe yo're right, an' mebbe yo're wrong, but," retorted Rufe, "what I want to know is what the devil you reckon yo're doin' in this thing, hornin' in like you are? You don't even live in this town!"

"That's as good a reason as any, an' it's enough," rejoined Freckles. "Most of them that voted agin' you don't live in this town—except Tupper's friends. Now you listen to me. The Pike trail has been heavy traveled the last couple of days. After you follered them tracks from the ford you lost 'em on it, an' if you didn't lose 'em there, you shore lost 'em here in town before they turned into that stable out back. I don't care how much you've lived with tracks an' slept with tracks, I'm bettin' you fifty dollars, payable next payday, that you can't foller the tracks of my cayuse from that place, through this town an' out back. We'll let Rain-in-the-Face hold the stakes, seein' as he'll be the one man in town that can't get away with 'em, for awhile." He laughed, and continued: "I'll make 'em for you to-morrow. An' how do you know that this feller's cayuse is the one that made them tracks you follered south from the ford? Have you took out his cayuse an' made some fresh ones to look at?"

"Huh!" said Windy.

"Shut up, Windy. You talk too much!" snapped Freckles.

"I LOOKED at the cayuse before I come in here," sneered the peace officer. "I follered the tracks plumb to the door of the little stable an' in it." He felt a little uneasy, for his deductions had proved so good that he had not bothered to examine the horse. Had he expected such a cross-examination as this he would have dissected it. Stubborn anger made him reckless in his handling of the truth.

"An' I looked at it, myself, after I went through his belongin's," said Frank, the deputy, whose confidence in his chief's trailing ability was unlimited.

Freckles' eyes narrowed now at what he knew to be a lie. Up to now his interest in defending the stranger had been nothing more than perverseness, due to the effects of the drinking of the night before, contempt for the town-dwellers, and an active dislike for the sheriff and his deputies—he would have

done the same for a yellow dog. Now, however, each of the above reasons was not only strengthened, but to them was added a real and more than common interest in the suspect himself. He looked carelessly at the deputy.

"Frank," he said, "I'm bettin' you two months' pay that you can't read a hoss-track riddle that a fool puncher from the Star X will make for you tomorrow. Let it get three hours old, with the wind blowin' an' a light rain sprinklin' down an' I'll make it four months' pay."

"'Tain't a question if he can!" snapped the sheriff. "It's if I can!"

"Lefty Joe's been makin' tracks in this town an' out on the range for years an' years, an' you can't tell his'n when you see 'em!" interjected Jake, with spirit.

"But as yore bright young friend has said, he don't allus ride the same cayuse!" snapped the angry official.

"Then how you know he didn't make the ones you follered?" quickly demanded Freckles with great interest.

"Huh!" said Windy.

"Shut up!" whispered Jake fiercely. He leaned back and roared with laughter. "Rufe, you should 'a' been sleepin' with some of the Star X boys, instead of tracks, all these years! You'd shore know more if you had."

"I know those tracks were made by this feller's cayuse!" roared the sheriff. "An' no pack of fools can talk me out of it, neither!"

"Then you can guess how long ago it was shod," said Freckles. "Is the horn trimmed purty good, or has it growed down a lot? New shoes, or old ones? Which side of 'em is wore the most?"

"That's none of yore business!" shouted the sheriff.

"Reckon it ain't much of yourn, neither," retorted Freckles. "That can wait, though, till we all go out an' look at 'em. Before we go into the stable, yo're goin' to answer them questions. There ain't a man goin' to leave this room till you agree to that, or tell us them answers. There's only two reasons that would make you refuse to tell them answers: one is that you ain't seen them hoofs; the other is—you can guess that. I'm spendin' my time in that stable from now on. It won't be healthy for nobody to come a-visitin' me, neither!" His eyes narrowed. "You know me, Rufe!"

"While yo're doin' that," said Jake with great cheerfulness, "I'll raise the dust around this dog's town an' set a lot of tracks headin' this way. They'll all be plain to read, too. 'Take twenty to one,' they will!" It appeared that his headache had left him.

"I'm goin' to tell you somethin' about tracks, right now," said Freckles. "This here hold-up took place yesterday about two o'clock at the ford of the Blacktail used by the stage—the reg'lar ford. It did unless there's more liars cuttin' in this. That's easy two hours from here, by the stage road. It's a lot more the way you went. At half-past two this man Duncan rode up to me, out on our Salt Flats, asked me the way to town an' if I knowed anybody by the name of Hepburn livin' round here. He had been fooled by Corson's Cut-off, which led him off the trail. When he rode up his blanket was draggin' behind him on the ground. I remember that well, because I told him about it, an' he said he knowed it. I ain't very curious, so I asked him why in hell if he knowed it he was doin' it. He says it was to brush out the varmints that had got into it, which is somethin' worth rememberin'. We swapped tobacco an' talked for awhile an' then he rode off. He must 'a' took it easy because when us boys come into town we bumped smack into him at the crossin' of the streets out here. An' we all of us got here just when the stage was comin' in. There's some of that gristle Jake was tellin' you about, a short time back."

WINDY opened his mouth, but did not speak. He had remembered his warnings just in time.

The outfit of the Star X was noted locally for being clannish, and Freckles' two friends lived up to its reputation by maintaining grave facial expressions with but little effort. The quiet stranger, who all along had taken the proceedings with a strange indifference, was now looking interestedly at his new friend, and he noticed the two surrendered guns, with their ivory butts now temptingly toward him. They lay across Freckles' knees, under the shielding protection of the overhanging edge of the table. Into his consciousness there gradually had crept the recognition of a change in the monotonous, constantly repeated rhythm of Freckles' drumming fingers, and he

idly glanced at them, whereupon they instantly became quiet. After a moment he glanced away and they promptly began drumming again. This struck him as curious, and he experimented a few times, with always the same result. Thereupon he lazily re-crossed his feet and became buried in thought.

"You said you found tracks," continued Freckles ironically.

"An' you didn't see the signs of that trailin' blanket? Well, mebbe you ain't been sleeping with blankets, like you has with tracks."

The stranger caught a repetition of the low sound outside and instantly the fingers began drumming again, galloping on and on, faster and faster. Freckles' right leg raised and fell gently, raising the butts of the captured weapons up and down.

"Look here, Freckles," said the sheriff with sudden graciousness, "there's a hull lot in what you been sayin'. There's allus two sides to a question. These here gents are shore he looks strong like the feller that held them up, an' I ain't supposed to question their word. I know they said different yesterday, but they was all excited then. I say them tracks led from the ford, right into that old stable. I'll swear to that. There ain't no doubt, at all. I give you my word for that. On the other hand, you says he was with you on the Salt Flats about that time, an' I'm admittin' there wasn't never a cayuse foaled that could get from the ford to them flats in half an hour. Of course, you ain't swore to that now; which you will have to do later when you repeat it. Are you shore about the hour you met him? I'm admittin' that the tracks I follered didn't go to them flats. Also I'm promisin' you that I'm goin' to them flats just as soon as I can get there. I want to see them tracks. Meanwhile, there ain't nothin' else for me to do but hold this feller till we finds out more——"

"Hey!" shouted Tommy from the door. "I found 'em! They're both comin', pronto. I got—— *Holy Smoke!*" he breathed, as surprising things happened rapidly.

THE table soared from the floor and struck the sheriff under the chin. A chair whizzed through his field of blurred vision and took the

deputy at his side halfway to the door with it. A second chair closely following the first turned another deputy halfway around and sent his belching gun spinning into the office. Freckles, startled by the unexpectedness of the action, and his balance rudely disturbed by the cat-like recovery of the surrendered guns, fell over backward and frantically grabbed at the nearest object to save himself. This, unfortunately, was the remaining and swift-moving deputy just behind him. They went to the floor together and became tangled up with each other and the chair, and the deputy's gun slid against the wall, where Jake clumsily booted it into a far corner. The room was full of dust and movement. Duncan had streaked to and out of the open window and landed, feet first, almost against the side of a saddled horse, and in another bound he was on the animal's back and tearing for the open country like a frightened rabbit, making tracks directly toward the big canyon in the frowning walls of the Black Buttes, a canyon entirely different in its arrangement than the one on the east edge of the Buttes, facing the Bar O, and the whistling of the wind past his ears was a sweet and welcome sound.

After Jake had arisen from his chair and awkwardly booted the Colt across the room he became frantically anxious to get outside before the shooting became promiscuous. He bolted for the front door, and, in keeping with his characteristic directness, chose the straightest course. This, it is sad to relate, led through the heart of the excited little crowd and resulted in bruising and shakings up for every one. His panic was so blind that he had bumped squarely into an arising deputy, and the latter's gun drilled one more hole in the board ceiling of the room. The two men rolled across the floor from the momentum of the collision and struck the still-groping sheriff just behind his wobbly knees. It was at the moment when this officer was about to shoot instinctively at the figure going through the rear window. The officer later assured Jake that he did not intentionally sit down upon him. The Easterner who had lost the precious watch with the baby's tooth marks unfortunately got in the pan-

icky puncher's way, and for many days carried the blue imprint of Jake's left foot exactly in the small of his back. When he struck the clerk's desk in the office he bounced back, but not back into the bar-room.

Freckles, like the loyal and law-abiding citizen he was, had bounded to his feet like a rubber ball, leaped to the rear windows and filled it with his person as he shot eagerly and too rapidly after the fleeing horseman. He filled the opening so completely, despite the slenderness of his build, that no one else could get a glimpse of the fugitive until they had dragged this zealous citizen and his empty but still clicking gun from the important opening and vantage point. Indeed, his zeal was such that he did not at once realize the motives which inspired them, and excitedly resisted their efforts. He thus is exonerated from any suspicion that it was he who so violently assaulted Effingham Lowell, of Albany, with a chair just as that unfortunate gentleman was ducking through the door leading into the office. Tommy, when questioned about this regrettable incident, replied that the only man he had seen with a chair in his hands was a tall, stout, lean fellow with red hair and gray whiskers—which only deepened the mystery. Windy, nursing all his knuckles, found himself outside the front door and saw Jake leaning placidly against the wall. Jake glanced around and then grinned as well as he could with two teeth missing and a split in his lip. "Terrible thing, a stampede," he said.

"Huh!" said Windy.

Turmoil, confusion, curses, and darting members of the sheriff's posse seeking saddled horses. Shouts and orders flew up and down the street. An apologetic and abashed Star X contingent draped itself mournfully on the hotel porch, nursing various minor injuries, and tried to explain, in many different ways, just how it all had happened.

A MOUNTED deputy, his face scratched and bloody from scraping itself across the barroom floor, jerked his horse onto its haunches and scowled into the placid countenance of Freckles.

"How'd that feller's cayuse git under that back window?" he shouted.

"Don't know, Frank," answered the nonplussed puncher. "It couldn't 'a' been there when I went after Lafe, because you looked at it after I come in. After you looked through Duncan's belongin's!"

Frank flushed. "There's somethin' rotten in this town!" he snarled.

Freckles nodded complacently. "Didn't I say as much? It'll get better soon, though," he finished, looking down the street at the deputies streaming toward the Buttes.

Having expressed their deep sympathy for the sheriff of McLeod and their burning regret over the lamentable escape of a desperate criminal, the Star X contingent solemnly shook hands with the cheery hotel clerk, and solemnly and soberly departed for their ranch, all with a brighter outlook on life.

The following day, when the sheriff started for the Salt Flats, being until then much occupied in other directions, he had no trouble at all in finding that portion of the Star X ranch, because he followed the tracks of a herd of shod and unshod horses which marked a wandering course from the Pike trail to the flats and from the flats into town. At the flats he pulled up for a moment to glance sorrowfully along the tracks of an unshod horse which came from and returned to the ranch-houses of the Star X. These must have been made by Freckles when he rode out to swap tobacco with the wandering and confused stranger; they looked to Rufe to be very fresh, and they caused him to use words which he never had learned inside of a school-room. Officers of the law are naturally suspicious because of their training, or lack of it, and because of the nature of their work; all of which is proved by the way he talked to himself as he occasionally caught sight of bits of wool torn from a gray blanket by thorns here and there along the trail, which trail often seemed to have wandered aside for the purpose of finding said thorns.

One incident, perhaps, will throw a great deal of light on the happenings of these few days. When the foreman of the Star X returned from the smaller horse corral early in the morning, after his punchers had come back from town, having provided himself

with the horse he wished to ride that day, he was angry about something and went straight to the bunkhouse to find out about it. Instead of finding the entire outfit at breakfast, as he expected, four chairs were empty.

"Where are the rest of the boys?" he demanded, looking around the room. "Somebody's been drivin'—"

The *segundo* hastily arose and whispered earnestly and to some length in his foreman's ear, whereupon the foreman took his grin into the darkened bunkroom and silently looked down upon the missing four, who slept soundly in the utter relaxation of their merited and peaceful rest. For fully half a minute the foreman stood thus, remembering the wild tale he had heard the night before; and then he deferentially removed his big, soft sombrero and tip-toed to the door and even on to the side of the waiting horse.

"Great Jumpin' Wildcats!" he told it, reverently, and urged it forthwith toward the Salt Flats.

CHAPTER V

INTO THE BUTTES

WITH the start he had been given and with a rested horse under him, the fugitive whirled toward the great canyon splitting the face of the forbidding buttes and felt no apprehension of being overhauled. Jeff was superior to the great majority of animals found on the ranges, the trail was plainly marked by the wheel prints of Lafe's great wagon, and as he pushed on at the best speed of his mount he echoed a remark made by one of his late friends concerning Lafe: why did this person, with only himself and daughter, freight in such quantities of provisions and other supplies from the town? It was no annual visit, this trip of the teamster's, for he made it every few weeks.

A backward glance showed him a few dots, rising and falling against the background of a toy town. They strung out while he looked and seemed to grow even smaller. He smiled at this, for he knew he was distancing them a little more every minute he rode. Nearer and nearer came the great canyon; what lay in it or beyond

it, in that wild and mysterious butte country? Did this canyon connect with that other one he had helped to explore the year before? Evidently strangers were not welcome. He had thought it wise to have a strong reason for penetrating into that unfriendly region, and he now thought it might be well to strengthen that reason. With the coming of this idea he checked his horse and went on at a lope; whereupon the following dots became slowly but steadily larger. Two miles, one mile, and then he drew a heavy rifle from its saddle sheath and fired carefully, aiming to miss. Following the roar of the shot came a splitting among the group of dots, now easily determinable. The posse separated, spread out, but did not slow up for a moment. For added to the compelling interest provided by man hunts, they had personal reasons for the recapture of this man, and their gain pleased them; but, do what they could, they were unable to cut down that mile.

At last the towering walls of the great mesas were before Duncan, the winding canyon between them closed in upon him and echoed and re-echoed the pounding hoofs of his racing horse. Great rock cliffs frowned down upon him, their smooth rock sides bare of vegetation above the line of detritus. Along the bottom were pools of water in the deeper and more shaded parts of the stream bed, and patches of grass and brush and clumps of stunted trees made a pleasing contrast to the barren rock walls rising high above. He glanced back again and found his view cut off by a great bend in the chasm; and as he faced forward again a bullet whined high above his head and spat venomously against a rock near by. He slid the rifle into its sheath and raised his hands, guiding his horse by his knees. The report of the shot came from a point high up on the right hand wall, and, while the echoes were tumbling through the canyon another shot sounded from the same place. He did not hear this bullet, but there came an answering report from the direction of the canyon's mouth. For once the sheriff and his posse had entered the great defile, carried into it by the momentum given by their shame and spite. It was the high-water mark of all their Black Butte ventures, but

they did not stay for long. Hidden riflemen four hundred feet in the air are not to be lightly faced.

Another bullet spatted against a rock so close to him that he instinctively ducked and checked his horse, but even as he stopped it he swung it around to face the back trail, having no certain knowledge that the posse had been turned back.

"Ride ahead at a walk," said a voice high above him. "Fold yore arms. Nobody's follerin' you no more. Any quick move will be yore last."

HE obeyed and jogged along the trail, still following the wagon tracks. Soon he turned to the right and then to the left, rounded a sharp bend in the wall and came to a sudden contraction of the canyon, where the walls drew so close together as to leave room only for the narrowed bed of the creek. Along this, rough as it was, went the wagon tracks, sometimes lost to sight where they dipped into pools of varying lengths and depths, their water as clear as flawless glass. Another sharp turn and the wheel marks left the creek bed and went up an incline so steep that it fully explained why Lafe's wagon was drawn by an eight-horse team. He reached the top of the incline and stopped his horse again as another voice accosted him.

"Git off on this side an' drop yore hardware."

Duncan looked around, saw no one, and slowly obeyed, walking a few paces from the horse and his dropped six guns as a proof of the honesty of his intentions.

"Turn around and don't look back," came a further command. When he had obeyed he heard quick steps and then the voice spoke again. "All right. How'd you come to head this way?"

The fugitive slowly turned and saw the new possessor of his gun, an individual in no particular way different from the type common to cow towns and their vicinity.

"I was lookin' for a hole to crawl in, an' this was the first I saw. Didn't have no time to look well. Only thing that saved me was the posse got a late start. Not knowin' this country, I was lucky to find a place like this."

"Tain't hard to see," admitted the other, swinging the Colts from a finger

thrust through their trigger guards. He drew the rifle from the saddle sheath and swung it under his left arm. "Git aboard ag'in, an' keep goin', follerin' the wagon tracks till they turn off up a side canyon. You'll know where to leave 'em an' where to stop."

"What about them?" asked the fugitive, looking at the surrendered weapons. "They're such old friends I don't want to lose 'em."

"Mebbe you'll git 'em back, an' then mebbe you won't. What was it a-chasin' you?"

"Sheriff Nincompoop, of McLeod."

"Then what's happened to Rufe since mornin'?" demanded the guard in some surprise.

"What you mean, since mornin'?"

"Rufe was sheriff then, when"—he paused—"when we heard of him last, he was."

"He's gone blind."

"Hell you say!"

"He can't tell my cayuse's tracks from them made by that feller that stuck up the stage."

"Is he stone blind?" asked the guard, somewhat hopefully.

"No, just track blind. Can't tell one from another."

"Hope so, but I reckon yo're wrong there. There ain't nobody in this country can read tracks like him."

"Then he's a liar."

"Mebbe; don't know nothin' about that. Most sheriffs are, 'cordin to my experience with 'em. Better move along now, time's flyin'."

"How'd you know I wasn't one of that cussed posse?"

"Easy, stranger. We all know who belongs to town. You wouldn't got past Larry if you wasn't chased. Yo're luckier than some others has been."

"How'd he come to let me get past, then?"

"Might be because he knowed I was here waitin' for you. Git along—time's flyin'!"

Duncan mounted, waved his hand at his captor and went along the trail. He soon turned another jutting point of rock, slipped off his horse, struck it on the rump and then shouted at the top of his lungs for help. Clattering feet replied to his call and the canyon guard, still carrying the captured weapons, turned the corner to see the stranger piled up in a heap against a

boulder, his horse trotting briskly up the trail.

The guard dropped the weapons and hurried on to the injured man.

"You sat a saddle like you knowed how to ride," he growled in strong disgust as he bent over the limp figure. Then he pitched across it and landed on his back as the fugitive suddenly came to life and heaved. The next thing the guard knew was that he was looking into the muzzle of his own gun and listening to the fugitive's soothing remarks.

"Didn't like to be rough with you, but I never like to be without them guns," said the man with the Colt. "Had 'em took away from me once before today, an' it riled me considerable. Where was I goin' when I got throwed off?"

"To the camp," came the surly answer. "Look here, friend, if you go there with them guns we'll both be in trouble up to our necks. I know what that means, an' I'd ruther git out of this country than let you git past here with 'em! Anyhow, there's another feller, further on, that'll stop you. You can't git through with 'em, an' you'll only git me in trouble."

"Where'd you come from before you struck this country?" asked Duncan, smiling.

"All over the country; why?"

"What towns you been in?"

"Santer Fe, Albuquerque, 'Paso—all of 'em. Why?"

DUNCAN'S smile grew. "What town was it where we was friends?" he asked.

"What you talkin' about?"

"Well, I don't want to march you into camp, past that other guard, an' all, in front of yore own guns an' me wearin' all of mine. It'd look bad for you, me bein' a total stranger."

"I'm here to tell you it wouldn't look any too cussed good for you, neither!" snorted the guard. "An' me! I wouldn't last five minutes!"

"Kinda reckoned it'd be bad for both of us," admitted Duncan, "but if you an' me was old friends an' you knowed me well enough to let me ride in with my guns on—why, that'd be different, wouldn't it?"

"What you up to? What's yore

game?" demanded the disarmed guard suspiciously.

"I was accused of holdin' up the stage a couple of days ago, which of course I didn't do. You can see that, easy."

"Shore; you wouldn't no more hold up a stage than I would," replied the canyon guard.

Duncan studied his companion in some doubt. "Reckon not. Anyhow, I was accused of doin' it, which is the main thing, an' I took a big chance gettin' away from yore good friend, Rufe. If the winder had been smaller I couldn't 'a' done it. I had to get to cover quick an' this place looked best an' closest."

"Rufe ain't no friend of mine!" retorted the guard. "Don't blame you none so far, but why are you so hell-bent on keepin' yore guns? Nobody's goin' to eat you if yo're tellin' the truth."

"Rufe was told the truth an' he didn't believe it. That bein' so, yore friends might not believe it. The main point is I never go nowhere without my guns, just like you. Now then, what town was it?"

"Better make it far away; some of the boys come from the towns I named. Suppose we met each other in Van Buren, Arkansaw, three years ago? My name's Washita Charley; what's yourn?"

"Call me Duncan; that's as good as anythin' else."

"All right, Duncan; but what was we doin' around Van Buren?"

"Rustlin' when it was safe; gamblin' an' stealin'," answered the fugitive with calm assurance.

"Are you shore you wasn't there about the time I said?" asked the guard with rampant suspicion.

"Might 'a' been. Can't say just where I was, three years back."

"All right, Duncan, but don't forget that I'll be watchin' you close when I'm off duty here. First mistake you make will be yore last, for I'll get you, even if it's from behind."

Duncan nodded. "That's fair enough, Washita. I ain't aimin' to make none of them kind of mistakes."

"All right. I'm goin' back now."

"Wait till I get them guns out of yore way," said Duncan, backing off. He picked up his Colts and slid them

into their holsters, put the rifle under his arm and then, emptying the guard's gun, he placed it on a rock. "How's that loco wagon driver mixed up with you fellows?" he idly asked.

"That's somethin' I had to find out for myself, an' I ain't shore that I've found out all about it," replied the guard. "Reckon you'll have to learn that for yoreself, like I did."

"Like you didn't," corrected Duncan, grinning. "All right, Washita: come ahead now; but if I was you I wouldn't pick up that empty gun till I've been gone about five minutes. It ain't no good ag'in a rifle, anyhow." He whistled, and at the sound the grazing horse, two hundred yards up the trail, raised its head and trotted to obey its master.

Washita grunted. "Fine cayuse you got there. I like to see 'em well trained."

"Jeff's a good cayuse; easy gaited, too. I can ride him all day an' not get tired. Just like settin' in a rock-in' chair."

"Cussed if I could: must be the way you set him."

"Don't forget that Van Buren's on the Arkansaw River," laughed Duncan as he went to meet the horse, "an' don't forget them five minutes, Washita; they ain't begun to start yet, you know."

"All right, Duncan. See you later, if yo're alive."

Duncan mounted and went on along the trail, facing around in the saddle until well out of range of the Colt behind him. He came to the side canyon, up which the tracks of the wagon lay, and pulled up while he considered the situation. The wagon tracks lured him, but he quickly decided against following them and went on again, passing several more bends. As he rounded the last of these and looked ahead the canyon appeared to come to an abrupt end a quarter of a mile farther on and he pulled up once more, considering this.

"Ain't lost, air ye?" asked a sarcastic voice from somewhere near.

Duncan turned lazily in his saddle and looked toward the place the voice had seemed to come from.

"Not now, I ain't, but I nearly was before I saw Washita," he answered. "He said to keep on through this canyon, straight ahead, past that side

lead: but mebbe I mistook him. How'll I get to the camp!"

"Who let ye git this fur with all them guns?" demanded the voice. It came from above and Duncan glanced up.

He smiled. "Charley was strong for takin' 'em till he saw who I was. We was near speechless with surprise. Never reckoned on meetin' out in this country; but anythin's liable to happen when yo're chased by a posse. Should I 'a' follered them wagon tracks, back yonder?"

"You better keep away from them wagon tracks till we know more about ye," came the sharp reply. "So yer a friend o' Charley's, are ye? Huh! Well, if he let ye past I reckon I ain't got no call fer to stop ye. Keep a-goin' like ye was. Soon's ye git out o' the canyon ye'll see whar to go."

DUNCAN nodded and went on, looking curiously about him and appearing to be somewhat puzzled by the blank wall of the canyon ahead. Its threat of being a bar to further riding did not change until he came within a score of paces of it, and then he saw a narrow cleft splitting the left-hand wall at an acute angle. This cleft was so narrow that at places his knees rubbed both walls at once, and when he came to the end of it he checked his horse and gazed in surprise at the scene before him.

He had expected to find steep-walled valleys like those he had explored with the first trail outfit on the other side of the eroded plateau, but hardly anything like the one he now looked upon. Under his gaze lay a great, grassy plain a few hundred feet below the level of the tops of the surrounding buttes, sloping from its edges to a stream which flowed northeastward from a swampy place a few hundred yards across. In the middle distance, rising sharply from the western edge of a small creek, was a wedge-shaped butte which split the farther half of the valley into two nearly equal parts. This division was carried out by a crude fence running from the point of the great wedge up to a small, fenced-in pasture in which half a score of horses were impounded. Over both halves of the valley numbers of cattle were grazing.

A glance along the towering wall at his right showed two adobe buildings squatting under an out-thrust part of the cliff, and not far from them a few men were at work branding full-grown cattle. Toward this group he rode, slumped lazily in his saddle, careless and nonchalant, accepting everything as matter of course. One of the group arose to his feet, blinking from the smoke of singed hair, and waved his hand to his companion. The two riders loosed their ropes and let the cow gain its feet, alertly watching it until it chose a docile course and lumbered off to freedom. The man on foot tossed the iron toward the near-by fire, wiped the sweat from his face and turned to speak to his companions, caught sight of the slowly approaching horseman and, staring incredulously, shouted a warning and drew his six-gun, his companions following his lead.

Duncan smiled at the war-like preparations, but came on without a pause. "Howd'y," he said, pleasantly. "Is this the camp Washita was tellin' me about?"

"Where'd you come from an' who are you?" growled the man on foot, scowling and suspicious.

"McLeod. Name's Duncan. I didn't know that sheriff would stop at the canyon; but Charley says he allus does. Got some sense, if he is a fool."

"Got more sense than some folks, I reckon," retorted a rider, pointedly. "What you doin' here anyhow?"

"Tryin' to keep out of jail," answered the intruder. "This whole cussed country seems hos-tile. Got chased out of Pike, have been cussed by every puncher I met, an' had to come a-flyin' from McLeod. Don't seem a hull lot welcome here, though Washita seemed to be glad to see me ag'in. He'd said he was with a good gang this time, an' I'm shore hopin' he's right. Where'll I get somethin' to eat?"

"Friend of Washita's, are you?" queried the man on foot, mellowing a little. "Hum!"

"Was till I lost track of him down to Van Buren. I was shore surprised to stumble on him back yonder—and right glad. Who's runnin' this here outfit?"

"What did Rufe want you for?"

"Stickin' up the stage," answered the

stranger, grinning. "The funny part of it is I might 'a' done that very thing after I got the lay of the land an' learned what was what. 'Tain't hardly right to accuse a man before he does somethin', no matter what he might 'a' been thinkin'." He grinned again, expansively. "Of course I didn't do it."

"You shore are frank an' open," commented a rider. "Reckon we oughta turn you over. Did Rufe track you?"

"Yes; said he did, anyhow."

"Huh! So you was only figgerin' on doin' it, mebber?"

"Charley said you was friends of his'n," complained Duncan, a little worried. "I wouldn't 'a' talked so careless if he hadn't. Who's the feller out in this part of the country that owns the blue neck-kerchiefs with white peacocks on 'em?" he asked, as if to change the subject.

THE three exchanged looks and then regarded the newcomer all the more closely.

"Nobody that I knows of," answered the man on foot curiously. "Why?"

"Rufe's lookin' for him, hard. The stage passengers remembered the peacock on the feller's mask, though they couldn't remember nothin' else. After I get somethin' to eat I'll give you a hand. Might as well start right in bein' useful as well as good-lookin'. Where'll I feed?"

"There ain't nothin' more to do now," said one of the riders. "We just got through."

"Been roundin' up some mavericks," explained the man on foot, starting toward the houses. "Beats all how the yearlin's straggle off into the canyons an' start keepin' house in some valley fur away. I reckon the moss-heads chase 'em away from the cows till they has to hunt grass of their own." He glanced around at the scattered bunch of four-year-olds which paused often to lick the red and smarting iron marks. "There's a bunch that's been by themselves for near three years. We stumbled on 'em accidental the other day."

The riders pushed on and dismounted at the door of the larger house, and by the time Duncan and his companion reached the building the pleasant aroma of coffee permeated the air. The fact that it had stood on its

grounds since breakfast and was now warmed over made no difference to these hungry and uncritical men. They quickly sat down to a substantial meal of bacon, beans, beef, biscuits and coffee, and by the time they had finished and were loading pipes or rolling cigarettes there came the sounds of horses nearing the buildings.

"Whose cayuse is that?" angrily demanded a voice. "Hello, in there! Whose cayuse is that?"

The branding-iron man sauntered to the door and looked out. "We got comp'ny," he replied, facetiously.

"Don't be so damned smart!" snapped the voice above the jingle of chains and the squeak of leather. "Who is he, an' where'd he come from? Who let him through the canyon? Are you tongue-tied?"

"He's a friend of Charley's," was the answer. "We got him in here, waitin' for you. Ain't no cause to go on the prod!"

A long shadow flowed through the doorway, preceding its owner, who stopped on the threshold and peered inside, impatient until his eyes should adjust themselves to the dull light of the interior. Behind him half a dozen men silently filed into the room, their eyes on the stranger who stood against the rough table and nonchalantly regarded the leader. His pose was deceptive, for he was ready to fight for his life at the first unmistakable movement.

"You got him!" sneered the leader, his hand resting on his gun. "Looks like it, with him totin' two guns! Speak up quick, stranger. Who are you? How'd you get here? What you doin' here?" The speaker's eyes were like those of a snake, beady, glinting, cold.

Duncan re-told his story, his calmness unshaken. He acted as if he knew he was among friends and sympathizers, one outlaw among others, bound to them with a common tie.

"Rufe say he follered yore tracks from the ford into town?" demanded the interrogator. "He did, huh? Then it's a bettin' proposition. Follered 'em right up to the stable, huh? What time did you get to town? When the stage did, huh? Well, that don't mean so much, not with that cayuse, outside. What did you do with the stuff?

We'll find a way to get it for you."

"Didn't get no stuff because I didn't hold up the stage," answered Duncan.

"That so? Well, I heard you did. Anythin' you got before you came in here belongs to you, I reckon; 'though I'm advisin' you to get it an' turn it in the first chance you get to leave the Buttes. We split everythin', accordin' to a fixed plan."

"Find the man that owns the peacock handkerchiefs an' you'll find the man that should split his winnin's," replied Duncan calmly. "I didn't stick up the stage, 'though I might 'a' done it later on."

AT the mention of the peacock handkerchiefs the leader looked a little self-conscious, but he controlled his expression.

"Mebbe you'll do; but," he drawled, a sneer shaping itself about his lips, "if you didn't do it, who you reckon did?"

"Hadn't no idea, at all. Some said it was Lefty Joe, whoever he is."

The leader laughed contemptuously. "It's allus Lefty Joe!" he said. "Lefty Joe, or the Black Buttes; an' when they say Black Buttes they mean Lefty Joe."

"So I told 'em," said a complaining voice from the door. "Jest what I said! So I told 'em that there feller done it, an' he did, too!"

In the door, pressing against the nearer casing, was Lafe, his skinny arm outstretched and his bony finger pointing accusingly at the stranger. "I'd 'a' took one to twenty on it, I would; but they was blamin' the Buttes, they was, till I told 'em he done it, hisself!"

"Thanks!" sneered Duncan.

The leader laughed. "He's just the same as admitted it, Lafe; but didn't you forget somethin'?"

Lafe was picking at his belt and was lost in abstraction, but as the last few words sunk into his mind he squirmed and rallied his animal cunning to his aid. "Didn't forget to get it: jest forgot to bring it. I gave it to my daughter myself before I remembered. My head is funny sometimes an' I forget things. It was awful purty. Twenty to one on it."

"Yore head mebbe is funny, but it don't never give you the worst of

nothin'!" snapped the leader. "Yo're too generous with what don't belong to you!" He was studying the old man intently, evidently a little puzzled. "That's the fourth time you've give her my presents. You tell her they come from me, every one of 'em! Hear what I say? Tell 'em they all come from me!"

"All right, Joe; but you oughter let me have a gun. You've got lots of guns over here, an' I'm scairt without none over there. I'm scairt, I am. Wolves howlin' every night in the buttes! Ought to let me have a gun, Joe, you should!"

The wagoner slid away from the door, senselessly repeating his request as long as they could hear his voice. A few minutes later Duncan caught a glimpse of him through the open window, a dejected figure astride a dejected horse.

Lefty Joe turned toward the door to go to his own quarters, and paused as he reached it, looking back at Duncan. "There ain't many rules out here, Duncan; but what there is you'd better listen to. Keep away from that feller's valley; don't talk to no woman you might meet; no gun-fightin' with nobody in this outfit 'cept me; do what yo're told, an' stay right here in sight of somebody till I tell you to do different. After I have a talk with Charley I'll mebbe have more to talk to you about."

Duncan nodded. "Any time. Don't happen to know anybody hereabouts by name of Hepburn, do you?"

Lefty Joe's face hardened a little and he ignored the question. "Not *any* time: *my* time!" he snapped, and went out toward his own quarters.

After his exit a general conversation started. It was as if a shadow had lifted and let naturally exuberant spirits out from under its blight. No one knew any Hepburn in this part of the country.

CHAPTER VI

LOCAL HISTORY

DUNCAN opened his eyes and looked around the bunk-room, waiting for his memory to explain where he was, and to bring him up to date with events. He

was alone in the room, but he heard a cracked voice singing somewhere near. He had slept unusually well and the only knowledge he had of the departure of the men was a vague and confused remembrance of being slightly disturbed some time in the night or early morning. What time it now was he had no means of knowing, but he could see that it was broad daylight. The singing came nearer and Washita Charley entered the room.

"Awake, huh?" grunted Charley. "Yore saw shore hit plenty of knots this mornin'. I've heard snorin', but you win the gent's first prize. Come on, git up; an' we'll eat."

"All right, Charley," replied Duncan, lazily sitting up and swinging his legs over the side of the bunk. "They should 'a' got me up when they did. I ain't lookin' for no special favors."

"An' you ain't goin' to git no special favors," chuckled Charley. "There ain't nothin' happens 'round here that ain't figgered out. Joe's usin' his head all the time, day an' night." He turned toward the door leading into the other room. "Come along soon's you can. I'll tell the cook to put it on the table."

"You must be hungry, waitin' for me," Duncan replied, slipping into his trousers. "You shouldn't 'a' done it: you should use yore head, like Lefty Joe."

"I'm usin' it. I ate with the boys. Now I'm eatin' ag'in, that's all. Finished my spell watchin' in the canyon this mornin', an' gettin' away from there allus gives me a powerful appetite."

As soon as Washita went out Duncan reached behind him, down between the grass-filled mattress and the wall, and brought up a handful of cartridges. Emptying his left-hand gun he carefully examined the cartridges and then re-loaded it with some of those from under the mattress. The remaining dozen of the cached cartridges he slipped into his chaps' pocket, and those he had taken from the gun he shoved into the belt loops, and remembered where they went. A quick examination of the weapons satisfied him as to their general condition and he slid them back into their holsters as he went toward the door.

"Just like old times, huh, Duncan?"

chuckled Washita across the table. "Where all have you been the last three years? We shore got separated." "Pokin' 'round 'most everywhere, Charley," answered Duncan. "Been up north a lot. Healthier country up there, every way; an' not so settled, some places. Strange faces in a strange land is useful, sometimes."

Charley laughed. "Many's th' time I found that so. Here, help yoreself. If I ain't forgot, yo're a hawg for bacon."

"Yore mem'ry's good. Say, there can't be much line-ridin', up here. Still, I reckon they do stray, more or less."

"Some: cows is cows, everywhere. Yore friend Rufe shore is peeved about you," said Charley, turning the subject. "He's sent notices about you to all the other towns, so when you leave the Buttes you'll git took quick. I don't like a shod cayuse for a job like that. Even if you put good cow-hide moccasins over the shoes they don't last, no time at all, out here. If it ain't shod it's easy to change the shape of the hoofs if you got a good knife an' know how; but with shoes on 'em, then it's different. I see they didn't git yore guns."

"They took 'em, but I got 'em back ag'in," replied his companion, pushing back. "Cook makes good coffee: I shore like it strong. What you aimin' to do today?"

"Loaf around. I got the day off. Show you around if you wants, as long as I do the guidin'."

"I don't care: you can if you wants, if there's nothin' else to do," carelessly replied Duncan. "I'd rather get busy at somethin' useful, an' earn my salt."

"You'll earn it; time enough for that. Everythin's figgered out. Come on; let's git started." He glanced at the kitchen and scowled heavily, shaking his head.

HALF an hour later they rounded the end of a mesa and came to a small grove of cottonwoods on the banks of a muddy creek. Washita pulled up and dismounted.

"Let's set here awhile," he suggested. "Reckon we're fur enough way from the cook's ears, though they shore are powerful listeners. Got some questions to ask you. Mebbe we're not goin' to

be as good friends as you figger on."

Duncan joined him, sitting cross-legged on the grass. He was calm and self-possessed. "Go ahead an' ask 'em," he said, stretching ecstatically.

"You've got me inter this neck deep, now," complained Charley, a worried look on his face. "Strikes me I ought to know where I'm ridin', seein' I'm goin' so rapid. What's yore little game, anyhow?"

"Just at present it's nothin' more than hidin' out from Rufe," answered his companion, frowning a little. "That Freckles feller give me the tip without knowin' it when he was ridin' the sheriff with spurs on. From what he said to Rufe about these here buttes I shore reckoned they was the place for me if I could get away an' into 'em. He ain't likin' Rufe very much, I reckon?"

"Not much; 'though it ain't nothin' personal. Politics mostly, though everybody knows Rufe is a city marshal more'n he is a sheriff. He looks after the town a hull lot more'n he does after the rest of the country. The cowmen don't like that, at all. One of Freckles' friends run ag'in Rufe an' got beat, an' the election was some hot an' the speeches was plain an' unfriendly. Rufe's been sheriff out here without a break for nigh onto twelve years; an' as long as Tupper's runnin' the party he'll keep on bein' sheriff."

"Tupper?" murmured Duncan. "Seems to me I heard that name somewhere before. Tupper? Who's he, Charley?"

"Rancher over southwest of here, outside the buttes. He's the feller that's got Lafe's old ranch. Big man, he is. Got lots o' sense as well as money. You'd think a feller like him would put a man in for sheriff that would do what he was told, wouldn't you? Most politicians figger that way, bein' for themselves first, last an' always. Tupper, he don't. He's got brains, an' don't have to. There is other ways. Rufe is straight, but he's so cussed wrapped up in his pet game of trackin', an' so plumb stupid in other ways, that he don't bother folks much."

"He can't track worth a damn!" grunted Duncan contemptuously.

"He can't, huh?" chuckled Charley. "If yore cayuse didn't make 'em

tracks he follered, you could 'a' proved it easy by showin' 'em yore hoss's feet, couldn't you?"

Duncan looked sheepish and idly tossed a rock among a group of bowlders. A whirring rattle answered it and a gleaming, ovate head arose above a large stone, the beady eyes fixed upon him. The thrower swore under his breath and, drawing his right-hand gun, shot at the snake and missed it every time. He swore out loud and reached for the other weapon, but there came a flash and a roar at his side and the mangled head drove down out of sight.

Charley ejected the empty shell, shoved a fresh cartridge into his gun and slipped the weapon back into its holster without saying anything, but on his face was a wordless disgust. Five shots at twenty feet, and all of them wild! This man Duncan had no business to wear two guns, and wear them low; he courted death by his pretense of being a gunman.

"WHAT are you figgerin' on doin'?" he asked the poor marksman, who was angrily shoving cartridges into the smoking gun. "Yo're in here; then what?"

"Yes; I'm in here, an' I don't want to get out ag'in, not with Rufe passin' the word around to watch for me. I'm a purty good hand with cows. I can rope, ride herd, an' run a brand through a wet blanket with the next man; an' I can bust cayuses good enough to make a livin' at it. Lefty Joe say anythin' to you about me?"

"He was gone when I come in from the canyon," answered Charley. "If I was you I wouldn't pretend I didn't stiek up the stage. Looks like you don't trust us; an' you got to do that for awhile, anyhow. One of the boys come in from town last night an' he told us all about it. He was wonderin' how them Star X fellers are goin' to fix up them tracks around their salt flats. Shore as hell Rufe'll look for 'em." He glanced at the rock hiding the mangled snake. "Before I forget it, Duncan; don't you git in no gun arguments with nobody here, 'specially Lefty Joe. He's leader now because he's got the best gun hand of anybody hereabouts. Shot his way up to where he is; an' one shot was allus enough,

every time. If you get a grudge ag'in him, take it out in thinkin'. Come on; let's go along. Want to show you a purty sight, 'though I shore knows I shouldn't. If you'll keep quiet about it I'll take a chance. All right: come ahead."

They rode through a short canyon, across a sunken pasture, through another canyon and came out at the head of another steep-walled valley, whose luxuriance was strongly emphasized by the sheer and bare rock walls around it. A spring, hidden in a mass of vegetation, sent its cold, pure waters down a bed hardly a foot across, to grow rapidly by many small additions as it went along and it soon attained the dignity of two or three feet in width. On a grassy ledge thrusting out from the west wall of the valley, a score of feet above the surrounding pasture, was a well-built house of stone, small and square. Around it were flower beds and half-grown trees and the gravel walks were as clean as a hard-worked broom could keep them. A flimsy stable in the rear was divided into two parts, in one of which Lafe's team could be found on stormy nights. The other was a cow shed, for Lafe's daughter could not see any wisdom of living in a cow country without having milk, cream, and butter. A small vegetable garden, well tended, bespoke independence from the canned varieties.

As they looked they saw old Lafe come out of the kitchen with a bucket in his hand and start for a fenced-in spring at the foot of the towering mesa wall.

Lafe straightened his shoulders and swung the bucket vigorously. "Mebbe," he said. "Mebbe; but I oughta have a gun. Lefty said to tell you that comb come from him, but 'tain't so: one to twenty on it! 'Tain't so, Tupper! 'Tain't so, Tupper! Slattery done it hisself, he did!"

Then a woman came to the door, and as she faced the upper end of the valley she caught sight of the two horsemen sitting quietly in the mouth of the canyon. Sudden disgust and a trace of fear made the frown more complex and the door slammed shut behind her. Her father shuffled on toward the spring, swinging the bucket and muttering.

"Purtiest girl I ever saw," com-

mented Duncan. He scowled. "Cussed shame she's got that on her young shoulders. This is no place for her!"

"Wouldn't let Joe hear me say that if I was you," replied Charley, wheeling his horse. "Time for us to be gittin' away from here, but ain't she a purty pitchure?"

HIS companion's jaw was set and his face grave. "Yes; like a rosebud in hell! Who's he mean by Slattery? He's a new one to me."

"Him? He was Tupper's pardner when they was gamblers together in McLeod. Slattery made the big winnin' ag'in Lafe, an' was found dead next mornin' with his own knife stickin' in his back, an' not a cent on him. Lafe killed him an' robbed him, shore as shootin'. Lafe was plumb crazy. Tupper was scared near to death by how quick Slattery got knifed, an' lit out of town quick before he got the same dose. Pity he didn't get it, too. First time anybody ever saw him scared, but he shore made up for that. Don't reckon you can hardly blame him, not with no crazy man lookin' for revenge. Lafe was rar'in' an' tearin' crazy, too; yellin' an' fightin' his friends to get loose. 'Twasn't no pleasant sight."

"Reckon you can't blame him. A feller can't shoot a crazy man. It'd make the shivers run up a man's back," said Duncan. "That must 'a' been a big game that night, an' shore excitin'."

"You'd 'a' reckoned so if you'd been there," replied Charley, warming up. "Soon as the news got around town, which didn't take long, you can bet 'most everybody that could stopped work an' crowded into the hotel saloon to watch it. Lafe said the game was crooked, but it couldn't hardly be crooked with so many eyes watchin' it close. It run all day an' most all night, se-sawin' back an' forth. They took the limit off just about dark, an' a little while later, when Lafe had lost a powerful lot of money, he tried the gambler's trick of doublin' the stakes, every play. That was a favorite play of his. He only had to win once, that way, to git it nearly all back. I'm tellin' you that was some game! The last hand was dealt by Tupper, who hadn't hardly won or lost any-

thin'. The money on the table was most all in front of Slattery, an' Lafe was playin' with I. O. U.'s. Slattery had a stack of 'em mixed in with the money in front of him. Tupper dealt fast, like a nervous cayuse tacklin' a hill; Slattery was red in the face an' Lafe was near white. They started easy, but she kept gettin' bigger an' bigger. When the call come Slattery near stopped breathin'. Lafe laid down a ten-full. Slattery's queen-full won, Tupper havin' dropped out quite some before this. Lafe grabbed the deck to start a new deal, like the game cuss he allus was, but Slattery, lookin' down at the I. O. U.'s, figgered 'em up quick an' then reached out his hand an' stopped the deal. He was shakin' like he had the chills. It was a mighty big game for a tin-horn, an' he wasn't nothin' else.

"Wait a minnit," he says. "I got twenty thousan' dollars here in paper—in yore I. O. U.'s. I never play ag'in my own money. How do I know they're worth anythin'?"

"We all reckoned Lafe would bust a blood-vessel, he got so mad. He was square an' game, an' hardly nobody that knowed him an' the ranch he owned would 'a' asked him a question like that. His face went red as fire, an' then white ag'in.

"I ain't askin' no man to take chances with my promises to pay," he said, quiet like an' cold as hell. He turned to Jim Thatford, that was standin' in front of the crowd. Jim owned the Frolic, that's now owned by his woman. "Jim," says Lafe, "is my ranch worth twenty thousan' of yore money on a mortgage? She's free an' clear, an' I got good title, as you know."

"Jim looked at Slattery like a fightin' dog looks at a rat. 'I hate like hell to hear a friend of mine insulted by a pup like you; an' I hate to have him insult me. Lafe, you know damned well you don't have to give me no mortgage. I'll buy them I. O. U.'s from the dog that's got 'em, an' throw him out of my place the next time he comes in!'

"Slattery took it settin', 'though it shore went down his measly throat cornerwise. Bein' a gambler I reckon he thought he could read faces purty good, an' a six-year-old kid could 'a'

read Thatford's. He never said a word.

"Lafe stood up an' leaned acrost the table. 'Jim,' he says. 'Jim, if you won't take a mortgage I'll have to go to somebody else an' pay terrible interest. I got to perfect a friend; an' you ain't never been nothin' else.'

"**U**TAH FRED, that's been dead half a dozen years now, stepped out from the crowd. 'Lafe,' he says, smilin' like a turkey buzzard, 'I'll take yore mortgagge an' only charge you twelve per cent on it.'

"Lafe turns to him, noddin' his head, but Jim Thatford jumped forward an' shoved the buzzard back, so mad he was shoutin' his words, 'Damn you, Lafe! If I must, I must. I'll take it without no interest at all! Make it for twenty years!'

"Lafe wouldn't make it without interest, an' they finally wrangled along till Thatford consented to accept five per cent. When it was all signed an' fixed up Thatford tossed a thin little package onto the table in front of Lafe. You should 'a' seen it! Not as thick as a lead pencil—an' twenty thousan', even! Lafe picks it up, counts it an' then slaps Slattery acrost the face with it.

"'There, you white-livered card-cheat!' he shouted. 'You've stole this by your dirty dealin'. Get out before I kill you!'

"Artie, the bartender, grabs Lafe, while Thatford knocks the gun out of Slattery's hand an' then knocks Slattery head-first into the crowd. Artie, big as he is, is havin' his hands full, but we none of us realized that Lafe had gone shore enough loco, not for a minute, anyhow. He's yellin' an' screamin' gibberish we none of us could understand, except for a word or two; an' when we go to help Artie hold him he gets quiet suddenly. Purty soon we let loose of him an' he goes over an' sets down in a chair, talkin' low an' laughin' about his gal, that you just saw back yonder, goin' to git eddicated in the East.

"Slattery picked hisself up meanwhile an' when his head gits useful ag'in he soon figgers he ain't got no friends in that crowd. It looked like a lynchin' crowd looks, only there wasn't no call for a lynchin'. He brushes his-

self off, feels of his jaw, that Thatford near busted, an' bolts sudden for the door, his hand in his pocket hangin' onto his winnin's. Lafe sees him an' like a cunnin' coyote slips past us an' races after him. Artie, who can run like a rabbit for a big man, goes after Lafe, an' Tupper, mebbe reckonin' the crowd might make it two lynchin's, tears after Artie. Artie finds Lafe an' Slattery fightin' all over the street in the dark, an' he separates 'em. He near has to fight Lafe after Slattery runs on, but after awhile he picks Lafe up in his arms an' carries him, kickin' an' yellin', up to a room in the hotel.

"The town was hummin' like a greaser's guitar string. Never was so much excitement in it before. Clostin' time had come an' went, an' Artie was so busy settin' drinks on the bar that he never knowed what time it had got to be. He finally runs out of water for rinsin' the glasses, yells for Squint, who ain't worth a damn in a squeeze, an' then grabs up the buckets to git it for hisself. Halfway to the well he stumbles over somethin' soft, lights a match an' sees it's Slattery, face down in a pool of blood, with his own knife stickin' in his back. This here was a couple of hours after Slattery had run out of the saloon with Lafe after him.

"Everybody said Lafe done it, an' Rufe went up to the room an' got him outa bed. He had his clothes on an' he didn't have no knife. That was found layin' near his saddle in the store room, where he must 'a' dropped it when he put his saddle on the floor when he first rode into town. Rufe locks him up because Tupper makes so much fuss that he has to—which was just as well. We all reckoned Lafe done it, all right, an' we ain't changed our minds about it since. But a crazy man don't know what he's doin'. There wasn't no real proof, an' Slattery had plenty of enemies in town that wouldn't 'a' thought twice about killin' him, 'specially when he had all that money on him. Whoever did it was well paid, for they must 'a' got a clean twenty thousan' in cold cash out of his clothes. Nobody never heard nothin' more about that money, for no thousan' dollar bills was ever cashed in McLeod, from that day to this.

"Well, next mornin', soon after daylight, when Tupper heard that Lafe

was goin' to be turned loose right soon, he gets scared as a rabbit when it feels a coyote's breath on its back. Bein' killed with his own weapons didn't set well on his stummick. He carried on fit to be hobbled an' calls everybody fools for lettin' a murderin' crazy man out to kill somebody else. He packs up pronto an' clears out, an' don't come back for some months, when he blows in, buys up the mortgage an' hires a man to watch Lafe every time the poor feller comes to town."

"You don't mean to tell me that Thatford sold anybody that mortgage?" incredulously demanded Duncan.

"Thatford? Hell, no! Jim was dead an' buried then. He left everything he had to his wife, an' she sold it to Tupper. Reckon Jim plumb turned over in his grave when that was done. An' let me tell you that you want to look out for her; she can fan a knife like an arrer, an' she ain't scared of no man that walks, nor rides, neither!"

"Long as she stays in McLeod I don't reckon I'll get in her way," laughed his companion. "Go on, what next?"

"OH, nothin' much. Everybody plumb forgot about the interest, an' when it was over-due Tupper foreclosed, bought in the ranch for the figgers in the mortgage an' threwed Lafe an' his darter out. That is, he just the same as throwed 'em out, for some says he made a proposition to Lafe that even a locoed man could understand. Lafe would 'a' killed him, except for some of Tupper's punchers, what he had hired to take the places of Lafe's old outfit. They interfered. Just because a man's loco ain't sayin' he's forgot his love for his darter."

Duncan's face flamed and then went white. It seemed as if some old sore had been cruelly prodded. "Why didn't somebody else kill him?"

"Nobody was shore it was true till afterward. Tupper's punchers didn't git to the ranch house till after the fight started."

"So Lafe brought her up here to live?" asked Duncan. "I'm willin' to believe he's loco enough to do anythin'!"

"Nope; he didn't bring her up here, at all," corrected Charley, chuckling. "We-all went an' got 'em. Beat Artie

an' the town gang to the ranch. The stone house was here, ready for 'em. It was built by a nester that had a lot of accidents an' finally got hisself killed arguin' with Lefty Joe. So we put Lafe an' his darter in it, an' there they are."

"Yes, there they are, an' it's a hell of a place for a woman like her!"

"Well, you see——" Charley stopped suddenly, an ugly leer on his face. "Us boys all think a powerful lot of her. She's shore as shootin' goin' to make trouble in this outfit. She's a growed woman, now."

"But, of course, Lefty Joe thinks more of her than any of the rest of you?" sneered Duncan. He shook his head savagely, and suddenly realized that only the mutual jealousies of the gang had saved Anita Pettigrew; and, as his companion had just said, she was bound to cause trouble between them. He promised himself that he would be on hand when the trouble started.

"Us boys think so much of her that even with his lightnin' gun-hand the boss ain't doin' no gamblin' in *that* direction," growled Charley. "Tupper's a big man out here an' he's near mad about her, but nobody ain't never noticed him a-callin' on her. She's safe enough, an' we're shore takin' good care of old Lafe." He laughed knowingly. "Artie won't let him drink in town; but we ain't so cussed stingy!" He laughed again. "He could be in worse places than these here buttes, stranger."

"Don't forget yoreself, Washita; my name's Duncan, of Van Buren, Arkansas!"

CHAPTER VII

AXLE GREASE AND THREATS

TWO days passed for Duncan hanging around the camp and in aimless and harmless riding in the company of Charley or some other member of the gang. Then Lefty Joe sauntered up to the bench near the bunkhouse door, on which Duncan and a companion were seated, and made an abrupt gesture.

"Dutch, you an' Duncan pair up an' take the Long Pond valley. Figger on a week's grub. While yo're out there comb them draws an' little canyons

north of it. I'm gettin' a herd together for the northwest trail. We'll have to wait till we get more T 40 animals before we can make another delivery south. We'll 'tend to that when we get back from the other drive. What you think of this place, Duncan, from what you've seen of it?"

"It's a bang-up lay-out," answered the other with enthusiasm. "If it was made to order it couldn't be better. I'm a little puzzled, though, why it is that McLeod don't make things more unpleasant for you."

"If you knowed more about McLeod you wouldn't be surprised," replied Lefty Joe, smiling cynically.

"Mebbe not," admitted Duncan. He glanced in the direction of the branding scene which had met him on his first appearance in the valley. "I don't like this hangin' around all the time," he said. "Comin' right down to cases, I'm purty handy with a straight iron an' a rope."

"When you know more about these buttes you'll be downright surprised at what a bang-up lay-out they are," said Lefty, ignoring the offer. "Get yore blanket roll an' go with Dutch. There's a shack over there in case it rains."

In a few minutes the two men rode away toward the west half of the main valley, the great wedge-shaped butte on their right hand. Duncan was beginning to have a genuine respect for the area covered by the Buttes country by the time they reached Long Pond valley in the afternoon. Nature had been in a very capricious mood when she fashioned this section.

"Dutch, these buttes must cover a lot of country," he said, as they left the last canyon behind and moved out over a scenic paradise, heading for a rough shack on the shore of the long, narrow pond.

"Yes, they do," replied his companion. "The distances are fur enough as the crow flies, but when you figger the windin' an' twistin' they're a hull lot further. 'Tain't no trouble for a stranger to git lost up here, an' if one of us was gunnin' for him he'd never have a chance. You was askin' why McLeod didn't make things hot for us: that's one of the reasons."

"Yes; I was wonderin' why you was never raided. Can't understand it yet, neither."

Dutch laughed. "Lafe's eight-hoss team can haul a powerful load when they all pull together; but if they was each pullin' his own way they might not be able to move the empty wagon. Jealousies, rivalries an' politics; we got lots of friends in town, an' two thirds of them that ain't real friendly are a hull lot in the same boat with us—on our side of the fence, an' ag'in the law; that's why we ain't bothered much. Would you look there, now! Beats all how cows stray. That animal ain't got no business up here, but with all our ridin' an' turnin' 'em back, it's up here jest the same."

Duncan looked at it. "T 40," he read. The brand occupied nearly the whole hip and rear half of the animal's side. The brand appeared to be an old one and there was nothing about it to excite his suspicions.

"Tupper's mark," offered Dutch.

"Tupper? He's the big man of this part of the country, ain't he?" asked Duncan, and nodded at his companion's reply. "Yes; so I heard. Allus have lots of money? One of the first settlers, I reckon."

"He did not, an' he wasn't. He was only a tin-horn gambler before he got Lafe's ranch. Him an' Slattery an' Lefty Joe used to be thick as thieves, an' they all of 'em was clean busted frequent. Why, a week before that big poker game he borrowed feed money from Lafe. He shore struck it rich some'rs."

"Of course he didn't buy in that mortgage of Thatford's outright: must 'a' give his paper for some part of it, I reckon," suggested Duncan.

"**N**OTHIN' of the sort. He paid spot cash for it, right in the Frolic, an' blowed the crowd till some of 'em couldn't stand up. That's why I said he must 'a' struck it rich. Twenty thousan' dollars, in small bills. He had a hull grip-sack full of 'em. Some of the boys was near sick because they hadn't met him some'rs along the trail to town. A chance like that don't come once in a lifetime, out here." Dutch sighed deeply. "The funny part of it was that I was only a couple of miles behind him all the way from Pike!"

Duncan laughed at the other's expression. "You shore missed yore

chance, Dutch. What was Lafe's brand, before he lost the ranch?"

"L P. Tupper kept it till about four years ago. Some of his animals still wear it. If it'd been me I'd 'a' kept it," Dutch said, glancing sidewise at his companion.

"Me, too," replied Duncan. "In the new mark I reckon the T stands for Tupper, but why the 40?"

Dutch did some quick thinking. "Why, he changed the brand on his fortieth birthday an' I reckon it was part of the celebration. Kind of stuck on hisself, he is."

"I suppose him an' Lefty Joe are still good friends?" suggested Duncan as they stopped before the shack.

"Well, they are an' they ain't, dependin' which way the wind's blowin'. When it comes to business they pull together purty good, but there's trouble brewin' between 'em, shore as shootin'. There's another T 40! We'll trim that brand out of these cattle an' start 'em back through the canyon. These cows up here should only be Star X. It's a hard brand to change into any we has any use for, so we don't try it—just keep 'em for breedin' an' eatin'. There was a funny thing happened to one of their herds, an' it shore was made to order for us. Gave us our best card."

"That so? What was it?"

"There's a cold spring right behind the hut," said Dutch, untying his possessions.

They put their blankets and supplies in the shack, turned the horses loose and prepared to loaf for the remainder of the day, killing time with Old Sledge and swapping stories. Dutch occasionally let fall remarks which, fragmentary and innocent as they appeared to be, were treasured in his companion's memory.

After supper Duncan paced restlessly before the shack and then, without a word of explanation, took a walk along the shore of the pond. He wanted to be alone to think, to try to figure out the connections between the things he had learned. Lefty Joe and Tupper pulled together pretty well in a business way, yet with his own eyes he had seen that Lefty was running off Tupper's cattle. Here was a situation which would have to remain a puzzle until he had learned more about

it. He already had gained an inkling of the nature of the disagreement between the two, and there came to him the picture of Anita Pettigrew, old Lafe's daughter, standing in the door of the little stone house, sweet and innocent and beautiful in her budding womanhood. No matter whether Tupper or Lefty Joe won, she would lose.

Dutch rambled down to the pond and joined his companion.

"Dutch, you was sayin' a stranger could get lost up here," Duncan remarked, grinning sheepishly. "I'm sayin' you called it. I'm lost right now. Of course, I know we come in through that canyon, an' I could easy find my way back to camp by follerin' our tracks, but right now I ain't got no idear of which way it lays. Let's see: I reckon it oughta be about over there," he said, pointing in the direction where he thought Lafe's valley lay.

Dutch laughed heartily. "Over there where yo're pointin' is where Lafe lives; the camp is *that* way. Did you ever see Lafe's valley?"

"You know how much chance I've had to see it, or anythin' else worth lookin' at," growled Duncan. "Wonder is I ain't been picketed out in front of the bunkhouse!"

"Me an' you'll go over there tomorrow, though I wouldn't say nothin' about it to the rest of the boys. There ain't no harm in it as long as a feller behaves hisself, an' you've been here long enough to see a few things. We'll figger on gittin' there before dinner, for that gal shore can cook. You was wonderin' about the butter an' cream the other day, that's where they come from."

"It's too bad Lafe went loco," grumbled Duncan. "Seems to be a harmless old codger. Reckon he wouldn't hurt a flea."

The expression on Dutch's face took strong issue with this remark. "Tupper don't think so," he replied. "An' Lafe's so harmless that he shoved Slattery's own knife in its owner's back, clean up to the guard. He's all the time beggin' for a gun to tote, an' we're cussed shore he don't git none."

"**H**OW could Lafe stab Slattery with the gambler's own knife?" demanded Duncan, scornfully.

"He done it, just the same. Reckon Slattery must 'a' pulled it to use on Lafe in the struggle, an' Lafe got it away from him an' socked it home. He was strong as hell in them days. But the great question is, where'd all that money go to? What'd Lafe do with it after he took it off the body of Slattery? Lots of folks in this country has been losin' sleep about that for years."

"Reckon it's worth losin' sleep over," admitted Duncan. "Lafe forgot what he done with it?"

"Nobody knows," answered Dutch. "He's either forgot, or he's too cussed cunnin' to tell. I got my own idears about that."

"Hardly too cunnin', bein' loco," said his companion. "A crazy man ain't cunnin'."

"Think so?" sneered Dutch, his eyes glinting for some reason. "Yo're thinkin' in the same rut that most folks out here are in. You'll change yore mind after you git to know him better. There's streaks of cunnin' all through his talk; question is, which is the cunnin', an' which is the crazy. Lefty Joe laughs at me for thinkin' like that. He says Lafe is just plain loco, without no trimmin's. Rufe an' Artie think the same." He slapped the saddle. "If they'd let me alone I'd 'a' found it out for 'em cussed quick—I nearly had it when they cut in."

"They were silent for a time and then Duncan yawned. "Artie seems to think a heap of the old feller," he said.

"Artie oughta, all right. Lafe shore pulled him out of a hole, couple years before he went loco. If it wasn't for Lafe, Artie would 'a' been planted ten years back. He raised hell when he found out that we'd got Lafe out here in the Buttes. Him an' Rufe was shore strong on keepin' Lafe in town by theirselves."

"Then why didn't they?" demanded Duncan. "Lafe seems to like Artie a lot. Why don't he stay in town? There hadn't oughta be no trouble for him to do that, seein' how he goes in with the wagon."

Dutch became very thoughtful and took a few moments before answering. "Well," he finally said, "it costs a little money to keep Lafe. Artie's sort of close-fisted," and with this unjust ac-

cusation planted in his companion's mind he arose and stretched. "Reckon I'll turn in. I'm tired, tired all over." He grinned at his companion's expression as he turned to face the house. Charley had told him that Duncan's shooting was poor; Dutch could tell that his thinking was on a par with it. He was easily stuffed.

Duncan arose with a curse. "When a human is mean there ain't nothin' livin' that can even come near him. Why, the old man would near earn his keep around the hotel, doin' odd jobs. Artie must be somethin' of a skunk!"

"My sentiments prezactly," said Dutch. "The town's full of 'em. Matter of fact, there ain't nobody honest but me an' you, an' we're rustlers an' brand-blotters. Come on: things don't git no sweeter for thinkin' of 'em. Let's git to sleep an' fergit 'em."

Duncan followed his companion toward the house, smiling ironically at the puncher in front of him, and when he was rolled up in the blankets against the chill of the night he lay awake a long time, thinking.

THEY rode into Lafe's valley from the north and turned their horses into a small corral at the foot of the ledge, Lafe dancing up and down in his pleasure at having company. The pleasure seemed to be centered almost entirely upon Duncan, for when he looked at Dutch a malignant expression flashed over his face, to be instantly wiped off again. He had espied them as they rode out of the upper canyon and he had dropped the accursed water bucket in the path to the spring to run to his beloved wagon and putter around it for a few minutes, getting it in shape for inspection. It was his pride, that great freighter, and was kept bright and clean. When the visitors had pulled up at the corral their host clambered down to them and helped them put up the bar across the corral gate. His furtive glances at Dutch were pleasant when that person was looking, but turned to hate when they were not observed.

"Glad to see you boys, glad to see you, glad to see you!" he shouted, laughing and dancing. "I'd 'a' laid ten to one nobody would 'a' come. Glad to see you." His gaze rested on the pair of ivory-handled Colts at Dun-

can's thighs. "Did you bring me a gun? Did you bring me a gun? Oughta have a gun." His glance flashed to Dutch and back again. "Wolves howl-in' nights. Oughta have a gun, I ought." Suddenly his expression became one of strong suspicion. "Didn't bring 'Nita no presents, did you? Won't allow none. Don't you bring her nothin'. Come see my wagon! Want to show you somethin', stranger. You stay back, Dutch. Want to show *him* somethin'."

Dutch winked at Duncan and nodded. "Go ahead, Duncan. Go see the treasures. He keeps 'em locked up tight, don't you, Lafe?"

"So nobody can git 'em," chuckled Lafe. "Locked up tight, they are. I set on 'em all the way to town. Keep 'em locked up tight. Twenty to one on it!" He grabbed Duncan by the arm and led him up the steep bank and across the little ledge to the wagon. "Don't you tell nobody, stranger. Look a-*here!*" Taking a key from his pocket, he pushed the cushion from the wagon seat and unlocked the padlock. The seat was a plain board and formed the top of a narrow box which extended from one side of the wagon to the other. In it were tools, a coil of rope, nails and some wire, a half-emptied box of axle grease and a small, wooden box tied around with small rope. This latter Lafe removed and hugged tightly, crawling back into the wagon, under the sheltering canvas cover.

"Come back in here, where nobody can see it," called the wagoner, hurriedly removing the rope.

Duncan complied and Lafe held the box close to his companion's eyes, removing the lid. In it was a collection of miscellaneous junk—pebbles, old cards, pieces of ribbon, fragments of cheap jewelry, empty cartridge shells and one unexploded cartridge. Lafe looked troubled at this last article, but pounced upon it and held it up.

"Member it?" he demanded, in a whisper. "You gave it to me in Artie's. Shoved it in my hand, you did. Nobody knows I got it but me an' you. All I need is a gun that fits it. Mebbe you'll give me one of yourn'?"

Duncan's memory flashed back to the saloon and to the incident. He thought that shell had rolled across the room when Lafe had dropped it, but he was

not certain. Anyhow, the old man could have picked it up later.

"So you want a gun, do you?" he asked, smiling. "Want one of mine?"

Lafe looked closely into his face and leered. The expression reminded Duncan of a coyote, for it was filled with cunning. "Give me one?"

"Shore, give it to you before I leave," replied Duncan, humoring his host.

Duncan's glance returned to the tool box and settled on the open and partly used box of axle grease. Deep in the plastic surface was moulded the imprint of something unmistakable, something long and thin and plain, as if the object which had made the impression had been pressed there with a little force.

"That Dutch comin'?" he asked, and as Lafe peered from the rear end of the wagon, Duncan effaced the tell-tale imprint with one swift, strong wipe of his thumb. "If it's Dutch you better lock up that box. He ain't no good, he ain't."

"Don't like Dutch," snapped the wagoner, hurriedly snapping the padlock. "He's allus watchin' me, every word I says. Allus watchin' an' listenin', watchin' an' listenin'. Don't like him. They cheated me," he shouted, his face working like that of a maddened beast. "They cheated me! Him an' Tupper, damn 'em!"

"**T**HEY won't do it ag'in," said Dutch, poking his head in under the wagon cover. "Got any buttermilk, Lafe?"

"Don't know. We'll ask 'Nita; she knows. She knows everythin'—but don't you bring her no present! Knows purty near everythin', she does," and again he burst into laughter. "Don't you bring her no present, though, Dutch! Wish I had a gun!"

"Damned glad you ain't!" muttered Dutch under his breath. "Yo're foolin' everybody but me, you cunnin' ol' coyote!"

They followed the hurrying wagoner toward the house and Dutch looked curiously at his companion. "Well, what you think now? Reckon he's jest plain loco, or loco an' cussed cunnin'?"

Duncan thought that an answer to such a question was not one to be hazarded off-hand, and he considered deeply.

Dutch waited impatiently and then asked again. "Reckon he's plain crazy, or cunnin' as a coyote?"

"Why, there ain't no doubt, at all," answered his companion, dismissing the subject as being one of sheer foolishness. "He's just plain crazy, all the way through."

Dutch shook his head in profound dissent and then knocked on the kitchen door.

Reluctant steps crossed the room and the door opened slowly, grudgingly, to reveal Anita Pettigrew, whose face expressed fear and abhorrence as she looked at Dutch. Duncan caught his breath and removed his sombrero with a gesture which somewhat modified the woman's expression. A soft flush swept through her cheeks, but she looked at him disdainfully, fearing the arrival of another jackal to join the pack and to dog her father's footsteps, ply him with liquor and madden him with questions; but she could not entirely banish the feeling which that gesture had awakened in her, and she became vexed because of it.

"Lafe said you mebbe had some buttermilk," remarked Dutch, his hat in his hand. "I shore smell somethin' good a-cookin'," he added, grinning.

"I have some buttermilk," she replied. "Come in. Dinner will be ready soon. Wasn't Father with you just now?"

"Yes'm; he started ahead of us," answered Dutch, his grin widening. "Reckon he ducked around the house; don't seem to like me very much." He turned, looked around, and then shouted, "Hey, Lafe! Dinner's near ready."

There was no answer, but if they had looked farther they would have seen the wagoner slipping along a narrow, blind canyon leading back into the western wall of the valley, pausing every few feet to look behind him and to listen.

Anita Pettigrew came to the door again with two brimming glasses of buttermilk, since her unwelcomed guests did not seem inclined to enter the house. They drank thankfully, both with their eyes on her; and what she read in one pair was nearly compensated for by what she saw in the other pair. Dutch started to hand his empty glass back to her, but his companion

quickly and calmly took it from his hand and carried it with his own into the kitchen and placed them both on the table. As he turned to leave he noticed a little silver watch hanging around her neck by a ribbon, and he smiled.

"Now if that was a gold watch I'd be lookin' for the initials 'G H. G.' an' some baby's tooth marks on its case," he told her, laughing. "I don't believe I'll ever see a little watch again without lookin', unknowingly, for them signs. I can see an' hear that overgrown baby yet. It shore was funny!"

"Indeed? I don't understand you," replied Anita in polite interest.

"Didn't Lafe tell you about that?" asked Duncan, laughing again, and at the shake of her head he rapidly sketched the scene in the hotel, sensing as he went along that the story was falling flatter and flatter. Being a woman and having maternal instincts her viewpoint was perhaps different from his own. Finally her look became so forbidding that he did not finish, and his self-consciousness was now blooming with embarrassment. With the latter came clumsiness, and his quick gesture to express his helplessness knocked one of the glasses from the table. Swearing under his breath, he stooped quickly to pick up the pieces at the same instant that she did the same thing. Their heads for a moment were very close together and she was no more surprised than he was when his lips formed a whispered warning for her ears. "Don't let yore father drink no more with nobody—specially with Lefty Joe!"

"Don't bother with this, I'll sweep it up," she said, arising, a flush on her face. "You'll get yore fingers full of glass splinters."

"Thank you, ma'am. I'm sorry I was so clumsy," he replied, backing toward the door. Closing it carefully behind him he put on his hat and turned to Dutch. "Where you reckon Lafe went?" he asked, somewhat breathlessly.

DUTCH was chuckling over what he had heard of the watch story and at the smashing of the glass. "You started strong as hell, but you was shore limpin' when you finished," he laughed. "Funny how clumsy a man

gits with a purty woman. First time I come here I busted three plates an' a pitchure; an' Washita backed plumb through a winder, thinkin' it was the door. Let's find Lafe. Mebbe's there's some of Lefty's whisky left that ain't been finished."

They walked toward the stables, not knowing that the woman in the kitchen was frightened and was on the verge of tears from a discovery she had just made. The search proved unavailing and the two men finally returned to the house and seated themselves on the wash bench, where they idly discussed idle subjects. After a pause in their conversation Dutch turned suddenly to his companion and forced a smile.

"Be just as well if we don't say nothin' about comin' here," he suggested with a trace of nervousness. "The boys are quick-tempered an' a hull lot jealous. It'd only make trouble for us, shore as shootin'."

"You mean you'd get in trouble if they knowed you was over here?" incredulously asked the two-gun man. His quick ears had caught the barely audible sob which came from the open window near his other shoulder, and he shuffled his feet to cover the sounds.

"Shore as shootin'," emphatically answered Dutch, a worried frown appearing on his face. "We won't say a word about it!" he commanded.

His companion instantly arose, pretending to be frightened, one of his hands dropping carelessly to a gun butt.

"We're pullin' our stakes, Dutch," he said, quietly but decisively. "We like our own cookin' best, an' we ain't goin' to bother Miss Pettigrew to feed us. Come on; we'll go back to Long Pond, where we belongs."

"I don't mean to go now," said Dutch, surprised and mildly suspicious. "Having come over here to git a good feed an' a good look, I'm shore countin' on goin' plumb through with it. The damage is done, anyhow, so we might as well."

"The damage ain't even started. We're goin' back to Long Pond, an' we're goin' now," replied Duncan. "I'm forgetful, an' might let fall that we was over here, an' I ain't goin' to get you in no trouble for doin' me the favor of bringin' me here. I'm lost ag'in. You know the way back, so go ahead an' show it to me."

"Yo're shore nervous, Duncan," sneered Dutch, slowly arising. Without another word he strode swiftly to the edge of the ledge, slipped down its steep face and went to the small corral, his grave companion close to his heels. As they mounted the restive horses Duncan for a moment was whirled around facing the house, and he thought he saw a pretty, distressed face looking at him from a window. Thinking that it was purely imagination he made no sign, but silently wheeled and followed his companion toward the canyon at the upper end of the little valley; but the vision persisted and might have been the cause of the peculiar smile which for a moment transformed the hardness of his face into something reverent and mystical.

CHAPTER VIII

WEST CANYON

AT THE end of their week Duncan and his companion returned to the camp and found a cheerful outfit there assembled, a dozen men in all. Duncan was made known to the few he had not met before and loafed with the crowd, answering their idle questions of where he'd come from and entertaining them with news of the great states lying between the Rockies and the Mississippi. He was interrupted in his recital by a sudden bustle, and looked where his companions were looking. A horseman was coming toward them at top speed, his mount in a lather.

"Porter!" exclaimed a puncher. "An' he's ridin' like he's got somethin' on his mind."

The newcomer swept up before the door of Lefty Joe's house, waved exuberantly at his friends before the bunkhouse, vaulted out of the saddle and was swallowed up by the open door. Two or three men ran to the horse, stripped off the saddle and bride and let the animal wander away toward the creek. They carried the equipment into the bunkhouse, dropped it on the floor and emerged again, joining in an excited hum of conjecture.

Ten minutes passed and then the man they had called Porter left the smaller house and walked toward the interested crowd, which now was go-

ing forward to meet him. They met and stopped halfway between the two buildings, hurriedly exchanged words and then turned back to the bunkhouse together. Washita Charley and two other men dashed into the building and came out with several lengths of chain in their hands; two more hurried toward their saddled horses and rode off at a gallop; another spurred across the great pasture in the direction of Lafe's valley. Amidst the bustle and excitement Lefty Joe was seen standing in his door, beckoning.

"Hey, Duncan!" cried a puncher. "Joe wants you!"

The two-gun man nodded and obeyed the summons, and stopped in front of the leader's door. "Want me?" he asked.

Lefty was looking him through and through, and after a moment, nodded.

"Yes; got a job for you. It's a lazy man's job if everything goes off well; but a gun-fighter's if it don't. Take yore guns, a rifle, a warm coat an' a bucket of coffee. Washita or one of the boys will go with you an' tell you what to do. Stay where he puts you until somebody comes after you to-morrow. You might take a bundle of grub, too. One of my men's just brought me some news; but it's even money he ain't the only one that has it. I only got one piece of advice for you—excuses don't go in this outfit. Go back an' find somebody to take you out to the canyon an' tell you what to do."

Duncan nodded and swung around on his heel, hurrying back to the bunkhouse. He found Dutch cleaning a six-gun and he told the busy puncher what Lefty had said.

"He's O. K.'n you, Duncan," remarked Dutch, arising and slipping the gun into its sheath. "Yo're comin' along, slow but shore. Rustle yore stuff together while I see the cook. Reckon he knows his little piece; smell the coffee already?"

Duncan got the few things he needed, piled them on the washbench outside the house, and then went after and brought up Dutch's horse and his own. He was in the saddle and ready to start when his companion emerged from the cook shack with a bucket of coffee, a package of food, and a lantern.

"Big doin's to-night, Duncan!" ex-

claimed the hurrying puncher. "Boss say anythin' to you about 'em?"

"Only that I had a lazy man's job that might turn into a gun-fighter's. That didn't tell me very much," answered Duncan. "I'm hopin' she don't turn."

"Never has, so fur," said Dutch, pushing ahead half a length and taking the lead. "Never can tell about some folks, though. Main thing is to stay awake an' not light no fire. You can't smoke an' you can't walk around; you can't whistle an' you can't sing. All you can do is listen for splashing, an' shoot when you see somethin' to shoot at. That means men. Don't make no difference who they are. Anybody comin' up that canyon to-night will be enemies. Yore job is to stop 'em at any cost. Don't let 'em git past. I'll rig you up right when we git there."

To Duncan's surprise they passed the main canyon, the one which he had followed in his flight from McLeod, and they turned slightly to the right soon after they left it behind. His look of surprise drew a smile and a comment from his companion.

"We ain't fearin' nobody will try to pass through that," chuckled Dutch. "The play we're gittin ready for is somethin' entirely different. Rufe an' his crowd don't know our habits, an' you can't git them in that big canyon for all the money north of hell. For all they know there's three good rifle shots layin' on their bellies along that trail, an' the hull gang of us waitin' at this end of it. We won't have a man in that canyon tonight because we can take a chance with it. The play we're makin' out here ain't for Rufe; but you don't have to do no thinkin'. Just keep anybody from passin' you."

DUNCAN smiled and glanced at the lantern. "If you put that where it can't be shot out an' where it lights up the canyon I'm bettin' you nobody will get past it. Dutch, did you ever hear of anybody by the name of Hepburn, hereabout? Tall, lean feller; red headed, forty years old by this time; a tin-horn gambler; used to wear a shoulder holster an' was most amazin' fast in gettin' the gun out of it. Never wanted nobody to know he wore it, of course, so he allus used to keep his coat buttoned up, with plumb

weak buttons, an' wore a six-gun slung at his hip, man-fashion, so the other would be all the more of a surprise. He used to tote a heavy, double-barrel derringer in the shoulder holster—a big one, biggest I ever saw."

The distant rumble of a heavy wagon came to them while Dutch was considering his companion's question. After a moment he slowly shook his head.

"Don't reckon I ever did, Duncan," he answered, his mind vividly picturing the man he had heard described. A reverence of several years' standing again had been brought to his mind—a shoulder-holster draw so fast as to border on the miraculous. "That's a quick way of gettin' a gun out. I onct saw an awful fast shoulder draw. For them that can do it right there ain't nothin' to beat it."

Duncan smiled at him. "I've made a study of pullin' a gun, Dutch. I've tried out the shoulder-holster draw, an' all kinds of shoulder holsters, some of which you never saw. For a man settin' at a table, with his hands out over it an' well above his waist, like gamblers spend so much of their time, a fast shoulder holster draw can't be beat, if the other man's got his hands on the table, too."

While he was speaking Duncan visualized the trick shoulder holster worn by the man he had been hunting for ten years. He did not tell his companion what kind of a holster it was, nor that he once had had a holster like it made for himself and had practised with it until he had obtained perfection; and then had abandoned it in favor of the conventional, low-hung thigh sheaths. In the east the low rumble of the wagon was growing fainter and fainter.

"This here shoulder draw that I saw shore was fast," said Dutch, dubiously. "Of course, a man like Lefty Joe might beat it out with the hip draw, but cussed few others could do it. Quick as lightnin', it was."

"Yes; for a man settin' it's hard to beat," replied Duncan; "but don't forget that a man standin' nat'rally has his hands hangin' at his side an' that he has to raise 'em to make either one of the draws. With a hip gun he's got hold of it before they reach his waist, throws it up an' shoots; with a shoulder holster he's got to reach higher,

across his body an' then jerk the gun up, an' out sideways before he can pull trigger. If things are a little tense it don't take me long to spot a shoulder-holster wearer. He has little ways that tell on him, if you know what to look for." He laughed softly. "An' once he's spotted, he ain't got a chance ag'in a good gunman."

"Well, mebbe," grudgingly admitted Dutch, "but just the same, I'd shore like to see 'em in action ag'in each other. The side-winder that I saw was quick as a rattler." He grinned. "I tried it, myself, for quite a spell, but I couldn't just git the hang of it, so I went back to the old-fashioned draw."

Duncan laughed bitterly. "So'd I like to see 'em in action ag'in each other, an' have it settled, one way or the other."

HIS companion made no reply, but thought that the man at his side might be closer to having his wish than he suspected. They went on silently, each busy with his own thoughts, and when they reached and turned into the canyon which was to be the scene of the night's watch, Dutch glanced sideways at his companion and innocently asked if the man Hepburn was a friend of his.

"An old friend," answered Duncan quietly. "I've been tryin' to get track of him for old time's sake. What's at the other end of this canyon, Dutch?"

"Open range an' McLeod," said Dutch, pushing ahead and taking the lead before the trail narrowed to run along a ledge a score of feet above the bottom of the canyon, where two abreast was impossible. They came to a place where the ledge widened into a shelf running back into a split in the canyon wall, and here Dutch dismounted, motioning for his companion to follow suit.

"Tie yore cayuse back in there while I go down an' set the lantern," he said.

Duncan, having taken care of the horse, stood his rifle against the wall and went on along the ledge until he came to where it pitched downward at a steep slant and turned sharply around an abrupt point of rock. Below him Dutch was placing the lighted lantern among the boulders in such a position that it could not be seen and shot at from the other side, while its rays

would shine out across the canyon and make an area of illumination through which nothing could pass without being revealed to the watcher.

Dutch looked up in reply to Duncan's chuckle. "What you think of it?"

"You can tell Lefty there ain't nobody goin' to git past that light," answered Duncan. "I'm figgerin' that I'll be in the dark?"

Dutch nodded. "You will be. If anybody comes through here all they'll have to shoot at will be yore flash; an' as long as you keep yore rifle in the groove between them two biggest rocks, the flash won't do 'em much good, barrin' a lucky shot, of course." He made his way back to the ledge. "Hepburn ain't a common name," he said carelessly. "What was his first name?"

"Frank," answered Duncan. "Hepburn ain't a common name, but I've come across quite a few of 'em in my wanderin's." Unconsciously his right hand rested on the handle of a six-gun, whereat Dutch hid his smile. Evidently Hepburn was not so much of a friend of his companion's as he might have been. For some reason this pleased Dutch.

"Been lookin' for him steady? Travelin' all over creation after him?" he asked curiously.

"Why, no; I ain't," answered Duncan, on his guard. "I'm a drifter: wander all over, seein' the sights, an' can't stay long in one place."

The rustler nodded and swung into his saddle, wheeling to return to the camp. "Don't reckon you'll be bothered at all," he said. "Nobody has been yet, out here. If you are, keep 'em on the other side of that lantern till daylight. Some of us will be here by that time. It's gettin' late an' I got to go. So-long!"

"So-long," responded the sentry. "They won't get past," and he turned to familiarize himself with his surroundings.

Duncan's reveries going ten years back were rudely interrupted by the sudden and startling appearance of old Lafe stealthily creeping up upon the camp.

Duncan spoke without stirring, "Hello, Lafe. This is Duncan, the stranger. What are you doin' out here this time of night?"

Lafe did not appear to be surprised,

but the expression of distrust faded and a wan smile took its place. "Shan't git her. Twenty to one on it. Shan't git her, nohow."

"You can make it a hundred to one," replied Duncan, with spirit. "You can make it two hundred to one, now, seein' there's two of us. Who wants her, Lafe?"

"Saw you an' Dutch come in here. Know what that means. Didn't see him go back ag'in. Don't like him, damn him! Shan't git her: not ag'in!"

Duncan sat up, facing the patch of light below him, looking through a narrow slot between two bowlders. "Sit down here by me," he invited. "Here's a good place. If you stand up they can see you before you can see them, whoever they are. Slide yore rifle out through that opening, there; not too far, though, so the light will shine on the barrel. Where'd you get that gun?"

Lafe settled himself at the indicated opening, his back to his companion, and over the face there passed a cunning look. "It's busted, but don't tell nobody. Artie give it to me."

DUNCAN smiled but did not turn his eyes from the lighted place below.

"Mebbe I can get you a six-gun later on," he said. He had been putting twos and twos together and now hazarded a guess. "Tupper sha'n't get her. If she does Lefty Joe'll shoot him."

"Mebby, if he can," replied Lafe. "Ain't shore he can. Tupper's fast—terrible fast. One's bad as 'tother, damn 'em! Got a drink?"

Duncan was a little surprised by the apparent sense and continuity of the old man's words, and decided to make the best of this period of lucidity. "Why don't you take her out of the Buttes, an' stay in town with Artie?" he asked. "This ain't no place for her."

"Won't let me. Tupper's jest waitin' for her to come out. Terrible fast, he is."

"So is Joe," replied Duncan. "He's faster, mebbe."

"Cattle thieves an' stage robbers, all of 'em," muttered Lafe, and rocked to and fro in his mirth. "She likes you, but don't you bring her no presents. None of 'em is goin' to git her. Twenty to one on it."

Duncan's angry flush was hidden by

the darkness, and his mind whirled him back over the years. The yearning to speak to some one about the cause of his wanderings, to dull the aching memory by imparting his secret to human ears, swept over him as it had done many times in the past. Here was a man, a crazy man, who knew father love: perhaps he could understand brother love, as well; and no harm would be done to tell this foolish old man. Swept off his feet by the sudden, blind need for human sympathy even without understanding, he burst through the barriers which ten years of silence had built around his heart and soul.

"Listen to me, Lafe," he began. "You love Anita. She's yore daughter. I had a sister like her, ten years ago. Yo're scared somebody'll get Anita: an' yo're damned well right in it, old timer! It ain't the wolves that howl nights that we got to look out for; it's Tupper, an' Lefty Joe, and Washita, an' Dutch, an' all the rest of the carrion crows. Yo're luckier than I was; you know what you got to look out for. I didn't. You want to hear a story about a girl like Anita, Lafe?"

"Ain't none like 'Nita, stranger. Don't you bring her no presents!"

"I won't, Lafe, if you says not," replied Duncan, his thoughts far to the south. "Damn presents! My sister was given presents, by my best friend. He left her in Mexico, to die in shame among aliens and strangers. Threw her aside like an empty sack, an' left her to kill herself. Don't you let nobody bring her presents, Lafe."

The intensity of his voice, its passion, its ache seemed to react on the blasted mind of the old wagoner, and he reached out a hand and gripped his companion's arm, leaning eagerly forward to peer into the distorted face of the sentry.

The old man arose and peered into the darkness behind him, listening, apprehensive. "Goin' now. Don't tell 'em. Wolves howlin' all 'round the house. Goin' now——" and he made his words good, his shuffling steps quickly dying out in the canyon. After an interval there came a low, weird cackle of laughter to the sentry's ears, and then he was alone with the silence and the darkness, watching the lantern-lighted area below him with unseeing eyes.

Dawn and fading shadows, fingers of

ghostly light stealing down the western wall; the timid flame of the lantern was swallowed up like Life had swallowed up the hopes of the watcher. The musical burblings of the little stream were unmasked and it was shown to be a lead colored sheet of water fretting at the stones in the riddle beyond the pool, complaining, mildly rebellious, futile, passing on to fret again and again, helplessly, before they reached the distant gulf.

Duncan aroused himself, went down to get the lantern and returned to his place of vigil. He ate the package of food and finished the coffee, heating the latter over the harmless flame of the lantern, whose sooty smoke was too feeble to tell tales, and whose vile odor was carried northward by the stirring and fitful wind.

There came the clatter of unshod hoofs, the jingle of ornaments, the squeak of saddle leather and soon Washita Charley turned the corner of the rock wall and grinned his friendly greeting.

"Hello, Charley," said the sentry, slowly arising and standing his rifle against the wall. "Glad to see you. Begun to reckon I'd mebbe been forgot. Sorry there ain't no coffee left."

"I'm full of coffee," replied Charley. "Nothin' happened, I 'spose, as usual?"

"As usual," grunted Duncan. "McLeod didn't pay us no visit, less they come in through the other canyon. Seems like nonsense to me, though I reckon it's a good way to get rid of a stranger while important things are goin' on. What was supposed to happen, anyhow, if anythin' was?"

Washita laughed heartily. "You wasn't side-tracked at all. When the cat's away Tupper will mebbe go courtin'. You wouldn't reckon Lafe was half as pop'lar as he is. Jest at present he's a-visitin' us; an' we shore as hell aim to keep him. We wouldn't dare let him go to town in the wagon if it wasn't that his gal's a hostage for him comin' back; an' while others want him, most of 'em want the gal more. Come on, let's get started."

"Ever do any fishin' out here?" asked Duncan, pausing for a last look at the pool.

"Not with no fish lines," answered Washita, wheeling and grinning. "We mostly use forty-foot ropes an' snub

'em on the saddle horn. We're plumb particular about the markin's on our fish. Did I hear you tell somebody you was handy with a runnin' iron?"

"Ain't had very much practice of it lately," answered his companion, carefully following along the long and narrow ledge. "But I reckon it's just like swimmin'; once learned never forgot."

"If practice is all you need, then you'll shore get plenty of that," replied Washita, chuckling. "Near three hundred head, there are, an' we shore had one hell of a time gettin' 'em. We wouldn't need you, only me an' Dutch an' Pete usually run the irons, an' both of them can't work. Dutch got it in the thigh an' shoulder; Pete, through the arm. You had the best of it out here, storing grub and watching the scenery. Damn that dog!"

"Smelled you out, huh?" asked Duncan.

"Smelled out more'n us," growled Washita. "You'll think that when Porter spied 'em out, down on the trail, he would 'a' seen that dog. That's the worst of takin' long range looks an' then racing for home. He should 'a' got closer to 'em."

"What's that?" asked Duncan, raising his hand for silence and checking his horse.

"Lafe's express freighter must be rumblin' home ag'in," answered Washita Charley thoughtfully. "When Lafe sees the welts on them hosses he'll go on the prod. It was a close call, I tell you, an' everybody don't humor that team like he does." The speaker turned to squarely face his trail companion. "Ever hear of the V One brand?"

"No," answered Duncan thoughtfully. "Never did. It hadn't ought to be hard to change that into a Circle N."

"It shore ain't, an' we're goin' to do it, even if we don't get as much for Circle N's," replied Washita. "That ain't our favorite mark, but rustlers can't be choosers, all the time, anyhow."

"Reckon not," said Duncan, and rode quietly on in complete silence, busily wrestling with another complicated problem.

CHAPTER IX

RUSTLER ACTIVITIES

AT the camp two men sat in the sunlight, their backs against the wall of the bunkhouse, both wearing bandages. The man called Pete seemed to be taking things easy with a philosophical calm exasperating to his companion. Dutch was in a pugnacious, savage mood, due to several things. Because some one had maintained that he would be better off in his bunk he stubbornly had refused to stay there and had joined Pete outside. He was angered by the unexpected alertness of the strange trail outfit and their lucky shots in the dark, holding that it was all Porter's fault in not reporting the presence of the dog with the drive outfit. The rough surgery of his friends, the throbbing and inflamed wounds and the prospect of being inactive for an indefinite period joined in arousing a sullen anger, which was doing him no good. The two wounded men idly watched Washita and his companion ride up and dismount, Pete with cheerful loquaciousness, Dutch with sulky taciturnity which was habitual with him when things did not suit him.

"Go on down," called Pete. "They're waitin' for you fellers. Goin' to be a busy day with that bunch. Near three hundred, an' worth the narrow squeak. Wind didn't change till the last minute, an' then the dog let loose. He made enough noise for ten dogs an' there wasn't no guessin' that he smelled somethin' plumb excitin'. Things happened pronto an' near all at onct; but we got the cattle." He glanced sideways at his wounded companion and grinned. "Dutch got his quick; mine come later—a long lucky shot. Half the boys are guardin' the canyon. Ain't no tellin' what that gun-fightin' outfit will do. They're shore on the prod."

Washita nodded and turned to Duncan. "That's what comes of overlookin' things. Porter should 'a' let 'em git closer before he left 'em. Come on; they're waitin' for us."

Duncan looked at his horse and determined to spare it the hard work of cutting out, in case that should be his job. "This cayuse ain't very much

on cuttin' out," he replied. "Mebbe I better get me another."

"You won't have no cuttin' out to do," responded Washita, swinging into his saddle. "Me an' you'll be drawin' pitchures in burned hair an' blisters. So-long, you pore cripples."

"Cripples! An' him settin' in the canyon all night, takin' things easy," sneered Dutch, glaring at Duncan. "Nice baby job, that was!"

"He was where he was sent!" retorted Washita. "If you'd git in yore bunk like a sensible human you wouldn't be so damned ornery an' mean. Come on, Duncan. Let the fool rave."

"Hear that, Dutch?" laughed Duncan. "You can rave. So-long, Pete. I shore feel sorry for you."

They rode northward, bearing slightly to the east, and soon entered another of the apparently numberless canyons. It broadened at intervals into little, steep-walled valleys, and they were passing the last of these when Duncan's horse snorted and tried to bolt. After it had been mastered, Duncan espied two heavy crates against a ramshackle shed, before which the fresh tracks of a wagon made a small circle. The crates were long and narrow, and their height was half their length. Their bottoms and tops and one side of each were made of solid planking, while the other side and the ends were of hardwood slats, set close together. He eyed them curiously and glanced at his companion, but the latter was riding ahead and paid no attention to anything behind him.

This valley narrowed for several hundred feet and became a canyon again, and then the walls fell away sharply and formed a valley pasture of large size and surprisingly rich grass. A small herd of cattle, still a little wild-eyed from their recent experiences, were held closely by a few riders; four more mounted men started toward the herd at the sight of the two newcomers, and Lefty Joe, sitting idly in his saddle, turned and waved the new arrivals forward. Two men, each near a brisk fire, now got up and stepped forward, drew some long, straight irons from the blaze, swung them swiftly through the air and replaced them. Two tubs of water were

not far from the fires and each of these had a man attending it. Some of these men were strangers to Duncan, and he guessed that they had been hired or borrowed from one of the other gangs of the Buttes.

Two steers were lumbering toward the fires, the riders close behind them, and when the animals were near enough they were deftly roped, thrown, pounced upon by men on foot, their heads held down, their legs seized and forced into the right positions. At the instant they struck the ground the men at the tubs ran forward with dripping blankets in their hands; the men at the fires coming up with red-hot irons.

LEFTY JOE leaned forward in the saddle and watched Duncan with critical eyes. In a moment the blankets were thrown back to the tub men, the irons handed to the iron-tenders, the pain-racked steers released to scramble to their feet, the ropes cast off and the frantic animals driven off away from the herd to lick their burns and to vocalize as they wished. On the flank of each was an angry and swollen C 1, added to the old V I, which in a few weeks, if the re-branding were well done, would merge into a Circle N and gradually lose the tell-tale newness of the additions. The work went on with clock-like regularity and a seeming confusion, which was not confusion but only action and excitement. At the end of three hours a halt was called to rest the men and to change horses. The herd holders lolled in their saddles as they kept watch for insurgent steers to tempt to leave the shrinking mass and join their re-branded fellows at liberty in the valley, these latter now numerous enough to cause attempted desertions from the closely held remainder.

Every thrown animal had its blotted brand closely scrutinized by Lefty Joe before it was allowed to escape to join its fellows on the pasture, and not one of them had aroused his protest. The look of sullen criticism on his hard face gradually softened when the first rest was taken and he rode over to join the two tired brand-blotters lying on their backs on the grass.

Then the work went forward again with a dexterity, speed, and smoothness

which told of much practice, and when the next rest period came around only a remnant of the original herd remained unbranded. Two of the borrowed men had been given irons and had helped to speed up the work.

The night was spent here by the fires and at dawn the work went on again. Shortly after noon, as the men lolled on the grass, a horseman was seen coming toward them from the east, and Lefty, reading aright the newcomer's lack of haste, rode carelessly out to meet him. After a moment's talk the rider went back again and Lefty Joe returned to his companions, a frown on his face.

"What's up?" asked Washita, rising to his feet.

"Nothin' much. This trail gang didn't lose no three days before they entered the Buttes. Jim says they just passed the blind canyon, bound in. Had quite a talk before they went on, an' one of 'em rode so close to the crevice that he come near gettin' shot. Get back to the fires an' clean up the rest of these cattle. We got to put more men at the crevice. These fellers has got more sense than that 110 trail gang. It mustn't never be so close ag'in." He turned to Porter. "Take a good look, next time!" he warned, and loped eastward after the distant scout.

The work at last completed, most of the men rode eastward along the trail of their chief, Duncan going with them. He marvelled anew at the succession of short canyons and little, pocket-like valleys which lay between the greater valleys.

It seemed as if he had been riding for two hours, following the plain trail of the stolen cattle and then he suddenly became aware that the hoof-marks had abruptly ceased. He and Washita were following the rest of the gang through another short canyon, across the bottom of which were a few narrow, shallow drifts of sand, and these should have been churned up by the passing herd. At first he thought the stolen cattle had turned off, and then he saw that this was impossible. Yet the tracks stopped suddenly at a point which they must have passed.

He blinked from sheer amazement at the presentation of such a problem, and glanced covertly at his companion in hopes of getting a clue from the

other's expression; but Washita was looking ahead at the others and was whistling softly, his thoughts apparently far away. The wagon tracks lay straight ahead and for a moment tempted Duncan into a ridiculous explanation of the mystery; but sane thought banished it from his mind. The tracks, however, started his thoughts backward along them to a point where he first had seen them, and led him to the old shack and the two peculiar crates near it, and then to the sudden fear shown by his horse.

HE HAD learned who had stampeded both of the trail herds he had been with; he was beginning to exonerate the Bar O from having any hand in it, and that ranch was rapidly settling in his mind to some semblance of its proper place. He knew that only certain brands were considered worth the risk and effort of being run off. He easily could understand the stampeding of the T Bar cattle of the first trail herd, for never in all his experience had he faced such a storm; the stampeding of the cattle of the second trail herd was a mystery, for the weather had been ideal, the night riders had not heard or seen anything suspicious, and yet the cattle had risen as one animal and bolted without an instant's warning. Somehow a dog was not conducive to the success of the rustlers, and the explanation of this seemed to be obvious, but he failed to see how T Bar and 110 cattle could be rebranded to the Circle N mark. His companions also stole cattle from the Star X, Tupper, and two more ranches to the south, but so far he had not seen any Bar O animals in their possession. So lay the chain of his reasoning, crowded with truths, out of place and wrongly connected.

Washita turned and looked closely at his intent companion. "Got a match, Duncan?" he asked sharply, evidently forgetting the row of those useful articles sticking up from the band of his sombrero. He was forced to ask again. "Got a match, Duncan?"

The other, completely immersed in vexatious thoughts and conjectures, started and instinctively checked his mount. "What you say?" he asked, struggling back to matters of the moment.

"I asked if you had a match; time to smoke up," answered Washita glancing meaningly ahead, where the others had reined up and were waiting for them. "Hard thinkin' makes a man bald, out in this country," he added.

"I was thinkin' about somethin' far away," replied Duncan, smiling. "Funny how a feller's thought get to back-trackin'."

"Yes; 'specially when there ain't no tracks," rejoined Washita, grinning. "We got somethin' to think about now that ain't far away. It's plumb under our nose, or will be, soon. Here's where we split from the others. You an' me'll pair up by ourselves, an' they'll be damned glad to let us, too."

"You takin' yore old job an' yore old place?" called one of the group, grinning hopefully.

"Yes," answered Washita, sneering slightly. "Duncan's goin' with me, seem' I'm goin' *far back*."

"Which same he's welcome to," said the first speaker significantly. "Got yore glass with you?"

Washita patted his coat pocket, which strangely enough did not bulge, and nodded. Duncan glanced inquiringly at the pocket and noted its flatness, wondering at this phenomenon. He had never seen a glass as flat as this one of Washita's must be. Wheeling, he nodded to the group and then followed his companion into a split in the canyon wall which led off to the south at right angles. After a quarter of an hour's riding along a trail which led steadily upward they came to the end of both the trail and the split, where the wall had crumbled under the assaults of the weather and where erosion had roughened it enough to allow a careful, cool-headed man to climb to the top. Washita dismounted, tossed the reins over a stunted cedar, and looked at his companion.

"Here's where you want to forget that there's anythin' below you," he warned, slinging his rifle across his back. "There's a lot of folks that don't dare tackle this. I don't know how much climbin' you've done, but I'm tellin' you not to look down, even for a second. Keep yore eyes on the top an' plumb forget the bottom."

"I'll gamble on gettin' up," replied Duncan, "but not on gettin' down ag'in. Not alive, anyhow!"

"Couldn't be done, I reckon," said Washita, throwing his rope over his shoulder, "if it wasn't that we got places to hitch our ropes on. Take yourn with you, be sure you don't drop it on the way, an' foller me."

Two hundred feet of canyon wall, rising up only a few degrees out of the perpendicular, with cracks and rain-rounded and smoothed ledges none of them more than a foot wide, and the majority less than that; with here and there an iron bar projecting a few inches beyond the rock, confronted them.

DUNCAN'S closer study of the task before him brought a gasp from him, at which his companion turned quickly, a frown on his face.

"Ain't scared, are you?" asked Washita with a slight sneer.

"Yo're cussed right, I am," answered Duncan, rubbing his sweaty hands in the sand at his feet.

Washita laughed and clapped his companion on the shoulder. "I'm admirin' you for not lyin' out of it. Yo're the first man I've had out here that had the guts to say he was scared."

"We can't both hang onto them rods at the same time," said Washita as he started up, "an' there ain't no place else that's safe enough to rest at. Don't you start till after I pass the first spike, so it won't be occupied when you get to it. Take it easy an' don't look down!" He gained a dozen feet before he spoke again. "After I get to the top I'll lower my rope to you an' help you up the last stretch."

"An' have the folks back in Van Buren tell that on me for the rest of my life?" laughed Duncan. "I'm goin' all the way by myself: it's comin' to me for ever claimin' I was a friend of yourn."

"Shut up, you fool!" protested the man up the wall. "This ain't no place to make a man laugh!"

"If yo're aimin' to do any laughin' before you get to the top an' over the rim, I ain't startin' till you do get over the rim," declared the man below. "You ain't goin' to hit me on yore way down! That's flat!"

"I ain't never fell yet," retorted Washita as he gripped the first spike with both hands.

"Do you think you have to tell me

that?" inquired the man below. "I know I look dumb, but I ain't nowhere near as dumb as that!"

"I saw a feller fall from near the top," said Washita as he released one hand, wiped it on his sleeve, and then rubbed it on the wall. He took a fresh hold of the spike and then rubbed the other hand. Inch by inch he went up, in some places barely moving, and at last reached the second spike. Section by section he neared the top and at last drew himself over it, kicked out his feet to the man below and then turned around and crawled back to the edge to look down at the animated and diminutive sombrero which bobbed and jerked along the face of the wall. With shaking hands Washita rolled a bungled cigarette and lit it, exhaling the first lungful with audible pleasure and relief. He then uncoiled his rope, slipped the loop over the iron rod set just below the rim, and carefully lowered the sinuous length down the face of the wall. If his companion scorned using it, well and good, it would be there, waiting for him, if its assistance was needed.

Section by section Duncan climbed the wall, resting at each spike and wishing he dared look down to relieve the unnatural bending back of his neck, and this, coupled to a perverse and persistent curiosity, needed a constant effort of will to overcome it, and became more insistent and impelling as he ascended. At last he reached the beginning of the last section and, tightening his tired grip on the iron peg, reached his other hand for the dangling rope. Here was a strong temptation, but before he touched the enticing lariat he snatched the hand back and grasped the spike with it, stubbornly determined to go through with his foolish boast. His searching feet found a firm, if narrow foothold and he slowly let his weight rest on it to ease the strain on his arms and fingers. Encouraged by this opportunity for rest he let several minutes pass before climbing on.

HE started up again, inch by inch, hold by hold, his fingers gradually becoming numb, his wrists tortured by little stabs of pain, and his arms leaden.

 Hanging to the peg with one hand he

climbed the last few feet in a frenzy of effort, hoping to beat out total exhaustion by a hair. He did not see Washita's grim look of admiration, nor feel the looped rope into which he had climbed without knowing it and which now gently tightened under his arm pits; and when he finally threw himself over the rim and down onto the hard and level stone he did not feel the careful withdrawal of the rope.

He opened his eyes and looked around, seeing his companion seated Turk-fashion on a rock and grinning at him. With his legs curled under him on his stone pedestal Washita might have passed for some idol of cheerfulness.

Duncan sat up and looked pugnaciously at his Van Buren friend. "How long has Lefty Joe been usin' this fool way up the butte?"

"Years," answered Washita. "Why?"

"Then he's a fool, an' so are the rest of you," retorted Duncan with heat. "Anybody that's been usin' a thing like that for years, an' figgers on usin' it more, when a little brains would make it easier an' safer, ain't even a fool, he's an idiot! How about a rope ladder?"

"She'd sway too much if the wind blowed."

"What if it was a series of rope ladders, each coverin' one section?"

"Ain't never had time to make one, an' I reckon it'd be a hull lot of work."

"It could be made while you'all was loafin' around the bunkhouse: you could do it while you was restin'," snorted his companion. "Work?" he laughed sarcastically. "Work? There ain't as much work makin' three of 'em as there is climbin' that damned wall once. An' if you didn't want to make it yoreselves, you could have it done for you." He stood up. "Now where we goin'?"

"To see the trickiest thing in the whole butte country," answered Washita, getting up. "The greatest blind trail in the whole Southwest." He strode forward hurriedly and after ten minutes' walk dropped to his hands and knees and then to his stomach, wriggling ahead the last few feet, his companion following suit and close to his heels. He slipped off his huge hat and peered down into the valley before him.

Below them the wall dropped down straight as a plumb line into another of the characteristic Butte country valleys, at each end of it a narrowing of the forbidding walls until they formed canyons. Washita's eager eyes searched the valley and the canyons and then he backed away from the rim, arose and led the way southward again. Half a mile farther on he repeated his cautious approach to the edge of another valley, and as he peered down into it he reached back a hand and checked his companion.

"Come along slow," he warned. "They're down here, pickin' up the handful of cows we started through. Jim left one every once in awhile an' drove the last two out on the plain again an' then dusted for McLeod. Wish I could see their faces."

"Put yore glasses on 'em," suggested Duncan, looking cautiously over the edge.

"Ain't got none," replied Washita, which made his companion glance sideways at the flat coat-pocket and frown slightly. Why was Washita lying, when he knew that Duncan had heard the question about the glasses? "We'll stay here till they either leave the Buttes or go back the way they come in," said Washita. "That's our job an' that's why we made that climb."

"But they have to turn back to get out ag'in, don't they?" asked Duncan with a show of ignorance.

His companion chuckled. "Didn't I tell you this was the trickiest part of the whole Butte country?" he demanded, pushing back from the edge and motioning for his partner to follow suit. "That canyon down below where them fellers are runs every-which way, except into our part of the Buttes. With all its branches it must have near fifty valleys an' cover a stretch of 'most a hundred miles. Why, if you foller this side wall alone, which is the straightest way through, it's a twenty mile ride from one end to the other."

"But is there a way through?"

"Yes; an' them fellers down there are the first trail outfit that ever follered this side wall, got this far an' have reasons to go on through instead of turnin' back the way they come. They didn't wait for no round-up on the plain to find out how many head

they was short. They knowed their herd was stampeded deliberate an' they started right on the trail, as soon as as they could in the dark. They wouldn't be movin' so fast an' easy if they knowed we got three hundred of their steers. Knowin' they knowed the stampede wasn't accidental, Lefty fixed the false trail for 'em, an' he shore used his head again, for it led them right into the first grass valley, after they'd searched the first few canyons. I'm bettin' they go clean through an' come out a dozen miles back on their own drive trail." He stretched and chuckled again. "One grass valley leads 'em to another, an' they pick up one of their cows every once in awhile. I'm tellin' you we've got the best layout in the whole Southwest!"

"I reckon we have," replied his companion automatically. He was very busy with his own thoughts, most of which ran back to the recent stampede of his own trail herd and to that other of the year before, and also to his own exploration of the eastern end of the labyrinth below him.

THE fragment of the trail outfit moved on, driving its handful of cattle before it, and when it rounded a distant bend Washita and his companion moved across the top of the butte another half mile and came to a place from where they could see the other end of the last canyon and the open plain beyond. Washita was right; never in all his riding had Duncan seen such a perfect and baffling, time-eating false trail as this tricky chunk of the Buttes country, cut off by perpendicular walls of stone from the many and great valleys behind it. Yet there must be a way past the barrier, else no cattle from stampeded trail herds could be brought in to be rebranded by Lefty Joe and his gang.

"There they go," said Washita. "Look at 'em look around! Yes, sir; they're going back by the cattle trail, plumb satisfied by their little trip. Wonder what they'll think after they round up an' tally? Shore as shootin' some of these mad trail outfits are goin' to blame the Bar O. Well, that'll be all right too, 'though not so much for us as for others. Come on, we got that wall to tackle before dark."

The descent of the wall was not hard.

Washita tied a small, non-slip loop in one end of his rope, cast it over the upper iron peg, slid over the rim and, taking a turn of the rope around one leg, slipped down it until he could grasp the next peg. Hanging to the iron with one hand, he flipped the rope from the peg above, drew up the swinging loop, placed it over the peg and went down the second section, soon reaching the bottom. Duncan followed him without hesitation and soon they were riding back toward the ranch houses.

They did not wait for the others, Washita saying that no news was good news, but pushed on at a lope, and when they again passed the ramshackle shed and the two crates near it Duncan's horse bolted once more. This time the rider was not caught fully unwarned, for the sight of the crates had brought back to him the former actions of his horse. Washita's mount gave its rider a little trouble and as Duncan mastered his own horse he got a glimpse of a deep split in the wall behind the shed, which had not been visible at the angle of the former bolting. There came to his nostrils a faint and baffling odor, strangely familiar, but one he could not name. He did not know that it was a composite odor, made up of scents he knew well, for they masked each other to the extent of hiding their separate identities, the sense of smell being incapable of fine distinctions in blended odors. He forced his mount to wheel again, as if he were having a hard time with it, and looked more critically at the low opening behind the shed as it whirled past him. He thought he could make out the vague outlines of some sort of a heavy stockade, but the glimpse was too hurried and before he could wheel once more his horse bolted again. He let it have its head until he had caught up to his companion.

"Don't know what's got into Jeff," he complained with some vexation. "Mebbe he went a little loco watchin' his beloved master climb up that cussed wall."

Washita laughed and pushed ahead. "There's no tellin' what gets into their fool heads," he flung back over his shoulder. "Mine wouud a' been glad if I fell. Mebbe you ain't rode it enough."

CHAPTER X

A VISITOR

DUNCAN and Washita were lying on the grass not far from the bunkhouse that night when the long drawn howl of a wolf was heard. It was muffled by the intervening buttes and Duncan could not say how far away the beast was, nor its exact direction, but it sounded suspiciously as if it came from the direction he and Washita had ridden that afternoon.

"If there's any of them fellers around they'll shore raise the devil with the cattle," he remarked. "Cause you much loss?"

"Oh, they don't get down into the valleys," carelessly answered Washita. "They mostly run on the tops of the buttes. There ain't more'n an occasional one, at that."

Duncan smiled to himself as he pictured the buttes that Washita's wolves ran on, and then he grew intent, trying to recall that faint odor which he had sniffed as his horse bolted. Like a flash it came to him and he cursed himself for being a stupid fool; and then he wavered. There certainly had been a strong suggestion of a wolf den in that smell, but it was not the odor of a wolf's den. He became savage as one thought combatted the other. What was that odor? Why hadn't the wind been in the right quarter, and stronger, so he could have positively identified the smell?

"Reckon mebbe you'll have a chance to work some of the devilishness out of that cayuse of yours after that V One outfit gets further along the trail," said Washita. "We got word from McLeod that Tupper's wantin' some more Bar O cows. He shore is poundin' that ranch."

"They must 'a' run a blazer on him, huh?" asked Duncan idly.

"No-o; only they wouldn't sell out to him at his figger. He shore is set on gettin' that ranch, an' he'll do it, too, before he's through."

"What does he want to buy away over there for?" asked Duncan. "A ranch closer to his own would be handier for him. Ain't his own big enough?"

"Reckon it is, for grazin', but he's got a head plumb full of funny idears. Bought up a whole passel of worthless land, first an' last. Well, it's his money, he's spendin'."

Duncan ran back over a previous conversation about Tupper and reviewed what he knew of the Bar O. The solution to this question was easy when he visualized that gorge on the Bar O and the waterfall he had gone out of his way to look at. He thought he could explain the reception he had received on that ranch.

"Bar O must be plumb touchy by this time," he remarked carelessly.

"Ride across it, an' you'll mebbe find out how touchy they are," laughed Washita, stretching. "Last man he sent to talk 'em into sellin' out at his figgers swears he won't never go back again. Besides that, they're cussed suspicious about these here Buttes. If they were stronger they'd 'a' forced they way in here long ago. The only time they tried it they got too close to the place we didn't want 'em to find an' we shot the cayuses out from in under three of 'em, an' that shore cured 'em of bein' curious. It was lucky for us that some of our boys was out there when they called. There's only five men in their outfit, an' they ain't none of 'em got any too much nerve." He paused and thought for a moment. "You see, there's several gangs workin' in these Buttes, an' if things ever come to a showdown with the outsiders we'll all pull together ag'in 'em. Last word we got was that the Bar O was borryin' money in Pike. Tupper'll git it, shore."

"It's an easy brand to turn to a T 40," commented Duncan.

"It is, an' it ain't the only one, neither," replied Washita. He laughed again. "We get five dollars a head over the reg'lar price for every Bar O cow we blot an' turn over to Tupper. He must think they got a hell of a lot of cows. We're all laughin' in our sleeves. He's bellerin' for more Bar O critters right now, an' we shore aim to keep him happy an' cheerful. There's two hundred an' thirty-odd that ought to have their new brands good enough to pass inspection right soon, an' friend Tupper receives 'em at night, when little things ain't easy seen. He scatters 'em far an' wide right away, too. Some of the boys was cussin' Porter for not seein' a miserable dog!"

Duncan caught his breath. In his mind's eye he could see two different brands emerging from the valuable T 40. That mention of the two hundred

and thirty-odd clarified his groping suspicions. First there appeared the mark of the last trail outfit he had been with, its 110 pushing up sharply out of Tupper's brand. Rip the top off the T, tear away the left-hand perpendicular and the horizontal strokes of the 4, and the rightful mark of that two hundred thirty-odd was vividly revealed to his mind. Again the T 40 changed as the two upright strokes of the 4 and the whole of the O faded away, to leave the T Bar before his eyes.

But how did this gang drive the stolen cattle into their own part of the Buttes, and how was it done without leaving some tell-tale hoof print to point out the way to the searching eyes of the lawful owners? The wolf howl, the odour suggesting very vaguely a wolf's den, the crates, the fear of his horse—it must be that they made use of the range cattle's terror of the lobo wolf to stampede them. That also explained the part played by the dog, which smelled out "more'n us," to quote Washita's own words. But they couldn't haul the caged wolves in Lafe's great wagon and get near enough to a herd without the rumble of the vehicle giving warning; and its tracks would be too plain and too deep to be hidden. The team would be well nigh unmanageable with a pair of wolves, reeking with the stench of their rocky den, in the wagon behind them.

"Are they full grown, Washita?" he asked calmly.

"What?"

"That pair of wolves we cage an' pack on a cayuse for startin' our stampedes on the trail, out yonder. You must think I'm a fool, an' a tale-bearer, besides!"

Washita grinned in the dark. "No, they ain't; not yet," he answered. "They ain't tame, neither, 'though they ain't exactly stark wild."

"Have any trouble trainin' the cayuse to carry 'em an' not try to stand on its head?"

"No, they was near brought up together. We raised 'em right under his nose. He ain't what you might call in love with 'em, but he behaves good enough."

"What was the other part of that smell, besides wolves?"

"Stable, mebbe," chuckled Washita. "There ain't no use of me tellin' you, long as yo're so good at figgerin' things out for yoreself."

"Stable, mebbe," admitted Duncan, laughing, "but I'm near certain that there's somethin' else."

Washita was about to reply when the sounds of horses engaged his attention and he looked around at the bunkhouse. "Sounds like two of 'em," he said. "It's ag'in the rules for two of them canyon guards to leave at the same time. Must be one of 'em with a visitor. Let's ramble up an' see what's happenin'."

The horses stopped before Lefty Joe's house and the door opened, the light falling on two mounted men. "Raised the devil till I brought him in," said a voice. "I took Bill's hoss for him to ride. If it's all right I'll take it back ag'in."

Lefty Joe nodded, pulled the visitor into the house and shut the door. The canyon guard went on to the bunkhouse to replenish his supply of tobacco before returning to his post, and he found himself welcomed by every man of the gang except those who were on duty elsewhere.

"Who'd you bring in, Whiskers?" asked a voice. "'Twasn't Tupper."

"Naw. Lay you ten to one you can't guess, neither," replied the horseman, enjoying his momentary importance. He laughed at the names mentioned. "Told you so. You remember Cross-Eye? Haha-ha! Cross-Eye! The worst bum ever seen in McLeod? That was never seen ag'in after the night Lafe killed Slatery? Shore! That's the feller. Never got over the scare that Tupper threwed into him the night he tried to steal Tupper's hat. It shore is the same ol' Cross-Eye. An' I'm admittin' he ain't improved a hull lot since I saw him last."

The volley of conjectures as to why Cross-Eye should visit Lefty Joe after the years that had passed brought no satisfactory explanation. The canyon guard obtained his tobacco, surreptitiously slipped a small flask of liquor into his pocket, mounted and rode off again, leading the second horse.

The crowd dispersed, leaving Washita and Duncan standing by themselves. Washita was gazing thoughtfully at the smaller house, the curtained windows of which carved a weak yellow patch out of the night.

"It's cussed funny, after all these years," he muttered. "There's somethin' in the wind worth runnin' a risk for, or Cross-Eye never would have had the nerve to face Lefty Joe."

Washita was silent for a few moments and then turned abruptly to his companion. "I'm takin' a walk by myself, Duncan. I ain't as good at guessin' as you are, an' I has to do mine by myself. Good-night."

CHAPTER XI

OUT OF THE PAST

AFTER Lefty Joe had closed the door in the canyon guard's face he turned swiftly, leaned against it and studied his unexpected visitor. Lefty was neither supersensitive nor hypercritical, but as he examined his caller his contempt and disgust reached depths where profanity was too inadequate to express it. He regarded the visitor much the same as an amateur scientist might regard some foul individual of a species new to him; and under the searching look Cross-Eye wilted more and more, his false courage turning to water.

He had tried so hard to stir himself to a point resembling courage as he had shuffled over the weary miles between McLeod and the mouth of the canyon, declaiming fiercely to a cowed Lefty Joe; at the first challenge in the canyon his pose started to slip and it was only by a great effort that he had saved most of it.

The second challenge he took more as a matter of course and when the third stopped him it had found him unshaken and master of himself. Even as he rode by the side of the silent Whiskers across the great valley, on a horse again after more than a dozen years, he thrilled with a sense of power and dignity. Upon this occasion he was a person of importance.

When the door closed upon the friendly dark and his dangerous host turned to look at him he collapsed like a pricked bubble. The cold eyes stared through and through him, the savage face hid none of the thoughts behind it; the lean lithe figure, hard as rock and elastic as whalebone, loomed before the bleared eyes of the newcomer like the figure of Destruction. Cross-Eye licked his dry lips and tried to swallow, remembering the famed speed and accuracy of this six-gun killer, his cold anger and ruthless savagery.

"Ain't ye glad to see me, Joe?" came

a trembling whine from the shrunken and huddled shape on the box.

Lefty sneered, showing his stained teeth, but said nothing.

"I wouldn't 'a' come only I reckoned ye'd be glad ter see me, Joe," asserted Cross-Eye, squirming. "It was terrible, walkin' all that way in the heat an' the dust, Joe. I'm nigh burned up fer a drink." He tried to look into the eyes of the quiet man against the door, failed miserably and stared at the floor. "Ye ain't mad at me, air ye, Joe?"

"Stop that whinin'!" snapped Lefty. "You know damned well that walk from town ain't hot at night, an' you know damned well that I ain't glad to see you, now nor never! Yo're dirtier now than you was then: which I wouldn't 'a' believed possible. What you doin' out here?"

"I reckoned mebbe you'd be glad to see——"

"Don't say that ag'in! What brings you out here?" demanded Lefty. "You was never a man that would run a risk. Must be somethin' powerful big that forced you into this place. What is it?"

"I heard tell that Tupper's worth a lot of money," whined Cross-Eye. "Barrels of it. Too much fer him to keep all to hisself." He leered knowingly and winked, which convulsed every black wrinkle on his scored face. Cross-Eye's winks were cataclysmic. "Ain't got no liquor, hev ye, Joe?" Again he licked his dry lips and tried to swallow. His fear-paralyzed salivary glands refused to function and the effort was a distressing failure. "I can't talk, dry like I am."

Lefty strode across the room to a cupboard and jerked out a demijohn. Filling a teacup with the liquor he handed it to his companion. Cross-Eye snatched it as a famished dog would snatch a bit of meat, and downed the fiery liquor seemingly in one gulp. It was raw, frontier brandy, to be handled with proper suspicion and respect, but the only effect it had on the drinker was to release a vast and satisfied sigh. He swallowed several times experimentally and then grinned fatuously. "There ain't nothin' like brandy fer ter put life inter a man," he averred, scratchin' his chest with quick and desperate energy.

"Yo're livin' proof of that," sneered Lefty. "You ain't here to talk about liquor. What made you come out here?"

"'Taint nowise right fer one man ter have so much money, while others has none," said Cross-Eye. "Gits 'em inter bad habits, it does."

"Then you must a'a had millions an' millions, onet," replied Lefty. "I'm admittin' the evils of too much money, if it ain't us that's got it. What about it?"

"How'd ye like fer me ter tell ye how ter get a big hunk o' that money Tupper's got?" asked the other.

LEFTY got one glance into the squinting, bleared eyes and saw animal cunning gleaming out at him. "It all depends on how it's got, an' who does the gittin'," he answered. "Go on; what about it?"

"Oh, them was long an' weary miles," sighed Cross-eye, omitting to say anything about the heat. "Long, an' dusty an' orful dry. Ain't never hoofed 'em, hev ye, Joe? Through all that sand afoot? I can't hardly talk, my throat's that dry an' burnin'."

Lefty re-filled the teacup and passed it over. "I ain't givin' this away," he warned; "I'm investin' it!"

His companion's head resumed the vertical again and another sigh burst from him. "It's the best investin' ye ever done, Joe," he chuckled, hazarding another glance at his host. He started to swing gently to and fro, his back rubbing along the edge of the table; which evoked a second and softer sigh. "I know my shortcomin's, Joe. Nobody knows 'em better'n me, an' nobody knows yore strong pints better'n I do, Joe. I ain't never forget 'em all these years. They was plain an' strong before me every step o' that long an' weary, weary walk from McLeod, Joe." He paused to lick his lips, smack and glance suggestively at the demijohn. Lefty frowned at the thirsty glance.

"I got the idea, Joe. I got the secret. You'll know how to use it, an' there ain't no better man, nowheres, fer ter see it through. Tupper'd laugh at me, an' mebbe shoot me; he'd jest curl up like a witherin' leaf, with you facin' him an' tellin' him what I know. I hears he's got barrels of money."

Again his glance roved over the room

and again rested for one instant on the eyes of his host. "Don't see noa 'baccy, Joe. Hev ye quit smokin'?" he asked as he slyly drew a battered and reeking pipe out of his rags.

Lefty pulled a sack of tobacco out of his pocket, started to toss it to his companion and then swiftly changed his mind as Cross-Eye energetically investigated the other arm-pit.

"Hold out yo're hand—don't touch me nor the sack," Lefty commanded, reaching over. He poured some of the tobacco into the eager, filthy palm and shoved the sack back into his pocket again. Then he sniffed cautiously. The combination was too much. He looked searchingly and apprehensively at the floor around the other's box, blared at the reeking pipe and its disgusting owner, and took three steps to the door. Yanking it open he stepped outside and jerked his head back. "Bring that box with you, an' come out here!" he snapped.

"But mebbe somebody'll hear us," protested Cross-Eye, wary as a coyote, his glance again resting on the demi-john.

"There's worse things than that!" retorted Lefty, scratching again. "You hear me? Grab that box, an' come out of there!"

Cross-Eye came precipitately, with a promptness and speed he had not thought possible. "Ain't ye glad to see me, Joe?" he whined, shrinking into his rags.

"I told you not to ask me that ag'in!" snapped Lefty. "You come along with me! An' what you reckon yo're goin' to do with that box?"

"But ye told me ter bring it, Joe," explained Cross-Eye. "Don't ye remember?"

"I told you to bring it out of the house. Drop it, now, an' come along!"

They stopped within a hundred yards of the house and sat down. "My pore old feet ache somethin' orful," complained Cross-Eye. "Ye didn't fergit ter bring yer 'baccy did ye, Joe?"

"Here," said his companion, handing over the sack and then inched away. "Keep it; but don't use it out here! Now, what do you want to tell me?"

Cross-Eye told him laboriously, to his companion's growing astonishment, and at the conclusion of the recital Cross-

Eye leaned eagerly forward, expectant.

"Now ain't ye glad ter see me?" he asked, chuckling.

"Well, I'll be cussed!" muttered Lefty. "Oh, what fools we've all been! It ain't that I'm willin' to take yore word, but it all fits. What a fool I've been! A stupid, blind, blunderin' fool! It fair hollered to be knowed. Look here, Cross-Eye; this'll take some thinkin' over. There's allus a right way an' a lot of wrong ones. Till it's all settled don't you try to leave this valley; an' don't you say a word about this to nobody. *You hear me?*" He swung his arm through the air viciously. "What a fool I've been!"

HE sprang to his feet and looked down at his companion. "You allus was a liar, Cross-Eye; the biggest liar I ever knowed, an' I ain't swallerin' everythin' you said. Before I go to see Tupper yo're goin' to tell me just what's so an' what ain't so. If I spring anythin' on him that he knows is a lie it'll hurt our whole play the whole way through. He'll reckon I'm just guessin'. He's got to know in his heart that every word I say to him is shore gospel. You study on it an' try to remember every step of it, just as it happened. Before I go to him we'll go over it all again. If I has to back up in one single thing I tell him, I'll come back here an' take it out of yore hide! Don't you forget that, Cross-Eye: it'll come out of yore dirty hide!"

"S'elp me, Joe, everythin' I told you is true—every word of it," assured his shrinking companion. "It's so true that I dassn't stay in McLeod after that night. I gits drunk, Joe, an' talks, I do; an' if I ever said a word about that when I was drunk I wouldn't live long enough to git sober ag'in. An' don't you tell him I told ye, Joe! Don't you tell him that! Ye won't, will ye, Joe?" He clutched at the other. "Ye won't, will ye, Joe?"

Lefty considered a moment. "No. If he don't know who told me, an' who might tell others later, he can't shut yore mouth. That's another reason you've got to stay here in the Buttes. If he saw you in McLeod after I had a talk with him, he'd shoot you on suspicion."

"I ain't a-goin' to leave here!" ex-

claimed the wreck. "Not till it's all over, an' then I'm goin' north, fast as I can git there."

"Who saw you when you was in McLeod, before you started for here?"

"Nobody that knowed me," assured the tramp. "I was too cunnin' fer that, till I saw how things laid."

"Then how'd you know Tupper had so much money?"

"I was bummin' with a feller this spring that knowed a lot about this part o' the country. He told me. I been plannin' it ever since. Then I heard that you was still up here in the Buttes, an' the whole thing come to me like a flash. You was the one man that could turn the card. How much you reckon we oughta git out of it, an' what's my share? Half?"

"Don't know what it's worth. You'll get what's belongin' to you. I'm goin' in now. There's a lean-to ag'in the back of my house that you can use. Keep yore mouth tight shut when yo're around the boys; an' don't drink with them! Good night."

Cross-Eye watched the other grow smaller against the faint glow of the curtained window, and when the door had opened and shut behind Lefty Joe the tramp pulled out his pipe and filled it so carefully that not a flake of tobacco was lost. He rocked to and fro, gently puffing and gently scratching, an occasional cackle coming from him. If there was only some way to get Lefty Joe's share as well, after the stake had been gained! The thought frightened him, but he considered it just the same. It was improbable, but something might turn up that would let it come true.

"Barrels of it," he mumbled, rubbing his hands. "Barrels of it, he has. Even if I only git my own share it'll mean likker an' 'baccy fer the rest o' my days. Nobody but Lefty Joe could play cards, neither. An' that tent parson tellin' me old age was gittin' closter an' closter all the time an' I ought ter repent my sins! Huh! An' jest when they're goin' to amount to somethin'!"

He got to his feet after a little effort and shuffled toward the house. He remembered an ax standing in one corner of the big room, and wondered if Lefty locked his door and if he was a sound sleeper.

"Time enough fer ter find them

things out," he chuckled. "He's a funny feller, Joe is. Wonder what he was aimin' at, makin' me drag that box outside, an' then leavin' it behind? Well, he mebbe *is* funny: but he's the man fer Tupper, damn 'em both!" . . .

He reached the house and stopped. "Hey, Joe! It's gittin' cold out doors, an' my pore ol' bones ain't what they onct was. Got any more liquor?" He waited expectantly for a reply and as the silence remained silent he shook his head mournfully and shuffled on around the corner to go to the lean-to. "Allus was sorter stingy, Joe was: but he's the man fer Tupper: an' mebbe I'll be the man fer him, damn him! Likker an' 'baccy all the rest o' my days. He-he-he! *Repent?* He-he-he! He-he-he! *He-he-he!*"

Out on the floor of the valley, not a score of paces from where Lefty Joe and Cross-Eye had spoken without restraint, a man rolled over on his back and stared up at the occasional star revealed by the drifting clouds. He was lying in a small but deep drywash, into which he had rolled at the first sound of footsteps.

"Well, I'll be—be—tee—totally—damned!" he whispered and, arising, melted into the night away from the houses, to circle back to them from a much less suspicious direction.

CHAPTER XII

A WELCOME TASK

FOR the next week Cross-Eye loafed anxiously and restlessly between the bunkhouse and the dwelling of Lefty Joe, perplexed by the latter's procrastination in a matter which Cross-Eye had let lie dormant and unformed for weeks, but which now set him a fire with impatience. Lefty Joe scarcely gave the tramp a second glance and the rest of the men good-naturedly tolerated him as long as he did not enter the bunkhouse. The cook frankly was hostile, stirred deeply by the indignity of waiting on a "McLeod bum," for his orders had been to place Cross-Eye's food on a bench outside the door of the kitchen, where the tramp seized upon it and bore it off to his lean-to.

Dutch and his wounded companion

had convalesced rapidly because of their perfect physical condition, the stimulating air and sunlight and the excellent attention they had given to their injuries.

The former's grouch against the world in general now had a focal point and as his healing wounds itched more and more the meanness of his nature showed itself in petty things. He grumbled incessantly, nagged constantly, and found fault with a diligence scarcely short of genius. His first essays had turned toward Duncan, the stranger in the crowd, but there had arisen on occasion when he had looked into blazing eyes full of the unspoken promise of death, and the dexterity of his abandonment of Duncan as his butt did him proud. Then came the heaven-sent Cross-Eye, unarmed, timid, unfit physically, mentally, and morally, a grotesque wreck of a man. Dutch gloated and turned his attention to bedeviling the unfortunate. He had incited his fellows with some of the outward manifestations of his spirit and they rushed heedlessly to the persecution. There came the afternoon when the screamed maledictions of a furious cook, who had caught the tramp in a bit of petty pilfering, gave point and body to the heckling of the bunkhouse crowd. They roped the tramp and dragged him to a pond not far away, accompanying his terror-urged steps by a fusillade of shots, made him strip and then threw him as far from the shore as they could. The water was not deep and the sandy bottom had made the pond the favorite swimming place of the crowd, and so they now placed themselves about its edge and hilariously made their victim scrub until his grimy skin first turned white and then red. But this did not satisfy them, being entirely too tame and inactive on their part, and so they forced him to apply the brush until blood began to ooze from beneath the harsh bristles. When he turned near the bank a bullet stopped him.

The cook came running with a blanket. "Bounce him, boys, an' heave him back! See how far you can toss him!"

Here was a rare sport and the trembling wreck was ordered ashore, thrown into the blanket and then tossed back into the pond. He was sailing through the air on the third toss when a sharp, angry voice snapped a command and the merry-makers turned to see Duncan

striding toward them, his face wrinkled with anger. Behind him, leaning against the corner of the bunkhouse was Lefty Joe, who had been attracted by the cries of the tramp, and as yet his presence had not been discovered.

"He's tired of that by now," said Duncan, slowly. "I'll take his place, if you bullies feel able to get me into that blanket!" He glanced at Washita Charley, who had been sitting apart from the hazers, and then he looked at Cross-Eye, arising above the surface of the pond.

"Come on out, Cross-Eye!" he ordered. "The show is all over."

HAND after hand let loose of the blanket as man after man slowly faced the angry newcomer. Some grinned sheepishly, realizing that they had been playing the part of bullies; some yielded to anger and spite and a spirit of conflict. Dutch, the irritable, remembering Charley's tale about the wasted shots at the rattlesnake, swung away from the crowd and faced the objector. His partner, Utah, also stepped aside, a scowl on his evil face.

"Reckon it would be more fun to bounce a human bein'," sneered Dutch, his good hand creeping toward his gun. He was glad that his right hand and arm had not been injured. As the chief instigator of the torments he felt called upon to uphold them. "Clothes an' all, you smart Aleck," he said.

"There ain't no use of makin' a bum take a bath if he puts on the same clothes ag'in," said Duncan. "Seein' yo're so prominent an' full of talk, Dutch, I'm lookin' for you to fit Cross-Eye out with clean clothes, complete to hat an' shoes. After you get all healed up ag'in you can make any play you wants."

"That'll mebbe be a long time—" began Dutch, and jerked at his gun, his partner following his lead. He winced as it tore from his fingers and splashed into the pond, staring into the little smoke cloud at Duncan's hip with unbelieving eyes. The second gun pointed squarely at Utah's lean stomach, and the owner of the stomach stood as he had frozen, his gun half drawn, his mouth open. "Better let it go back ag'in, Utah!" ordered Duncan. He then looked at Dutch, who was rubbing his numbed hand and wrist. "I said after you get all healed up you can make any play you wants. That goes for Utah, too. Together, or

separate, as you like. Come up to the bunkhouse with me an' get him them clothes."

At this moment Lefty Joe slipped away from the bunkhouse, being seen only by Washita, and he hurried into his own house. He wheeled in the door and watched Dutch loafing along ahead of Duncan, waited until the two men had come out again and gone back to the pond, and then he sauntered over to the bunkhouse and sat down on the wash bench just outside the door. He wiped out the grim smile on his face and waited.

It was not long before a silent procession straggled around the corner, the blanket-tossers appearing first, followed by a shuffling and enraged Dutch. Behind him came Utah, who had not been disarmed. This fact had aroused his suspicions and he was careful to keep his hand away from his gun. Washita strolled into sight and sat down on the ground, leaning back against the bunkhouse wall. Then Duncan turned the corner, carrying a wet and dripping six-gun in his hand. He called to Dutch and tossed the weapon to its owner, watching him narrowly until the other had taken his hand from the weapon. Cross-Eye straggled into sight worrying a clean and faded blue cotton shirt over his head and shoulders. His trousers were worn but serviceable and his toes no longer showed through holes in his boots. Seeing the crowd watching him, he stopped and risked a grin, glancing furtively and hopefully at his distant lean-to. A dozen raw spots on his skin burned and smarted and he was sore and aching.

Lefty Joe, pretending that he knew nothing of the happenings of the past quarter hour, looked up and stared at the tramp.

"Why, you look thinner, Cross-Eye, an' most amazin' clean," he observed. "You must 'a' been in the hoss pond!"

Cross-Eye squirmed and grinned anxiously. "Was," he hesitatingly replied, "but it made me powerful thirsty, Joe."

"Cussed if you ain't got the most unusual thirst of anybody I ever knowed," retorted Lefty. "There ain't nothin' you do that don't make you thirsty." He smiled at the group around him and, no one offering any information, he arose. "Boys, that bunch of T 40 cattle ought to be near ready for delivery by

this time. Go up an' get 'em together. I'll meet you at West Canyon. Dutch, you an' Pete look well enough to ride ag'in: go with 'em. I got a job for Duncan; somethin' very special."

HE caught the sullen glances directed at the last named, but took no notice of them. "Seein' yo're so clean, Cross-Eye, you better give up the lean-to, before that makes you thirsty, an' bunk in the storehouse in my place. Come on, Duncan," he said, turning to go to his own quarters. "I'll tell you what you got to do."

The rest of the gang melted away toward their horses and soon were riding off to round up the T 40 cattle. Cross-Eye was holding a distant, but earnest and one-sided talk with the obstinate cook. Lefty Joe stopped when just outside the door of his house and seated himself on a bench, motioning for his companion to join him.

"Seems to be a little coolness between you an' some of the rest of the boys," said Lefty. His companion did not reply and he considered a moment. "Yo're a two-gun toter an' you oughta be purty good with 'em. I been thinkin' lately that mebbe Lafe an' his darter ain't exactly safe, livin' alone out there so far away from us all. There's quite a few fellers in town an' elsewhere, that'd like to run off with her. That would just about kill Lafe. I'm goin' to send you out there to stay an' keep yore eye on things."

Duncan nodded carelessly. "All right; but I don't hardly know anybody hereabouts by sight an' might make a mistake. Wouldn't it mebbe be better to send somebody else, that does know folks?"

Lefty smiled. "They all know her too well. Take yore blankets with you. If it rains you can sleep in the stable. What I said about folks wantin' to run off with her goes at it lay, an' for every man in our gang—Dutch, 'specially. Yo're goin' out there to see it don't happen. I wouldn't bother with sendin' you only I'll be with the herd we're goin' to turn over to the T 40, an' I mebbe won't be back for a night or two. We oughto get better prices for T 40 cattle an' I'm goin' down to make Tupper raise the ante on 'em."

Duncan nodded again. "All right. When am I startin'?"

"When I go to join the boys tomorrow mornin'." Lefty arose. "I'll point out the way to you after we get to West Canyon. You can't miss the valley from there."

At dawn Duncan was in the saddle, following Lefty Joe westward, and as the latter turned to join the already moving herd Duncan, following the course described by his companion, went ahead along toward Lafe's little valley. As he reached the entrance of the northern canyon he turned and looked back, watching the two hundred thirty-odd cattle slowly trickling into the mouth of the great gorge to the south. He saw a sombrero wave, thought that it came from Washita, and replied to the signal. Wheeling, he entered the narrow chasm and clattered through it into Lafe's restricted paradise of clean rock walls and crisp, fresh greenery.

He approached the house without seeing any one and dismounted before the kitchen door. Then a cackle of laughter made him glance toward the stables, where Lafe grinned cheerfully from an open door.

"'Twon't do you no good," chuckled the wagoner, slowly emerging. "You can't find it, no better'n the rest." A suspicious scowl banished the grin. "You didn't bring her no presents, did you?" he demanded.

"Not one," answered Duncan; "but you told me I could, if I wanted to."

"Nobody can, but me," replied the wagoner, shuffling toward the house. "'Nita! 'Nita!" he called. "Here's company come to see you."

The door grudgingly opened and Anita locked out. "How do you do? Won't you come in?"

"I'm not here to intrude on you, Miss Pettigrew," Duncan answered. "An' I'm not here on my own choice—though my choice would be to be here. Lefty Joe seemed to be a little anxious about your safety, since he expects to be gone from the Buttes a few days." The irony in his voice was plain to her. "Me bein' a stranger here, an' a little at odds with the rest of the gang, he reckoned I was a suitable guard. If I can persuade yore father to pack up an' take you away from this place I'll be very glad to hold some canyon behind you—an' scatter some carrion for the buzzards to feast on!"

"WON'T you please come in, Mr. Duncan?" she invited, smilingly.

"I'm not goin' to be a nuisance, Miss Pettigrew. I'll keep out of sight as much as I can, but I'm afraid I'll have to intrude at meal time."

"Won't you please come in, Mr. Duncan?" she asked again. "A nuisance is never invited the third time." She held open the door invitingly and laughed.

"Thank you. I will, for a moment," he answered, stepping forward.

"Father, bring me a can of butter-milk from the spring. Mr. Duncan must be thirsty, an' a cold drink is usually welcomed, out here."

She watched her father start away and then stepped quickly into the house, facing her standing visitor. "Just what do you know, an' what do you mean, Mr. Duncan?" she hurriedly asked.

"Very little that I'm shore of," he answered, smiling to reassure her.

"Then what made you suggest that I leave my home here in the Buttes?"

"Why, these Buttes ain't hardly the place for a young woman," replied the visitor. "There ain't nobody up here, except you an' yore father, that ain't a cattle thief—or a stage robber," he finished, remembering her father's canny remark during the night watch in the west canyon.

"Are you a cattle thief?" she asked.

"No, not yet, though I did blot a lot of brands some time back."

"They would 'a' been blotted if you hadn't done it?"

"They shore would, only it would 'a' took 'em longer without my help."

"But they'd been stolen then, hadn't they?" she persisted.

"Yes'm," he answered, wondering a little about the way she was trying to exonerate him.

"Then there is some one, up here in the Buttes, that ain't a cattle thief?" She laughed at him, her eyes dancing.

"Yes'm, but you forget the second part."

"Instead of forgettin' it, I remember it very vividly. Women are supposed to be intuitive creatures, Mr. Duncan. To live up to my part of that, my intuition tells me that you are not a stage robber. Let me show you your room."

"Why, I'm aimin' to stay outside nights," he replied. "When it rains, Lefty was kind enough to say I might sleep in the stable. He didn't say whether it would be with the horses or the cows. Reckon he left that to me," he laughed. "I reckon I won't have much use for a room, Miss Pettigrew. I'll be wanderin' about nights, an' sleepin' days, mostly. If I was in the house nights it would be puttin' all our eggs in one basket."

"If you'll follow me I'll show you your room, whether you have any use for it or not." She smiled. "It has a door opening onto the porch, which makes it easy for you to come an' go. I can't see any reason why you shouldn't sleep in the house during daylight. I'd wake you up quick enough if I had any reason to. Stone walls make a good fort, and the three of us could make things hot for any enemy!" Her eyes flashed.

"Gosh!" he whispered, his rebellious eyes telling more than he knew.

She nodded decisively. "Let me show you your room."

Still protesting, he followed her and poked his head into the small corner room. It was neat and clean, the spread on the bed spotless. There was a home-made wash stand, a chair and some shelves, from whose edges hung curtains of calico. She was looking at her guest and wondering at the expression on his face.

"What is it, Mr. Duncan? Don't you like it?"

He gulped and looked at her frankly. "It hurts, Miss Pettigrew. It's been over ten years since I was in a room like this—my sister's room. If you don't mind I—I'll sleep outside an' take to the porch when it rains."

"Your sister? She is—?"

He nodded, a hand straying to a gun handle. "I wonder if you've ever heard of anybody in this part of the country by the name of Hepburn?" he asked.

ANITA PETTIGREW, remembering something of what her father had babbled, now connected it properly. She shook her head slowly. "I never heard of a Hepburn out here. I hope you'll forgive me for bringin' you in here. I didn't know."

"Oh, pshaw, it's my own fault for

bein' so easy hurt. It was a long time ago, an' I'm a growed man. I'm ashamed of myself. Here comes yore father, an' a long drink of that cold buttermilk will be just the thing."

Lafe shuffled into the kitchen carrying a tin pail whose sides were sweating, and after a few more minutes Duncan arose to leave. "I'll just wander around the valley an' learn all I can of it," he said.

"No snoopin'!" warned Lafe.

"Don't be beyond call around noon," said Anita, smiling.

"No snoopin'! Mind yore own business, stranger!" warned the wagoner. His belligerent mood swiftly changed and he grasped Duncan by the sleeve and pulled him toward a little bedroom on the other side of the house. "'Nita's room," he said, chuckling. "Want to show you her presents, what I got her. Twenty to one I did. Lefty Joe's a liar. Won't let nobody else bring her none, only you. Twenty to one I won't. Only you."

Anita paled and stepped quickly to the door of the room, barring it to them. "Father, you must *never* take anyone into my bedroom," she chided, smiling in a strained way at their guest for the way he was holding back. "Take him out an' show him over the valley, Father: *that's* what he wants to see. It isn't right to take men into my room."

"I want to show him the presents!" persisted Lafe rebelliously. "All them nice presents I got for you. Lefty Joe is a liar, *damn him!*"

"Show 'em to me tomorrow: ain't got no time now," said Duncan, pulling from the wagoner's grasp and smiling reassuringly at the daughter. "Besides, you know I hate presents wors'n a snake!"

A faint look of pity came to Anita's face, but she smiled and tried to explain away a ticklish situation, which no one but she knew to be ticklish.

"It's pitiful, Mr. Duncan," she swiftly said. "Father is the dearest father a girl ever had; but he thinks he has to offset a few presents which I accepted, for safety's sake, from Lefty Joe. Even in your case, Mr. Duncan, it was not the presents that counted with *her*: it was the man who gave them! That was all that counted with her: the man who gave them. Lefty

Joe thinks he can buy his way with presents: Father thinks he can beat him by givin' me more: it's excusable in my father, but an *insult* from Lefty Joe! If he forces me to marry him I'll kill him the first chance I get! It won't be hard to find the chance early, either!" She turned to Lafe imperiously. "Take Mr. Duncan over the valley. Dinner will be ready at twelve."

"I want to show him yore presents, which I gave you! Lefty Joe's a liar!" stubbornly persisted Lafe. "Pretty presents, what I gave her!"

Duncan was at the door. "Well, Lafe," he said regretfully, "if you won't show me the valley, I'll have to show it to myself. *Fine* way to treat a visitor, *this* is! I'm surprised at you!"

"No snoopin'," said Lafe, pulling his long black coat tightly about him and hurrying out of the door.

Duncan was looking at the coat and he glanced aside at Anita. "Yore father's left-handed, Miss Pettigrew?" he carelessly asked.

She looked a little surprised. "Yes, he is."

Duncan smiled a trifle, glanced out at the waiting wagoner and nodded.

"Now to look over the valley. We'll shore not be far away at dinner time, an' you can bet on that!"

He walked slowly out to the wagoner, a faint but knowing smile on his face. "Dutch ain't as far off as he might be," he thought. "Funny the rest of 'em ain't noticed that. Reckon it's because they look at him like he was part of the scenery. He's cunnin' as hell in some things!"

"No snoopin'!" warned Lafe, leering at his companion. "I can see it yet, stickin' in his back, damn him! Shan't have her. Them there's the stables. Built most of 'em myself. Ever see 'em?"

Duncan looked critically at the patched shack, his eyes resting on a patch of worn-out oilcloth which formed a section of the near wall. He did not know it then, but that patch of oilcloth was destined to have a great importance before he left the Buttes.

"If they only knowed what I got cached away!" gloated Lafe, chuckling. "No snoopin'!"

"I won't do no snoopin'," replied

Duncan, smiling broadly. He didn't have to snoop, for he knew what Lafe had cached away. He laughed outright and determined to keep a good watch on the old man's movements whenever he was close at hand. Lafe was crazy, but Duncan was not prepared to say just how crazy.

Anita, glancing out after them, put her hands to her breast and hurried in panicky fear to close the door of her room. Then she peered out of the window to see in what direction her father was going, and sighed with relief. Her father was crazy, but there were streaks of cunning all through his aberrant mind, and this thought calmed her.

CHAPTER XIII

A COYOTE AT BAY

THE rebranded "110" cattle moved slowly through the canyons and valleys and were held in the last valley until twilight, when they were driven on again to cover the last few miles of the journey to the plain. Lefty Joe rode ahead and as he reached the end of the canyon found upper and his men waiting for him. Tupper's outfit were very loyal to their boss, every man having been imported and having nothing common with any of the local inhabitants. They were paid well and they did what they were told to do without question or hesitation.

As the first of the stolen cattle emerged from the canyon Tupper's foremen placed men and began the tally and as the total was called off Tupper smiled in the darkness, at this latest blow at the Bar O.

"Every one of 'em is a three-year old," commented the foreman in surprise. It struck him as strange that a blind night raid over the Bar O should result in such a uniform herd. It looked as though every steer had been carefully selected.

"Once in awhile we can pick 'em careful," replied Lefty Joe casually. "We been watchin' 'em purty close an' found they was roundin' up for a drive over the trail, like they did once last year. These cows are worth more than the extra five dollars a head. Pay me the reg'lar price now, Tupper; an'

then I'll go down with you an' have a talk about raisin' the ante."

Tupper laughed as he produced a roll of bills and began counting them into Lefty's hand. When the last bill had been paid over in the flickering and carefully shielded light of numerous matches and the rustler had verified the amount, the payer shoved the rest of the roll into his pocket and grinned.

"Joe, if you can talk me inter payin' more you'll shore git it," he said, "but you can't do it, nohow."

Lefty laughed. "Just the same I'll ride down with you an' have a try at it." He separated his share of the herd money and shoved it into his chaps pocket and then turned and handed the remainder of the roll to Washita Charley, whose peculiar expression was veiled in the dim light. "Split this with the boys accordin' to the rule. Duncan don't come in on this money. His pay starts with the other herd. I may not git back for a day or two. You take charge. So-long."

Washita and his companions turned slowly back into the canyon and were lost to sight in a minute, Lefty Joe riding at Tupper's side toward the ranch. Ahead of them somewhere in the night moved the stolen cattle, to be spread out and driven all over the T 40 range before dawn so that its identity as a herd would be lost. The two men rode forward in silence, one planning his course of action and perfecting its details; the other, vaguely disturbed and wondering about the real reason for the company of the rustler.

Both of these men at one time had been ne'er-do-wells, lacking in character and initiative, floating aimlessly on the sea of Fate which took them as it wished despite their feeble efforts to control their course; but as the years passed since their successful starts toward affluence they both had acquired force, determination, vision, and courage. One had developed more along lines of mastery over business questions; the other, over men. One was noted for his scheming, his cunning, his trickery; the other for his growing contempt of danger, his cold-blooded shootings, his reckless driving along a chosen course despite opposition. Success had made both dominant in their chosen fields; but the knowledge each had of the other was based on certain funda-

mental truths of their real natures, gleaned during their association together through the lean and precarious years. Before each other they stood stripped to bed-rock.

Lefty Joe always had been the coldly ferocious, weasel-like member of the old trio, feared by both of the others because of the quality of his courage and the directness of his actions; he always had scorned the petty subterfuges both of the others had found so useful. Slattery had been easy-going, the good fellow, the easily persuaded member of the partnership, very adept at handling cards and content to bask in the security afforded by the friendship of Lefty Joe. He had done very little original thinking for himself. Tupper was the long-headed planner of their joint enterprises and for some months his best schemes had borne but little fruit because of things beyond his control. Then his great inspiration had come to him one day while watching the good-natured, open-handed Lafe Pettigrew buying drinks for the crowd. Having decided on his plan of action he let nothing interfere with it and wormed his way into the rancher's confidence by every trick his wily brain could offer.

As he became more and more successful he managed to get Lefty Joe interested in the rustling operations going on in the Butte country, operations which strongly appealed to the nervous activity and to the love of risk which were the foundations of the other's nature. Tupper wanted no third split in the spoils which he knew were getting nearer and nearer with each passing day. Finally Lefty had withdrawn from the trio, preferring to spend his time with his associates in the newer and more appealing field.

After the withdrawing of Lefty, Tupper worked with renewed energy, smoothing the way for the one great play. He early had introduced playing for I. O. U.'s whenever Lafe sat in a game with him and Slattery, which made the rancher accustomed to them. If Lafe gave the innovation any serious thought Tupper's plausible remarks about concealing their money and their winnings from covetous eyes satisfied him. When a man plays with money on the table he at all times knows about how much he has won or lost; but the

total of his I. O. U.'s can be easily forgotten in the excitement of the play.

Gradually the stakes grew larger, although the rancher never was allowed to win or lose much, and he was not allowed to lose two days in succession. He became convinced that he played as good a game as his pleasant friends and that they were honest in their dealing with him. Nothing, however small, was overlooked by Tupper, who was a genius for details. Under his watchful eye Slattery practised for weary hours in the secrecy of their own room and their system of signals grew steadily toward perfection. Tupper always had tried to avoid anything which might lead to gunplay and consistently had preached caution to his two companions, only one of which had stood in need of the sermon.

IF Slattery had given this any thought he dismissed it before the half formed conclusions had made much of an impression on him, but Lefty Joe had taken the everlasting preachments as the sign of a lack of courage on the part of the preacher. This he later had reason to change and to ascribe it to its proper place in the character of his present companion. Tupper was not a coward, but placed sheer courage second to cunning in the working out of his schemes. It took brains to win by wits; any fool could be brave.

Slattery was dead, but these other two were riding side by side through the night toward a conference which was destined to lead them to the great crisis of their evil lives. Lefty Joe knew what it was to be about and was serenely confident in the outcome; Tupper, uneasily turning over every possibility, was as confident that his cunning and experience would carry him through it successfully. He felt that it was to be coyote against wolverine, and if the matter concerned cattle prices then the game would be the coyote's.

They reached the house without breaking the long silence and as they dismounted Lefty Joe, slipping out of the saddle on the far side of his horse, swiftly unbuttoned his coat and shook his holster. Tupper had no play of preparedness to conceal, for he preferred to keep his coat buttoned to the

neck, in spite of the warmth of the night. This preference on the part of the rancher was not missed by the rustler, who smiled knowingly to himself. Years ago he had learned that not only were the buttonholes of his companion's coat all enlarged, but also that the buttons themselves were sewed on by a few weak threads. He knew the reason for it, and he knew that Tupper knew that he knew. The element of surprise, thus being lacking, might deter Tupper from acting rashly and spoiling the pleasure of an evening which promised to be thoroughly enjoyable to Lefty Joe. There was one thing concerning Tupper and his methods, however, that the rustler did not know.

Lefty Joe unhesitatingly obeyed his companion's thoughtless gesture and entered the house first, standing aside while his host lighted the lamp. Tupper tossed his sombrero on a chair and his guest followed suit, but when the host seated himself on the far side of the dining table and drew close up against it, facing squarely across it, this action was not followed by the rustler, who remained standing, leaning with his right shoulder against the wall, his idle hands hooked by their thumbs to the edges of his pockets.

"Sit down, Joe," invited Tupper cordially.

"Been settin' too much to-day," answered the rustler, smiling a little. "I allus seem to think better standin' on my two feet, an' I reckon I've got some hard thinkin' ahead of me if I pry higher prices out of you."

Tupper laughed. "You called the turn then, Joe. But if I remember right you allus used to think better settin' in a saddle. Are you changin', Joe?"

"Reckon not. That's the same as standin', the way I ride. You ain't changed much, I see. You allus did like to set at a table, where you could rest yore hands on the edge."

"That's the gamblin' habit, crowdin' a table. You got a great mem'ry for little things, Joe," said Tupper, smiling thinly.

"An' for big things, too, George. It's a valuable thing, a good mem'ry," rejoined the guest, also smiling. So they remained, smiling at each other like two over-polite duelists, each studying

the other. Not once did Lefty's eyes stray to his companion's tightly buttoned coat; not once did Tupper glance at the low-hung holster of his guest.

A well-informed gunman expects the ordinary wearer of a shoulder holster to edge his left side a little forward when facing an opponent. The left hand, tearing open the coat at the cost of the buttons if they do not easily slip through the buttonholes, clears the way for the right to reach in, pull the weapon and shoot without having to turn it toward the target, for that already lies in a line that is a continuation of its symmetrical plane.

TO a strange, studious gunman Tupper's present position, facing his companion as he did chest to chest, might have been very misleading, even to the extent of causing him to believe the other guiltless of the shoulder holster, which conclusion would be aided by the fact that Tupper wore the customary gun slung at his thigh; but while Lefty Joe never had seen the peculiar contrivance worn by his old partner and while he did not suspect anything out of the ordinary, he knew that there was a gun under Tupper's armpit, and on one occasion had seen it drawn.

The exhibition had been one to awaken a quiet respect in the rustler's mind, and to warn him that he had under-rated his cautious, peace-loving friend and partner. Something in his expression told Tupper that the element of surprise, indeed, would be missing. Lefty Joe was the best hip shot in that part of the country, his hand almost touched the butt of the six-gun barely an inch above the slightly curled fingers, and there was no buttoned coat to be torn aside. Lefty wore his weapon openly and scorned the secrecy which made the other keep his hidden.

"What's the sudden trouble about prices, Joe?" quietly asked Tupper.

"Why, there's a feller out in the Buttes that's got a good mem'ry, too," said Lefty Joe. "He's aimin' to stay in the Buttes fer his health—an' mine. If anythin' should happen to me he knows jest what to do. Of course, I'm with an old friend an' his hand-picked outfit of Texans to-night, an' there ain't nothin' likely to happen to me.

But a feller never can tell what might happen." He paused a moment to let his words sink in. "After listenin' good to what he had to tell me, I reckoned I oughta come down here an' see you about it. George, you've been plumb successful. Jest about what is this here ranch worth now?"

"Why, I reckon I'd have to do quite a heap of figgerin' to answer that question, Joe. Are you thinkin' of buyin' me out?"

"No; more like bein' yore pardner, only I reckon we mebbe wouldn't get along very good together."

"Sorta think yo're right, Joe. I've got so used to doin' what I want. I reckon we wouldn't get along together at all."

"Figgered that way," said Lefty, growing a little tense. "I come down to tell you somethin'. It's somethin' you shore oughta know. Listen close till I get through, then we'll talk it all over."

He swung into Cross-Eye's tale, careful to keep away from everything that was not truth. Tupper's customary calm flickered at times, but he controlled himself to the end of the story, knowing that he now needed control of himself more than he ever had at any time in his life. So he waited silently until his guest asked a question.

"How's that for a mem'ry, George?" asked Lefty at the conclusion of his talk.

The following discussion was dogged, bitter; accusation followed by denial; denial by brief repetitions of the story, a story complete down to the last, small detail. They wrangled from one end of it to the other, but through it all Lefty Joe's voice remained low-pitched, earnest, convincing. Tupper's emotions finally lost him the poise he so much had prided himself upon having, his face flared with sudden anger and a look of desperation came into his eyes.

"It's a lie, a damned lie!" he shouted, forgetting himself to the extent of standing up, his hands still resting on the edge of the table.

"Don't sit down again, George," warned Lefty Joe. "A man settin' is likely to get rash. You say it's a lie. You know it ain't. I know it ain't. That other feller knows it ain't. But for the sake of argument suppose we

look at it like it is a lie—everythin' fits, like an old saddle to a cayuse. Everythin' is there, before, durin' an' after, to make folks believe it. The town is plumb full of old-timers that have good mem'ries, too. There's forty men out on the range that would be plumb eager to believe it. You lose, either way; but there's one way you don't lose near so much. There's only one thing that ain't jest clear, but there's a dozen ways of explainin' that, an' men that want to believe a thing shore will explain it enough to satisfy themselves. How much is this ranch worth, George?"

THERE ensued another spell of bitter wrangling and the whole thing was gone over again, but at the end Lefty Joe asked the same question.

"What's this ranch worth, George?"

"Before I ask you how much you want out of me to keep you quiet, an' not admittin' that I'm goin' to pay you a damned cent," said Tupper, sinking back again on his chair, whereat his companion poised himself, "I want you to understand that when I buy anythin' I buy all of it. If I should buy anythin' from you I'll want a statement over yore signature that so far as you know, or have reason to believe, there ain't a word of truth in anythin' you've said to-night; the same signed statement from that feller in the Buttes, an' I'm to have that man that told you this damn fool story! Yo're to turn him out of the Buttes, through the canyon we used to-night. Yo're to do it when I gives the word. Then yo're goin' back into the Buttes, quick, an' mind yore own business, forgettin' that he ever come out of the Buttes. I never pay twice for a thing. Now, then; how much do you figger it's worth?"

"An even half of this here ranch—in cash."

"Damn you, that's near twenty thousand!" roared Tupper, his hand trembling and the desperate look flaming into his eyes.

"Don't!" snapper Lefty Joe, tense as a spring, his curling fingers curled a little higher. "Don't you pull it! Yo're good, but I'm better! I reckon you oughta stand up ag'in. The temptation to make me kill you won't be half so strong if yo're on yore feet."

He waited a moment, reading the glaring eyes, and then continued. "Yo're a modest rancher, George—twenty thousand! You think jest as quick as you ever did, don't you? You ain't changin', no matter what I'm doin'. Why, I heard that you said that this ranch was worth eighty thousand—when you was talkin' to a man that wasn't lookin' to be given half of it."

"Braggin'!" snapped Tupper. "Like we all do; an' to a man that might figger on buyin' it. Forty thousand is a fair value, but I reckoned I'd have to come down a lot. Why, that would give you twenty thousand—that you ain't entitled to!"

"Jest the same amount that you wasn't entitled to," snapped Lefty. "We ain't goin' to argue over a few pennies. I'll split the difference with you an' say it's worth sixty thousand. Got it handy, my half?"

Tupper snorted with rage and disgust. "You know a man don't keep no sum like that layin' around the house! I ain't even got it layin' handy in the bank, up at Sheridan. Money works for a man that knows how to make it work. Things has got to be turned into cash first. Take a week; mebbe two. I've been puttin' money back into the ranch, as you know. I've been buyin' up acres of land I can't never sell like it is now. I'll mebbe have to give my paper for it—an' I won't give it for no thirty thousand!"

Lefty considered, watching his companion narrowly and studying him. He knew men and the danger of driving them into acts of blind desperation. He did not want to have to kill Tupper, for the rancher was worth nothing to him dead. His asking price purposely had been high, and now he smiled knowingly and nodded, chuckling at the working of Fate.

"I ain't aimin' to bust you, George. How soon can you get twenty thousand? That's half of yore own valuation. How soon can you get that, in cash; mostly in hundred-dollar bills?"

Tupper stiffened. This crude, forthright cattle thief was weakening—the coyote was going to win out in the coyote's game. "Not a day sooner. Why, the bank is goin' to have trouble gettin' that much cash!"

"Oh, no, 'tain't," replied Lefty Joe.

"It can dig up that money as quick as I can dig up—*this!*"

Tupper glared at the level, steady weapon and knew that for the moment the wolverine had won; but only for the moment. Two weeks was a long time to a desperate man, a cunning man. He sighed and nodded wearily, hopelessly, but his dejected relaxation, his hopeless resignation failed in their purpose. The gun remained leveled.

"**K**NOWIN' you so well, George," said Lefty Joe, "I want somethin' to remind you about our bargain. Gimme yore note for twenty thousand, payable at my place in the Buttes in two weeks. If it ain't paid in two weeks Rufe and his posse will be lookin' for you, if you ain't had an accident before they get after you. You know me, Tupper. You side-tracked me up inter them Buttes when you got the idear of skinnin' Lafe. I ain't changed a damned bit these eight years, less'n it's to git worse!" The sudden gleam in Tupper's eyes made the speaker's face set into a wrinkled threat of death. "If anythin' happens to me the man up in the Buttes knows what to do, an' he'll do it out of spite for losin' his share. Write that note an' I'll be leavin'. I got some business to look after in town."

A sneer flickered around Tupper's lips. "*His* share! Hell!"

"He'll get his share on the way into the canyon to meet you; an' lose it before he leaves the canyon," replied Lefty. "I promised him nothin', but I made an agreement with you, an' I never go back on 'em."

"Specially when it saves you money?" inquired Tupper with a sneer.

"It ain't healthy to use no spurs on me!" retorted Lefty, flaring a little.

"There ain't nothin' I can say to you that'd make you kill the goose that's goin' to lay the golden aigg," replied Tupper, smiling bitterly. "I ain't worth nothin' to you dead." He sneered again. "I could call you a blackmailin' cow-thief, without even that rag of honor a thief's said to have, an' you'd take it. You'd gulp it, hot an' raw. Every man's got his price, an' yourn is a hull lot short of twenty thousand. I can remember the day when ten dollars would buy you. Yes,

even a drink of rot-gut would 'a' bought you!"

"Between a cow-thief, and a card cheat that never had the nerve to risk his cheap skin, there's just the difference that there is between a thigh sheath an' the shoulder holster that you an' yore kind wears," rejoined Lefty. "Between an even break an' murder. After I get the money yo're welcome to say that all over ag'in. Jest now you can write me that note."

"I got a notion to sit tight an' let you go ahead," said Tupper. "The cowmen 'round here would like to hear my interestin' story about Lefty Joe, thief an' blackmailer."

"You've mebbe got the notion, all right, but you ain't got the nerve," retorted Lefty. "You've also got the promise of two weeks more of livin'. Whether you live longer than that depends on you. You better start writin'. Come to think of it, I don't want no note. You've had so much to say about me that I reckon I'll take somethin' else. Somethin' that'll make you sweat nights. I've got it all writ out, right here. Sign this, Tupper. I can't afford to kill you except to save my own life, but I shore can shoot you full of holes, none of 'em fatal. So full of holes that you'll spend the rest of yore life a cripple. You've had too much to say!"

He tossed the paper on the table under Tupper's nose and the ranchman, sensing what it was, sneered a little as he picked it up without much interest. He read it perfunctorily, the sneer increasing, and then he turned it over. After the first few words on the reverse side the carelessness disappeared from his perusal of it and a flush, creeping from throat to forehead, swiftly faded to leave the paleness of rage behind it. He slammed the paper on the table and held it there with his clenched fist, raising blazing eyes to those of his tense companion.

"You reckon I'm a *fool*?" he choked. "I might 'a' signed the first page, but no man livin' can make me sign the second! Think I'm goin' to nullify the mortgage an' the foreclosure? Think I'm goin' to see this ranch, that I've improved year after year, go back to a crazy man an' his stuck-up daughter? Yo're too damned fond of writin';

you've wrote just a little too much! You can go to hell!"

LEFTY leaned over the table, his gun crossing it and pressing against his companion's chest. With his other hand he reached under the buttoned coat and removed a flat, short-barreled, heavy-calibre derringer from the shoulder holster. The latter he neither touched nor saw. To him a holster was a holster and he did not give this one a thought. The weapon had two barrels, one above the other, which made it ideally suited for the way in which it was carried. He slipped it into his pocket and then warily went around the table and appropriated the six-gun which Tupper wore openly at his thigh. Backing off, he took out the derringer, opened it, shook out the cartridges and tossed the weapon into a corner. The Colt he retained.

"Yo're goin' to sign on both pages," said the rustler, the weasel part of his nature shining in his eyes. "What do I care about the ranch goin' back to them that owns it? You sign as I told you, an' when I get the money you'll git this paper back ag'in, along with the man I'm keepin' in the Buttes. Yo're too slippery to fool with, Tupper; an' I ain't takin' no chances with you. Sign it, an' when I get the money you'll get it back again. If you stick to yore bargain that paper won't do you no harm. An' if you don't stick to yore bargain you won't live very long, anyhow."

"I won't sign it!" shouted Tupper. "Think I'm a fool?"

"You'll sign it—both pages—or I'll put a .45 slug through both yore wrists," retorted Lefty. "You know what that means; you'll never use yore hands ag'in!"

One last, despairing look at the man before him, at the granite face, the hard, cold eyes and the two guns, balanced deftly, their hammers under the strong hooked thumbs, and Tupper yielded. He walked to a shelf, got pen, ink, and paper, and wrote his name as he had been told he would write it—at the bottom of each page. As a sign of contempt he carefully wiped the pen on his coat sleeve and pushed the paper across the table, but in this latter movement he gave him-

self away, for the trembling of his hand was apparent. Lefty put one gun into the holster, blew on the signature to dry it and then folded the confession and shoved it deep into his trousers' pocket.

"There ain't nothin' to sweat about, if you go through with the play," said the wolverine as he backed toward the door.

Tupper wiped his forehead with the back of a hand and was surprised to find that it came away wet. As he looked down at it the door softly closed and a moment later he heard drumming hoofbeats dying out in the direction of the town.

Then came the reaction. The ranchman slumped down into his chair, his chin on his chest. Moments passed and then he slowly grew erect. A glance at his clamorous watch surprised him; he had thought that hours had passed since he entered the house with Lefty Joe. With the going of the wolverine he was in the open once more; a restricted open, but without instant danger. He sat upright and then, leaning forward, put his elbows on the table and rested his chin in his hands. The coyote was searching for a way out, a safe way. There came the sound of more hoofbeats and for a moment he feared the wolverine had returned, but the opening door revealed the smiling face of his foreman.

"Got 'em scattered everywhich way, George," said the newcomer, dropping on a chair. "Strikes me funny, though, the way they grade up. Fur's I could see at night they looked like Government specifications, every one of 'em. Hand-picked, with care. Did you raise the ante?"

"No," answered Tupper. "They mebbe was picked out to meet Government specifications. He said the Bar O was roundin' up for a drive. Get that bottle out of the closet an' help yoreself. We're goin' to have a long talk—an' a cussed important one. Draw up close. I'm goin' in to town soon after daylight, an' I may go up to Sheridan, but I've got to wrastle a few things out before I do either. I made you foreman because you got brains; here's where I want to borrow 'em. It may be we'll have to lay an ambush between the main canyon an' McLeod in a couple of weeks, but if there's a

better way I want to find it out. First, you tell me everythin' you know about every man in our outfit."

IT was still early in the morning when Tupper rode into McLeod and stopped before Thatford's old gambling hall, which had improved none in moral tone since his death. He had left it with all the rest of his possessions to 'Paso Annie, and she had added another feature to the entertainment and was making three dollars to where Thatford had made two. When Tommy, of the Star X, had told Duncan that she could fan a knife and hold her own against any man in town he had spoken truly. By rights the handle of her knife should have shown notches. Tupper swung from the saddle and entered the silent building, crossed the deserted barroom, where only a substitute bartender was in sight, and paused before the bar.

"Good mornin'," said the substitute, smiling. "Early, ain't you?"

"Tell Annie I want to see her right away. It's important."

"Yessir," and the substitute left the bar, hurried up a flight of stairs and knocked on a door. "Hey, Rose!" he called, loudly. "Tell the boss Tupper wants to see her, right away. Important." The reply made him grin, and step back a pace. "Gee, you must 'a' had a terrible hard night! Yore language ain't fit for a gentleman's ears. No, I won't go away an' let you alone. You tell the boss that Tupper's got to see her right away." He turned and looked down from the gallery, grinning at the impatient ranchman and shaking his head. "Did you hear her?" he asked, chuckling. The door behind him opened abruptly and Rose stepped out to the railing.

"That right?" she called to the man below, and at his terse reply she shook her head dubiously. "I'll shore get hell if I wake her up at this ungodly hour. She can throw like a man. Reckon you better come up an' do it."

Without bothering to answer her, Tupper mounted the stairs and followed her into her room, stopping before a door leading from it while Rose hammered on the panels.

"What's the matter with you, you fool?" came a snarl from behind the door. "House afire?"

"George Tupper wants to see you, right away, Ma'am," answered Rose, grimacing at her companion. "If you ask me I'd say she's in a hell of a temper this G. M.," she whispered.

"Let George Tupper wait. I'm not goin' to get out of this bed for a couple of hours!"

"Can't wait, Anne," called Tupper. "I've got to see you, quick!"

"Damn you an' yore 'gots'!" came the retort, and unmistakable sounds from within sent Rose scurrying out to the gallery again, dragging the night gown behind her. She waved her hand at the substitute and ordered a "big one."

The door was jerked open and Annie blinked in the stronger light.

"What's the matter with you, George Tupper?" she demanded. "Got the itch an' can't sleep?"

"I got three cards of a straight flush," answered Tupper, pushing her aside and following her into a side room. He carefully closed the door behind him and then faced her. "I've got to get the other two before I call for a showdown. I'm hopin' you can give me one of 'em. It's the biggest game I ever set in. Life an' death."

"Whose?" demanded Annie, yawning.

"Mine!" snapped her caller.

Annie rubbed her eyes, yawning again.

"I knowed it wasn't mine, from the hot interest yo're takin' in it. All right," she sighed. "Roll me a smoke an' tell me about it."

"Annie, anybody come back to town within the last month that you knows of?" asked Tupper, lighting the cigarette and handing it to her. "It must be some old-timer that's come back; anybody that was here right along wouldn't 'a' waited so long."

"So you only want to know his name?" she asked lazily.

"That's all."

"You promised to get me some of this tobacco," she accused. "Never tasted any the equal of it. Have you tried a little rum on it?"

"I'll send you a can from the ranch, an' order you a case," he replied impatiently. "You know everythin' that happens in town. Who came back durin' the last month that has been away from McLeod for a long time?"

"HOW long, George? They come an' go, all the time." She was watching him out of the corner of her eyes, disguising her interest in his expression by a rougish one of her own.

"I don't know," he lied, "but it was mebbe six or seven years."

She inhaled deeply, holding the smoke in her lungs with practised ease. "Couldn't be eight years, could it?"

His face didn't change. "Mebbe; six or seven or eight," he answered.

"More likely eight, I reckon," she said, smiling coldly. "The idea of callin' me out of bed at such an hour!"

Tupper squirmed on the chair in impatience. "Anybody come back, Annie?"

"Nobody of any importance," came the answer, followed by a pale cloud of smoke.

"I'll judge the importance," he replied. "Who is he?"

"Thanks for the 'he,'" she laughed. "Marie came back yesterday," she explained, shooting him a suspicious look. His expression reassured her and she curled up comfortably against a pillow. The transition from vague and perturbed suspicion to relief and friendliness was gracefully accomplished, but there still lingered a disturbing fear. "Marie used to be a great favorite of yourn," she accused.

"When Thatford was alive," he replied, on his guard. "That was no fault of mine. *He* was a great favorite of yourn, too. Marie be damned: I know wimmin."

"Do you, Georgie?" she purred. Her eyes glinted and then she laughed. "Eight years is about right. Roll me another; these burn fast. I'm afraid the only man I know about, that come back here for a couple of hours an' then slipped out again, won't do you no good, but as long as yo're judgin' the importance of it, I'll tell you. When are you goin' to order that case of this tobacco?"

"Right now if you've got pen an' paper handy. Who is he, Annie?"

She snuggled into the pillow and began humming an old air, and after a few bars of it the words came softly:

"—Now I stand alone 'mid the flowers
While they mingle their perfume o'er
thy tomb."

Tupper was pacing the floor, hands behind his back and was in a mood that music is supposed to soothe. It failed signally, in this case, and he whirled about, glaring at her. In his present state of mind there was a disturbing sense of ambiguity in the promise of the song, and Delphic oracles were not very much in favor with him.

"Stop that damned noise an' be sensible! *Who is he?*" he curtly demanded.

She laughed and sat up. "An old friend of yours, George. You threatened to shoot him, an' you'd 'a' done it, only Thatford stopped you. You scared him 'most to death, anyhow; an' he sneaked away every time he saw you, after that. Can't you place him?"

"Who is he?"

"You made a big mistake that time, George. Nobody would 'a' knowed you packed a shoulder holster, an' could draw like lightnin', only for that. You showed yore hand on the worst bum McLeod ever saw, instead of waitin' till it was needed in earnest."

He stopped, staring. "Cross-Eye!" he shouted.

At this unjustified insult to her mistress Rose had visions of a crowded few minutes, entirely too crowded for one of her nervous temperament. A little thing like finishing her dressing, scarcely begun, was too trifling a matter to be considered under the circumstances, and Rose leaped through the outer door and along the gallery, making much better time than she could have made had she been normally encumbered. The pious exclamation of the substitute bartender fell on heedless ears; but by the time she had gained the far side of the gallery, with the full width of the great room between her and annihilation, she realized that the cataclysm had for some reason not yet started. A rippling laugh further assured her, and she tripped gaily back again, engaged in sparkling repartee with the slowly turning substitute below.

"How smart you are," laughed Annie. "Why—*where you goin'?*" she shouted.

"To order you *two* cases of that tobacco," flung Tupper over his shoulder as he dashed into the hall.

CHAPTER XIV

PREPARATIONS

THE next few days passed quietly and uneventfully in town, in the Buttes, and on the range. Tupper had gone to Sheridan, Lefty Joe still was absent from the Buttes, and a strange atmosphere was beginning to wrap Lafe's little valley in a subtle and rose-tinted charm.

Cross-Eye, not allowed to use a horse because it might enable him to make discoveries that he should not know, was not restricted as to walking and he rambled over the main valley as he wished, strictly obeying the injunctions to keep out of all side leads. Secretly he was pleased that he was not expected to ride, for the docility and pleasant spirits of the horses he had seen in the Buttes had been very conspicuous by their absence. With the exception of the one he had ridden in on there was not an animal that did not appear to his canny eyes to be only waiting to kill its rider.

Time began to hang heavy on his hands and his pedestrian excursions had lengthened. On one of them he came to a stretch of gravel creek bottom that awakened a flame he had thought dead years before. Had he been given to introspection he would have known that the fires of the gold fever, once lighted in a man's soul, never become totally extinct.

As the days passed he grew more and more restless and finally insinuated himself in the good graces of the cook by lugging water and firewood and by doing odd jobs about the kitchen, and as a consequence his privileges insensibly widened.

Having filled the wood box and the water barrel Cross-Eye hung up the bucket one morning after breakfast and eyed a wide, shallow pan which he had not as yet seen the cook use. He took it down and turned it over and over in his hands, a wistful expression on his old face.

"I'll go halves with you, Cookie," he offered, an expectant, sly grin playing about his lips. "Looks good ter me. Shore oughter be some in that gravel. Looks first rate, it does."

The cook suspended his dish wiping,

in one hand a plate, in the other a towel. He regarded the tramp suspiciously.

"Some what?"

"Gold!" whispered Cross-Eye, eagerly turning the pan and rocking it a little. "I ain't forgot the signs."

"Gold! Where?" demanded the surprised cook.

"You ain't a-carin' where it is if ye git yer share of it, air ye?" asked the tramp, evasively, his eyes sweeping along the shelves filled with supplies.

THE cook carefully placed the plate on the table and then looked with frank and disbelieving eyes at his eager and hopeful companion.

"Reckon mebbe I don't. What's got inter yore fool head, anyhow?"

Cross-Eye chuckled and looked wise. "Grubstake me fer three-four days, lend me a blanket, a fryin' pan an' a coffee pot. I'll take this here pan, too. The grub don't belong to you, I'll be doin' all the work an' you'll be here settin' an' smokin' yer pipe. Ye can't lose nothing', nohow."

The cook quizzed him, found out but little more than he already knew, and in a few minutes became a little enthused. Ten minutes later Cross-Eye trudged toward the point of the wedge-shaped butte which split the main valley into two parts, loaded down with his equipment. Despite the load, which to him was not a light one, he whistled as he walked, happier than he had been for years. The old fires were burning brightly, memories of solitary campings in the clean outdoors returned to galvanize him, and while his faith grew stronger and stronger as he went along he did not need success to keep his spirits high. The mere thought of shovelling and panning, resting and cooking, eating and sleeping by himself along the verdant banks of a murmuring brook were in themselves sufficient; and there ever would be present the wine-like stimulant of the gold to be uncovered each nearing minute. He had a week's provisions, plenty of tobacco and a small bottle of liquor. His exhilaration gradually raised his pace from two miles an hour, his customary shuffle, to another mile, and he varied his musical renditions by an occasional outburst of song in a cracked, husky and atrocious voice.

Walking and resting, he at last reached the chosen spot, where the shallow waters of the creek made sweet music as they sped like liquid crystal over the golden bed of clean and sun-kissed pebbles. A small group of cottonwoods mingled their branches, canopy like, above a patch of fresh, wind-swept grass, and here the optimistic prospector dumped shovel and pan, blanket roll and pack; and thereafter a strange sight would have greeted the ordinary butte-dweller who should trace down the vocal crimes to the human derelict undergoing rejuvenation.

He built a small and cunning fire and after busying himself with coffee pot and frying pan he sat down to a frugal repast which tasted like a feast. Old, orderly habits returned unexpectedly and he washed up the few utensils before seating himself to enjoy an earned pipeful. A debate was going on in his mind, a struggle between the sloth and the evasion of physical effort which had been his compass for more than a dozen years, and the re-born habits of earlier and more purposeful years. Should he start to work now, or for the remainder of the day rest up from his long walk? He decided to rest, but even as he decided it he was reaching for shovel and pan. He paused, stood stock still, and grinned at himself, scratching his clean scalp in elated bewilderment.

"I'm an old fool," he muttered sheepishly. "Jest a common, old fool; but I can't keep away from that crick. I'm goin' ter work." And enraptured bird somewhere up in the branches over his head was pouring out its song with reckless exuberance, and the old prospector squinted up for a glimpse of it. "Feel like singin', do ye?" he asked it contemptuously. "Huh! If you was as plumb full of happiness as I am you'd shore bust yoreself!" and his lyrical screeching not only stopped the song over his head, but drove the singer into panicky flight.

Up in Sheridan quite another scene was being enacted. As Lefty Joe had prophesied and Tupper had known, there was no trouble in getting the required twenty thousand dollars at the bank, and no time was wasted in talking about paper of any kind. Not only was Tupper's account able to stand the withdrawal of the above men-

tioned sum, but it uncomplainingly stood up under the withdrawal of an additional sum.

FROM the bank the ranchman wandered about the town, eventually finding himself in its southern fringe of questionable buildings, where he went the rounds before finding what he sought. His reception in place after place showed that he not only was well known, but welcomed, and his low-spoken questions in all cases were met and answered without equivocation or hesitation.

At last he reached the "Retreat," a dive seemingly the lowest to be had. Strangely enough he felt quite at home and at ease.

He walked directly up to the bar and shook his head at the proffered bottle.

"Ain't drinkin' to-day, José," he said to the halfbreed behind the counter, and then leaned far over it, asking his set question.

José's face brightened and he nodded eagerly. "*Si señor*," he answered. "If you but wait." His shout caused the scraping of a chair in a little room at the end of the bar and a surly face appeared in the door, looking about warily before its owner shuffled across the room to the counter. He nodded understandingly, flashed a curious look at the ranchman, and made a silent and quick exit. After a few minutes he reappeared, called out curtly, and then led the visitor up a set of rickety and steep stairs, ushering him into a squalid room.

"Wait here. He'll be along in a couple of minutes, stranger. *Thanks*, boss! Let me dust off the chair. If you want anythin', just shout."

Tupper closed the door after the departure of the other, wheeled swiftly to face the window, hurriedly opened his coat and examined the holster and derringer slung under his arm-pit, a sneer twisting his face as he thought how fortunate it was for him that Lefty Joe had tossed the weapon into a corner instead of taking it with him. It might not have been possible to duplicate this big derringer by the time he should have great need for it. The holster was a peculiar affair and one of his own invention. Its back was a piece of stiff sole leather, from which jutted a leather cup for the end

of the derringer barrels. This was scarcely an inch deep and flared out a little at the top. Above it were two heavy springs circling about the flat weapon, fastened at the ends which lay against the top of the barrels, and open at their other ends, which made them strong clasps and permitted the gun to be yanked out from under their grip, sidewise, instead of having to be drawn out of the top. One of the clasps reached around the weapon a little below its trigger, while the other spanned it just behind the hammer and barely cleared the wooden grips of the butt. He knew nothing deadlier in the holster line, and he kept himself from rusting in its use by practicing the draw when in the privacy of his own house. A glance told him that everything was as it should be, and then he hastily peeled several bills from the great roll he had obtained at the bank, put them in his left-hand pocket and shoved the others deep into the right-hand pocket. Walking quietly over to a dilapidated chair he sat down, faced the door, and waited.

Soon there came the sound of heavy steps and the stairs creaked under the mounting weight. The steps approached the door of the room and stopped as the newcomer knocked impatiently on the panel. At the answer he slipped inside and closed the door after him, not for an instant taking his eyes off the man who awaited him.

"How'dy, Gus," said Tupper.

"How'dy, Tupper," replied the other. "I was told you wanted to see me."

"That's right, I do. Set down," responded the ranchman.

"Fall out with Lefty Joe?" inquired the other with a slight trace of sullenness and suspicion.

"In a way, yes," admitted Tupper. "He's been givin' too much time to gettin' cattle for the Circle N up north, an' not enough to gettin' 'em for me."

At the mention of this ranch, lying miles northwest of the Circle N of his own vicinity, the speaker watched for his companion to give some sign, and was, not disappointed.

"IF I'd 'a' got my boys together in time he wouldn't 'a' drove that last herd up to 'em," growled the other, his face darkening with anger. "We laid fer 'em on the way back, but they

must 'a' smelled us out, for they circled past us an' was gone before we knowed it."

"Didn't you have scouts out?" asked Tupper in surprise.

"Thought so!" snorted the other, his face flushing with anger at the remembrance of it. "They was too busy gamblin' in the shade of their cayuses to 'tend to their business, but they won't make that mistake ag'in!"

Tupper nodded. "Yes, they smelled you out," he said. "Boasted about how they fooled you. Yo're goin' to have somethin' to worry about from now on, I reckon. What's the Circle N payin' you for blotted cattle?" The reply made him grin widely. "Well, 'tain't hard to figger that, seein' Lefty has the pick of two big drive trails." He stiffened suddenly as the words slammed a disturbing idea squarely before him; perhaps his foreman *had* cause to cogitate about the uniformity of the stolen Bar O cattle!

"Figger what?" demanded Gus, curiously. He waited a moment and asked again.

Tupper came out of his disturbing reverie and looked at him. "Why, Lefty's gettin' a better price than that for 'em, an' it's goin' to his head. Gus, do you know he came down to my place to get me to boost my price to him, an' when I refused, what do you think he did?"

His companion growled an unintelligible answer and Tupper continued.

"He told me to go ahead an' rustle my own cattle myself. Said he was tyin' up with the Circle N at a better price an' didn't have no time to waste on me less'n I met his terms."

"Hell he did!" growled the other. "An' what about me?"

"Didn't say nothin' about you, at all. Figgered you didn't count, one way or 'tother, I reckon."

"He's figgerin' wrong. I sent word to him for him to stay away from the north side of the Buttes an' to stay where he belongs. There won't be no more warnin's. What brings you up here?"

"Had to put some money in the bank an' see about renewin' a note," answered the ranchman. "I was just gettin' ready to leave town when I thought I'd hunt you up an' see what you could do about gettin' me some

cattle; but that was sorta foolish, because I don't want nothin' but one brand of cows, for awhile, anyhow, an' you dassn't work that part of the country while Lefty hangs out where he does."

He shook his head. "I don't know what we're goin' to do with him. He's a cussed nuisance. He's got the best layout, down there, that I ever saw. McLeod's scared of that canyon, he's got the other fellers in the Buttes takin' water, an' that blind trail, over east, is the grandest thing of its kind in the whole country. I reckon he's there to stay, whether we like it or not."

He arose and sighed. "If you see any way to run me some Bar O cows don't forget that I'm payin' five dollars a head more for them animals than I am for any others. Five dollars more than anybody else is payin' for any cattle. If I get a herd of them inside of ten days I'll pay seven an' a half a head extra for 'em."

"Can't be did; brands take more'n that to heal right."

"I'll take yore word for the brandin' if I see you got 'em in the Buttes," said Tupper, starting to rise.

"Hold on a minute," said his companion, who had become very thoughtful. "How's the land lay down there? Lefty got many friends outside the Buttes?"

"You can't do it," replied Tupper, shaking his head. "It can't be done, not with no big gang, anyhow. Oh, you was askin' me if he had many friends in town? No, he ain't. Them he had he's losin' fast. Why, he needed another man, an' where you think he had to go for him? Clean down to Texas! An' the feller he got is his right-hand man, now. Looks like a bum, but he's got the brains of the devil. I figger Lefty's goin' to take a big hand in lookin' over the active operations while the other feller stays at home an' does the plannin'. I heard they're countin' on joinin' up with several of the nearest gangs, weedin' out the men they don't want, an' then drivin' all the other crowds out of the Buttes. After that they'll work the ranges on every side. That's the new feller's scheme, an' Lefty's for it strong. That Texan may be cross-eyed an' look like a bum, but he's goin' to make things whirl around here be-

fore long. And don't you forget it."

"Is he?" growled Gus, a murderous leer on his face. "Is he?" he repeated. "He'll likely make a rope whirl! Got big idears he has! Huh! What's he look like, Tupper?"

TUPPER'S description, seeing that he had to allow for eight years added to the tramps age, left nothing to be desired. He was facing the door restlessly, as if he were anxious to leave and he had made several false starts toward it.

"All right," said his companion. "I got two boys that shore are bang up with a rifle. They shine at long-range shots, but," he considered a little pessimistically, "they can't clean up the hull gang."

Tupper scratched his head and seemed to be thinking deeply. He glanced abruptly at his companion. "I hear the rest of the gang ain't cheerful about lettin' none of the other crowds in. They know the value of the location they got. Strikes me it's been a one-man gang for so long that they'll sorta hang back an' feel their way if Joe an' his new man should get potted. Joe allus has been sorta uppish with 'em; an' you can't brow-beat men without leaving some kind of a scar. You better give it up, Gus; the new idea will be workin' inside of ten days from now; mebbe inside a week."

"I reckon mebbe it will," replied Gus significantly, "but I ain't sayin' which new idea I means. How much interest you got in gettin' rid of them two?"

Tupper spread his hands. "I don't care much, one way or 'tother, as long as I can strip the Bar O of cattle. Of course, I'd ruther do business with a man like you than a feller like Lefty Joe, the way he's gettin'."

"Suppose I told you that the Bar O was goin' to be stripped fast if certain things work out right?" suggested Gus, a grim smile playing on his face. "Would it be worth anythin' to you, in money?"

"You mean that?" asked Tupper, a little surprised.

"Yo're shoutin' I mean it!"

"Well, that's a new side of it," cogitated Tupper aloud. "Joe an' me allus got on purty well together, before him

an' that cross-eyed dog begun to plan a game of freeze-out. Him an' me was pardners, years ago, an' I never had no fault to find with him. Still, a man's got to look out fer himself, 'specially when the other feller's settin' the fashion." He thought for a moment. "If it's done quick, an' quiet, mebber I might ante up for the general good."

"How much?"

Tupper thought quickly. He had not only to get rid of Lefty Joe and Cross-Eye, but also to recover the paper he had signed and which now was in the rustler's possession. It might be possible to squirm out of the signed statement by saying that he had been forced to sign it to save his life, but he wanted the paper if there was any way of getting it.

"Years ago me an' Lefty, to prove good faith, both signed papers an' swapped 'em. They was lies, both of 'em, but would make a lot of trouble for the signers if they got into the wrong hands. Mine disappeared mysteriously, but Joe's still got the one I signed an' gave to him. I want that paper. I'll throw in a thousand in cash for the men an' the paper. All his papers an' belongings go to me, unread. There ain't nothin' in his pockets or house that's to be touched until I have looked everythin' over. Any money he's got layin' around can go to you fellers. I don't want none of it."

Gus arose, shook his belt, and strode for the door. "Come on. I'm buyin' the drinks to bind the deal."

"Wait a minute," objected Tupper. "How an' when are you goin' to start things? *This* ain't no game of mumbly peg! It's got to be planned an' talked over, careful."

"I don't know how to play mumbly peg," replied Gus. "It'll be planned an' talked over from every angle. You'll hear all about it when it's been cleaned up."

"**J**EST the same, when I put that much money into a thing I shore get a little curious about it," responded Tupper, holding the door shut. "Besides, I got a bunch of hard-bitted Texans ridin' for me, an' I might want to hold 'em handy in case somethin' went wrong. Lefty an' his new pardner might make a run for it to the south,

in which case I shore aim to have a surprise party layin' where it'll do the most good. I tell you what—after you get things figgered out, suppose you ride down on the west side of the Buttes an' have a talk with me? Figger on gettin' to my place in the middle of the night, so you can cross the open country south of the Buttes after dark."

Gus put aside the vague suspicion which the invitation aroused in his mind and he nodded. "Either me or one of the boys. I might be too busy. Better have that thousand handy for me when I come or send for it."

"I'll have half of it, anyhow," answered Tupper. "The other half can wait till the storm's over an' that paper's in my hands."

"How do I know there is any such paper?" demanded Gus, with fresh suspicion. "Suppose there ain't no paper like that found?"

"You let me do the searchin' an' if it ain't found you'll get the money just the same. Nobody's to touch anythin' belongin' to him till after I'm done with it."

His companion laughed heartily. "That's you, Tupper! Yo're allus usin' yore old, red head. All right: now come on down. I'm buyin' it out of a private bottle. McLeod ain't got nothin' that'll stack up ag'in it."

CHAPTER XV

TWO JACKALS

WHEN the re-branded cattle had been turned over to Tupper and his outfit, their share of the money handed to them, and Tupper and Lefty Joe were ready to ride to the T 40 for their conference, the rest of the Black Buttes rustlers wheeled and followed Washita back into the canyon, stringing out into a silent line as their horses picked their way through the dark. Coming to the great, home valley Washita turned toward the bunkhouse, the others following along in careless order. Then it was that Dutch and his close friend pushed ahead and joined the leader.

"What was it Joe said about stayin' away?" curiously asked Dutch.

"Said he might not git back for a day or two," answered Washita.

"Huh!" muttered Dutch. He laughed contemptuously. "Figgers on doin' what he won't let nobody else do. That money's shore burnin' a hole in his pocket."

"You figger he's goin' on one of his periodics?" queried Washita.

"What else?" demanded Dutch sullenly, his throat suddenly dry. "It's jest about due, ain't it?"

Dutch's friend shook his head in the dark. "I'm figgerin' it's somethin' else. Last time the stage was held up Lefty was here with us; but do any of you *hombres* remember about the time before?" He laughed shortly. "No, you don't; but I do. That day an' the next night he wasn't nowhere around. He'll be back ag'in day after tomorrow, at daylight." He sneered. "Let's see if he splits his winnin's with us; he didn't last time!"

Washita grunted negatively. "Yo're off the trail, Utah; 'way off. He's gone down to hold a palaver with Tupper, like he said, but not about what he told us."

"That so?" exclaimed Dutch, seeing a great light. "Takes a purty woman to raise hell in an outfit. But where do we come in? Are we goin' to let him an' Tupper fix things up to suit themselves?"

"Wonder how much Tupper'll pay for her?" cogitated Utah. "Whatever it is, I reckon that money will come under our workin' agreement. She belongs to us as much as to him. An' what about Lafe an' the pile he cached that time he killed Slattery? *That's* under our agreement, too. If he gives up the gal, Lafe will go with her, an' then we lose all chanct of ever findin' out what he did with it." He grunted in strong disgust.

"Why in hell did he go an' put a stranger on guard in Lafe's valley?" demanded Dutch, with an angry interest seemingly out of all proportion to the act. "An' will somebody please tell me why he's taken in that bum Cross-Eye? Why, he used to hate the bum like pizen."

Washita turned in the saddle and looked at Dutch. "Yo're the last man in this gang to ask that question," he retorted. "I ain't no Sunday school teacher, but you damned near turned my stomach that time. If Lefty had 'a' shot you when he busted in that night

you'd got just what you had comin' to you; an' why he didn't shoot you is more than *I've* ever been able to figger out. You know damned well why he put a stranger to watch that valley, an' a stranger that made you walk the line down by the hoss pond, that day you was devilin' Cross-Eye!" he said.

"Lefty knowed I was only a-foolin', that night," replied Dutch. "Didn't she say so fur herself, then an' there?"

"Yes, she did, to keep you from goin' through with yore threat about killin' her dad if she told on you!" retorted Washita. "Lefty knowed you wasn't foolin', I knowed you wasn't, an' all the rest of the boys knowed it. An' you know we all do, because you ain't never had the guts to stick yore nose in that valley since. He picked a good man when he put Duncan to watch that valley."

"Who told him about the hoss pond? He didn't see it."

"He saw the whole thing from the corner of the bunkhouse," replied Washita. "I saw him lookin'. You ain't the most popular feller in this gang, Dutch: you want to watch how you ride. Lefty ain't never forgot that night in Lafe's house: an' you know what kind of a *hombre* he is. An' none of us has forgot it, neither!"

DUTCH did not reply, but became reflective and gradually dropped back, his friend Utah going with him. They carried on a low voiced conversation and when the bunkhouse was reached Dutch volunteered to drive the horses into the little fenced-in pasture near the pond, and called for his friend to help him. The others trooped noisily into the house, only Washita pausing in the open door to peer into the darkness after the two self-appointed wranglers. They soon returned and joined the rest, acting in no way to arouse suspicion. After an hour or two the lights were put out and sleep descended over the room.

In the pitch-black darkness of the bunk room a head cautiously arose from an old pair of trousers doing duty as a pillow. While one might count fifty it remained motionless, and then lowered again to let the body roll noiselessly to the edge of the bunk, rise slowly to the perpendicular, and one foot softly followed the other to

the floor. Across the room another head arose and its owner soon was sitting up. The two men, silently groping for their clothes, tip-toed to the door and out of it, not pausing to dress until they had left the building a hundred yards behind them. This task soon performed, and without a word being spoken, they went hurriedly on toward the horse pasture, deftly selected and captured a horse apiece and, leading the animals over the turf, were swallowed in the night to the north of the ranch buildings. Back in the house Washita stirred restlessly, awakened, listened intently as he tried to peer about the room and after a few moments of indecision, sighed, turned over, and went to sleep again.

Dutch swung into the saddle and took the lead, his companion close behind him. They crossed the big valley close to the end of the wedge-shaped butte and struck straight for a canyon which led from the pasture almost westward. Far off to their right they could make out the struggling embers of Cross-Eye's dying fire, fanned to fitful incandescence by vagrant breezes.

Dutch sneered. "He ain't up here fer no good. Things are goin' to happen 'round here, Utah, an' after sizin' up the things that has happened, an' what Washita was shootin' off his mouth about, I reckon me an' you'll be a heap better off some'rs else. Washita was plumb right. Lefty ain't never forgot that night in Lafe's valley. He laughed nastily. "All right; here's where we give him another night to remember—a *real* one. I'm also payin' off a new score. It was jest a lucky shot, but no man can shoot a gun out of my hand an' then make me parade up to the house an' give a dirty bum my clothes, an' not pay me fer it. Slow up, now, here's the canyon. Give 'em their heads."

Utah did not reply for a moment, and when he did speak his words showed that his mind was more occupied about the security of his own skin than with his companion's thirst for revenge.

"I reckon he will be watchin' the south canyon," he said, very thoughtfully, and with an inflection which seemed to suggest that he was reassuring himself. When rats desert a sinking ship it either is the wisest or the

most cowardly that go first, and among those who knew them neither Dutch nor Utah had a reputation for wisdom.

"Course he will," answered Dutch, his mind presenting the picture of a two-gun man emptying one of his weapons, in vain at the head of a rattlesnake a score of feet away. The whole outfit had heard of that ludicrous exhibition. "Course he will, him figgerin' on Tupper; an' if he ain't, all the better to git it over quick. It'll give us all the more time to practise on the old man an' find out jest how loco he is. He'll git his senses back damned quick, an' talk fast, once we get going. He's been foolin' everybody but me."

Utah deftly saved his horse from a stumble. "Shore; but what about the gal?" he asked.

Dutch growled. "I'm figgerin' that out now. Shut yore face, an watch what yo're doin'!"

THE rumble of distant thunder echoed and re-echoed through the canyon.

"Jest our luck!" muttered Utah, cursing. "Of course it'll have to storm to-night!"

Dutch chuckled. "Couldn't be better," he replied. "It'll wash out what tracks we have made, cover us after we leave Lafe's valley, an' drive Duncan inter the stables. That's where Lefty told him to stay when it rains. No man would pick out a cow stable, so that leaves him in the other. I hope it rains buckets!"

Utah fumbled at the fastenings which held his slicker to the cantle and after a few moments slung the garment across the saddle and pressed it there with one thigh.

"If it's a good storm it'll cover any noise we make. Hadn't we better slow up an' wait fer it to break?" he asked.

"We don't know if it will break, or when. It may go past us," answered Dutch. He laughed suddenly. "I got to laugh when I think of Lefty bargainin' with Tupper about the gal, an' the way he's been pourin' good likker down the old fox's throat all these years. We'll find out more about that cached money in five minutes than all the rest of 'em has since the cunnin' old coyote's been livin' out here. If Tupper pays anybody fer the gal, he'll pay us."

The canyon presently widened and they smiled as they emerged into the little valley and saw that the storm was coming nearer and nearer. By the time they had crossed and entered the following canyon, which led southward, a few scattered, but heavy drops of rain warned them to get into their slickers.

Five minutes later the scattering drops had become a steady downpour, and by the time they reached the entrance to the valley they sought, the hocks of their mounts were deeply buried in a frothy stream pouring through the canyon.

They pulled up short and peered into the darkness of the valley, pleased because no light shone from the little house on its elevation of rock. They waited until a flash of lightning illuminated the scene, and then went on again at a walk, guns in hands. It was not long before they had ridden as far as they dared, and when they reached the thin strip of timber fringing the creek they dismounted, tied their horses to a sapling, and pushed cautiously ahead on foot, working around to the rear so as to come up to the horse stable from behind.

They approached it after the manner of snakes, caring nothing for mud and water, and at last crawled the few remaining feet which separated them from the rear wall. The building was flimsy, rickety, full of knot holes and wide cracks. It had been patched and repatched with box covers, barrel staves, and even wornout canvas and discarded oilcloth. They each selected an eyehole and waited expectantly for the flash of lightning that would light up the interior. The first flash was a distant one and permitted them to see but little more than the open door and the horses huddled away from it. When the second flash came it almost blinded them, but served to answer all their questions about the interior of the stable. It also revealed the figure of a man shuffling hurriedly through the rain from the house an old coat over his head and shoulders. Dutch shoved his gun into a knot hole and waited for another flash, and the nearer approach of the hurrying figure. It came before the gun was levelled and revealed Lafe, hastening to close the stable door.

HERE was luck, and Dutch, nudging his companion and whispering the news and a curt order, arose to his feet and slipped around the end of the building. He reached the far corner just as Lafe had closed the door and was fastening the hasp. Under the impact of the two leaping figures the old man went down, a yell of terror and surprise bursting from him. They quickly overcame his struggles and dragged him into the stable, tying his hands and feet with straps and ropes, and then rolled him into a corner to leave him while they cleared the way for unmolested action.

"That yell will bring him if he heard it," panted Dutch, slipping through the door and dropping to all-fours, closely followed by his companion. "You go back behind the shack, layin' for him at the corner. I'll crawl up clost to the back door of the house an' git him if he goes past there. We can't do nothin' till he's out of our way."

They separated according to the plan, Utah vastly relieved in the part he had been given, for he was certain that Duncan, if he heard the shout, would go straight for the house. Dutch, pressed for time to get under cover before the sentry should show up, scrambled frantically along the path, holding his breath for fear another lightning flash would reveal him. It did not come until he had gained the rear wall and flattened himself against it, and it showed him nothing but a wall of rain.

The precious minutes sped past, minutes that should have found him and his companion engaged in carrying out their ill-conceived plans. He grew more and more impatient, and gradually it dawned on him that the wind which drove the furious rain against him was blowing steadily from the lower end of the valley. It was hardly possible that Lafe's voice had carried against it for any distance and could have been heard above the beating downpour by any one at the mouth of the south canyon. He had been a fool, and had wasted precious minutes. Duncan would be huddled back in one of the two hollows which lay under a narrow ledge on the canyon wall.

Cursing, Dutch ran back to the stable, calling his companion's name in

a low and eager voice, and when they again stood within the building he hurriedly explained the matter. Feeling swiftly along the walls for a lantern they discovered there was none in the building and Dutch turned toward the door.

"Git off his boots an' socks while I rustle a lamp from the house," he ordered, and plunged into the storm. He was gone only a few minutes and when he returned he placed the lamp on the floor and held a lighted match to it. The wick snapped, caught fire here and there, sputtered and went out. Dutch swore under his breath and tried again, bending lower to shield the flame. This caused his sombrero to tilt sharply and let a little stream of water slide off it, squarely on the wick. Cursing like a wildman Dutch leaped up and hurled the offending lamp across the stable. It struck and shattered within a foot of a horse's head and the animal, frightened, its eyes and nose full of kerosene, broke its flimsy tie-rope and bolted into the rain.

"Git another," said Utah with a growl. "Hold yore hat over it, this time, an' the wick won't git soaked." He paused to peer through the door and to listen. "I wish we'd gone an' got Duncan first. I don't like this at all!"

"He can't see no light in this barn from where he is in the canyon," replied Dutch. "That ledge, off there, shuts it off."

LAFFE was growling and gnawing at the dirty gag between his teeth and now he rolled over on his side and brought both of his bare heels against the wall in a hopeless effort to make a noise. The flat sound got him a merciless kick and he groaned and lay quiet.

"Kick hell out of him if he gits smart!" growled Dutch, going toward the door. "Be back pronto," and the dark and the storm swallowed him. He reached the kitchen again, found another lamp and slipped out, his hat over it.

The door hardly had closed behind him before Anita stirred, sat up in her bed and called softly. There was no answer and she went to her father's room and called again. Feeling over his bed she nodded understandingly and returned to her own room to sit up

until he came in. Suddenly she heard a horse walking on the porch and nodded at what it told her: her father, going out to look after his beloved team, inadvertently had let one of the horses loose, and now he foolishly was hunting for the wanderer, as if a wetting would do it any harm.

She dressed hurriedly and went through the room she had offered to Duncan, a piece of rope in her hand, to secure the animal and then call her father. The horse snorted as the door opened, and then stretched out its neck, shoving its head toward this friend who so often gave it sugar. Anita laughed contentedly and stroked the velvety muzzle with one hand as she cautiously brought the rope up in her other; and then she stopped abruptly and sniffed, smelling her hand and then the nose of the horse.

Hurriedly tying the animal to a porch column, she hastened back through the house and peered out of the rear window. There was a light shining through the cracks of the stable and as she looked it was blotted out in two widely separated places by moving bodies. This was puzzling, but her cogitations were cut short by a piercing scream, a scream of mortal terror. She struck a match, looked hurriedly for a lamp and found none. Her groping hand found the lantern on its peg and soon it was lit. She swung it several times back and forth across a south window, raised it up and down twice and then ran toward the kitchen door.

"Better wait till you feel it, Lafe!" gritted Dutch, savagely forcing the gag back between the straining teeth which his companions roughly had forced apart. "I'll show you whether you'll answer, or not! We're goin' to run a brand on the bottom of yore feet if you don't tell us where you cached that money you took off'n Slattery. Better spit it out an' save a lot of trouble. Where is it?"

The old man bridged and squirmed, bucked and wriggled with surprising strength, but his two captors added brutality to their combined muscular efforts and soon reduced him to panting non-resistance. They were tying his ankles to a post when the door was flung open and admitted a gust of rain and wind that snuffed the unprotected lamp flame, before either of them

caught a glimpse of the newcomer. Their guns roared in unison, and then Dutch collided with the intruder and grappled. His profane shout of amazement was echoed by his companion and in a few moments the unequal struggle was over. Utah lit the lamp again and felt of the bloody furrows on his cheeks. Dutch had pinned the exhausted girl and ordered his companion to get more ropes and straps.

"Better an' better, all the time!" he exulted. "Luck's shore with us, Utah! To hell with the old man! Here's the one to work at; he'll cave quick enough."

"Don't like it!" grumbled Utah, tying the last knot. "We better stick to the 'riginal plan. Try him first, Dutch."

"An' lose more time?" snorted Dutch, turning exultantly toward Lafe and loosening the gag. "Look a-here you!" he snapped. "If you love yore darter you'd better speak up, damned pronto! Where'd you cache that money, the night you killed Slattery? You'll wish she was dead if you don't talk fast! *Where is it?*"

"I can see it yet!" shrilled Lafe, writhing. "Dead he was! You can't have her!"

DUTCH grabbed for Anita's arm. "Better speak while it'll do you some good! You'll talk before we're through!" he snarled. "If this don't make you open yore trap the brandin' will! Better talk fast an' save 'em both." He turned his head and snapped a command at his companion. "Gimme a hand here, you gapin' idjut! What the hell's the matter with you?"

"We're goin' to try the old man first!" retorted Utah, picking up the lamp and moving toward the bare feet of the old wagoner.

"An' I say we're not!" snapped Dutch, his eyes blazing like a beast's. "Put down that lamp an' gimme a hand here! Do you hear me?"

"I won't be no party to that!" rejoined Utah, his lips tightening. "We'll try the brandin' first. It *allus* works!"

Dutch loosened his hold on Anita and wheeled with an oath. "All right, you stubborn fool! Gimme the lamp." He held it close to Lafe's face and peered into the eyes of the frightened old man, a sneer twisting his face into

that of a jackal's. "You got just one more chance, Lafe. Where's that money cached?"

"Allus blamin' it on the Buttes," whimpered the old man. "Don't you bring her no presents, Dutch! Don't you bring her no presents!"

Dutch roared with bestial laughter. "That's good! 'Don't you bring her no presents!" he mimicked. "Hear that, Utah? Come on, now, where'd you cache that twenty thousand?" The babbling reply maddened him. "All right! We'll damned soon find out how loco you are! Utah, start the brandin'!"

Utah took the lamp and moved it toward the wagoner's feet as scream after scream burst from Anita, who struggled like a beast in a trap, and as hopelessly. A moan of pain and terror burst from the old man and Dutch gloatingly watched the convulsed face, repeating his insistent demand.

"Where is it, Lafe? Where is it?" he asked, his face twitching with eagerness.

There came a stab of flame in the darkness outside, a storm muffled report and Utah, hurling the lamp convulsively through the door, arose on his toes, whirled around and pitched head first under the restless hoofs of the frightened horses. Dutch leaped back, crouching low down against the stable wall, his gun poised and ready, straining his ears for a tell-tale sound, but the drumming rain on the roof drowned everything. For a moment he was safe. Duncan dared not fire on a gamble for fear of hitting his friends.

Dutch backed rapidly along the wall toward the other door, waiting for a flash of lightning to give him the information he wanted; but when the flash came he was between cracks and saw nothing. He was seized with an inspiration.

"Drop yer gun, Duncan!" he shouted savagely, but his voice wavered. "I'll kill 'em both if you don't!" There came no reply and he tried again, after shifting his position in case the two-gun man should hazard a shot by ear. "I'll kill 'em both if you don't! Drop 'em an' come in here, hands above yer head! Damn you, I mean it!" He backed again, whirled to face the other door near the horses, and waited. The rain drummed monotonously overhead,

the frightened horses tramped this way and that, instinctively avoiding the lifeless figure under them. Gusts of rain whipped in through the cracks and the wind moaned and whistled as a steady accompaniment to the occasional roll of the thunder. "Damn you, Duncan!" shrieked Dutch, his nerve rapidly failing him. "I'll kill 'em both!"

"All right, I'm comin'," said a tense voice outside, and then the whole side of the flimsy, overpatched wall crashed in on top of the desperate jackal and the hurtling two-gun man came with it. "Kill 'em, will you?" came a snarl in a different voice. *You won't kill nothin'—yore killin' days are over!*"

A battle raged over the floor amid the débris of the wall, under and away from the pounding hoofs of the panic-stricken horses. One by one these broke loose and tore into the night, leaving behind them the struggling forms of Duncan and Dutch. Lafe squirmed and screamed meaningless words, his insane laughter stabbing through the noises of the storm and the fight. Anita strained at her bonds and cried out encouragement to the man who was fighting for her and her father, sobbed with rage because she was helpless to give aid. A gun roared deafeningly, the lurid flame lighting up the wrecked stable. There came a choked scream, a hoarse gurgle and then the fight went on with renewed strength. A sobbing curse was choked off in the middle and there came another desperate flaying amid the wreckage. Another scream of rage and pain brought a savage pride to the bound girl, for not once had she heard Duncan utter a sound. A glare of lightning showed her a writhing tangle on the floor, Dutch's evil face for an instant standing out, a livid, contorted gargoye streaked with crimson, his bulging eyes and open mouth sending a thrill of mad joy surging through her. Another screamed curse was throttled instantly. There came a final mad flurry of boots, bodies, and débris, and then a silence broken only by rasping gasps as one of the combatants arose to his feet and fell through the ragged opening in the wall.

"Wyatt! Wyatt!" cried Anita, sick with a sudden fear.

Another flash showed her a shaking man clawing himself to his knees,

and at sight of two empty holsters she gasped and slumped down against the straining ropes.

It seemed an age before the struggling man crawled through the door, his outstretched hands groping this way and that, his eyes trying to penetrate the darkness.

"Nita! Nita!" came the agonized call. "Nita! Answer me!"

Duncan's fumbling fingers tried match after match on the wall before he found one that would light. He stepped over the contorted figure at his feet and staggered toward the woman hanging limply from the ropes which supported her against a post. Lafe's ceaseless babbling quieted perhaps by the face he had recognized, grew softer and finally died out in a low, contented chuckle.

Duncan felt over the ropes holding Anita to the post, cut them, and caught her in his arms. He was about to turn toward the door when the old man's shrill laugh stopped him long enough to reach one hand down and cut the ropes on the wagoner's wrist. Thrusting the knife into the freed hands he turned, placed both his arms about his precious burden and staggered toward the house, the pelting rain feeling like a healing hand on his scarred and burning face.

CHAPTER XVI

THE CALM

LEFTY JOE was gone longer than Utah had prophesied, three days passing before he dismounted in front of his house and carried a bulky package into it. Ten minutes later he came out again and rode on to the bunkhouse, where he found no one but the cook, who fairly was bursting with news.

"Dutch an' Utah are dead," said he with no regret in his voice. "Went up to beat up Lafe an' the gal an' got killed by Duncan. There's a feller we been figgerin' wrong, that Duncan. Soon as they was missed in the house, here, at daylight, Washita an' the boys figgered what they was up up an' raced over to Lafe's valley. They found everythin' all right, but they shore didn't stay long.

"Washita says there ain't no use try-

in' to argue with a two-gun-son-of-a-gun layin' on his belly under a winder an' who ain't got sense enough to tell friends from enemies. Duncan told 'em yore orders was to keep everybody away from the house; he was so convincin' that they had to believe him, specially since they was all friendly with him an' didn't have no cause to start no fight. He told 'em what had happened an' let 'em drag Dutch an' Utah off an' bury 'em." He looked inquiringly into Lefty's face, and the latter nodded coldly and told him to go on talking.

"Then the boys come back here an' Washita decided to go up in the north canyons an' round up to find out jest what we had, figgerin' mebbe you'd like to know. They cleaned up over near the crevice, some of 'em, an' drove all them cattle farther back, like you said. Cross-Eye is prospectin' fer gold som'ers the other side of the Wedge. I grubstaked him for a week, to git rid of him. Ain't seen him since he left, but some of the boys has from a distance."

Lefty swore in vexation. "Ain't you got no sense at all?" he demanded. "I've seen signs of color a few places in here, an' if that fools comes acrost any the first thing we know the news'll leak out an' the stampede will start for the new diggin's. There ain't nothin' that'll stop a gold rush!"

"Easy enough to keep the news from leakin' out," growled the cook. "Did Tupper raise the price on Bar O 'T 40's'?"

"No, but he will," answered Lefty with a growl, swinging back into the saddle. He thought for a moment. He had seen Tupper riding toward Sheridan to get the money from the bank, and while he was trying to think of a scheme to suit his needs the cook's careless remark gave him his cue.

"One of the boys," said the cook, retailing careless gossip, "saw a feller he thought was Tupper ridin' along the cattle trail, headin' Sheridan way. He wasn't sure of it, though, him bein' so fur away."

Lefty Joe pretended to be surprised and to find the news disturbing. His numerous and conflicting ideas began to integrate into a coherent, beautifully connected scheme which strengthened the plans he had been laying for the

last few days. He had no knowledge nor even suspicion about Tupper's main reason for going to Sheridan, and when he spoke it was with no thought that he was a true prophet. His cunning mind had found a plausible excuse for placing his men where they would be out of his way.

"Cookie," he said, leaning slightly forward in the saddle to give his words emphasis, "we've got to fight for our place in the Buttes. It's plain, now. Tupper's gone to Sheridan to stir up Gus ag'in us. Remember the word we got about keepin' away from the Circle N, up north? Remember that we made the drive in spite of it, an' missed bein' ambushed by the bull-headed luck that caused us to detour three miles? We got to move lively. It's shore clear enough now, after what Tupper let fall the other night. Git a cayuse an' ride off to the rest of the boys. Pick 'em all up an' send 'em all up to U Canyon. That's the best place we can find to make a stand. To get in here them fellers has got to come through that way or go 'round an' tackle the McLeod canyon. They won't try that. I'm goin' to look around a little, pay a visit to Cross-Eye, an' then drop in on Duncan. You tell 'em to stay up there till they hear from me. That's our only chance. Gus will outnumber us three to one, an' once he gets past U Canyon we'll be killed like rats in a trap. Better take along a couple of hosses loaded with supplies. Get started, pronto!"

The surprised and excited cook, believing that the vague rumors and threats of years were about to become real, lost no time. He and Lefty Joe cut out three horses, threw pack saddles on two of them, loaded them to capacity with food and other supplies, and in half an hour the cook was leading them away from the house.

LEFTY watched him until he was out of sight and then, laughing heartily, paid another visit to the horse pasture, cut out the two animals he had refused to let the cook have, led them up to the bunkhouse and went into the kitchen, where he assembled more supplies. In his eagerness to get away before any member of the gang might return, he forgot the package he had hidden in his own quarters and, mount-

ing his own horse again, led the two pack animals after him along the route taken by the cook. He followed this as far as the first diverging fissure, into which he turned and headed straight for the distant and mysterious crevice so often mentioned by the gang. This was the only way out of the Buttes on their southeastern side and it figured largely in his plans.

At last reaching a circular butte valley, whose rich grass had been spared because there was not enough of it to justify the pasturing of a worth-while number of cattle, he cached the supplies among the boulders, covered them with a tarpaulin, and then a layer of flat rocks, put side line hobbles on the two extra horses and then, swinging into his saddle, rode swiftly back the way he had come, struck straight across the big, home valley and turned northward after he had passed the wedge-shaped butte.

Cross-Eye looked up expectantly at the sound of the clattering hoofs, and a wide grin stretched across his face as he recognized his visitor. He straightened his back with caution, sighing with relief when he stood erect.

"You goin' loco?" demanded Lefty, a cynically humorous smile playing about his lips. "Don't you know there ain't no gold in these Buttes?"

"Oh, well, I'm jest gittin' my hand in ag'in," chuckled Cross-Eye. "It's makin' a new man o' me. Have some coffee, Joe?"

"No. How many barrels of gold have you found?"

Cross-Eye shook his head sorrowfully. "I ain't even found a speck, Joe," he mourned, glaring accusingly at the whispering creek, "but it shore oughta be here. Everythin' hollers 'gold,' 'cept there ain't none. I can't figger it, no-how." He looked furtively into the eyes of the man above him. "Tupper?" he suggested, with a rising inflection. "What did he say?"

"He says it's a lie, an' that he'll see us both in hell before he'll pay a plugged peso. That's what he says!" replied Lefty, sharply. "I told you not to lie to me."

"So help me, I told the truth, Joe!" eagerly assured the man in the stream. "The livin' truth, every word, it was! I saw it with my own eyes! Come up in the shade with me an' I'll go over it ag'in

word fer word! Joe, he's bluffin', bluffin' like he's never bluffed before."

His little, rat-like eyes became beads of jet. "He's near scared cold, Joe. You jest keep a-hammerin', Joe; jest keep a-hammerin', an' he'll chuck up his hand. He can't stick it out ag'in you. He ain't got the guts!" An idea popped into his head and frightened him down to the soles of his feet. "If I only dast!" he whispered to himself, moistening his lips. "Oh, if I only dast!"

Lefty Joe, watching the moving lips, narrowed his eyes and his face grew grimmer. He hazarded a shrewd guess. "Well, why not?" he asked harshly, his eyes twinkling momentarily at how his companion started. It felt good to have one under your thumb.

"What you mean?" quavered Cross-Eye, trying to hold his gaze on the cold eyes of the killer. "What you mean, Joe?" he whispered, fearsomely.

"Why not face him with it? I'll take care of any trouble that comes up—only there won't be none. He knows me, an' he's cussed careful where he puts his hands when I'm watchin' him. You an' me will meet him some of these days, down near the west canyon, an' we'll make him dance to our tune." That made one for each thumb, he reflected.

"Let's go up in the shade an' talk it over, Joe," mumbled the prospector, his skin clammy at the bare thought of facing the ex-gambler with such an accusation. Also there was something in his companion's looks that frightened him to his very soul.

"What's the use of that?" demanded Lefty.

"It don't pay fer to be hasty in nothin' like this," answered Cross-Eye desperately. "A chance like this don't come oncet in a lifetime. You'll git on faster if you hammer at him yoreself! Soon's he knows who 'tis that told you he'll know more about the cards yer holdin', Joe. If he knows it was me that let out on his, he'll figger no jury will believe a bum. We mustn't make no mistakes, Joe!"

"Well, I ain't got time to talk about it now," replied the rider. "I'm goin' out to see Duncan. He had to kill Dutch an' Utah a couple of nights back. Damned good job, too. See you ag'in in a day or two. If you git more gold than you can handle, I'll send Lafe over with his wagon. So-long."

CROSS-EYE stared after his visitor, his mouth open from fright and amazement. How quickly Lefty had read that accursed thought of his, and how quickly he had taken hold of it! It had been Lefty's own suggestion, if he remembered that hectic night, that the talebearer's identity should remain a secret, and now he wanted it known. To face Tupper, with such a charge! To be with the two of them, both at one time unquestioned enemies of his! It near sickened him, and he stood like a man in a trance, the waters of the creek gurgling about his ankles saying over and over again: "They'll kill you, Cross-Eye! They'll kill you, Cross-Eye!"

The old man looked around fearfully and then, his senses returning all at once, he leaped from the creek, hurried up to the little grove, frantically put on Dutch's socks and boots and set off at a dog trot for the ranch buildings, with no plan in his panicky mind but only a blind wish to do something. When lack of breath forced him to drop into a walk he began to think with a slight degree of coherence, and tried to figure some way out of his dilemma. The harder he thought the more hopeless he became, but the faster he walked, the stimulus of fear and hard thinking driving his old muscles far beyond their wonted power. By the time he had reached the ranch-house only two thoughts had survived out of the chaotic whirling mass he had started with: he must have liquor, at once; and he must not be totally unarmed. He tottered into Lefty's house, aflame with thirst, and searched frantically for liquor. Shelves, closets, drawers gave barren results. Then he leered at the two bunks against the wall of the smaller room. The first of these yielded up a wooden box and he hauled it out eagerly.

"Dynamite. Forty per cent. Handle with Care." he spelled out, gently pushing it back onto the bunk as its message became plain. "Dynamite!" he whispered. "What's he wantin' with dynamite?"

Here was a puzzle, but it did not hold his interest for long, for in that box was something he had at one time been accustomed to use—something of a destructive power he had witnessed again and again before he had become a tramp and worse. He had found no weapons in his search for liquor and feared he must

remain defenseless. And if he had a gun, what good would it be against such men as these? In his untrained hands it only would mean suicide. Defenseless! The thought made him tremble anew, and then he froze. Why defenseless, with a box of "forty per cent." under his hands? He peered through the window, seeing no one, and slipped back to the box. A quick examination showed him that it had been opened and the nails driven back into the same holes. The marks under the ends of the cover boards looked as if they had been made with an ax, and he reached for a like implement standing in a corner of the room. A few deft, careful pries lifted the cover and he found six sticks packed in the sawdust. Taking out three of them he loosened the woody filler to fill up the space, replaced the cover, and put the box back where he had found it.

Another hasty search discovered the fuses and caps shoved down into an old giant powder can which was a repository for miscellaneous junk. He found no liquor, but a partly depleted box of cigars paid tribute to his grasping fingers before he left the house; and somehow the liquor was not as necessary now as it had been a short time before.

He scouted a little before he entered the cook house and here the emptiness of the shelves surprised him. Something was wrong. To his timid and furtive nature anything which might hold a menace and which he did not understand awakened his suspicions, and first of all Cross-Eye's suspicions concerned the welfare of his own skin. It was late afternoon when he scurried away from the building, a small pack of supplies on his back, and started on a long walk to find some way out of the Buttes, his mind as active as his feet. Something was wrong and his curiosity was not great enough to cause him to stay around until he found out what it was.

LEFTY JOE entered the homestead valley from the north, hailed until he received an answer, and then rode carelessly up to the house, passing with a casual glance two newly made mounds of earth and rock. He swung down from the saddle, dropped the reins over the horse's head, and strode confidently toward the door. As he raised his left hand to knock, a man stepped out from behind the corner of the house.

With his hand still raised Lefty turned and saw Duncan coldly regarding him. Somehow the two-gunman seemed to have a different personality. Lefty smiled and lowered his hand.

"Heard you had to kill a couple of dogs, Duncan," he said, his nod meant to be reassuring and congratulatory. "You mebbe saved me the job. Everythin' all right here now?"

"Yes, to both questions," answered the other. "It was yore orders, wasn't it, that nobody but me an' you was to come into this valley.

"Yes, an' them's still my orders. Where's Lafe?"

"Out back of the stable, tryin' to find stuff to patch it with."

Lefty turned his back to the door, unknowingly saving complications.

"He's the one I come over to see," he said. "We're near out of supplies an' I reckon he'll have to go to town early in the mornin'. Looks like we're in for a siege. I got all the boys but you layin' up in U Canyon. Reckon we'll have to fight to keep our part of the Buttes, an' to keep from bein' shot down like sheep. Soon's I speak to Lafe I'm goin' up there. You stay right here an' keep everybody out of this valley."

"That's a job to my likin'," replied Duncan, and watched Lefty go off in search of the wagoner. He stood without moving until the other had turned the corner of the stable and then, vaguely disturbed, slipped around to the side of the house where a bullet from the direction of the wrecked shed would not reach him. At his back the house was as silent as a tomb, the cheery humming and the wholesome sounds of household tasks having ceased. A threatening shadow seemed to have settled over the little valley. The cessation of the sounds in the house brought a warm smile to his face for some reason, but through it there slowly crept a trace of grimness.

It was, indeed, a job to his liking; and now his orders, if he felt the need of any such, were plain—he was to keep everybody out of the valley. Sudden decision made his square his shoulders as he saw Lefty Joe emerging from behind the cow stable, but again the rustler saved complications by stepping briskly toward his horse at the foot of the rocky elevation on which the house stood.

Swinging into the saddle Lefty glanced up at the silent man leaning

against the wall of the house, studied him a moment, and seemed to cogitate about something. There was no mistaking the air of the sentinel, but Lefty smiled to himself, flipped a curt salutation, and loped back the way he had come in. Duncan watched the rider until a slight bend in the canyon hid him from view, and then he walked slowly back toward the rear of the house. Lafe, staggering under a clumsily piled load of barrel staves and fragments of packing cases, dropped his burden in front of the stable and wiped his forehead with a sleeve. His mumbled grumbings were a jumble of meaningless sounds and he began a hectic search for his hammer and saw, and had eyes for nothing else but them.

The door at Duncan's back opened and Anita looked out, Duncan wheeling at the sound.

"Is father going to McLeod to-morrow?" she asked, her face expressing a peculiar look of relief and apprehension.

"Yes. Lefty says they're near out of supplies."

"Oh, it's Lefty this, an' Lefty that!" she exclaimed petulantly.

"From now on I reckon it's Lefty that," he replied.

She looked at him for a moment, puzzled over his remark, and then spoke of more pressing things.

"So we are nearly out of supplies," she said. "I used the last flour this morning and there's only a little bacon left. I guess we can tide over now, an' I won't have to ask you to go to the camp, but it will be touch and go, just the same."

"Don't you hesitate to ask me to go to the camp, nor any place else," replied Duncan with a warmth he had forgotten to guard again. He was about to say that the only reason he did not go then and there was because he feared to leave her father and her alone in the valley, but he checked himself for fear of alarming her. It was very possible that his groping suspicions were entirely unfounded. He smiled. "I can get there an' back ag'in, on Jeff, before you can say Jack Robinson."

"Where in hell is them tools?" came a roar from the stable, where Lafe had been running circles in his rage. "Fust ye see 'em, an' then ye don't!" He shook his fist at the earth in general and then began to hop up and down.

DUNCAN laughed into the smiling but wistful face before him.

"He dropped the load of wood on 'em," he explained. "Reckon I better go out an' give him a hand with the build-in', seein' as I'm the one that did the wreckin'."

At this, his first mention of that awful night, Anita's expression changed, and she placed her hand on his shoulder.

"Yo're so good an' thoughtful, Mr. Duncan," she said hurriedly, somewhat breathlessly. "After what you did the other night, an' all the little, thoughtful things yo're doin' all the time—I—I—" a flush suffused her face and throat and she darted back into the house and closed the door with an emphatic bang.

"A job to my likin', Lefty Joe," joyously muttered Duncan, striding toward the stable.

CHAPTER XVII

SNARLING SPITE

WHEN Cross-Eye left the bunkhouse he headed straight westward, for with his limited knowledge of the Buttes he believed there were only two sides of exit, the south and the north. The north side was by far too many miles away, with mazes of canyons and valleys and with scattered gangs of outlaws between him and its edge. The south side was only a few miles away, in comparison, and he had heard fragmentary bits of conversation around the bunkhouse which led him to believe there was another canyon leading southward to the open plain and that it lay beyond the one through which he had come in. This latter he knew by his own experience was guarded against some sudden flare of ambition in the breast of the sheriff of McLeod; but he suspected that the farther canyon, for some reason unknown to himself, had no sentries. He did not care where it led, so long as it let him get out of this hottest part of the fire. Once free of the Buttes he could hide during the daylight hours and travel by night until he had put McLeod, Tupper, and all the rest of the accursed country behind him.

It was nearly dark when he reached the first canyon and he scurried past it with his heart in his mouth for fear that one of the sentries might be riding out

of it on his way to the camp. He plodded on and on, but the increasing darkness and his own fatigue, which only the nervous stimulus of a great fear had overcome thus far, slowed him more and more, and at last he staggered to a low boulder near the entrance of the second canyon and dropped on it. Even now he feared that he might have passed the entrance to the gorge he sought, and this danger in itself would have been enough to check his progress until dawn.

He did not dare to light a fire, but had to eat his bacon raw and to be sparing with the water in the big canteen. He ate slower and slower, grumbling because the dry biscuits stuck in his dust-lined and fear-dried throat, and his actions became more and more sluggish, more and more wavering, and when he finally yielded to sleep, a partly eaten biscuit fell from his relaxing hand.

It still was dark when he awakened with a start and listened. What that thunder, over in the east? No; there came a faint clacking with the rumble and he recognized the sound of a heavy wagon rolling over a rough, rocky trail. That must be Lafe, going into McLeod for supplies.

He sprang to his feet and raced toward the sounds, abandoning everything in his hot eagerness to catch the wagon. Once under its shielding canvas cover he felt sure he could persuade the addled-minded driver to keep quiet about his unexpected passenger and to get past the guards without detection. Fast as he ran the sounds grew fainter and fainter, and he was forced to give up the pursuit, cursing with panting breath. He had heard it too late.

Going back over his course he picked up the pack and the canteen and plodded on to the west until there gradually opened before him a deep, narrow fissure in the great rock wall. He had not passed it! Only a few miles more and the open plain would greet his eyes; the open plain and its lesser perils. He hastened forward, anxious to get within the shelter of the great walls and beyond the danger of being seen by some curious eye a mile or more away. They closed in on him and he sighed with relief, gradually slowing his pace, in no way eager now to make haste.

He would not dare to leave the canyon until dark and he might as well take things easy going along as to hurry now,

and then wait somewhere else for the coming of night.

Having made up his mind to this, he loafed here and there and rested often. Now that he felt that he was in no imminent danger from the rear, and as he had no reason to expect any from the front until the canyon ended, he tried to figure out just where it would lead him, and he became more and more immersed in thought. The first widening of a little valley was reached and passed and the canyon closed in again; another little valley was crossed and again the canyon walls drew together. The trail arose imperceptibly up the left-hand wall and came to a little platform of rock fringed with boulders. His roving eyes passed over a small object and flashed back to it. In a shallow crack of the rocky floor was a matchstick, standing up as if some one had forced it in. This was the shelf where Duncan had maintained his all-night vigil, and the rains had not entirely effaced the spoor of his horse.

CROSS-EYE stopped and looked hurriedly about him. Beyond, at the foot of the steeply pitching trail, was a pool of water; to his left, running back a little in the canyon wall before it started up it, was the crevice in which Duncan had fastened his horse. It was perhaps a dozen feet wide at its mouth, but narrowed rapidly and became a two-foot split running up the wall at a very sharp angle. Suddenly he cocked his ears. Were those shots, or only the figment of his over-wrought imagination? Then he turned quickly and listened to sounds he thought came from the other direction, the direction in which he was travelling. Horses!

What kind of a trap was he in? Horses in front of him, beyond a doubt now; and shots far behind him. There was only one place which afforded any kind of cover, and that was as far up the crevice as he could scramble. He lost no time, for now the sounds of the horses were very plain. Up he went, frantically skinning shins and knees, forearms and elbows, cursing each misstep, each slip. The clatter of hoofs filled the canyon now. In his unheeding eagerness to get as far up as he could before the horse-men reached the bottom of the crevice he was sending an occasional rock bounding and clicking downward; and this

suddenly got his attention. He froze, squeezing himself as flat as he could, and lay like a dead thing.

"Hello!" said a voice far below. "Pull up! Somebody's been spittin' terbacker juice so recent it ain't dried yet! Look there, Tupper!"

Tupper leaned from the saddle. One glance and one sniff was enough. "Yo're right."

"Cussed fresh," observed the foreman, watching the telltale spot. "I reckon we better send a couple of scouts—" his roving eyes caught sight of something which checked his words. "There he is!" he cried, pointing upward.

Cross-Eye frantically climbed anew to gain the protection of a flatter place above him and he instinctively glanced down.

"Cross-Eye!" exulted Tupper. "I'd know that face if a hundred years had passed! Git that bum, boys; git him for certain. The wall rises plumb up an' down a little farther on, an' he can't git away. Jim," he said to the foreman, "me an' you will go on to Lafe's, like we'd planned. You boys," he told the rest, "git that bum—stone dead—an' then go through with yore orders. Turn to the right when you git out of the canyon an' you'll see their houses at the foot of the wall, clean across the pasture. You know what yo're to do, an' remember not to touch a thing in the house this side. But *git that bum* before you leave this spot—an' make it quick!"

As he and his foreman turned away a rifle cracked behind them and a scream come down to them. Again the rifle cracked and another scream replied. There was more shooting as the two men rode out of sight into the narrowing canyon, and Tupper laughed evilly.

"I figgered he might be the hardest to find, since his breed runs at the first sign of danger, while the other fellow will turn an' fight just as long as he can draw breath or pull a trigger. I call it luck."

Back in the crevice, with no illusions about his fate, lay Cross-Eye, crowding between two masses of rock and for the moment out of range of the bullets which sung and spat and screamed about him. His right leg had been shattered below the knee by the first two shots. Racked with pain, slowly bleeding to death, he knew there was no hope for him. He had reached the end of a long

and worthless life; but if he was deficient in courage, which he knew he was, Nature had given him something else. Without a gun, without a hope of escape on such a mangled, dangling leg, Homeric courage would have blazed in vain; but this human rat, vindictive to the last breath, could strike, and would. Trembling fingers fumbled in the pockets of the tattered coat, haltingly dragging forth three coils of fuses viciously black and tipped with gleaming copper. Chattering teeth crimped them tightly on the snaky fuses; shaking hands gouged desperately with a battered knife, making snug nests in the ends of the greasy, innocent-looking paper rolls for the insertion of the wicked caps. A strip of rotten cloth torn from what was left of the lining of the old coat bound this bolt of spite to its possessor's satisfaction. Cannily estimating the time it would take the bundle to reach the canyon floor, he cut the fuses to what he thought was the proper length. There came the fumbling striking of a match, a low sizzling and a faint spiral of smoke.

"Can't you see him?" demanded a horseman impatiently. "If he had a gun he'd 'a' used it before now. Reckon I better go up after him?"

The peering rifleman did not take his eyes from the lined-up sights. "Yes," he grunted. "He's worth five hundred to us, an' we ain't got any too much time. He's a cool cuss; damned if he ain't smokin'! Go ahead; I'll cover you."

The impatient individual swung from the saddle, hitched up his trousers and started toward the foot of the steep incline. As he reached it he drew a Colt and paused to look up searchingly. He raised his gun at the instant the rifle cracked, saw a smoking something curving down toward him through the air and an inert body rolling and sliding from rock to rock.

"Good shot!" he exclaimed. "What the hell's that?"

"Dynamite!" guessed a companion in a high-pitched scream, and there was no denial offered by the bursting smoke which shot heavenward. The roar crashed through the canyon, again and again and again, reverberating and echoing for some minutes after the last leaping boulder and plunging ledge had made a monument to the memory of a hand-picked crowd of imported Texan gunmen. Across the top of the pile of

rock lay a battered, misshapen figure which once had been a man, although but few of his fellows had so called him.

CHAPTER XVIII

AFTER TEN YEARS

DAWN had found a stirring household in the wagoner's valley, for Lafe had left while it still was dark and Duncan, after helping the old man hitch up, went back to the house to get his breakfast. After eating he worked at the wrecked side of the stable and was surprised when dinner time came around. He ate slowly and in abstraction, recalling a remark which the old man had made during the harnessing of the team, and it provided him with clues to some of the things which had remained mysteries.

"This here wagon hauls more'n supplies, it does," the teamster had boasted. "Near five hundred skins, out an' back. Twenty to one on that. He-he-he! He's a smart one, he is! "Skin 'em quick an' git back," he said. An' he's stopped bringin' her presents, damn him! Twenty to one he has."

Duncan now mused over the words. Five hundred skins, out and back in the wagon. He could understand hauling them out; but why were they hauled back again? Skins meant dead cattle, and he had seen no signs of any skinning operations during his stay in the Buttes. Was this just another example of the old man's mental aberration?

He reached for the last biscuit and bit into it absently. Wait a moment—what was it that one of Star X punchers had said about skins? If he remembered aright one of them had said something about finding that number of stampeded cattle dead in a steep-walled ravine, and the carcasses had been skinned. So far as he knew there was only one route used by the wagon, and that was to McLeod and back. No, it also had been used over east. He remembered its circling tracks before the old shed in front of the wolf den. Skins? Shins? That composite odour of wolf and stable—and something else! He had it! The third odour had been that of improperly cured skins.

He stirred his tea and paused with

the cup halfway to his lips. "Out and back"—why not out somewhere from that shack, and back again? Skins! Out and back, in the wagon. Why would they cart skins eastward? He suddenly sat back, amazed by his stupidity. The marks of the stolen cattle had ceased abruptly in the "trick valley, outside the Buttes proper. This he remembered from his own excursion into it with the first of the trail outfits; they again had ceased on the day he and Washita had ridden out to spy upon that last trail gang. Of course, it was plain enough now—these rustlers covered the sand drift across the narrow canyon floor with layers of skins, drove the stolen cattle over them to and through that crevice he had heard them mention, picked up the skins and hauled them back to the shed, to be used again when the occasion warranted it. He laughed aloud, and then heard light footsteps come to the door between the kitchen and the front room in response to the sound.

"Have you had a-plenty?" asked Anita anxiously. "I'm afraid that's all there will be to eat until father returns to-morrow."

He laughed. "Then we'll have all the better appetites when to-morrow comes. Far as I'm—" he stopped short and looked accusingly up at her. "Look here! Have you had anythin' at all to eat this mornin'?" he demanded.

She smiled and slipped back into the little sitting-room without answering and he followed closely, anxious and contrite.

"Have you?" he demanded, reading her eyes. They dropped under his close scrutiny and he suddenly raised his clenched fist and brought it down sharply through the air. "I might 'a' knowed it, fool that I am!" he growled and, wheeling, ran to the kitchen. He grabbed up his saddle and bridle from a corner and went to the door with them, pausing long enough to fling over his shoulder, "I'll be back as quick as Jeff can make it; an' that's quicker than any other cayuse in the Buttes. Stay in the house an' keep the doors an' windows shut. Don't answer any knocks."

SHE walked to the door and stood framed by the casing, watching him hurrying toward the coming horse,

which placidly was obeying its master's shrill whistle.

"Thoughtful an' kind in everythin'; an' his horse loves an' trusts him like a child might. Rob a stage? Oh, what a fool that sheriff is!" She waved in answer to his signal and turned slowly to enter the house. "Why should I keep the doors an' windows shut? I'm shore I don't know; but he said to do it, an' that's enough for me."

Jeff had not enjoyed much exercise since he had come to stay in the valley and when the saddle settled on his back it found him eager and ready. The first weight of a foot in a stirrup and he was off like a dart, running at his best for the sheer joy of it. They whirled down the valley and shot into the gloom of the canyon, went through it like a skipping stone and flashed out of the other end to streak for the distant camp.

Their stop before the bunkhouse was spectacular, but no eyes were there to appreciate it. Duncan hastened into the deserted kitchen and paused agape at sight of the stripped shelves. Here and there was a bit of food. Some one in his haste had dropped a can of beans and let it lie where it had rolled. On a rafter overhead was the tail end of a strip of bacon, too small to tempt them, but not too small for Duncan. He found a few hard biscuits in the bread box and scraped a cupful of flour from the bottom of the barrel. There was nothing more worth his while, and there did not need to be; what he had found would suffice for Anita until her father returned, and for himself he asked nothing. He tied up the flour in paper and dumped his scanty collection into a sack, and as he hurried to the door a roar struck his ears. Thunder? A glance into the sky told him otherwise; and then the glance became a fixed stare as a climbing mass of smoke arose above the distant buttes, a smoke of a colour he knew. Dynamite! why, and how?

"Looks like the place I watched that night," he growled, and then dashed to the horse. "Come on, Jeff. That's the Tupper canyon!"

Up in the U Canyon Lefty Joe's amazement at how his fabrication had become a vicious truth swiftly had died in the press of action. His men were well placed and so far the fight had

gone in their favor, for having been on the ground before their adversaries and picked the best positions; having been expecting an attack and all ready for it, their first fire on the careless and unsuspecting invaders had reduced the odds a little and put the others on the defensive. Lefty Joe was not the only one who was surprised. Gus, cursing with rage and hatred at the trap he had fallen into, swore to have Tupper's life blood for this treachery; for to him it was nothing else. Lefty Joe's men were fighting like fiends and had exultant confidence in their leader and took this timely preparation as but another proof that it was merited.

Lefty kept his surprise well hidden and acted as if it were just what he had been expecting, but as he superintended the defense of the narrow canyon his mind was in a turmoil of conjectures. What did it mean? What was the real reason for this invasion of the north, this audacious attack of Sheridan's crew? Did Tupper have a hand in it? If he had, then they could expect a thrust from the south. Was McLeod mixed up in it? Were the punchers of the south ranches taking a hand? The main canyon was now unguarded, as an enemy scouting force would soon find out. Perhaps other enemies even then were filing through both of the south canyons and escape was being cut off more and more with every passing minute. Was this but a feint in force to hold their attention while the real attack developed from the rear? Under the circumstances, this attack came too pat; Tupper had engineered it, and that meant that Tupper and his imported Texans would play their part.

"What the hell!" exclaimed Washita, turning his head to look behind him in the direction of the roar. "What's that, Joe?"

"Good Lord!" cried the frightened cook. "What is it?"

"Don't know, but I'm goin' to find out!" snapped Lefty. "You can hold this place till I get back. Won't be gone long!"

"Right! We've damned well got to hold it!" growled Washita, squirming back under the bulging side of his boulder. "If you need some of us, fire three shots quick together when you get where we can hear 'em I'll bring

a couple of the boys on the run."

Lefty vaulted into the saddle and raced south, straight for Lafe's valley. He had taken his last look at the men he was deserting, for he was desperately eager to throw Anita on a horse and flee eastward, through the upper string of canyons, to where his hobbled relay waited not far from the secret crevice. Once he put that behind him the way was clear, although he dared not go back to the camp for the dynamite he had procured to blow the crevice up behind him. He had not been idle during those few days spent away from the Buttes; there were two more relays waiting for him with men he could trust. He had drawn every cent of his account and was free to leave, to desert a sinking ship. Tupper had won now, but later Tupper would pay.

Canyon after canyon echoed the drumming of his horse, valley after valley softened it a little; and then he raced out of the last short gorge and tore across Lafe's pasture, straight as an arrow for the little house perched up on its platform of rock. He was now riding along the far side of his horse—a tribute to Duncan—and as he peered across the animal's back he saw a door close and heard the slam of a window.

"All right, Duncan; here's where yore two guns meet the one of Lefty Joe!" he muttered, and forthwith leaped from the horse to get under cover. His approach was cautious but swift and he drew rapidly nearer to the silent house.

EMERGING from the little used south canyon, Tupper and his foreman rode hard across the open toward the only gorge that lay between them and their goals.

"Talk about luck!" exclaimed Tupper. "To find that bum under our very noses, when I reckoned we'd have a—*What the devil!*"

His foreman had ducked instinctively and looked back in the same movement. The billowing brownish-yellow smoke needed no further explanation than the roar which had preceded it.

"Dynamite!" he cried, aghast. "What's it mean?"

"It means they blocked that canyon too late, damn 'em!" snarled Tupper.

per. "If it means anythin' else, to hell with it! I'm too close to Lafe's valley to turn back now. Come on! Hear them guns up north? We still got a chance to get in an' get away with one of the things' we've come for!"

"Gus was on time to a minute," said the foreman, urging his horse to its utmost speed to keep close to his racing employer.

The canyon walls fairly hurtled toward them and then enclosed them. They shot around the slight bend and dashed along the straightaway, the little house in plain sight. The gloomy walls fell away on both sides and they crossed the open, slide to a stand before the house, and threw themselves from the saddles.

"More luck!" cried Tupper. "Lafe's in town; his wagon ain't here. There's nobody around but 'Nita. Brains an' luck; you can't beat 'em!" and he whirled around at the foreman's smothered exclamation, and saw a figure flit from one cover to another, directly in front of the house.

"Keep cool!" whispered Tupper. "I'll fool him again, for that's my game." He raised his voice. "Lefty! *Oh*, Lefty! This is lucky. I didn't find you at the house, so' come up here. I've brought you what I promised, an' I want what you promised me. What's all the fire-works, up here?"

In a whisper he said to the foreman, "He's caught us both out in the open; spread out; it's our only chance."

Lefty smiled behind his cover, but only he would have called it a smile. Out there in front of him, a score of paces from the slightest bit of cover, was Tupper, who had tricked and outwitted him. It was an easy shot, he could get them both with ease, but this did not suit the humor he was in. Tricked, was he? Yes, but the fool was not tricking him again. He only thought he was.

LEFTY stepped out from the cover and sauntered careless toward the waiting pair, a cynical smile on his face; and one quick glance at the sidling foreman caused that gentleman to freeze in his tracks.

"Reckoned you'd better go through with it, eh?" he called, his hand brushing his gun at each slow step, and the foreman watched that gently swing-

ing arm, to draw and fire when it was at the end of one of its swings. Not for a moment had the windows and door of the house been out of Lefty's sight; but the movement he expected to see at one of them did not materialize. Where could Duncan be? His horse was not in sight. Off investigating the explosion, perhaps. If he was in the house and had caught one glimpse of Tupper's face, as he certainly would have done by now, he would have revealed his presence by this time. For Lefty knew a secret of Tupper's past and also the quest of vengeance Duncan had been pursuing all these years. Perhaps Duncan was waiting to see how things broke, for Duncan was no fool.

Tupper's right hand was hooked to a button of his coat by a crooked thumb. The foreman had slumped into that deadly relaxation which seems to give a reflex action a speedier start, and his eyes were glued to Lefty's slightly swinging left hand, a thing as deadly as the glinting strike of a rattler. The other two were smiling. Tupper's left hand slipped very slowly into his trouser's pocket and brought out a thick roll of bills. He stepped forward, raising them slowly, moving a very little to one side to widen the distance between him and the foreman and to be sure he was out of the latter's line of fire.

"You needn't mind turnin' that feller out of the Buttes, Joe," said Tupper as he slowed. "We'll take him back with us when we go. Got that paper with you?"

"I can git it quick enough," answered Lefty, smiling a little more. "Who'd you see back at the camp?"

"Only the cook. He said you——"

THREE movements occurred almost as one. Tupper's hooked thumb tore through the weak button-thread and flashed under his coat; the foreman's right hand seemed to lift but a very little and to end in smoke; Lefty's hand seemed to pick its smoke out of the air. He whirled half way around, his second shot, aimed at Tupper, grazing the ribs; his first had dropped the foreman in his tracks, but not quickly enough to entirely destroy the aim of the weapon or to stop the finger on the trigger. Its bullet struck Lefty's

right shoulder as he fired at Tupper, and saved the latter's life. Tupper, fast as he thought he was, had been slower than either of the others, for the thread was one strand too strong; but his shot went true before Lefty could fire again, and the rustler's body hardly had touched the ground before the triumphant rancher was upon it, his fingers searching pocket after pocket. He shouted aloud in his joy and relief and leaped up, shaking the deadly confession high above his head.

"Got it!" he cried. "This, an' Lefty an' the bum! Got 'em all!" Still holding it tightly clutched in his left hand he turned to run toward the house, and then stopped to glare at the mouth of the south canyon, whence came the sound of racing hoofs.

"One of the boys," Tupper muttered. "More luck! He's just in time to give me a hand." So sure was he that his dozen Texans had cleaned up every menace to the south that he ran toward the canyon in his impatience. The horseman shot into sight, bent low over his saddle and came on like an arrow.

Tupper stopped again, looking curiously at horse and rider. They looked like Smith and his horse, yet somehow they were different. Again his hand slipped under the lapel of his coat and he backed off. The horseman slid to a stand and sat up in the saddle, and for a moment they stared at each other in unbelieving amazement.

"Wyatt Whitney!" muttered Tupper, his face paling.

"Frank Hepburn!" exclaimed the other, slipping off his horse, his eyes glued on those of the ranchman. "I knew I'd find you *some* day!"

"Lot of good it'll do," snapped Tupper, going into action as he leaped to one side. There was no hitch in his draw, no threads to check the speed of his hand; the flat derringer flashed sideways from its spring clips with all the speed years of practise had gained—but too late.

From Duncan's hips sounded a roaring tattoo, each spurting cloud of smoke bursting through the one before. He saw the flash of Tupper's gun, but the sound of the bullet over his head was lost in the inferno of noise at his hips. He never knew that Tupper's first and only shot had been fired by spasmodic reflex action after the man really was

dead. The ranchman fell backward under the repeated impacts of half a score of heavy slugs, pouring into his body at a distance of ten paces.

DUNCAN methodically reloaded one gun and then the other as he stared down at what was left of the man he had wasted the best years of his life to find. The paper clutched in the left hand caught his eye, and he was about to ignore it and pass on, but something made him pause.

With a gesture of apology and impatience rolled into one he reached down, pried open the clutching fingers and unfolded the wrinkled sheet. One hurried glance down each side was enough, and he started to run toward the house, which stood as a house deserted. A spasm of fear shot through him and then he saw two things at once: a curtain was pulled slightly aside and a frightened, but lovely face peered anxiously out at him; up at the northern end of the little valley three horsemen dashed out of the canyon and raced toward him.

"A job to my likin'!" he shouted, and then cunning put in its bid for a hearing, and it was granted. Three men turned into enemies, and spreading out among the rocks with rifles in their hands would be heavier odds than he dared to make against himself, especially while Anita Pettigrew still remained in the Buttes. He recognized Washita, and his face beamed. Yanking off his sombrero he swung it around his head in a peremptory demand for speed as he ran toward them; and they waved an answer as they raced toward him. The three men drew up at the foot of the rocky platform in a cloud of dust and swung from their mounts. When they turned and took the second step Duncan's guns leaped out and covered them. They stopped almost in mid stride, their mouths open and expressions of amazement graven on their faces.

"Hands up! I'm friendly as long as you don't force me!" Duncan snapped crouched behind the ivory handled Colts. "Higher yet, you two! Washita, unbuckle yore belt an' step out of it. Right. Step aside. Farley, do the same! Right. Carter, yo're next! Right Stone those horses—hard!" At the sudden and treacherous attack from

the human ingrates they had faithfully served, the three animals wheeled and dashed back the way they had come, and in a few minutes trotted out of sight into the canyon.

"Boys, it's a mean trick, but I dassn't do nothin' else. Hoof it after yore cayuses, an' hoof it slow. *Don't look back!*"

Washita glanced at the house, raised his eyebrows, looked back at Duncan, and solemnly winked as he jerked his head toward the house. At Duncan's sudden smile and nod Washita sadly shook his head, grinned like an ape, and paraded by himself after his slouching friends, his feet going high and his elbows flopping at each step.

Duncan grinned, and could not keep from speaking a friendly word.

"See you in McLeod, Washita?" he called. "The game's up, you know. Lefty Joe's dead, an' so is Tupper."

Washita jumped, whirled around and waved his hand. Then, disobeying for the second time, he leaped past his plodding friends and dashed for the canyon, and his horse. From what he had heard the night he had listened to Cross-Eye's tale to Lefty Joe, Tupper's body would be worth searching. Then, if he could do it quickly enough, he fully expected to see his peculiar friend Duncan in McLeod before morning.

Duncan hurried back to the house, calling eagerly. "'Nita! 'Nita! Grab whatever you need—hurry! The way's open at last; yo're goin' back to McLeod, an' to yore own!"

The door swung slowly back and she stood bravely in the opening, smiling at him, her telltale eyes abrim with tears of thankfulness at his escape from death. In her hand was an old grip-sack, and at her feet lay a bundle.

"Oh, Wyatt; yo're shore yo're not hurt?" She swayed a little and he bounded across the porch and steadied her. "I'm all—right—now. Quick, Wyatt. I hate the place!"

CHAPTER XIX

TRACKS ARE TRACKS

THE sheriff of McLeod and two of his friends and deputies were riding along the stage route a dozen miles from town, investigating the stealing of some Circle N cat-

tle which had occurred a few nights before. There were some features about the tracks which Rufe wished to examine again to see if they bore out an inspiration which had come to him since he first had followed them. The three men cantered carelessly along the well marked road, deep in the discussion of the latest outburst of rustler activity, when one of the deputies, glancing to his left across an arc in the road, exclaimed suddenly and leaned forward in his saddle. His two companions, following his gaze, swore softly and raced at his side toward the billowing dust cloud which drew rapidly nearer to them above the brush on the little rise ahead, and under which a madly driven stage coach careened and bounced behind the racing team. The guard beside the driver, catching sight of the three riders, stood up perilously and waved his hat with vehement energy.

"Shore as shootin'!" growled Rufe. "It's happened *agi'n!*"

The stage and the horsemen met in a cloud of suffocating dust, rapid-fire questions and answers were exchanged, and then the stage rolled on toward town at its customary pace, the need for speed having shifted from it onto the shoulders of the three horsemen who now were tearing along it back trail.

The stage had stirred up the dust greatly in its mad progress, squashing it out from beneath its wheels, scattering it in showers from under the pounding hoofs of the six horses, and sending its less ponderable matter rolling behind in a dense and opaque cloud which the gentle north wind pushed over to the left of the road, where it sifted down and covered everything within its reach. Therefore it was without warning that Rufe suddenly thought he detected an occasional, partly-effaced hoof mark which did not fit in with what he knew of the hoof marks of the stage team, and which, also, pointed the other way.

The man's trailing ability was little short of marvelous, a natural gift of remarkably keen sight, tenacious memory, and powers of observation which missed nothing, beautifully coordinated and carefully exercised and trained. His innate love for the art was hardly more important in the proficiency he had attained than the years he had spent in an environment offering practically unlim-

ited opportunities for study. Leaning far forward in the saddle, one arm around the horse's neck, he peered ahead along the road until the suspicious track wandered a little to one side, and then he flung out an arm and turned his horse from the trail on one side as his two companions whirled off it on the other.

Rufe was on his hands and knees, his face but a few inches above one of the straying prints. For a full minute he examined it, shook his head savagely, and crawled on to the next. This he hardly more than glanced at, since it was the print of a left hoof, and therefore farther in on the road, and spoiled by the passing of the stage. There remained one more mark of that short swerve from the centre of the trail and he waited nearly two minutes before he effaced it with an angry sweep of his hand.

"I ain't shore!" he muttered. "I ain't shore, but I'm cussed suspicious! Damn that fool driver! Why couldn't he 'a' saved me a few yards of the road, so I could save miles in the chase? But we got a start! Miles better than we ever had before. Come on, boys; if we can't find one that ain't been dusted an' trampled all to the devil, we've got to git to Sentinel Rock as soon as we can. Why didn't that driver leave me a few yards of the trail unspoiled by turnin' off it for a spell? All right, I'll find some near Sentinel Rock that ain't been spoiled—an' then I'll run a blazer on this swell-headed stick-up gent! I hope he ain't gone back to the Buttes!"

ON they went, three pairs of keen eyes sweeping the road before them without finding anything plain enough to make them pause in their riding. Mile after mile passed behind them, and then over the dried brush there suddenly loomed the bottle-necked tip of Sentinel Rock as they whirled up to the top of a gentle rise. First it had been Antelope, then Blacktail, and now it was Sentinel Rock; the outlaw was getting bolder and more reckless.

Rufe raised his arm and shouted, and the three spread out, the two deputies dropping a few yards behind, ready rifles balanced in their hands against the possibility of an ambush. Rufe leaped from his saddle near the base of the rock and worried back and forth over the

ground. Suddenly he snapped erect, twisting as he arose, and flung up an arm triumphantly.

"Same feller!" he yelled, burning with eagerness and excitement. "Same feller an' the same cayuse! The cayuse that went in that little stable back of the hotel! Wish I knowed just where he got onto the road, back yonder, an' whether he was ridin' down from the Buttes or up from the town. Ain't got time for that, now, an' I'm bettin' I do know it; just the same! Serves us right for lettin' him git away from us when we had him cold. Foller behind me till we see how it leads; I'm prayin' it don't turn for the Buttes, but goes like it went before."

As they loped south toward the Pike Trail, Rufe did some thinking out loud. He was elated, proud, vindicated and vengeful. "Boys, shore as shootin' he's follering' his old way, mebbe figgerin', like a fool, that as long as it won the other times it would repeat ag'in. All we need now is jest to find somebody that saw that two-gun stranger between here an' McLeod this afternoon! Look at these tracks, leadin' plumb south!"

He sighed happily and glanced at his companions, one on each side of him and each with a rifle at the ready.

"When I follered his back tracks down to the wash where he had tied his cayuse an' fixed hisself for the stick-up I got me a pitchure of his boot soles that'll nail him to the cross. What a fool he was to ride the same cayuse, an' to head like he went before!"

"An' he's a fool to go to McLeod when we'll all waitin' for him for the last hold-up; havin' been arrested an' escaped, he's a fugitive, now, an' can be shot if he even wriggles!" said a deputy.

"He aims to get there, like he did before, after dark," retorted Rufe, holding back his exultant laughter. "Goin' to ride straight through, mebbe, to mix up his tracks an' lose 'em in the street. Aimin' to make a fool out of me, but here's where I make a fool out of him. You boys stick to the tracks, while I take a short cut an' git to town ahead of him. A nervy cuss like him oughter git a better reception than a common visitor."

"I'm sayin' he ain't as much a stranger in town as he let on," said the other deputy. "He's got a friend there that'll mebbe swap hosses with him an' help him get away. Anyhow, he's a damn fool fer goin' to town; lookit all the time he

could 'a' saved if he'd headed straight fer the Buttes! He'd be safe by now. I don't savvy it, nohow."

"Mebbe he's playin' smart Aleck, an' rubbin' it in," suggested the other deputy with a curse. "Got a swelled head since he got away."

"You boys stick to the trail: I'm off," said Rufe, whirling off at a tangent.

"Don't you take no chances, Rufe!" warned a deputy. "He's a bad gent, an' he packs two guns!"

"An' he packs 'em low!" shouted the other.

"He's a fugitive now: I'll shoot if he winks!" came the faint reply, and the galloping sheriff set as straight a line for town as the brush and the nature of the ground permitted.

Riding cross country was different from following the beaten smoothness of a well-travelled trail and the sheriff continually was forced into small detours by bushy thickets, rugged ravines, and great patches of bowlders; but he did not complain, for he knew that he was cutting a score of miles from the total covered by the man he was after.

THE afternoon was dying when he came to a trail occasionally used by Star X punchers on their way to a far, outlying part of their northeast range and as it came into sight, a light streak against the shadow-covered ground between the brush clumps, he laughed aloud. Here was where he could increase his speed without overtaxing the strength of his horse: he pushed straight for it and then pulled up in anger and surprise, for plain along the little path lay the prints of racing hoofs, prints he had good cause to know well. The man he was following also had taken a short cut. He could not get to town ahead of the stage robber now unless the other's horse played out or met with an accident, but he might reach it at the same time; and this became one of the rare occasions when Rufe made use of the spurs and quirt.

The brush no longer appeared as isolated and detached clumps but ran together and streamed past like a solid fence. Bowlders loomed up vaguely in the gathering dark, grew swiftly, and faded into oblivion. The drumming of the pony's hoofs rang in the rider's ears like music, and the rushing of the night wind made him button his vest and

swing the kerchief around to the front of his throat. The twilight wavered, winked, and then blinked out, the ghostly little path ending nearer and nearer to horse and rider.

Now the brush fence was but a darker smudge and the bowlders were seldom seen. Ahead there appeared suggestions of lights, mere pinpoints which might have been tricks of overstrained eyes; but they grew steadily after the first wavering appearance and when within nearly two miles of the town the sheriff pulled up sharply, listened for a moment, swung off his horse and held a lighted match close to the earth.

Across a deep-toed hoof print a crushed twig still was straightening out. He swung back into the saddle and spurred on again, hot on the heels of the man he was chasing, so eager that he gave no serious thought to ambush. As he whirled into the straggling outskirts of the town he saw a rider racing ahead of him, looming vaguely and indistinctly against the few feeble lights of this unimportant street.

He shouted for the fugitive to halt and then he shot to miss. The other swung abruptly from the street and became nearly lost to the sheriff's sight in the darkness behind the straggling buildings, heading straight for the hotel stable. Rufe cut across the arc of the other's course and fired again. There came an answering flash. Another shot from the sheriff was answered from within the door of the little stable, and it hardly had winked out before Rufe's reply evoked a choked scream.

The sheriff, flinging himself off his still running horse, barely escaped crashing into the great freight wagon before he could control his course. He turned as quickly as he could and dashed into the larger building, under the rope stretched across its wide doorway, and crept cautiously along its dark interior wall toward the open door connecting the two buildings, his Colt breast high and covering the faintly outlined opening. Reaching the end wall he hazarded a quick glance around the edge of the door and then cautiously looked again, this time not drawing back.

On the floor just inside the stable door lay a huddled figure. Rufe, his eyes fixed on the outflung hands, his Colt still levelled, felt in his pocket for a match and went slowly ahead, ready for any-

thing. The brief flare made him gasp and step back from the dead man. His gun hand shook and he slipped the six-gun back into its holster, leaning against the wall until the wild conjectures rioting through his mind cleared enough for him to think rationally.

There came a movement in the farther stall and he struck another match and looked at the horse and at its tracks. He had made no mistake in his trailing or in his shooting, but the results of both still amazed him. He became aware that a noisy crowd had formed at a respectful distance from the stables, and that Artie loomed up above its front line. The sheriff stepped to the door, carefully avoiding the body and the slowly growing pool at its side, and called the bartender to him in a low voice.

"Somebody git a lantern, pronto," he ordered as Artie paused just outside the door. "Wait till we git a light, Artie. I'm doubtin' my own eyes!"

"Feller that held up the stage today?" asked the bartender in a hushed voice.

"Yes; took a short cut after him an' got sight of him back yonder in the street. He answered my warnin' shot. Same tracks as the other two times; same headin' to town an' to this stable. What a fool I was, not to come in here an' look at that stranger's cayuse when I had the chance, 'stead of follerin' it to the door an' guessin' the rest. I had tracked him perfect, right up to this here door an' saw the tracks leadin' in here. Here comes the light, an' it's bringin' you bad news, Artie, old feller."

The crowd surged nearer in the wake of the bobbing lantern and its collective gasp drowned the bartender's, who did not seem to be as much surprised as he should have been, and whose eyes had been filmed with tears before he had entered the stable.

"You mebbe had three reasons for not wantin' anybody to git him drunk?" suggested Rufe, whose faculties had resumed their orderly functioning.

"One more than you had fer wantin' to git him drunk," retorted the bartender, pushing the officer out of his way and roughly forcing a path through the gaping and murmuring crowd. Somebody close to him laughed contemptuously, and then turned a backward flip in the air, and did not know for nearly half an hour that he

not only had been hit, but now was the possessor of a broken jaw. Artie did not pause in his stride nor glance backward, but strode blindly on through the awed silence toward his little room up under the roof of the hotel where he could make a fool of himself without providing merriment for others.

Rufe ordered the body taken away, drove the horse into the larger building and then, lantern in hand, went out to the big freight wagon and studied the ground between it and the stable. There was not much here for him and he walked around to the rear of the barn, where a much used path led from the rear door down to the sandy-bottomed, shallow pool of the creek. He followed it to the water's edge and back again, getting nearer and nearer to the solution he sought. By the time he returned to the wagon everything was plain to him. The tracks which led so plainly to the water did not return along the path, and they had been made last of all of the tracks leading to the stream. He nodded in understanding, for he was familiar with the wagoner's habit of leading each horse of his team for its turn in the creek; and he knew now why the big, off-lead horse had been the last one taken down. It not only was the one saddle horse in the team, but its position as a leader let the following three horses on its side efface its tracks.

He pictured the wagoner taking it down to the water, and when not observed, riding on down the creek on his way to meet the stage, his tightly-buttoned, long black coat hiding the two ivory-handled six-guns slung from his waist. He could see every step of it all, even the return to the stable. The barn door usually was closed by the rope across it and the quickest way to get into it, and to the other horses of the team, was through the old stable and the connecting doorway. The outer door of the older building usually was unbarred, and a man in fear of being seen would get under cover as quickly as he could before he paused to untie troublesome ropes. But where did he hide the saddle and the guns when they were not in use?

Rufe looked about the wagon and his gaze rested on the huge tool box under the seat pad. The padlock was

open and the sheriff soon was peering into the wagoner's treasure box. A folded saddle blanket, for some reason not used this time by its owner, lay in the bottom; a few tools and some scattered cartridges lay near it. Several times Rufe had been shown the contents of this box, which innocent inspection had been calculated to place it above suspicion, and he had smiled at their worthlessness; but none of the trash was to be seen now. He suspected that the old man cached the guns and saddle somewhere near his house in the Buttes, but he did not suspect that Lafe habitually carried one of the weapons slipped through the back-strap of his trousers and covered by the long, tightly-buttoned coat. This is a handy place for a six-gun if its owner is left handed, which Lafe had been. While the old man had begged for a gun to scare away the wolves that howled nights he had an excellent weapon under his coat.

R UFE lowered the top of the box, replaced the cushion and walked slowly into the hotel, looking around for Artie. Squint was behind the bar, serving drinks to an excited crowd and, catching the sheriff's searching look, nodded and raised his eyes toward the ceiling. Rufe obeyed the hint and made his way through the office and up to the little room under the roof. His knock was answered and he went in, closing the door carefully.

"What made him do it, Artie?" he asked in friendly tones as he leaned against the wall and stared out of the window into the night without a glance at the man slumped down in a chair.

"To git money for trinkets, to outbid Lefty Joe," mumbled the other.

The sheriff nodded slowly. "It shore is a hell of a world when a father's got to outbid a damned cattle thief fer the affections of his own darter," he growled.

"Lafe was loco," said the bartender.

"Yes; in spots!" snorted Rufe. "I shore feel like a murderer. The man didn't know what it meant, holdin' up the stage, I reckon, no more than he knew what it meant when he killed Slattery." He paused and continued to stare into the darkness. "Now that it can't do him no harm, Artie, he did kill Slattery, didn't he?"

There was no reply and after a moment he tried again. "There ain't nobody in this room but me an' you, Artie, an' what we says to each other ain't never goin' to be said to nobody else. How did Slattery's knife git in its owner's back?"

Artie cleared his throat with a rumble. "I put it there, in the place of the one I found there. Lafe was loco an' didn't know what he was doin'. Slattery only got what he'd been workin' fer; I'd do it ag'in to-morrow!"

"Don't blame you," commented Rufe, ignoring the fact that Artie was an accessory after the fact. "He had done as much fer you, in another way. I reckoned I was smart, takin' that cut-off to-day. When a man reckons he's playin' the smartest he's likely makin' the biggest fool of hisself." He fumbled at his watch chain in heavy silence.

"I tried to stop him," mumbled Artie. "I didn't know what he was up to till the other time, when I saw him slippin' the saddle into the barn. I didn't know then, till that night after he come back. When he come in this mornin' I watched him like a cat, but he slipped away. He was too cunnin' fer me."

"Then that's why he didn't have time to take his saddle pad, nor lock up his wagon box," commented Rufe, turning to face the accessory before and after another fact. He fumbled at the knob and the door squeaked a little. "Oughta ile these hinges, Artie. Well, what other folks don't know ain't goin' to hurt 'em. I like yore style, though I shouldn't, bein' sheriff. So-long."

The door squeaked again and the latch clicked, and the man alone in the room lowered his head and hid his face in his huge hands.

CHAPTER XX

THE END OF THE TRAIL

T HE Buttes at last behind them and lost to sight in the dark, Wyatt sighed with relief and drew a folded paper from his pocket.

"Nita, here's somethin' you want to keep a tight hold on," he said, holding it out to her. "Put it some'rs in yore dress where it can't fall out, nor nobody see nor get hold of it."

She took the paper from him with a little hesitation. "What is it?"

He chuckled. "It's a double-barrel confession, signed by Tupper, sayin' he murdered Slattery with yore father's knife, which he had picked up in the scuffle with Artie. It says he robbed Slattery of his share, an' that the poker game was crooked an' fixed up to bust yore dad. Lafe's got plenty of friends an' they'll fix things right for him. I'm stayin' around town till things are fixed right."

"Then—Father—is cleared of that—that horrible thing?" whispered his companion.

"Clean," answered Duncan. "After Slattery had got away from Lafe, in front of the hotel that night, he went to the room that him an' Tupper shared together. Tupper followed him and they had words about dividin' the winnin's. They finally patched that up an' then Tupper said that Jim Thatford wanted Slattery's signature as a witness to the mortgage yore dad gave, an' they went back toward the hotel. When the got behind it Tupper stabbed Slattery in the back, like I said, leavin' yore father's knife in the body. Later on when he learned that it was Slattery's own knife that was found stickin' in the dead man, Tupper got scared, an' scared bad. He figgered that somebody else knowed near as much about the killin' as he did, himself, an' he left town as soon as he dared. Somebody did yore father a good turn that night—though I don't reckon nobody would 'a' done much with a man that didn't know what he was doin'. Everybody knowed he was out of his head."

"I never believed that Father did that," replied Anita after a moment, "until just lately, when I thought he *might* 'a' done it."

"Whatever made you doubt him?" asked Wyatt in surprise.

"Oh, I don't know what to do!" she cried, torn between two loves; and then she made up her mind to let the justice of the matter rule her, be the cost what it might. It was not fair to let an innocent man suffer for her father's misdeed; besides, her companion had just said that people would not be very hard on a man who did not know what he was doing.

"You remember when you told us

about the scene in the hotel office the day the stage was robbed? Remember what you said about the tenderfoot that had lost his wife's watch, a watch with the initials 'G. H. G.' on the case, an' the marks of a baby's teeth showin'? I thought I'd smother, Wyatt—that very minute that watch was hangin' on the wall of my room. Then so many things were made plain—the way he hid his six-guns an' saddle up in a crevice not far from the house; the trinkets of all kinds he brought me, some of 'em of a kind never bought in McLeod; the way he begged for a gun, when he had one slung at his back all the time. I knew then that you were accused of doin' what my own father had done. When we get into town I'm goin' right to the sheriff an' tell him. I can't do anythin' else!"

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," urged Wyatt, racing to catch up with her.

"I won't! I'm goin' to tell him as quick as I can!"

"But it ain't necessary!" he expostulated. "Just as soon as Rufe sees Jeff's tracks he'll know I didn't hold up that stage, an' we aren't worryin' for him to know who did it! Yore father won't ever do it again, for he'll have his ranch back an' not have to worry about any thieves bringin' you presents. Keep quiet an' watch things grow smooth."

He placed a hand on her arm. "Stop a minute so I can listen again. There's no tellin' who's behind us, after what's happened." This time he heard what he feared he might hear—the sound of pounding hoofs far back on their trail. "It's mebbe Washita; but you ride on. I'll stay here an' make sure."

"But I don't want to ride on!" she protested. "We mebbe can beat him to town. Come on; let's try it!"

"Yo're goin' to try it—to take that paper to town while I have a look at the gent behind us," he ordered. She reluctantly obeyed, but slipped the rifle out of the saddle sheath, the rifle that once had belonged to Tupper's foreman, whose horse she rode, and pumped the lever cautiously to be certain the weapon was not empty. Her searching fingers felt the cartridge and she threw the lever back again. The ranch-raised daughter of old Lafe Pettigrew could shoot for the man she loved

and, barring the uncertainty of the darkness, shoot fast and straight.

SHE heard Wyatt's voice ring out its challenge and Washita's cheery reply, cheery for more reasons than one, since he had turned away from Tupper's pockets; and she pulled up and waited for them to join her, the rifle thrown carelessly across her saddle; but its muzzle covered the newcomer.

Washita entertained them with what he had heard Cross-Eye confide to Lefty Joe that night in the Buttes, which was substantiated in detail in Tupper's confession. Discussing the recent and stirring events, they approached the outskirts of the town and Washita pulled up.

"Rufe ain't got nothin' on me but suspicions; he can't prove a thing," said their cheerful and newly-rich companion. "Jest the same I'm holin' up with a man I know till things has settled a little. Rufe has got a stubborn, bull-headed streak in him a mile wide. If you want to get word to me ask for Pop Smith, in the 'Rope an' Saddle.' So-long."

Wyatt and his companion rode on more slowly and entered the town. The streets were deserted, but there were lights and plenty of noise in a few of the buildings. They heard 'Paso Annie's voice boom angrily from the "Frolie," followed by the crash of a chair and sudden silence. Going on to the hotel they found the office with but one occupant, the clerk who was asleep in his chair behind the desk. From the open door of the barroom came familiar voices. It seemed that the Star X group were again baiting the sheriff, their favorite indoor amusement.

Wyatt put a finger to his lips, reached over the clerk's shoulder, and took a key from a nail in the keyboard. Tiptoeing to the stairs, they went softly up them and soon found the room corresponding to the number on the key. Wyatt stepped in, lighted the lamp and then tried the lock on the door. It was a good one and he nodded with quiet satisfaction. Reaching into his shirt he pulled out the six-gun once belonging to Lefty Joe and tossed it onto the bed.

"There!" he chuckled as he backed toward the hall. "If anybody insists

on comin' in, shoot through the panel of the door. I'll be on hand before yore ears quit ringin'. I got to go now an' find Lafe to tell him to stay here in town."

"Oh, yes!" she answered, nodding emphatically.

"I'm figgerin' we'll have to eat breakfast together in the mornin'," he suggested.

"That's somethin' I'll insist on," she replied, smiling wistfully. "An' then we'll find the sheriff."

"Well, if you says *sheriff*, all right; only I was sorta thinkin' of a—a—good night, 'Nita!" and the door closed before she could reply.

The clerk grumbled and blinked. Then he jerked his head back so hard he might have dislocated his neck. When he could tear his eyes from the shimmer of the steel circle in front of them, he threw up his hands and opened his mouth.

"There's a lady up in Eighty-eight," announced the two-gunman, coldly. "She ain't to be bothered till breakfast is near ready. If she is bothered, she'll shoot through the door; after which I'll do the shootin'. If you reckon you might forget it in yore sleep, stay awake."

He left the gasping clerk, who would sleep no more that night, and tiptoed to the barroom door. His entrance behind the two ivory-handled Colts made nothing like the impression he thought it would. Rufe glanced up at him, flushed, and went on with his conversation; Freckles blinked rapidly, grinned, and pulled up a chair.

"Sheriff," said Wyatt calmly, "you can have these guns, peaceable, and me with 'em, to-morrow night. I won't leave town. Until then I'm free to look after some important business. In the meanwhile you might take a look at my cayuse's hoofs. That suit you?"

"I don't want yore guns, nor you, neither," growled Rufe, grinning despite himself. "Don't act like a damned fool; set down here an' be sociable."

WYATT froze: "You mean—you mean you—?"

Freckles nodded dejectedly. "Yeah, Rufe knows; he caught him tonight, pore devil."

"What you goin' to do with him, Sheriff?" demanded Wyatt.

"He ain't goin' to do nothin' with him," answered Freckles. "Set down here, an' put up them guns. Lafe's dead."

"How?"

"Shot."

"Who did it?" snapped Wyatt, his jaw tightening.

"Nobody's to blame, you chump!" cried Freckles. "Set down here an' we'll tell you all about it."

The session was a long one, for there was a great deal to tell on all sides, and point by point certain mysteries were cleared up to the satisfaction of the solemn group. The sum of the accretions made, practically, the story here set down. The group resolved itself into an executive committee, which certainly would grow tenfold by the following night, to see that the T 40 ranch got back into the right hands. There was promise of an entire absence of red tape and whereases and wherefores that pleased Wyatt Whitney, and which bound him tighter to these fair-minded men, bound him in a friendship which was to endure throughout his life.

Rufe yawned and glanced at the east window, and then pushed back in surprise. Rose and silver tints of a paling sky showed through the grime of the glass in the upper sash.

"Good gosh!" he muttered. "It's gittin' daylight, an' us fools are still settin' here!" He arose to his feet and clapped Wyatt on the back. "I'm goin' to bed, Wyatt. You tell that little gal this here town is plumb full of her friends, an' all she has got to do is sit tight an' watch that ranch come a-runnin' to her. Pore thing; she ain't got no daddy, now." He sighed and walked to the door shaking his head, and in his eyes tears were gathering.

He left a silent group, for an unpleasant task remained to be done. It was agreed that Wyatt should break the news to Anita Pettigrew, and while this vastly relieved the feelings of every member of the group except Wyatt, they sympathized with him and gave him silent, but strong moral support.

"It'll be a couple of hours before breakfast's ready, you fellers," said the clerk's voice at the door. "How 'bout a cup of coffee with me to keep you goin'?" He grinned sleepily. "Mebbe you'd rather have likker?"

Wyatt shook his head slowly. "No; I'll take the coffee."

The chorus made it unanimous and the clerk departed to stage his regular morning argument with the cook, which he hoped would not be multiplied in unpleasantness by the number of cups he would ask for.

Artie wandered in, nodded surlily and went behind the bar. He briefly was made acquainted with all the news and emphatically enrolled himself with the executive committee.

"Who's goin' to bust the news to her?" he asked after awhile, backing up a little.

"I am," answered Wyatt.

Artie heaved a sigh of relief. "Better hurry up, then; breakfast'll be ready purty soon."

"I reckon my news will rest better on a full stomach!" retorted Wyatt. "Ain't you got any sense, at all?"

"Not a speck," said Freckles. Then his face changed into something like a look of admiration. "I take it back, Artie; I forgot the changin' of that knife!"

A RADIANT Anita descended to the dining room and showed a little surprise because only she and her companion were breakfasting. Had she looked into the barroom she would have seen a quiet group eating soft fried eggs and leathery fried ham with their fingers for fear they would make too much noise with knives. Freckles was a study in vermilion, while they all looked as though they were getting ready for a war dance or a war trail. Judging from surface indications one thing was certain; they all were very fond of soft fried eggs.

She asked him if he had seen her father and was satisfied to learn that Lafe was in town. They were served by a remarkably quiet waiter and it was not long before the breakfast was finished.

"I've got a couple of important things to talk over with you," said Wyatt, rolling a cigarette. "Got that Tupper confession with you?"

"Yes; want it?"

"No, you keep it a little longer. What you say about takin' a little ride?"

"To the sheriff's?"

"No, not yet. He ain't in his office."

We'll just ride out of town a short way, where there won't be nobody tryin' to listen to us."

She nodded brightly and followed him to the porch, where their horses, saddled and ready, were tied.

"Still thoughtful," she murmured as she settled herself in the saddle and he turned toward his own mount. She glanced about her and wondered why there were so many people on the street at this early hour, and why they were collected into quiet, observing groups. She drew a spur across the flank of her mount, and for the next few minutes was occupied with the animal. Wyatt kept his horse close to hers, but did not insult her horsemanship by offering to touch the bit, and when a more sober and sedate pace took the place of the sky-rocketty start he led the way toward the creek, which promised more greenery than could be found anywhere else.

A tree-shaded opening enticed them and soon they were seated on the grass, their horses grazing contentedly behind them, the creek whispering and glittering before them. After a little careless talk Wyatt bit his lip and faced her squarely.

"Nita," he slowly said, his heart in his eyes. "I got some bad news for you—mighty bad news. It was left to me to tell you. I didn't know it was goin' to be so hard. Everythin' else

has turned out so good that it'll make this all the more bitter. It's about yore father."

"Why, they can't hold him responsible for—oh, Wyatt, I can see it in your eyes! You don't mean—you don't mean—he's—?"

Wyatt placed his hand on her shoulder and nodded, his throat hurting him, his eyes blurred. "Yes, Nita; he is. No more trouble, no more abuse. It was too dark to see who it was. Nobody's to blame. They caught him goin' to the stable. There wasn't no doubt, at all, an' he shot back. It was too dark to see good."

Her quiet sobbing cut through and through him and he softly arose and slipped away, watching her from a distance. After awhile she arose and stumbled toward him, half blinded by tears. As he hastened to her she put out her hands helplessly. He held them tightly.

"Perhaps—it's best—Wyatt, but it seems so cruel, now that things were turning his way. An' who can I turn to, now?" She looked up at him with trusting, innocent eyes.

Somehow she found herself in his arms, her wet cheeks pressed tightly against his neck, and heard his voice telling her the age-old story. Her answer was to snuggle closer; and a reverent silence enfolded them in an all-wise understanding.

THE END

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THE WHIP was ready. He stood at the wheel, impatient to go, while an excited crowd milled about him. They were hilarious. He was grimly determined. They saw but a race ahead. He saw a dangling noose.

Five minutes to wait. The baggage man was shouting, "Right over here to get your baggage weighed, gents. It won't go unless it's weighed! Thirty dollars to you, ma'am."

"Thirty dollars!" The feminine voice carried a pitiful note of consternation.

Charlie Rannihan, the Whip, turned to see the speaker. She was slender and smartly dressed. But even a stage driver must know that slenderness could be achieved by corset strings, and smartness by a riot of ruffles. The profile of her face was youthful, a bit too delicate and smooth to suit Rannihan; but he couldn't ignore the lure of it—the parted lips and wide eyes reflecting surprise and dismay.

"That's right," said the baggage man,

impatiently. "Your trunk weighs a hundred and fifty pounds. Each passenger is allowed thirty pounds. Excess baggage twenty-five cents a pound."

The prospective passenger saw that people were looking at her, and said coldly, "Why, that's ridiculous. I won't pay it."

"All right, ma'am," said the baggage man, in that take-it-or-leave-it manner which characterized the early, independent era of the transportation business. "Who's next?"

He rolled the big trunk aside, and took a dilapidated suitcase from a woman who was neither young, pretty, nor smartly dressed.

"Thirty-five pounds. A dollar and a quarter to you, ma'am."

The woman pulled a wadded handful of bills from a frayed black purse, finally finding the necessary change.

The other woman stared in amazement at this display of wealth and at

the bedraggled possessor of it. Then, she smiled.

Charlie Rannihan was watching her stonily. As a stage driver in California in the early 60's, he daily came in contact with a wide variety of human beings. He thought he could size them up pretty well at a glance. Just a glance or a brief contact—that was all he shared of the continuously flowing, diversified stream of life that he guided over desert, mountain, and plain. Women never interested him a great deal, especially women of this type. They were pampered and coddled. They couldn't stand the gaff. They complained at the roughness of the stage, whined about the food and the lodging houses.

Charlie tried to fathom that smile. It surprised him and held his attention. There might have been some mockery in it, but, on the whole, it was genuine, and decidedly illuminating. Here was a pampered, coddled girl who could see the funny side of an octagonal situation, with embarrassment on seven sides.

She turned again to the baggage man, when he had finished with the suit-case. Charlie heard her say, "I'll give you twenty-five dollars on the trunk and pay the rest when I get to Bumble Bee."

"Sorry, ma'am. It's agin the rules."

Of course, the baggage man wouldn't do anything against the rules. Anybody could see that—anybody who was the least judge of human, or partly human, nature. But even she might have seen, by looking around, another company employe who might break rules. The Whip was that sort of man. Anybody could see it. He was tall, young, and strong. There was a reckless light in his eyes, and a slashing width to them. Here was a man who was capable of carrying her trunk to Bumble Bee, with her on top of it, if he took a notion.

SHE looked up at him, appraised him, saw that he was about to speak. Then she turned, quite deliberately, and walked away.

Charlie Rannihan turned back to his team. The pole straps on the swing team were a bit tight. He adjusted them. Everything had to be just right that day. Traces and straps must hang

loosely, each delicately adjusted against the pull of the other. Poles must have free play, taking unnecessary jerks from the shoulders of the wheelers. The horses must have every advantage. For speed was paramount.

The stage must reach Bumble Bee by seven o'clock that night, for two reasons. The first concerned Sidney Huser, a friend of Charlie's. Sidney had the spirit of the Conquistadores and the general appearance of a school girl. His neck was soft, smooth, and fair, in unnatural defiance of wind, rain, and sex. But it was not elastic.

Shortly after dark, in Bumble Bee, a necklace of hemp, seven-sixteenths scant, was due to caress that lovely neck; and a group of righteous citizens, self-appointed keepers of the peace and dispensers of justice, were due to bow their heads and ask mercy for the heavenward speeding soul of a murderer and horse thief—or fire a few slugs in the corpse, just as the spirit moved them.

Sidney was not a horse thief nor a murderer. He was several varieties of a damn fool, but that was all. He had been falsely accused in this instance, and Charlie Rannihan had a copy of a confession from the real murderer-thief, extracted by the officers in Mercedes, to prove it.

The confession had been obtained fifteen minutes previous to the scheduled departure of Stage No. 1 for Bumble Bee. The quickest way to get that confession from Mercedes to Bumble Bee was by stage. The distance was one hundred and seventy-four miles. The stage was due to leave at 7:30 in the morning and get there at 7:30 at night. No rider could make that time, without relays. There were relay teams on the stage route, but no extra mounts for riders.

Distance communication at that time was restricted to messages transmitted vocally by mud-wagon drivers to their lead teams or to their swampers, asleep in the rear wagon.

The second reason for speed that day was more important in the eyes of certain officials of the Proctor and Spangle stage line. If thirty minutes could be clipped from the scheduled time between Mercedes and Bumble Bee, the stage company would get an express contract which would increase

their revenue on that line considerably.

Just to make sure that Charlie would do his part, they had offered him five hundred dollars bonus if he made it, and had promised to fire him if he didn't. No excuses accepted.

There was a rival line, the Ixionic, which connected Mercedes and Bumble Bee. It was a longer route but a smoother one. They were competing for the express contract.

Dabbling with his harness, Charlie saw the girl walk briskly to the end of the loading platform and hail a man with a public hack. The man received her instructions and came hurrying back for the trunk. She got in the hack and was driven away.

Charlie examined his brakes, tested the swing-pole coupling, adjusted a collar. He looked over the whole outfit with a critical eye and an inward swelling of pride and confidence—the sleek, spirited team of six horses, the flash of ivory and silver ornaments, polished ash with its elaborate scroll-work. The vehicle was a Concord, popularly called a "thorough-brace," which was the name of the huge understraps of leather on which the body rested instead of steel springs. It was a beautiful rig. Soon all the flash and dazzle would be buried under a half-inch of dust, but under it all would be strength and dependability.

Just one minute left. Charlie crawled to the box, adjusting the six reins between his fingers, and the silver-feruled whip in his right hand.

"All aboard!"

Where was Pat Panther, the shot-gun messenger? Every seat in and on top of the stage was filled except his, there on the box beside Charlie.

Charlie scanned the crowd in front of the saloon which adjoined the stage station. Where there was a saloon, Pat couldn't be far away. But he was not in sight.

Charlie called to a jingler, "Go in there and get Pat!"

THE hack, with the girl and the trunk, came rattling back to the loading platform. The driver rolled the trunk up to the scales. The girl followed. Charlie looked at her with a puzzled frown. He had thought she was slender and graceful. But he had evidently been mistaken. She was, in fact,

rather fat. She bulged strangely, and walked with a duck-like motion.

"I weighed that un onc't," said the baggage man. "Besides the stage is full up and ready to go."

The girl looked at the coach in fresh dismay. "Oh! Surely there is room. I *must* go!"

She swung on the baggage man. "Weigh that trunk!"

"I weighed it onc't. It weighs a hundred and fifty pounds."

"Weigh it again!" commanded the girl.

He weighed it. "One hundred and *thirty* pounds," he grunted.

The girl handed him some bills and silver. "Here's your twenty-five dollars," she said. "Load that trunk."

"But—"

"There's your money. Load the trunk. It will go, at least . . . And so will I—somehow."

She looked up at the vacant seat beside Charlie. "Why can't I ride there?" she pleaded.

Charlie said. "That's the messenger's place."

The man Charlie had sent in search of the messenger came back. "Can't find him," he said. "He was in the saloon a little while ago, but nobody knows where he went to."

"If you'd look under all the tables you might find him," snapped Charlie, "but we got no time to wait."

He raised his whip.

"Wait, please!"

The girl was climbing aboard. He held his whip till she got in the seat beside him. Everybody was shouting final good-byes. The whip cracked, as did several necks in and on the coach, and the vehicle took its first lurch toward its distant goal.

The passenger on the box bounced against Charlie. She grabbed for the slender rod that marked the division of seats. There wasn't much to hold to.

"Excuse me," she gasped, the wind snatching the words from her lips.

"That's all right," Charlie conceded.

He sat as part of the equipment, grimly intent on his driving. The right wheel fell into a chuck-hole, and the girl collided with him again. She grunted.

"Hurt you?" he asked.

"No," she said. "I'm pretty well padded."

He grinned, remembering the light-

ened trunk. "About twenty pounds of padding, I'd say."

She was thrown against the low, unprotected back of the seat. "Next time I'll put it all on," she shouted through the wind. "Save twenty-five cents a pound and a lot of bruises!"

"You seemed to be dead set on makin' this trip," he said.

"It's a good thing for me the messenger failed to show up," the girl said.

She was brief. Her reticence provoked his curiosity.

Five minutes was cut from the regular fifteen-minute stop at the first relay station. Under Charlie's strict supervision and help, the fresh team was in the harness and the passengers back in their seats within ten minutes after arriving.

They stopped for dinner. She didn't eat. Charlie remembered the carefully counted out twenty-five dollars. But there didn't seem to be anything he could do about it. She had a free and easy manner about her that was strangely misleading. Charlie's astuteness told him she was neither free nor easy.

The last part of the route was the worst. It was mountainous country, and the road was dangerous as well as rough. Curves were so sharp that the lead team was often out of sight, and straight ahead was the breath-taking blue of distance and depth.

The girl on the box sat rigid, an unnatural whiteness on her cheeks. Her hands gripped the seat rods. Sometimes she closed her eyes. But she made no outcries, or panicky grabs at Charlie—as he had expected.

As the thorough-brace rounded one of the bends and straightened out through a cut, the team was confronted by an obstruction in the road. Four logs had been stacked, and fastened together by wire. In the middle hung a large placard.

Charlie wrapped his lines carefully and crawled down from the box. The sign was neatly penciled on brown wrapping paper. It read: "On the slope north of you are three men, hidden in different vantage points. On the point south of you, two men are stationed. Have all passengers get out and line up in front of the team. Then wait for orders."

IT was plainly written. And Charlie had a fair knowledge of the first two of the three fundamental "R's". But it took him a full minute to read and digest the information on the placard.

He had been in hold-ups a good many times. Usually they went off pretty smooth, but once in a while there was shooting. When there was, the shot-gun messenger seldom started it, for he and the driver were on the spot from the start. The trouble usually broke loose from inside the stage, where passengers had some protection and advantage over the road agents.

There would be no interference from this source, or from any other, if these agents had their way about it. And it seemed they were going to have their way about it.

Charlie looked up the slope to the north. It was covered with mountain laurel, oak, and boulders—an excellent first balcony overlooking the stage. Fifty men could find points of vantage there, unseen from the road. Three could command a regiment.

He glanced at the point to the south, which was the end of the ridge that jutted from the mountain-side and was pierced by the road. It, too, offered an excellent point of command.

Some of the passengers were getting out of the stage. Some were relieved at this short respite. Others were impatient. All were curious.

Charlie looked at his watch. It was five minutes after five. Approximately thirty miles lay ahead of him, to Bumble Bee. There was one more relay station, about five miles away. He would have to keep driving, and driving hard, if he made it to Bumble Bee by seven o'clock.

That was out of the question, then. But he might still clip several minutes off his regular schedule, provided the road agents worked swiftly and everybody submitted.

"Everybody out!" called Charlie.

There was a chorus of surprised exclamations, as passengers began leaving their seats.

"Hurry up!" Charlie urged. "We got to get this job over with as quick as possible?"

"What job? . . . What is it? . . . What's happened?"

Charlie waited until all were out, grouped about him. Then he read the

note to them. As he finished reading, a masked man arose from his place of concealment on the overlooking hillside, promptly but modestly, like an after-dinner speaker following a eulogistic introduction by the master of ceremonies.

"Is everybody out?" he called.

Charlie looked over his flock. "All here," he said, briefly.

"We don't mistrust you," said the road agent, "but just to make sure you don't have any stowaways, you can open the doors so we can see inside. That's right. The rear boot, too. Good."

Everything was being done so smoothly and with such disregard for the usual flourishing technique, some of the passengers were growing skeptical. They began muttering and moving about.

"Just so's you'll know we're shootin' square," the bandit called, "we'll sort of introduce ourselves. Boys, meet the folks!"

Five men arose from scattered hiding places on both sides of the group. The rebellious mutterings died away. The "boys" dropped again from view.

The road agent chief slid down to the road, climbed onto the stage, and ransacked the forward boot. He tossed aside an express box.

"Now, gents," he said, climbing down, "put your thumbs in your ears for a spell, so your hands won't be so apt to get you in trouble."

Charlie rolled his jaw in impatience. It was to be a clean-out. He had hoped that the bandits were interested only in the express boxes. Searching fifteen men would take a lot of time.

"I'll help you if you want me to," he suggested.

THE chief looked at him closely, then laughed shortly. "Want to join my outfit?"

"No. Just want to get goin'."

"You'll get goin' in a little bit. I can handle this end of it by myself."

He worked methodically, taking dust and bills but no jewelry. There were three women and a little girl in the crowd. His only notice of them was a "Beg your pardon, Ma'am" as he came to each, with a motion for them to step aside.

The victims had had no warning or

opportunity to attempt to conceal their money. It was a clean-out, neatly done.

"Thanks, one and all," said the bandit, collecting his loot. "Now you can be on your way. Everybody had better walk behind the stage for about a quarter of a mile, until you get to that next ridge and start down."

Charlie threw the logs out of the way and sprang to his box. The team plunged forward. He waited fifteen precious minutes for the last of the straggling passengers to reach the designated spot. It was twenty minutes till six when the stage, with everybody aboard, again got under way.

Paying no attention to the excited talk of his passengers, Charlie reined his team down the road at a stomach-turning pace. Arriving at the relay station, he barked a brief report and slammed the fresh team into the harness.

Then he was off again, behind schedule, without hopes of doing more than getting into Bumble Bee at his scheduled time, seven-thirty. The express contract had been lost, as had Charlie's job. There was still a possibility of saving Sidney's fool neck.

He paid no attention to the girl, giving his entire attention to his team. He pulled to a stop in front of the stage station in Bumble Bee at seven thirty-five, just five minutes behind his regular schedule.

It was dark. The lanterns in front of the station revealed a larger crowd than usual. Among them, Charlie thought he recognized the driver of the rival stage, grinning triumphantly.

He leaped from his box, and collided with a slender, sportily dressed young man with long, black sideburns, who was staring in a puzzled sort of way in the direction of the seat Charlie had vacated. Charlie glanced back, and saw the girl on the box gazing fixedly down at the sporty young man.

Charlie's grim lip curled scornfully. That was why the girl had been so anxious to get to Bumble Bee. He glanced again at the man. His scorn increased. At the same time, a doubt arose. This didn't appear to be a pre-arranged meeting, although the girl had come with the expectation of seeing this man. But he appeared sur-

prised, and if he had expected to see her, there was something that was causing him a good deal of consternation.

The truth came to Charlie. The true cause of the young man's consternation. Twenty pounds of excess baggage.

The girl was climbing awkwardly down from the box, presenting anything but a graceful, sylph-like figure. Charlie, pressed for time as he was, couldn't resist lingering a moment to see what would happen.

She was waiting for the young man's greeting. It came, uncertainly. She was beginning to show some signs of embarrassment.

"You—a—it is you?" he said.

She looked at him eagerly and expectantly. "Aren't you—glad to see me, Phil?"

"Why, sure," he said with forced heartiness. "Sure, I'm glad to see you, but . . ."

"But what?"

"A—nothing. That is"—he looked at her wonderingly—"you seemed to have changed."

"I—changed? What do you mean, Phil?" The frantic note in her voice did not escape Charlie.

"Oh, just—I don't know. Just sort of different."

SHE looked at him wonderingly, intently. "I haven't changed, Phil," she said slowly. "It's you that's changed."

"Did you bring any luggage?" he asked.

The girl was motionless for a moment. Then she broke into a giddy laugh, looking down at herself. "Luggage?" she echoed, choking with laughter. "I should say I did. I brought a hundred and fifty pound trunk."

The man looked at her with increasing alarm and chagrin.

She made a helpless gesture, dropping her hands to her side. "So that was it?" she snickered. "And you don't like the way I look, do you?"

"Who said I didn't?"

"The years will change us, Phil. We'll get old . . . and fat, maybe. You don't like old, fat women, do you, Phil?"

"What are you yapping about?" he demanded truculently.

"I'm just telling you that I brought a trunk, Phil," she said. Her voice was low but quite steady. "I brought a trunk, and I'm taking it back with me—on the next stage."

"Look here, Dolly. I don't know what you're talking about."

Dolly smiled bleakly. "And never will, likely," she said.

Charlie could waste no more time listening to this lover's quarrel. He pushed his way into the station.

"Well, Whip, you lost," said the station agent. "The Ixionic come in thirty minutes ago."

"Had a hold-up five miles the other side of Higgley Peak."

"Heard 'em talkin' about it. You better go back and report to the boss."

"Who?"

"Spangle's here."

"The hell he is. All right; I'll get it over with, a little later. I got something else to do right now."

He hurried down the street about three blocks and turned into a long log building with barred windows at the rear. There was a small office in front, with a scarred desk and chairs lining the walls. A sleepy looking man was sprawled at the desk, hat on, fingers laced behind his head. He didn't move as Charlie came in, but merely rolled his eyes.

"Got an hombre here named Sid Huser?" asked Charlie.

"Did have. But he got away from us."

"When?"

"About thirty minutes ago?"

"How?"

"Durned if I know. I went across the street to get a drink, and when I come back he was gone."

Charlie handed him the confession. The deputy read it.

"Too bad," he said.

"Where'd they go with him?"

The deputy shrugged. "How'd I know?"

CHARLIE realized he was wasting time. "Where's the sheriff?"

"He left out of here a little while ago. Don't know where he was goin'."

"On the trail of his escaped prisoner, probably," Charlie said, caustically.

Charlie's next stop was the Metz Hotel, directly across from the stage

station. Here was the true seat of government of Bumble Bee. Charlie knew that Gus Wells, proprietor of the hotel, was head of the Alamos. He knew also that the Alamos had helped Sidney escape. The unfortunate part of such an escape was that the escapee was never heard from, once the Alamos took matters in their hands and sprung him.

The Alamos was a secret vigilance association. It worked hand in hand with the sheriff and the judge, but went a good deal further, on occasions. They finished up where the regular officials left off. And sometimes they started in before the sheriff could take hold. They had cleaned up Bumble Bee when the sheriff couldn't do it, or wouldn't. Now they were in the saddle, running everything pretty much to suit themselves.

One-half of the lobby of the Metz Hotel was a bar. It was crowded at this hour of the evening. Charlie went to the desk of the room clerk.

"Where's Gus?" he asked.

The clerk nodded his head to a doorway adjacent to the desk. "If he ain't in his office, don't know where he is."

Charlie pushed the door open. The office was empty. He went among the crowd, asking the whereabouts of Wells or the sheriff. Nobody knew where either was. Some said they had seen one or the other "about thirty minutes ago."

If Pat Panther were only there. He knew some of the Alamos. It was he who had brought word to Charlie of the fate decreed for Sidney.

Charlie stood in the middle of the room, and looked about him. Men drinking and laughing. Music coming from the big double doors that led to the dance hall. Somewhere in that town, or nearby, an innocent man was being hanged. Did this crowd care?

"Hey!" shouted Charlie suddenly. "Hey! Everybody! Listen to me!"

Faces turned. There was a laugh. "G'wan, Whip. You ain't drunk."

"No, I ain't drunk!" cracked out the Whip. "The Alamos are hangin' Sid Huser!"

"Hurray—hic—where?"

"That's what I want to know—where?" shouted Charlie. "They're hangin' the wrong man. I got a con-

fession to prove it—right here!" He waved the envelope.

"There must be somebody in this crowd that belongs to the outfit. Somebody knows where Gus Wells is. Somebody—if he's any part of a man—will stop that hangin', if it ain't already too late."

Nobody spoke. A few turned to their drinks.

"I'm goin' to lay this envelope down on the north side of the hotel, three feet back from the sidewalk," Charlie said. "It's dark out there. A man can pick it up, and nobody will see him." He looked about the room. "Won't somebody take it to Gus Wells?"

He walked out on the street. There was a space between the hotel building and the next building to the north. Charlie put the envelope in the designated spot and weighted it down with a rock. Then he went back into the hotel, through the lobby-saloon, and into the dance hall, as a signal to those who had heard his appeal that the coast was clear.

"My dance, Whip." A worn-looking blonde pulled at his arm.

"Haven't got time, Galligo."

"You ain't never got time to dance with me, have you, Whip?"

"Sure. But not now." Charlie was looking over the dancers. He saw the man called Phil, who had met the girl at the stage station. He was dancing with one of the professionals.

"You know that skinny ike with the black side-whiskers?" Charlie asked.

"Yeh. He works for the joint."

"This joint?"

"Yes. Name's Phil Lassiter. Why?"

CHARLIE merely shook his head. "Do you know Sid Huser?"

"That little baby-faced guy that was in here drunk and wantin' to scalp everybody one night, and you carried him out?"

Charlie nodded. "The Alamos have got him."

"Gawd pity the Alamos!"

"He ain't a bad guy, when you get to know him. We used to be together a lot. The Alamos have got nothing on him. But they think they have, and you know what that means."

"Uh, huh. I know what that means."

"I've got to get to Gus Wells!"

"Uh, huh." She was backing away from him. When Galligo grew aloof toward any man, something was badly wrong with him.

Charlie caught her by the shoulder. "Do you know where Gus is?"

"Naw! Course I don't."

"Look here, Galligo. You know you can trust me, don't you?"

"Sure, I guess you're a square shooter, Whip."

"Then tell me where I can find Gus."

"I don't know . . . but if I was you I'd go up to the second floor and look around. And I'd take the back steps, outside."

Charlie started out.

"Don't start out of here like the place was on fire. Somebody might be watchin' us. We'd better finish this dance."

Charlie danced. He bumped into somebody. It was Phil Lassiter and his partner. The former frowned. The girl smiled at him. He stumbled through the dance.

"Next time bring in your horses," said Galligo. "I'd rather dance with them."

Charlie went out through the lobby. He stopped to see about the envelope. It was gone. He hesitated. Should he follow Galligo's tip, or should he let events take their course now. Nobody would take the envelope unless they were interested in seeing justice done, and were in a position to get the paper in the right hands.

He walked back to the street, thinking it over. Without conscious direction, his steps took him across the street to the stage station.

"Spangle's waitin' to see you," the agent told him.

"To hell with Spangle," said Charlie, absently.

A sour-looking, middle-aged man stepped into view. It was Spangle.

"To hell with Spangle, eh?" he snapped. "And to hell with the Proctor and Spangle stage line, I suppose. Here's what the company owes you, Rannihan. I have another driver to take your return trip."

He handed Charlie some bills.

"Don't think Charlie was to blame altogether about bein' late," interposed the agent, mildly. "What with the hold-up and everything . . ."

"No excuses accepted. That was the order. Besides, I am not discharging you merely for failing to get here on time, but partly for your coming off without your shot-gun messenger. If he had been along, there might not have been any hold-up."

Charlie said nothing. He stuffed the money into his pocket, and crossed the street. He peered through the darkness to the rear of the hotel. An outside stairway was barely discernible, leading up from the back of the building.

He passed down the side of the building and started up the steps. At the landing there was a wood door, solid except for a keyhole of light. Charlie squinted through the keyhole, but saw only another doorway, from which the light was coming. He tried the knob. The door was locked.

As he started to rap, he caught the sound of voices from within. A woman said, "You're an old donkey!"

Charlie stiffened in surprise. He'd heard that voice enough that day to recognize it anywhere. It was the girl who had ridden with him on the box.

"Good!" exclaimed a deep masculine voice, with a chuckle. "I like you. Let's be friends."

"Friends, my grandmother!" said the girl in disgust. Then, sarcastically, "You and my grandmother ought to be friends. You're both about the same age."

"How old do you think I am?"

"About a hundred."

A deep chuckle. "A hundred and two!"

THERE was silence. She said: "I guess you're not a bad sort, after all, Mr. Wells. But you just got me wrong, that's all. I'm up against it, sure. But then, I wouldn't have come to you, otherwise."

Again there was silence. Charlie rapped on the door. A heavy step approached, the lock turned, and the door opened. A thick man with lusty sidewhiskers and a forehead deepened by baldness stood in the door.

"Well, Whip," said Gus Wells.

"I've got to see you. About Sid Huser."

"Who?"

"They took him out of jail a little while ago."

"'They' who?" he acted mystified.

"The Alamos. They've got the wrong man. I can prove it."

"But why come to me, Whip? I know nothing about it."

"Look here, Gus. This ain't no time to hoss around. I know what's goin' on, and I'm goin' to stop it."

Gus looked surprised. "Don't get you," he grunted.

Charlie's fingers were working as though he were adjusting the reins between them. "I know you're head of the Alamos, Gus."

"Who told you that?" A harshness came into his voice.

"Never mind who told me." Pat Panther had told him that much. "I know a lot of things," Charlie went on, significantly. This was bluff, but it might get over. "I've got a written confession from the man you took Sidney Huser to be."

"Oh, you have? Where is it?"

"Didn't they bring it to you?"

"Who?"

"I don't know who. I left it down there under a rock. Now it's gone. They must have brought it up here."

Gus Wells stepped back. "I guess you're drunk, Whip," he said, making a motion to close the door.

Charlie took hold of the door. He stepped inside. "No, I ain't drunk, Gus," he said, evenly. "And I guess you know I ain't."

He studied the heavy face of the older man. "I thought you were a pretty square shooter, Gus. I wonder if I've been wrong."

Gus shrugged his big shoulders. "You talk strange, Whip."

"The Alamos have done some good things around here," Charlie went on. "They made this town safe for decent folks to live in. I give 'em credit for that. They have put away a lot of scraggy ones that needed it. But they've cut the wrong one out this time, I can prove it. All you have to do is hold off until you can check up with the Mercedes officers."

Still Gus retained his puzzled air.

"You're not foolin' me, Gus. And I'm givin' it to you straight from the shoulder. If Sid Huser stretches tonight, I'm holdin' you responsible." It was the Whip speaking now, sharp, swift. It was the Whip men knew, and feared or respected.

Gus twisted his leaded lips nearly shut. "So. You are threatening me?"

"No. Just layin' 'em down in front of you."

They were standing in a short hallway. Behind Wells' back was the room where the light came from. Charlie could see some chairs and another door. He hadn't seen the girl, but now he saw her hand grasp the knob of this inner door. She twisted it, but the door remained shut.

She stepped into full view, sauntered into the hallway. "Oh, hello there," she said casually. Then, to Wells, "I guess I'll be going." She passed through to the outside door.

"I guess I'll be goin', too," said Charlie.

He guided her down the darkened stairway. They heard the door close, and the key turn.

"It's bad luck to go in one door and out of another," he said.

"Well, Bad Luck, old pal," she said, "here I come."

They were back on the street, in the light of the hotel. She lifted her hand in an informal adieu. "Good luck, on your trip back." She started up the street.

"Where you goin' now?"

She laughed lightly. "Oh, up the street . . . to see some more of my friends."

He took an uncertain step after her.

"I'll be all right," she assured him.

"Thanks." She walked rapidly away.

CHARLIE grunted. "Plenty of guts," he muttered. He rubbed his rein-calloused fingers together. It was hard to stay out of this, even with Sid to think about.

"I ought to have worked over him, just on general principles," he growled. "But she didn't make a squawk. What could I do? . . . Maybe they've done for Sid already . . . If they have . . ."

He stared out through the shadows. "Damn little fool, high-tailin' it away out here by herself . . . Crazy about that weasel . . . Bet she ain't even had no supper . . . Wonder who got that confession?"

A hand touched his arm. "I was so wrapped up in my own affairs," she said, "I didn't think any more about what you said to Mr. Wells until just now."

He peered into her upturned face. Its youthfulness was lost in the shadows, its gaiety blurred by the night.

"This man you were looking for, I didn't understand much about it, but—I heard something you might want to know about. When I went up to see Mr. Wells about staying at the hotel—the clerk sent me, you see—I heard a commotion coming from somewhere. A man was swearing. Then he stopped, like somebody was choking him . . ."

"How did you get up there?"

"There's a little stairway just the other side of the room clerk's desk. He will show you."

"Not if I can help it," Charlie said.

He went into the lobby and approached the desk. "Has Gus showed up yet?" he asked.

The clerk shook his head. It was the same man who, a few moments before, had directed the girl to Wells' upstairs office.

Charlie noted a box of matches sitting on top of the cigar counter, near the inner edge. He rolled a cigarette and reached idly for a match. He knocked the box off, behind the counter. He grunted his regrets. The clerk frowned slightly and got down behind the counter to gather up the spilled matches.

Charlie swiftly gained the stairway, which was hidden behind the wash-room. He was out of sight before the clerk reappeared. There might be some signal flashed from the desk to the upper office, but he had a good start. Gaining the second floor, he was in a narrow hallway, lighted by a swinging lamp. There was a thick carpet on the floor, and the walls were papered with a grotesque pattern. At the end of the hall there was a locked door, the only opening from this corridor.

Charlie rapped softly. No sound came. He shifted his holstered gun, and took from his pocket a large folding knife. One of its blades was in the form of a screw-driver. He chiseled away enough of the door facing to spring the lock.

He passed into the little room where he had recently found Wells. There was an inner door, unlocked. It opened into an unlighted passageway. He

heard voices and went quietly in their direction.

There were two unexpected steps upward in the dark corridor. Charlie stumbled. He straightened quickly. A door swung open a few feet down the passageway. Gus Wells appeared.

The light from the open office door shone dimly on Charlie. Wells shut the door behind him swiftly and stepped into the hall. He was obscured by the darkness.

Warned by the other's swift, furtive actions, Charlie threw himself upon the floor. Gun flame and thunder filled the little space.

Charlie twisted about, returning the fire. In the terrific silence that followed there was a sharp inhalation of breath, and the faint friction of a sliding body.

The nearby door was swung open. Men poured out with drawn guns. Charlie lay motionless, his face in the shadows. Wells was emitting short grunts.

"Who? . . . What?"

"Take care of Gus."

They brought a light and held it above Charlie.

"Dead?" asked some one.

"No," said Charlie. "I ain't dead." He looked into the muzzles of two six-shooters.

Would they listen to his explanation? He lay without moving, and they looked for his spilling blood.

In brief, pungent words, Charlie told them everything. There were hasty prejudiced men in that crowd, but the majority of them were square according to their judgments. They listened to Charlie. They talked it over. Even then the deal was still in the cards, and Charlie knew it.

The crash of splintering wood came from the council chamber of the Alamos. Shouts arose. A gun was fired.

The men about Charlie turned. A whirling mass of arms, legs, heads, and bodies came out of the door. A shrill, curdling battle-cry came from the interior of the mass.

"Yi-ow-ee!"

It was a cry that might have come from a coyote, a cowboy, or a banshee. It was a cry that Charlie had heard many times. It always meant trouble. It came from the throat of Sidney Huser, and meant that he was having

one of his famous rebellious moments.

An oath of disgust escaped Charlie's lips. "The brainless little bastard," he muttered. "Just when I had things about fixed up, he breaks loose."

The melee rolled over Charlie, and he was absorbed by it. There could be no shooting at the moment. But the men who had hold of Sid were trying to club him with their guns. This was an uncertain business, too. Especially considering Sidney's suppleness.

A RANDOM blow caught Charlie on the ear, stripping down the concha like a shuck from an ear of corn. He fought desperately, blindly.

Down the passageway, the mass of fighting men rolled, impelled by some apparently irresistible force. Charlie thought he knew the force that was directing the movement. It was astonishing what the little runt of a Sidney could do in a free-for-all. He wriggled free, emerging with two guns. He crouched in the door of Wells' office.

Charlie threw off his immediate adversary and stumbled backward, toward Sid, gun leveled. He didn't want to shoot. One shot meant a massacre. Yet he dared not hope it could be avoided.

There was no motion for the moment. The only sound was heavy breathing. Charlie was tied, from boots to eyelids, by the chain of endless waiting. Why didn't they start it? There were half a dozen men jammed in that little corridor, facing him and Sid. There was nothing between them, nothing to keep any man in that crowd from seizing the advantage of the first shot. Yet no man moved. No man spoke. And none pulled trigger.

"Come away, Charlie," Sid said. His voice was low and soft, like a woman's.

Charlie waited an hour, in one second. Then he backed through the door. Side by side, he and Sid retreated, backing, through the office and into the little back hall. All the time the guns of the Alamos were on them, and they in turn kept their aim on the huddled group in the shadowy corridor.

"Straight back," Charlie muttered. "There's a door here." He felt for it, and his hand closed about a wrist. He froze, in the position of a backward step. His fingers, with the strength of

the reins in them, clamped about the wrist. But it was unresisting. And it was very small.

Charlie glanced behind him. The small, frightened face of the "girl on the box" was inches from his.

"What in hell!" he muttered.

"I—unlocked the door," she breathed.

He turned her loose. She pulled the door open. The edge of it pressed against Charlie's shoulder blades.

"Get out," he said. "Both of you."

"Get out yourself," hissed Sidney.

They backed out together. The girl was running down the steps. But she wasn't running fast enough. Charlie was at her side in two jumps.

"What in—what in—" he choked.

"... was I doing there," she finished, in short breaths. "I don't know. I—I think I'm going to fall."

Her knees gave way. Charlie caught her up and carried her to the bottom of the steps. Then he started across the alley.

"Put me down!" she cried.

Charlie was a bit dazed. He kept going.

"They're not going to hurt me." She had her arms about his neck and was jerking at him. "Put me down."

Sidney came charging after them. The darkened alley was strewn with bottles and boxes.

"How did you get in this?" Charlie demanded.

"I followed you up the steps. . . . Don't ask me why. Just wanted to see"—she caught her breath sharply—"see what was going on, I guess. I've always been like that."

"Charlie," piped Sidney, "Where the hell you goin'?"

Charlie didn't know. He slowed to a walk. Her arms were still about his neck, resisting, repulsing, in a partly hysterical manner. He felt only the warmth and softness of them.

"When they saw me behind you, they couldn't shoot," she was saying. "And I couldn't run. I was scared stiff. Say, where are you going?"

Charlie put her down. The warmth of her was still in his arms. He shut his hands, rubbing his rough fingers together.

"They're comin', Charlie!" Sid croaked.

"Let 'em come," growled Charlie. "You started it."

"I started what?" Sid was outraged.

"The whole ruckus. I had 'em quieted down, listenin' to reason, when you busted loose."

"Will you listen to that? I started the ruckus. When the first thing I know, this big yahoo comes chargin' in' throwin' lead."

"You're both crazy," said the girl, wildly. "Listen."

THEY heard the tramp of feet, coming down the alley. Back doors were being thrown open, letting out light and questioning voices.

"Come on," muttered Charlie.

"I ain't goin' to run," said Sidney, in high falsetto. "I ain't afraid of all the Alamos you can stack in this alley."

Charley got him by the shoulder. "Why didn't I let 'em hang you?" he pondered.

He pulled Sidney along. The girl stayed with them. She didn't want the pursuers to see her, or they would know which way their quarry had gone.

Crossing vacant lots, stumbling over junk piles, Charlie guided them to the edge of town. "The Todetown-Mercedes will be along here in a few minutes, if we ain't missed it," he said.

They waited and listened.

"What do you propose to do with me?" she asked.

"Uh, I don't know. Don't know just what I propose to do with myself yet. Except grab this hack when it comes by. I'll take you along, of course."

"How nice," she murmured, "How perfectly j-jolly!"

Charlie patted her on the shoulder. Say! she *was* in a jam. Had been ever since she hit Bumble Bee. She'd had enough to knock her clear out. And she still kept trying to make a joke out of everything.

"I'll see that you get back to Mercedes," he promised.

"Like fun, you will!"

"Why? Don't you want to go back home?"

"Mister, home is the last place in the world I want to go to."

Charlie was getting it, a little slowly, to be sure. She had run off from home to this dancehall-gal wrangler. She had found him out, right off the bat. She was lucky, in a way. But that didn't help her out of the jam she was in,

right then. She felt that she couldn't go back home and face the music there.

Maybe it was up to him to try to square her with the folks. A stage driver, of course, was a man of some importance in the community, and his word was apt to carry more weight than an ordinary person's . . .

Twelve hoofs pounded a rapid approach, and sand boxes clucked a contented accompaniment.

"Here it comes."

"How you goin' to stop 'em?" Sid asked.

"Why——"

It took a stage driver to forget, for the moment, how a stage driver—and shot-gun messenger—might react to a summons to halt, coming from the roadside in the darkness.

"I'll stop 'em," said the girl.

And, before Charlie could interfere, she ran toward the approaching vehicle, shouting, "Stop, please!"

Brakes scraped sharply. The team stopped.

"Don't be afraid," called the girl.

"We—we just want to ride."

There was an amused snort of astonishment from the driver. Then he saw the two men. The shot-gun messenger was showing signs of alertness.

"What cha doin' out here?" asked the driver.

"We didn't have time to make it to the station," said Charlie. "Got room for us?"

He inspected the trio. "Reckon so," he said, at last. "Two of you can get inside and one on top."

When Charlie came closer into the side lights, the driver said, "You drive for P.-G., don't you?"

"I did," said Charlie.

He got inside with the girl. Sid climbed on top. The coach bounced on.

Charlie and the girl sat up front with their feet propped up on some mail sacks. The girl clung to her arm sling. Charlie relaxed with an elbow on the window strap.

Thump, bump, jolt. The body of the vehicle swung back and forward on its leather sling. It swayed from side to side. Charlie didn't notice. He was use to it. She wasn't. The strength had about gone from her arms, and she dangled about like a rag.

"Excuse me," she murmured.

"TAKE it easy," he advised. But she clung to her strap.

"Eat any supper?" he asked.

"Sure."

"Where?"

"Oh, I don't remember."

He smiled fleetingly. "Just as you say," he consented. But he wished she wouldn't cling so hard to herself. And her strap.

One wheel hit a rock, and the opposite one dropped into a rut. She collided against his shoulder. The strap jerked out of her fingers. She lay against him in an exhausted slump. He put his arm about her.

"You're about fagged out," he said.

He could speak in a matter-of-fact tone, but he couldn't stop the chugging of his heart. The bumping of the stage, however, helped to conceal it from her. He hoped. Both arms were around her then. He fought the springs in them. She let go of her staunchness and her tears.

They came to the first relay stop.

"I think we better get something to eat," said Charlie.

"I'm starved," she admitted.

"You didn't have any supper, did you?"

"Gosh, no! Didn't have any money. And haven't had anything to eat all day. This morning, I was so excited, and—say, I'll bet you haven't had any supper, either."

Charlie reflected. "Reckon I haven't," he admitted.

They went into a restaurant adjoining the stage station, and sat down at the counter with the rest of the passengers.

"Fifteen minutes here," called the driver.

"Just time to eat a cow or two," said Charlie.

They ordered steak and potatoes and coffee. Sidney came in and sat down beside Charlie, but Charlie didn't see him. He started to speak once or twice but Charlie was so oblivious to his presence that he turned, in disgust, and went outside.

During the second leg of the journey, the girl held onto her strap. But she didn't cry any more. She seemed to have made up her mind definitely that she was happy; though she still glanced wonderingly at Charlie occasionally.

"What are you going to do now?" she asked.

"First off, I'm goin' to get married. Say! What's your name?"

"Dolly."

"Yeh. I heard him call you that. But your last name?"

"Fisher."

Her reluctance puzzled him somewhat. "Your dad don't happen to be Ed Fisher, with Wells-Fargo?"

"Yes," she admitted. "He's my dad."

Ed Fisher, Charlie knew, was one of the high officials of the express company. He had a moment of uneasiness, thinking of his own precarious position and the normal position of the girl beside him. It wasn't that he felt inferior to her in any way. But that business back in Bumble Bee. . . .

Dolly was thrown against him. "Do you bruise easily?" she asked.

He grinned a negative.

"I do," she said, rubbing her shoulder. "If I had known I was coming on another stage ride, I'd have brought my excess baggage."

"What did you do with it?"

"Left it with my trunk."

A startled look crept into her widening eyes. "Oh!" she gasped. "Oh!"

He sat up straight, filled with concern. "Wha-what's the matter?"

"My trunk! I just thought about it . . . It's back there in Bumble Bee."

Charlie sank back. "Quit joshin' me that way," he said. "I thought somethin' was sure-enough wrong."

"But you don't understand. My jewelry! Linens! Silver-ware! Everything I had in my hope chest!"

"Yeh. A hundred and fifty pounds of it."

"Well, I've got to go back. That's all there is to it."

"But we can't go back."

"You don't have to go. I'll go alone. Nobody's going to hurt me."

"There's no need of either one of us goin'," he said, with a sudden inspiration. "We can certainly have it sent on to us."

But this didn't inspire Dolly. "I'd rather go back and see to it myself," she said. "Besides, they'll be looking for you back there, and if we told them where to send the trunk, that would be just as good as telling them where you are."

"All right," he said, grimly. "I'll go back with you."

"Don't be silly!" she admonished.

"Silly?" He regarded her helplessly. "Who's bein' silly, anyhow?"

"You are, of course," she said promptly. "I've got it all planned. I'll get off at the next stop, and go back. You go on to Holliday, and I'll meet you there."

"But I don't want you to go chasin' off that way, now. I'm not goin' to stand for it! Why, I've only just—we just now——"

She drew his face down to hers. "I know," she murmured. "I feel the same way, but it won't be for long, and—" she straightened with determination—"I've got to have that trunk!"

In spite of his protests, she left him at the next station, which was called Hick's Ferry. She could get a stage back to Bumble Bee in an hour. That would put her there about six o'clock in the morning. She would have to wait until ten that night for a coach back through Hick's Ferry to Holliday, where they were bound. She would get there at seven o'clock in the morning of the following day. By going on, Charlie would be there just twenty-four hours earlier.

Charlie gave her all the money he had, and went on alone, absorbed in glum reflections. At the next stop, all the passengerws got out except him. He sat there, staring moodily at the sacks.

A piping voice came from the open door. "Let it alone. When it dies, I'll drag it out and bury it."

Charlie looked around sourly at the speaker. "Sidney," he said solemnly, "women are damn fools."

"Found that out already, did you? Well, well. She worked you over in a hurry. Where'd she go?"

"Back to Bumble Bee."

"Too bad," said Sidney, chuckling. "Wha'd she go back to Bumble Bee for?"

"For her trunk."

"Huh?"

Charlie's eyes lighted. "I'm goin' to meet her tomorrow morning at seven o'clock in Holliday." He consulted his watch. It was then one-thirty in the morning.

Holliday was a division point on the Overland Route. Charlie had paid their

fares to that place. They arrived a little after seven o'clock.

"Reckon we better have a snack to eat, hadn't we?" Sidney suggested.

"Yeh." He felt through his empty pockets. "How you fixed?"

"Ain't got a dime. They took everything off of me when they throwed me in jail at Bumble Bee."

"Huh!" grunted Charlie.

"You broke, too?"

"Yeh, I——"

"You what?"

"Well, you see, Dolly was, that is . . ."

"Oh, yes," said Sidney. "I see."

He squinted thoughtfully at Charlie.

"When did you say she was gettin' back here?"

"Tomorrow morning at seven o'clock."

An ironic smile flitted across Sidney's face. "Maybe we'll have some breakfast tomorrow mornin', huh? When Dolly gets back with the dinero."

There was a significant emphasis to his words, but Charlie didn't notice. "That's right," Charlie agreed, absently.

Sidney snorted suddenly. "You can moon around here till tomorrow mornin' without eatin' if you want to! Me, I'm goin' to go out and rustle a grub-stake."

Charlie focused his interest on his friend. "Are you hungry, Sid?"

"Oh, no," said Sidney. "These pains in my belly is caused by me overloadin' it."

"It hasn't been long since we ate supper," Charlie protested.

"Since who et supper?"

Charlie looked puzzled. "Didn't you eat supper with us at Willow Crossing last night?"

"Can't remember it if I did."

"Where was you? What was you doin'?"

"I was out playin' mumble-peg with the hoss jingler," said Sidney.

"Come on," said Charlie. "I know a bar-keep here. He'll stake us."

They found the bar-keeper and borrowed ten dollars. Sidney ate two dollars and seventy-five cents worth of breakfast. Charlie had five cups of coffee.

They stayed under cover that day at a rooming house. Charlie was up at four o'clock in the morning, and down at the stage station at five. Sidney got

there just as the stage from Bumble Bee pulled in. He saw some things that Charlie didn't. Charlie was looking at the passengers as they got out, yet not looking at them. One by one, he eliminated them, until they were all out. Then he stood there, just looking at the empty stage.

Sidney knew it would be like that, but he could think of nothing to say. He stood to one side, watching Charlie, and feeling sorry for him in spite of his antipathy toward Charlie's romance. He saw one of the disembarked passengers walk up behind Charlie. It was the sheriff from Bumble Bee. He saw the officer reach out and take Charlie's gun. Still Charlie didn't wake up. The sheriff jabbed him with the gun.

"You're under arrest," said the sheriff.

Charlie turned. "Huh?" he said absently.

"You're under arrest," repeated the sheriff.

"Aw, lemme alone," said Charlie.

"I'm takin' you back to Bumble Bee," said the officer.

Charlie studied him with new interest. "You are?"

Sidney was stepping up behind the sheriff.

"Drop it, Runt," said Charlie sharply. "I'm goin' back to Bumble Bee with the sheriff here."

The officer turned on Sidney, who paused with his hand on the butt of his gun. They eyed each other.

"I better take you along, too," said the sheriff.

"That's right," agreed Charlie; "you better go along with us."

Sidney's soft, fair chin was sagging. He dropped his hand, and the sheriff disarmed him.

"We'll be leavin' in the next hour," the officer said. "Won't be necessary to put you boys in jail, I reckon."

Sidney looked up at his tall, grim-lipped friend. "Didn't know you was that far gone, Charlie; honest I didn't. Or I'd just knocked you in the head this mornin'."

"Sheriff," Charlie asked, "did you see a girl back in Bumble Bee with a big black trunk?"

"Answered to name of Dolly," added Sidney.

The sheriff hadn't seen her.

"Well, you probably saw a big, slab-

sided gent back there with side whisks and a .45 slug in his guts?" Sidney suggested.

THE sheriff glowered down at the little man.

"Is he dead?" Sidney wanted to know.

"Probably," said the sheriff briefly.

"Probably!" echoed Sidney. "I knowed he was pretty thick, but looks like you could tell whether the big stiff was dead or not."

"He wasn't dead when I left," the sheriff explained. "But he probably is by now. The doc said he couldn't last long."

"Then we ought to be back in time for the funeral, hadn't we?" Sidney said.

"We'll be back in time for about three funerals, I'd say," the sheriff replied.

The stage came. Charlie and Sidney were put in the front seat. The sheriff sat behind them. He tried to remain vigilant throughout the long journey, but the ease with which his prisoners had surrendered, and the eagerness with which at least one of them looked forward to returning to Bumble Bee, encouraged him to enjoy a bit of relaxation late that evening, toward the end of the trip.

And that bit of relaxation was what Charlie had been waiting for. The sheriff thought the stage had run into a wash-out in the road. The first jolt he got, however, was due to being yanked swiftly forward and struck sharply on the point of the chin. The second jolt was another blow in the same place. The third, he didn't feel at all. The first two had been sufficient.

If any of the passengers had thought of interfering, they were dissuaded by the sheriff's gun in Charlie's hands.

"Got a lot of business to 'tend to when I get to Bumble Bee," Charlie informed them. "And I don't want the sheriff taggin' along after me."

Those on top were unaware of the disturbance inside the stage. Sidney rolled the sheriff out into the darkness, to lie beside the road until consciousness returned, or until some vehicle came along.

"Why didn't you do that a long time

ago?" Sidney wailed. "We're almost to Bumble Bee now."

"We ought to be there in half an hour, at most," Charlie agreed.

"You mean you're goin' to set right there and ride into that hell's nest?"

"I'm goin' to Bumble Bee," said Charlie, "just like I told you I was, to start with. Didn't have the money to pay my way, and when the sheriff come along and said he'd take me, I thought it was right nice of him."

Sidney covered his face with his hands. "Lord, Lord!" he muttered; "I know You'll take care of the simple-minded . . . but what's goin' to happen to me?"

When the stage pulled into Bumble Bee, Charlie was the first man out. Sidney followed him.

Charlie sought out the station agent. "You seen anything of that girl who rode in with me on the box yesterday?" he demanded.

The agent looked at him in surprise. "What are you doin' here?" he asked.

"She come back after her trunk," Charlie said. "You seen her? Did she call for her trunk?"

"Say, you better get out of town, pronto! If they catch you . . . Who's this gal you're so interested in, anyhow?"

"Her name is Dolly Fisher. Had a big black trunk. Weighed a hundred and fifty pounds, full."

"The trunk or the girl?"

Charlie grabbed the agent by the shoulders. "Have you seen her?"

"Yes, I reckon I have. She was in here askin' about her trunk. Said she was goin' out to Holliday last night. She come in to buy her ticket a little while before the stage came. An hombre walked up to the window and started talkin' to her . . ."

The agent winced, under the pressure of Charlie's hands.

"Go on," said Charlie. "What did he say to her?"

"Well, he asked her where she was goin' and she said she was goin' to Holliday, and he says, 'No, you're not, either,' and she says, 'I'd like to know what you've got to say about where I go.' There was a lot more talkin'. I didn't pay much attention to it. Finally, they walked off together. And that's the last I've seen of her."

"Did you know this hombre?"

"I've seen him around some. Don't know what his name is."

"Wha'd he look like?"

"Skinny. Black hair, come away down to his jaw. All slicked up, with a yaller hat on."

Charlie charged across the street toward the Metz hotel. Sidney pulled at his arm. "Listen, Charlie," he pleaded, "you're walkin' plumb into your grave. Have you lost what little dab of brains . . ."

"Go to hell," said Charlie. Then, seeming to realize for the first time that his little friend was tagging along behind him, he snapped, "What are you doin' here, anyway?"

"I'd like to know that, myself," said Sidney.

He leaped upon the board sidewalk and entered the hotel. Sidney followed doggedly.

It was a convivial hour—ten o'clock. And Bumble Bee was a convivial town, in an ordinary mood. The Metz bar was a favorite gathering place.

Charlie scanned the crowd in the lobby-saloon. Then he walked across to the hotel desk. A bar-keep paused in the act of fishing a silver dollar from a pool of suds on the counter. Others caught his glance and followed it.

A spot of stillness, beginning at this point, spread like a pebble-stirred wave on still water. The hotel clerk came out of his indolent position behind the desk, in a slow, uncertain manner.

"I'm lookin' for a gent named Phil Lassiter," said Charlie.

The clerk started to speak, closed his mouth, and swallowed. "He may be . . . up in his room. If he ain't in the dance hall."

"What number?"

"Thirty-two. Upstairs to your right."

Charlie was paying no attention to the curious, silent group at the bar. But Sidney was overlooking nothing. He had sidled up to the desk, backed against it, and was facing the crowd across the room.

Turning, Charlie glanced at them casually, and crossed to the big double doors that led to the dance hall. Sidney was about six paces behind.

Their entrance in the dance hall caused less apparent effect, for the noise, music and dancing went on. But faces began to turn, and soon all talk-

ing was trampled into silence, leaving only the scraping of feet and of fiddle-bows.

Charlie looked about him. He was tall enough to see everyone in the room. Sidney could see only those nearby. He backed against the wall at the side of the door, glancing from Charlie's face to the saloon, and back again.

The dance was concluded. The floor cleared slowly. There was a small clearing about Sidney and Charlie. Galligo, looking scared, approached Charlie at his signal.

"What—are you doing here, Whip?"

"I'm lookin' for a jasper, Phil Lassiter. Seen him?"

"No. I—don't think so."

"Well, maybe he's up in his room. I'll see."

He turned, passed through the double doors again, and crossed to a wide stairway that ascended above the clerk's desk. Sidney brought up the rear, doggedly faithful and alert, but wearing the look of the hopeless condemned.

They went upstairs, turned to the right, and stopped before Number 32. Charlie knocked, gently. They waited. He knocked again.

A voice came to them. "Who's that?"

"Lassiter?" Charlie inquired.

There was a grunt which might have been assent or denial.

"Want to see you, Lassiter," Charlie said.

Again they waited. There were some sounds within the room, but the door did not open. Charlie twisted the knob, but his shoulder met wooden resistance. He backed off and charged. Again, and again. The door splintered. He burst into the room.

A man stood in the middle of the room, a tall man with a long white mustache. At his side stood Dolly.

All three stood without speaking, or moving, for a moment. The white mustache was the first thing in the room to move. It fluttered experimentally, then shook fiercely.

"What is the meaning of this?" he demanded.

"**CHARLIE!**" Dolly rushed to him. She halted at a roar from beneath the mustache.

"Dolly! Who is this man?"

"This is Charlie, dad!"

"Charlie who?"

"Why, Charlie . . . Charlie . . ."

"Rannihan," supplied Charlie. He had never seen Ed Fisher before. "I'm going to marry your daughter."

The white mustache quivered and writhed. It waved above a series of choking noises, which ended in a brief cackle.

"Is there any special reason for breaking the door down in order to qualify as a bridegroom?"

A trace of a grin curved Charlie's lips. "Well, you see, I thought . . ." He couldn't say what he wanted to.

"I think I know what you thought," said Fisher. "You thought you would find the man here who formerly occupied this room."

Charlie nodded, not daring to look at Dolly.

"Well, you're a little bit late," said Fisher. "I found him first." He looked at Charley narrowly. "It seems my daughter amassed a host of friends in her short excursion."

Still Charlie couldn't think of anything to say.

"First, this—this unspeakable idler. I found she had come one hundred and seventy-five miles to marry him. Do you have a job, young man?"

"Not right now."

"You might get one, breaking up kindling wood with your head."

Charlie looked sheepishly at the door. Sidney was sticking his head through it. "Here they come, Charlie!"

There was a tramp of feet on the stairs.

Dolly sprang forward. "It's the Alamos! Dad! You must stop them!"

Charlie started out of the room, but ran into Sidney at the door, backing in. He looked for another exit. There appeared to be none.

"Get out of here!" he told Dolly. "Out of the door. They won't hurt you."

She ran to the door. But not to get out of danger. "Wait!"

They were filling the corridor. Sidney was in a fighting crouch, gun drawn.

"Let my father explain some things to you," the girl was saying. "Then . . . do as you will."

Charlie swore fiercely beneath his breath. He speculated briefly on grabbing the girl and throwing her aside. She would have been in no danger had

she gone on. But to stand there arguing. In a moment some of that crowd would see him or Sidney. Charlie paid little attention to what she was saying. His one thought was getting her out of it.

"Dad! Come here and tell them about Gus Wells. Let them know the kind of man he was. Then let them avenge him, if they will."

Fisher joined his daughter. "Gentlemen," he said, in a sort of fluttering dignity, "I came here, partially, to have Gus Wells arrested as the head of a band of road agents that have been preying upon travelers in this country for a couple of years. They have robbed the express company which I represent of hundreds of thousands of dollars. I have positive proof of my assertion."

"That ain't nothin'," scoffed Sidney softly. "I knowed that."

"I don't know much about these gentlemen here," he glanced back in the room, "but I suggest that you do them no violence until you are sure that you are right, and that they deserve it."

There followed a lot of talking, explaining, and comparing of notes. The thing that helped Sidney and Charlie was the fact, brought out by one of the men present, that Gus Wells had in his pocket at the time Charlie shot him the copy of the confession. The paper, bearing three bullet holes—it had been folded three times in the envelope—was taken from Wells' pocket by one of the men who administered first aid to him.

SIDNEY convinced them that he, too, knew of Wells' outlaw activities. He had learned all about it through some of his blackleg companions. He knew how Wells had become

head of that gang. As head of the Alamos, Wells had decreed vigilante extinction for the higher-ups in the outlaw band, and had taken charge himself. He was afraid that Sidney knew too much.

There was more talking, too much to suit some of those in the crowd. It was a long time before Charlie and Dolly got a chance to talk their prospects over.

"I've got to go back with him now," she said. "He was pretty decent to me, after the way I ran off, and everything."

"But," Charlie protested, "you said, you promised—"

"I know. And I still feel the same way about it, I think. Still and all, we were terribly hasty. I hardly knew what I was doing. That night. That ride. You see, I was hardly myself."

"I see," said Charlie.

"No you don't, either. You're getting the wrong idea altogether. I love you, Charlie. At least, I think I do. But I'm not going to make a fool out of myself any more. You'd think the way I've been jumping at men the last two or three days, that I was embracing my last opportunity."

"They say opportunity knocks but once," Charlie warned her.

"No!" she mocked.

"But I'm not goin' to be like old man Opportunity." He grinned.

"How's that?" Her eyes were knowing, dancing.

"I'm going to keep knockin' . . . around."

She studied him, more seriously. "What do you mean—'knocking . . . around'?"

Charlie didn't get a chance to answer. For just then Sidney came up and started talking.

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The Slip-Up

By James Corson

PLACERS PEKIN drew up in the shadow of a butte, and waited. His companion, a big man, firm jawed, bull throated, rode his mount with the grace of trained reflexes.

Montana was an outlaw, with a price on his head. Five thousand dollars was offered for him, dead or alive. The unique thing about the reward was that no mention was made of the five longriders which rode with him. For the residents and law officers of the territory harassed by them believed the outlaw band revolved about one man. Get Montana, they said, and the rest of the band would fall to pieces.

Placers Pekin, quieting his fretting horse, knew different. It was true that the band revolved about one man, that in the event of the death or capture of that man, the longriders would be broken up. But that man was not Montana.

Now he pointed one gnarled, steady finger toward the shadowy mountain range that cropped up on the desert horizon.

"Them's the Atoscocs. Usual thing, Mont. Water in 'em, plenty. I know a canyon, just this side them twin peaks—grass an' shade. The Mexs call it Paradise, or somethin'. It's there the Bobcat an' the others are waitin'."

Mont squinted chill grey eyes toward the misty hill rises. "Come on, Placers," he growled, and stepped his horse down a crumbly slope.

Placers Pekin loped his cayuse alongside Montana's, thoughts running through his mind. But he was not thinking of the band, which had split up after a recent rustling escapade, nor of the train holdup due tomorrow. He was thinking of the rift between Bobcat Rollins and Montana, and queer forebodings rose in him.

Sunset found them heading down into a green carpeted defile—answering a hail from one of the four figures grouped around the smoke of a cooking fire.

THAT night Montana gave detailed orders on the train holdup. The flickering firelight played over his stony face. Pekin would flag the engine, Cody and Spots and Miljin attend to the engineer and fireman and the side windows, while he went through the aisles and into the baggage car with the Bobcat.

Quick, sure work it had to be. The bolts shot off the closed baggage car at once, and both side doors slid open. One man at the entrance, looking down the long, connected aisles, two men covering the windows. Pekin himself further back, but in good rifle range, ready to offset unexpected developments. Every angle of the case was considered—all various possibilities.

From across the fire Rollins occasionally spoke, somehow fitting his words into the current of Montana's thoughts, so that no interruption was experienced. Placers Pekin gave credit where credit was due. The whole layout of action, seemingly voiced by Montana, was a framework erected upon the Bobcat's calm suggestions.

Later that night Pekin wondered how much longer it would go on. The Bobcat was tiring of his servile role. He was changing, had steadily changed since a certain day when over the slight question of mistreating a balky stallion Montana had coldly lain down the law of his authority.

Pekin could still see them—faced to each other—the Bobcat by instinct going into his deadly gun slouch, only to relax, and smilingly concede the point. Yet from that time he had changed. Pekin knew that the loyalty of Bobcat Rollins to Montana, which had made the outlaw a country-wide legend, was gone.

Somehow Pekin could not get to sleep. Such things were tiny rifts—yet no one could guess how wide they might become. Montana was treading dangerous ground.

BUT the morning sun, beating down upon his back as he rode out of Paradise Valley with the others shimmered away Pekin's forebodings. For

five years they had planned and struck as one man, and never slipped up. Their perfected code of action, time-proven, was by now an automatic habit. And the Bobcat had never given actual evidence of resenting Montana's rule. It was just his own imagination. So Pekin forced the question from his mind.

The sun was well up the arch of sky when they left the last slopes behind and rode straight east over level, sage dotted plain. Silent hours of steady riding, then Montana's curt command slowed the company, and their mounts went stepping down a sandy slope toward twin, glistening bars of steel that ran straight away toward the heat haze of the horizon.

Montana again voiced short, clear orders. The band dismounted, went about its appointed tasks. Several pointed staves, cut that morning back in the mountains, were inserted between the rails in an upright position, and nearly all of their height covered by the wrapping from a roll of red cloth Pekin drew from his saddle pack. The horses were group together and led up the opposite bank, out of sight. Spots stayed to watch them while his friends went back to the rail bed.

A half hour later the first long, warning whistle cut through the languorous quiet. From the top of the left bank Placers ran down, to stand, solitary and small, in the path of the black, hurtling mass of steel that came clattering along the rails. The long whistle sounded again.

Pekin waved energetically, a little distance behind the barrier of red cloth that stretched along the roadbed. Brakes shrieked sharply. The train slowed, came to a hissing stop. Heads protruded from the engineer's cab, from windows in the car sides.

The moment Cody and Miljin broke from cover at the top of the embankment and leapt down toward the engineer's cab Pekin turned, and ran swiftly back to where he had lain his rifle. Snatching it up from the railside, he pivoted, sank down, and rested the weapon upon one knee. From his position he commanded view of both sides along the train length. There would be no one slipping out those side windows while Montana and the Bobcat went up the center aisles.

The usual thing. The old longrider

chuckled to himself as he waited. A stopped train, smoke idling out of its funnel—the blue clad figures of engineer and fireman, standing with arms upraised beside the engine. Cody running to the baggage car—the boom of his Colts. All familiar. Pekin could visualize the scene inside—the frightened passengers dropping tribute into the Bobcat's outstretched palm. Montana stalking along, huge, menacing, behind his business-like Colts. They would reach the inner door to the baggage car by time Cody finished picking the remnants of lock. A few moments of quick, practiced work, and they would be ahorse again, heading for the sage strewn levels with another episode of daring behind them.

Pekin chuckled again as he watched a small box pass into Cody's waiting hands. The Bobcat followed, jumping down lightly, drawn Colts for a moment sweeping the line of cars as Cody, his arms burdened, turned away.

Pekin nodded approvingly. Everything perfect—flawless. The usual thing. He suddenly whistled and grew very rigid.

A small figure preceded Montana out the open doors of the baggage car—a woman's figure. Pekin swore in a wondering astonishment as he rose from his knee. Cody and the Bobcat were already half up the bank. Miljin was waving the fireman and the engineer back into the cab. It was time to break for it.

But even as he began to run in a swift spurt of effort that carried him up the slope, Pekin wondered. A woman. The word pounded queerly in his mind. But instinct for the moment caused him to react automatically as shots sounded from the train. Window glasses tinkled to the spangs of his Winchester. The shots below abruptly ceased.

Montana had gained the rim with the woman, was running effortlessly with her toward the horses. Pekin turned, after a final, silencing shot, and joined his comrades. Montana's sharp command raised them to horse as one man, and they pounded away, the Bobcat's rangy roan setting the pace.

THEY back tracked the entire distance. Well in the rear Pekin rode, and wondered. A woman. It was not altogether new. Montana had made off with them before. But this time—Pekin

could not shake off a queer, unnamable premonition. That slight figure that rode behind Montana seemed to mar the whole picture.

Unconsciously Pekin's eyes kept straying to the Bobcat. He was queer on the subject of women. Montana did not know that. His escapades with them had always occurred at split-up time, when the band had separated to allow angry posses free passage across the deserts and uninterrupted search of towns. Never had the chief bothered with them when on the march—never till now. Pekin felt his throat grow drier than the three hour stretch to the Atoscas warranted. What would Rollins do? He was queer, when it came to women.

THAT night, by the firelight at the Paradiso camp, Pekin watched them—Montana, Rollins, and the woman. She was a little thing, flaxen haired, wide eyed, apparently almost paralyzed by terror—hunched just within the flame glow, her head automatically turning from one speaker to the other.

Cody eased the strain from Pekin's mind by his request. With Spots and Miljin, he wanted to ride to Madregas—had business there. Spot's grin was sheepish. Miljin hinted at a generous payoff, since certain of Madregas' feminine citizens were expensive to pay attention to.

Pekin helped to ease the tension he instinctively sensed.

"What's struck you yearlin's, all at once? Wimmin—wimmin!" He shrugged. "Go ahead. We need a rest. Me an' the Bobcat'll amble down Terrich way. They play man-sized poker down there."

Montana scowled a little—shook his head.

"No time, Placers. I need both you an' Rollins for that bank idea in Apache. We'll start for it right away, an' settle there till we get the lay of the land. It'll take us say—three weeks." He turned to Cody—"Three weeks is all you can have to fool around that Mex town. An' I want you to be careful—get into no trouble. You gotta be ready to start in three weeks, not just think of startin'."

Bobcat Rollins spoke for the first time that night. He was seated a little back from the circle, directly facing Montana and the small, huddled figure

beside him. The flicker from the fire barely revealed his features.

But his voice was enough. Pekin felt a slow chill steal over him. He knew the Bobcat. No one else did. Montana, despite five years of authority, did not know.

"So we ain't splittin'? I thought we was, sure. When I seen you drag the kid out. She'll be in the way in Apache, Mont."

Montana shrugged, and lit himself a cigaret. The match glow threw his hard face into sharp relief for a moment.

"Don't think so. Part of my scheme, see? She'll be my wife—you her brother—Placers her father. Savvy? Family stuff. Lookin' for good settlin' places. We got a li'l money, an' we'll let 'em know about it, of course. We want to deposit in the bank—"

Pekin shifted uncomfortably at Rollins' voice. That hidden, queer note in the Bobcat's tone held.

"Just a minnit, Mont. So yo're figgerin' we'll be able to work a game like that? An' after it's over, what about—her?"

Pekin started, then next instant cursed his overwrought nerves. The silent, frightened figure of the girl beside Montana of a sudden galvanized to life. Her cries were piteous, incoherent, wild—she was frantic in her appeal. Clearly Pekin sensed the stark horror that possessed her—some sheltered city creature, perhaps she was, forcibly transported to a grim world of bearded, hard voiced men group about a wilderness campfire.

Montana's growl stopped her outcries—she cowered back again, moaning a little. The chief's tone showed traces of irritation as he answered the Bobcat.

"I'll tend to her, both before an' after. What we want to plan now is that bank bustin'. I know Apache—we can swing it—"

"Wait a minnit." Pekin chilled again, and unconsciously held his breath. There was no mistake now. That queer, underlying note was now plain in the Bobcat's voice. Pekin tried to think. Someone had to think, and think fast. The comradeship of five years, the spirit of gainful unity and frictionless coordination that had made possible the fame and escapades of the band, was suddenly rifted. There was an almost tangible strain about that campfire. Even Cody and Spots and the humorous

Miljin began to sense it—though they could not realize. He, Pekin, did. For years he had been dimly aware of the Bobcat's growing dislike for the man who led them—for years that dislike had smouldered, waiting for the vital breath of a real controversial issue. It had come at last. The grim conclusion came to Pekin as Rollins continued. Montana had slipped up. A little, flaxen haired girl, frightened out of speech and resistance, was doing what many posses and very many capable sheriffs had in five busy years failed to do.

"MONT—I got somethin' to say." The Bobcat's voice was level. "I ain't no sky-pilot—so I'll cut it short. You an' me been workin' together a real long time—it's no use splittin' cause of a womin. But I got my faults, just like you got yourn. An' one of mine is thet I won't have wimmin mixed in my deals atall—if you want to pull this Apache stunt, drop the kid at the nearest rail town."

The flames crackled in a dead silence. Somewhere out in the dark a coyote howled, and Pekin felt his mind dwell stupidly on the long drawn, familiar sound. Spots slowly straightened from a recumbent position, his eyes upon Montana. Cody sat rigid. Miljin paused in the act of rolling a cigaret—his fingers poised at his mouth.

Montana's careless, relaxed attitude underwent a slow change. He seemed to grow, his huge shoulders hunching forward—a hard rasp creeping into his voice.

"Rollins—I got you right? Yo're tellin' me what I gotta do? You're sayin' that if—"

Pekin hurriedly rose.

"Lissen, Mont—"

"Sit down!" Montana's voice was a whip crack. Pekin sank back. He could sense the cold rage that came over the leader. Montana was not used to having his word questioned. Especially questioned by the Bobcat.

Pekin sank down, a chill at the small of his back. Montana was riding blind.

"Everybuddy keep quiet—till this is threshed out, an' good. Now, Rollins—I got you right? You balkin' on 'count of this kid?" Montana was scowling half in unbelief.

"Yeah." The Bobcat's tone kept its level. "There's no use arguin' it, Mont.

My ideas are set on such things. I'm sorry we never spoke about 'em before. But I'm tellin' you now. I play brother to no wimmin—even if you get one that ain't scared an' helpless. This bank in Apache—we can bust it this way——”

“That'll do!” Montana was sneering. “You said plenty—I'll finish it. So yore ideas are set, eh? Since when? Since when are *yore* ideas runnin' this bunch?”

“Since I been with it.”

Slowly Montana rose. With his feline grace of movement the Bobcat did likewise. Miljin's hand dropped—Cody and Spots rolled over to clear the fire, came to their feet near Montana.

Thoughts tumbled in old Pekin's mind—moved him forward.

“Easy—easy!” he warned. “Don't break like this, boys! Mont!” he appealed sharply. “Five years together! Five years! Now—for a girl——”

But Montana was riding blind.

“Get out!” he ordered curtly, waving his left hand—the while his right shoulder hunched queerly.

Pekin swore in a sudden surge of feeling.

“Get out hell! I'm talkin' plain, Mont. Don't break like this. Over a kid. The Bobcat—yore best man——”

Montana strode forward, his booted feet scattering the fire. Pekin was thrust aside with unceremonious force—the leader faced Rollins.

For just a moment the old longrider thought of springing again between them—of arguing—pointing out the long years gone by. But a sudden sense of futility swept over him. The scattered fire embers—the five men around them—the girl crouched in a moaning, frightened heap beyond—it was the setting. Setting for the play of passion that for long months had been gathering, unseen, beneath the surface.

Pekin felt the slow chill leave him—a grimness set his jaw. Montana's trail was petering out. Instinctively he made note of many things—his mind now functioning sharply. Cody and Spots were edging toward Montana—Miljin, now erect, was dropping back. Three to three. A fair break. Even as his gun arm tensed the grim humor of it struck Pekin. No posse would ever round up Montana and his longriders.

“Since you been with it, eh?” Montana's huge form suddenly quivered. “Rollins—yo're a damned liar! A damned——”

The Bobcat's right hand lunged around in a vicious slap that rocked Montana back—his left hip wreathed itself in smoke, quick puffs stabbed by sharp jets of flame.

MONTANA lurched queerly—the shots from his Colt wavered—all that Pekin saw, even as he himself drew and cut down on Cody and Spots.

For perhaps two lurid minutes that flare-up of passion lasted. The little canyon echoed to the boom of shots—the picketed horses stamped, wildly—the shrill, uncontrolled screams of a terror stricken woman pierced above it all. Then quiet came down—over the dying, scattered embers—sprawled forms. Quiet, desert quiet, that seemed accentuated by the whimpers of a woman's crying.

Across the red coals the Bobcat shook Pekin's hand.

“Got you in the left shoulder, eh? How high?”

“High enough to be comfortable.” Pekin had to joke. But the reaction swept him.

“Hell! Gone out—all of 'em, gone! For nothin'!”

The Bobcat shrugged.

“That's the way it goes. It had to be, sometime. Now—what next?”

Pekin motioned to the crying woman.

“Take her back. Then we'll meet—best across the line. In Madregas. Guess we'll have to take new trails after this—there's no more stick-ups for me. You feel the same way?”

The Bobcat nodded, his gaze on a huge, still form.

“Reckon. Montana'll get a decent burial, *both* ways. We'll fade out, an' try new deals. An' let 'em guess!”

They did. And to this day guessing is rife in the mountain desert. The menace of Montana faded from the rail and stage lines, and speculation, generally wrong, proved wrong once again. For in none of its many phases did it strike upon the truth. And certain mounds of stone in Paradiso Valley keep their mute secret of Montana's first and last slip-up.

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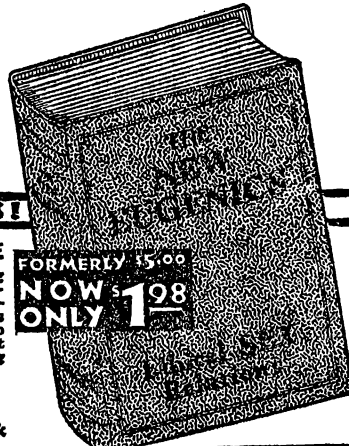
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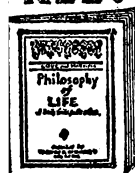


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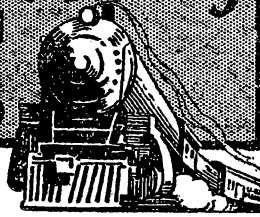


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