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DOWN EVERY DARK TRAIL?
GRIPPING NOVEL BY
ROD PATTERSON

2
GUN AT HIS BACK

SOMEBODY HAD KINCAID'S
NAME ON A BULLET...
BUT WHO?
BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL BY
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3
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WESTERN

NOVELS and Short Stories

June, 1952
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STORIES—NO
REPRINTS!

18th year of
Publication

Robert O. Eriemon
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★ ★ 3 BIG NEW BOOK-LENGTH NOVELS ★ ★

GET A WILD HORSE HUNTER!

6

by Giles A. Lutz

"He needs killing," his mother had said a hundred times of Narich, but the intensity of her loathing had only scared him as a kid, and Vince Carwin had near been able to share it, particularly with law and order more and more replacing guns.... And then this wild horse thing had come, leaving a man no choice but blood-letting or banishment....

THE HATE RIDERS

56

by Rod Patterson

The ways of violence, never changing in the New West, followed a familiar pattern. A man coveted his neighbor's gold, his cattle, his land, his wife—or he was compelled to fight to save his own. And if he was lucky he survived; or, unfavored, vanished with the smoke of his own guns....

GUN AT HIS BACK

92

by Dean Owen

In the girl's eyes, Kincaid was like most who drifted into Empire these days, men with the mark of the saddle on them, men in whom gold lust had blotted dreams of a few acres and an iron of their own. But to the others, Kincaid was stranger, dangerous enemy, boothill-bail!

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GOLD IS WHERE YOU FIND IT John Prescott 41

The gringos thought a derrotero was a map telling the location of hidden treasure. Only Isidro knew it was a devil's talisman....

HANGMILL HARVEST Robert L. Trimnell 49

Maybe Lopez would just take his stolen cattle back—or maybe he'd make the kid's pretty young wife pay for them....

COURTSHIP OF THE COLD-DECK KID....C. Appel 85

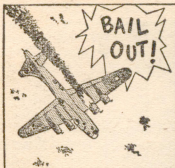
She was the one all right. Nor fists nor guns nor the law nor the power of Fate itself, could stop Gary Price now....

LAST BULLET Marvin DeVries 123

It took ten years for a man to leave his wild youth behind—but only a split instant to draw his gun....

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A prisoner of war in Germany ...



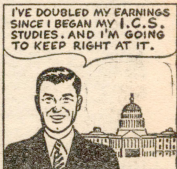
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GET A WILD HORSE



CHAPTER I

TOUGH ONE

THE TOWN was as Vince Carwin remembered it, gray and beaten under the vagaries of the

New Mexico weather. Perhaps a couple of streets extended farther into the semi-desert, but they were still unpaved and dusty. There had been some change, though, he could see two buildings, the crass newness of their rough-sawn planks standing out clear

**A MERCILESS MANBREAKER TO SIDE HIM THROUGH
SMASH ACTION, BOOK-**



HUNTER!

by

GILES A. LUTZ

THE U. S. CAVALRY LIKED THEIR HORSES FULL OF FIRE—SO CARWIN GAVE THEM A WILD-EYED CAVVY THEY'D NEVER FORGET!



"He needs killing," his mother said a hundred times of Nerich, but the intensity of her loathing had only scared him as a kid, and Vince Carwin had never been able to share it, particularly with law and order more and more replacing guns And then this wild horse thing had come, leaving a man no choice but blood-letting or banishment

HADES, WAS WHAT THE STRANGER WANTED
LENGTH FEATURE NOVEL! ★ ★ ★

and yellow against the drab grayness of the others. Ten years was a long time to be gone, almost half of his life, and the pull of childhood memories was still with him.

The sorrel danced, restless. Vince spoke sharply, then leaned over and patted its neck. It was only half broken, and a man was alert all the time or he would be dumped on the seat of his pants. It was the best advertisement Vince could have brought with him. It had fire and life, its burnished coat shone in the rays of the morning sun, and it would catch and gladden the eye of any cavalry officer. Vince hoped Captain Simas was waiting for him with a contract for a hundred more just like the sorrel.

He lifted the reins, moving the sorrel on towards the town. Thinking about the town, he shook his head. Things didn't change—only man with his restless nature tried to change them.

He rode easily, his tall, spare body giving with the motions of the horse. His smooth face was the color of a saddle left out for years in the wind and sun and rain, and his body had a hard, whip-lash quality about it. His eyes were gray, deep-set and a little withdrawn, the eyes of a man who had grown up too much alone. His clothing was dusty and worn, the boots battered and scuffed from long service.

An old black Colts .44 rode at his hip, and a rifle was in its scabbard under his knee. The guns were more for protection against wild animals than against man. In 1885 men didn't use guns to settle their troubles as they had done ten years earlier. The law and the courts were replacing the guns, and Vince wasn't too sure the change was a good one. The reasons for shooting some men were as evident as they had ever been, but the courts too many times overlooked those reasons and protected the wrong kind.

He pushed such thoughts out of his head. He had not returned to pick up an old feud. The war between the squatters and the big ranchers had

been over for several years, and he had no desire to blow on old embers. His father had been indirectly killed in that war. He could remember the night his father died, could remember it with a twelve-year-old's terrified confusion. The sound of his father's harsh, labored breathing had lasted for a long time in his mind. The memory of his mother's stricken face had lasted, too. Dry eyed, she had watched her husband die of pneumonia, the last tear having been wrung from her days before. The twelve-year old boy had thought that harsh, labored breathing would go on forever, then suddenly it stilled, and the silence of the bare little room had been worse than the other sound.

"Dobie Nerich did this," his mother had cried out. Then the dry sobbing came, fierce and racking, and with a small boy's helplessness, he could do nothing to comfort her.

There had been no proof Dobie Nerich was behind the firing of the haystacks. There was only the certain knowledge, just as the knowledge was there regarding the cut fences and the burned sheds. Knowledge without proof was no weapon for a small man. Vince's father had seen the crimson glow on the black horizon of the night and had jumped out of bed. The night had been bitterly cold, and he had gone out inadequately clothed. He had become too warm in trying to save the precious hay, and the reaction and the exposure had done the rest.

VINCE'S mother left the country after her husband's death. The hardships for a lone woman had been too great, and those and the bitterness had driven her away as surely as whips. She had died when Vince was fifteen, but in those short years, she had talked often of Dobie Nerich. "He needs killing," she had said a hundred times. The intensity of her hating had scared him as a kid, and try as he might, Vince had never been quite able to share it.

Vaguely, he remembered Nerich as a big man with a heavy beard. Dobie

Nerich was really only a name to him. Irritably, he pushed the gloomy thoughts from his mind. A man could not stir the ashes of the past without getting choked on the foul air the stirring made.

He was at the head of the main street when he shrugged the thoughts of the past away. There was still enough kid in him to want to make an entrance. He told himself Simas might be watching, that he only wanted to show off the sorrel, and grinned at his reasoning.

He raked the spurs the length of the sorrel's barrel, hearing its outraged rush of breath. The steel-like muscles bunched under him, and the horse was immediately in full stride. It had a sweet motion as it thundered down the street, its long clean legs reaching and scissoring distance behind them. Its hoofs drummed against the dusty street, the noise of them slamming back and forth from building to building.

Ahead of him, Vince saw men pulled out onto the wooden walks by the noise of the sorrel's run, and he threw back his head and howled in sheer exuberance. He slammed the sorrel into a skidding stop and swung off before the sorrel was halted. His face was alive with eagerness, for he was in his element. Vince Carwin knew and loved horses, and only when he was handling them did his inward shyness disappear. He had to fight the sorrel before he could tie it to the rack. It reared and lunged, squalling its displeasure, and Vince walked up the reins, digging in his heels for purchase with each tiny step.

When he finished the tying, he was breathing hard, and he turned to face the knot of watching men. His face went wooden under their stares, and he warily watched them. He was never quite at ease in a town, he always felt like an animal that had been caught too far away from its hole.

One of the men said, "You got a wild un, Mister. He'll break those reins."

VINCE GLANCED briefly at the sorrel. It jerked back on the reins, its eyes rolling, its wicked little pike ears alternately raising and lowering. The wooden tie-rack quivered under the savage force exerted against it. The horse was barely saddle-broke, but that was the way the cavalry wanted them. No recruit ever learned to ride on some mild, spirit-broken animal.

"Not those reins," Vince said briefly. He knew the leather he had in them. He looked around the crowd, hoping to see Simas. He wondered if Simas had forgotten the agreement in Santa Fe to meet him here.

He started to push through the knot of watching men, when he saw a blocky, sun-darkened man watching him from the fringe. The man stared at him with a puzzled frown wrinkling his forehead, as though he should know Vince but couldn't quite place him.

Vince knew him. Hoyt Morgan was one of the few pleasant memories he had of this town. Morgan was three years older than Vince, and he had been Vince's self-appointed mentor. He had kept some of the older boys off Vince, and he had let him ride his pony. Those days when he had worshipfully followed Hoyt Morgan loomed large in Vince's memory. He remembered ruefully, Morgan hadn't spared the blows when he had thought Vince hadn't been prompt enough in obeying some order. But no one else laid a hand on him.

"Hoyt," he cried and sprang forward. He was surprised to find he was a head taller. He remembered Morgan as towering above him. He guessed Morgan had stopped growing in his teens, while most of his own growing came in later years.

Morgan squinted at him. His face was round and chunky, and his eyes were as bright a bits of glass. Vince remembered those eyes as holding more warmth, then he thought their wariness could be because Morgan didn't recognize him.

"It's Vince Carwin," he said, still holding out his hand.

"I'll be dog-goned," Morgan said softly. He laughed, a low, amused sound. "You grewed up, boy." He took Vince's hand and pumped it, and those bright, hard eyes traveled over Vince, not missing a thing. He looked at the sorrel and its trappings, then back at Vince's clothing, and Vince could almost see the workings of his mind. The two things didn't add up at all.

Morgan said, "You come back looking for a job?" It was a simple question, but there was a depth behind it, a wary waiting.

Vince shook his head, still wrapped about with the warmth of old memories. "Not me. I only expect to be here a day or so. I've got a job."

Morgan studied him, and the weighing in his eyes hadn't diminished. "You didn't come back here to see any particular person?"

"Sure," Vince said and paused. He didn't miss the stiffening of Morgan's figure. "You," he said slowly. He watched that stiffening and thought it slackened a little. The meeting had gone flat, and he thought mournfully, *a man's memory plays him tricks. Nothing is ever actually as he remembers it.*

Morgan caught the change in Vince's attitude and put a note of heartiness in his voice. "I just wanted to be sure it was me. I'll buy a drink."

"You beat me to it," Vince said promptly, meeting the change in Morgan's manner.

He stood beside Morgan at the rail, expanding with the warmth of the liquor. He said, "What have you been doing all these years, Hoyt?"

MORGAN appeared prosperous enough, his clothing was good, and his boots cost seventy-five dollars if they cost a cent. Vince hadn't missed the respect with which men spoke to him. But it hadn't been warm and free, and a couple of times Vince

had the feeling it was respect without liking.

Morgan shrugged carelessly. "Working here and there. Wherever I can pick up a dollar. How about yourself?"

It hadn't been any kind of an answer, and Vince thought about it before he replied. It had been on his tongue to tell Morgan of his plans, and for some reason he held it. He couldn't say why, except that the meeting with Morgan hadn't gone as he had hoped. He turned the glass in his hand, making wet rings on the polished wood of the bar. "Wandering," he said slowly. "It isn't very profitable."

Morgan said sharply, "Your father's homestead went back a long time ago. If you had any ideas of picking it up—"

"I haven't," Vince said curtly.

The silence between them grew until it was awkward. Morgan flung a coin down upon the bar and said irritably, "Buy yourself another drink. I'll see you around."

There was anger in the way he planted his boot heels across the floor, making the rowels of his spurs jingle loudly. Vince watched him push through the doors, and his loneliness grew. The meeting had gone badly, and he wondered if it were due to his inability to talk to people any more, or because he had built something into a childhood association that had never been there.

It took him a long time to finish his drink. He stared for a moment at the coin Morgan had flung upon the bar, made a brief grimace, then walked out.

There was still a knot of men gathered outside on the walk before the sorrel. Morgan stood in back of them, leaning against a building. Vince looked at him, and Morgan's eyes were expressionless, the eyes of a man looking at a stranger. Vince felt a sense of loss, mixed with a rising anger. He held his nod and stepped quickly to the tie-rack. He would find

Simas, make the final arrangements, and get out of this town as quickly as he could. There was a big man, standing near the sorrel's head, and in his angered thoughts, Vince noticed only the bulk of him and none of the details.

He jerked the knot in the reins free, gathered them up close in his left hand, hauling the sorrel to him. The sorrel's muscles were bunched, and Vince thought furiously, *I'll break your blamed neck if you pitch now.*

THE SORREL backed a few steps, and Vince followed him. He put his left foot into the stirrup and started to swing into the saddle. He heard a loud grunt behind him and a swishing sound as though something was swept through the air. But his back was turned, and he didn't see what made the sound. The sorrel exploded under him, squalling with a mixture of fear and anger. Vince's right leg was in the air, swinging to pass over the saddle, as the animal went into action. The horse lunged toward him and pitched, and the cantle hit that right leg, knocking it back and turning Vince's body on the pivot of his left boot. He felt the boot slip, then his left leg was driven through the stirrup up to his knee. His foot slammed against the street, and shock waves flowed up the leg into his body, setting his teeth with the hurt of them. He still held the reins in his left hand, and he frantically hauled on them, trying to stop the sorrel's wild plunges.

But the horse was fury released, and Vince was off balance. It pitched again, jerking the reins from his hand, and driving that boot into the street. Vince's mouth was open with the agony of it. His hat was snapped off, and his eyes blurred. He heard a vague yelling behind him and thought he heard the sudden drum of horse's hoofs. But that could have been made by the sorrel.

He fought to stay upright, knowing if he went down, the sorrel would kick and pound him to pieces in the

street. The horse made another twisting, bucking lunge, and Vince's leg twisted under him, throwing him heavily to the street. The back of his head slammed into the ground, scattering his senses, and a black curtain moved in on him.

Through the haze of near unconsciousness, he heard a woman's scream, and the pound of hoofs sounded nearer. The sorrel was still pitching and twisting, and Vince's leg had slipped out of the stirrup. But the foot was twisted at an awkward angle and caught. His body flopped and bounced with the sorrel's bucking, and twice a rear hoof came dangerously near his head. He threw his arms across his face, helpless now to stop the sorrel's lunging, or to raise himself. His body was bounced and dragged with every movement the sorrel made, and the blackness was much nearer. He had seen men thrown and caught in such a predicament before, and a hundred feet of such punishment was usually enough to drive the life out of a man's body.

His only hope was that some of the watching men would spring forward and catch the sorrel's bridle, manhandling the animal to a trembling stop. There was blood in his mouth, and his tongue felt as though he had bitten it through. The shirt was torn from his back, and with each convulsive pitch, it felt as though steel claws raked his back and shoulders. He thought dully, no one is going to do anything, and he welcomed that sullen blackness that would take him out of this pain.

He became dimly aware the sorrel had changed directions, that instead of bolting down the street, it was heading for the buildings, that lined the street on one side. He heard the bang of its hoofs on the wooden walk, felt the edge of it bite into his back, then scrape to his waist. He heard the woman's voice again, not screaming this time, but still loud and sharp with anger. It seemed to come from the other side of the sorrel, and he couldn't

understand it. He heard the voice, imperative with its demand, call, "Grab him, someone. You, Hoyt. Grab him."

He could hold on no longer, and he let go, sliding down the long, black tunnel. It had a soothing warmth to it, it was much better than all that banging around out in the street....

CHAPTER II

AFTER I GET A STAKE—

HE CAME to, feeling someone fussing around his left knee. The street had grown suddenly soft, then he realized he was lying on a bed. He opened his eyes, and the pounding in his head made him instantly close them. A man's voice said, "Feel it, eh?"

It held a tone of professional interest, and Vince opened his eyes again. He held them open despite the hammering in his skull and looked at the little bald-headed man, fooling with his knee. He saw the black bag, sitting on the bed beside his leg and said, "What have I got, Doc?"

"Enough," the little man grunted. "A couple thousand bruises and lacerations. But nothing broken. You twisted this knee. You may be walking on it before the week is out." He gravely regarded Vince. "You know how lucky you are, don't you?"

Vince raised himself on an elbow. He felt the clamoring protests of all those bruised places, of which the Doc spoke. His clothing had been removed, and he saw raw, scraped places extending from his back to his sides. The places had been covered with some kind of a soothing salve, and only when he moved, did they cause him trouble. His face was clean, and the taste of blood and dust was gone from his mouth.

He asked wonderingly. "Where am I?"

"Marshal Goddard's house," the doctor answered. He saw the puzzled look on Vince's face and said. "Hal-

lie Goddard saved you. She was riding down the street just as that horse of yours started to pitch. She hazed it up onto the walk and into a building. Before it could turn, someone grabbed the bridle."

Vince remembered the woman's voice calling, "Grab him. You, Hoyt. Grab him." The picture of a long-legged, awkward girl with pigtailed and freckles flashed into his mind. Hallie Goddard. He had wanted to be around her often as a kid, but Morgan hadn't liked it. The worst whipping Vince had taken from Morgan had been because he carried Hallie's books home from school one day.

He said slowly, "I owe her something."

"Just your life," the doctor said dryly. "Everyone else was standing around like they were spellbound." He snapped the bag shut and said, "I'll look in later on in the day."

He walked out of the room, and Vince heard him talking to someone. He thought he heard a woman's low murmuring answer, and he had an overwhelming desire to see her. He waited until he heard the front door close, pulled the sheet up around his neck, and called, "Hello."

He heard the firm, yet light beat of her footsteps coming toward the room, and he was suddenly sweating. What did you say to a woman who had saved your life?

A tall girl came through the doorway, moving with a sweet, lithe grace. His tongue was frozen, and he could only stare at her. The pigtailed were gone. Her hair was a luxuriant, auburn mass, piled high on her head. In the light of this room, he wasn't certain of the color of her eyes, they could be either green, or a gray-green. The rough man's shirt she wore couldn't hide the youthful curves. The cheekbones were too high, too wide, the mouth too long and full for real beauty, but there was a force, an attractiveness about her that pulled a man's attention. She gravely looked at him, then smiled, and he saw he

was wrong about her not being a real beauty. His heart thudded, and his throat was dry and tight.

She asked, "How do you feel?"

"All right." He looked at her and shook his head. "I wanted to see you, when I came back, but I sure never figured it would be like this."

She colored a little under the directness of his eyes and said, "I recognized you as you started to mount."

HIS WORDS were slow and wondering, "If it hadn't have been for you— Hallie, I won't attempt to say my thanks. You even had me brought here."

She said scornfully, "Where else could you have gone? The hotel? You needed attention."

Her eyes were brilliantly hard. "Dobie Nerich hasn't forgotten anything. He wanted to see you dragged to death."

He remembered the vague bulk of the man, he had seen standing near the sorrel's head. If that had been Nerich, he hadn't recognized him.

He said, bewildered, "What did he have to do with it? The sorrel is only half broken. I should have been more—"

She shook her head, interrupting him. "I was close enough to see it all. He waited until you were in the air, then swept his hat in front of your horse's nose. Maybe he couldn't figure on it turning out the way it did, but the least he expected was to see you thrown."

A voice drawled from the doorway, "You've got to excuse Hallie. She's got an imagination."

Vince jerked his head toward the speaker. He hadn't heard Hoyt Morgan come in. By Hallie's start, he knew she hadn't, either.

Morgan leaned against the door-jamb, an odd, little smile on his lips. The smile held no warmth, it didn't lessen the probing hardness of his eyes. He said softly, "Hallie is noted for picking up all the stray dogs and cats in town."

The girl whirled on him, her voice

snapping like a whip end. "Hoyt Morgan, don't you know enough to knock?"

Morgan said lazily, "The front door was open. I didn't have to knock. You trying to hide something?"

His eyes sharpened at the increased color in her face. "You pick up another stray dog, Hallie?" he murmured.

She walked to him, and Vince noticed she was as tall as Morgan. She said, "Why were you just standing around? Why did you let someone else stop that horse? And why did your boss spook him in the first place?"

Morgan threw Vince a quick look. His eyes shifted back to Hallie's face. "Dobie never had nothing to do with that horse bucking. He just took off his hat—" His voice trailed weakly away.

"He waved it in front of the horse," Hallie said furiously. "What are you up to this time?"

"Now, Hallie," Morgan said plaintively. He looked at Vince and said, "Ain't she the tough one. Vince, you—" He broke off at the hardening expression on Vince's face and snapped, "Think what you blamed well want to." He whirled and stomped out of the house. The spur rowels made the same angry jingle they had made in the saloon.

Vince turned some things over in his mind. So Morgan worked for Dobie Nerich. Well, why not? A man worked at the best job he could find. It still didn't stop his feeling of loss, for somehow it put Morgan on the other side of the fence from him.

HALLIE was staring at him, her head half-cocked to one side. He remembered she had been determined as a girl, and he guessed she had grown into womanhood even more so. She said, "Did you come back looking for Dobie?"

He shook his head.

"But he thinks you did."

He said wearily, "He didn't even know I was coming. I saw him a couple of times as a kid. He wouldn't

recognize me. I didn't recognize him."

She said slowly, "Then Hoyt Morgan and I were the only ones in town who recognized you. Yet Dobie Nerich was waiting when you came out of the saloon."

He followed her line of reasoning. Morgan had had time to notify Dobie that Vince Carwin was in town. One ugly summary led to another, and Vince said weakly, "I didn't come back to rake over the past. That horse is only half broken. It could have happened the way Hoyt said it did."

She said exasperatedly, "I'm only trying to tell you to be careful, Vince. Dobie Nerich is—"

Before she could say anything else, the door opened, and a bent-shouldered, graying man came into the room. He looked tired and beaten until one saw his eyes. The blue in them was as clear as ever, and the sharpness hadn't been diminished by age. Vince remembered as a kid how he used to stand in awe of Ron Goddard. Some of that feeling still persisted.

Goddard's gaze was as probing as a coon's paw. He said, "You come back looking for trouble?"

Vince said slowly, "Mother always blamed Nerich for what happened. There wasn't any proof. I did not come back to pick it up again."

"There never is," Goddard muttered. For a moment, he seemed to be lost in black thought, then he said, "There'll be no fighting in my town." He asked brusquely, "What is your business here?"

The tone rasped Vince, but he held his resentment. Asking questions like that was part of Goddard's business.

He said, "I came here to meet a Captain Simas. He's contracting to buy horses for the Army."

He thought Hallie sharply sucked in her breath, and he threw her a glance. He could read nothing in her face, and he looked back at Goddard. Goddard's face was hard. "Another wild horse hunter," he said.

He made it sound like horse thief, and Vince reared up on an elbow. He

said hotly, "What's wrong with that? What's wrong—"

Goddard said harshly, "The last two groups who outfitted from here didn't come back. We found one group, laying around a dead campfire. Most of them had been shot while they were sleeping."

THE SILENCE in the room grew heavy enough for Vince to weigh it in his hands. He said, "The other group?"

"We never found 'em," Goddard said curtly.

He stared at Vince and went on, "The group we found had some horses. There were hoof marks in their holding corral. We never found the horses, either." He said abruptly, "I've told you."

Vince said stubbornly, "Where did the horses go?"

Goddard shook his head. "It's a big country. I don't know. If you're smart, you won't go after them. If you're half smart, you won't tell anybody that you are." He walked to the door and looked back from it. "I'm glad Hallie was near. You're welcome to stay as long as you like."

Vince said ruefully, after the door closed behind Goddard, "He doesn't think much of wild horse hunters." His eyes asked her what she thought.

She colored under his gaze and said, "It worries him—what happened to all those men."

There was something else on her mind, the same unvoiced suspicion there had been in Goddard's eyes. She went on slowly, "Dad will worry more now. Colin wanted to go with the last bunch of hunters. He'll be harder to hold this time."

He recalled Colin as a nuisance of a kid who was always tagging along where he wasn't wanted.

She smiled at his look and said, "He thinks he's grown up now. He's seventeen. He talks all the time about the money and fun there is in hunting wild horses."

Vince said quietly, "There's some money and some fun. Mostly, it's hard

work. I don't intend to stay in it all my life. After I get a stake—" He was suddenly aware of the way his tongue was running away with him. He was used to the lonely spots where a man conversed inwardly with himself. And now he was putting all those thoughts into words. They were new thoughts, he admitted. New from the moment she had walked into the room.

Their eyes met and locked for a long period, and she looked away first. She said unsteadily, "You call if there's anything I can do for you."

He stared at the ceiling, after she had gone. His heart was beating at a queer, unaccustomed speed. It made a man nervous and mighty glad to be alive. He looked at the door and said wonderingly, "You better go slow, boy. You'd better go mighty slow."

She came back later in the day and said, "Your Captain Simas isn't here yet."

At Vince's scowl, she said, "He'll probably be here in a few days. Someone else wants to talk to you. Could Colin come in?"

Colin Goddard was lanky and tow-headed, a man in physical stature but a kid in enthusiasm. His eyes had an intense gleam, and Vince saw a lot of Hallie in them.

He let the kid talk for quite awhile, then slowly shook his head. "I'm looking for hands, Colin," he said gently. "But they've got to have experience."

He was only six years older than this kid, but he felt as though it were a boundless gap. A kid grew up and aged fast away from the benefits of home and family.

"Experience?" Colin yelled. "I've chased wild horses. I've caught a couple."

"Were they any good?" Vince asked gently.

Colin colored. "Maybe not like that sorrel of yours," he muttered. "How did you start?" he demanded fiercely.

SOMETHING like the way Colin had started, with the love of running down a wild animal strong in-

side him—but with a great deal more urgency and necessity. If Colin missed, it didn't matter. He had a home to return to. If Vince missed, he didn't eat.

"No go, kid," Vince said. "Your dad wouldn't have it. And I'm not bucking him."

Colin swore and stormed out of the room. Vince thought, they'd better take the reins off him. He'll be going on his own anyway. He looked at Hallie and grinned, and she smiled back at him.

Despite the doctor's warning, he tried the leg the following morning. There was some swelling, and he winced as he bore his weight on it, but he could hobble around after a fashion. Hallie watched him, displeasure on her face. "You're the hard-headed kind, aren't you?" she snapped.

Vince grinned. "Maybe. But a man has to get things done."

She sniffed and went on with her sewing. He had limped into the front room, and he stood over her, looking at the voluminous folds of material in her lap. She was clever with a needle, the dress was almost finished.

At his look, she said, "Dance tomorrow night."

He thought it could have been a question, and his heart was speeding up again. He said hesitantly, "I couldn't do much dancing. But I'd sure admire to take you."

Her eyes were shining as she said simply, "I'd like that."

She told Goddard about it that evening at supper, and Goddard slammed his fork down upon the table. Colin had been pestering him all during the meal about joining up with Vince, and Hallie's statement about the dance was the key that unlocked his anger. He had been a widower for a dozen years, and Vince guessed raising Hallie and Colin had given Goddard more than his share of headaches.

"No," he roared at Colin. "And I don't want to hear anymore about it."

Colin sullenly looked down at his plate. Goddard turned on Hallie and said, "Are you trying to start trouble?"

Hallie flushed, but she tossed her head. "You know I'm not," she said angrily. "Didn't I stop as soon as you told me?"

"You should never have started," Goddard roared. He got up from the table and looked long at Vince. He said heavily, "I've got a feeling you've brought a heap of trouble to this house."

He stalked out of the room, and Hallie would not look at Vince. The rest of the meal was eaten in silence. As she cleared the dishes from the table, she said, "Don't pay any attention to him. He's always grumbling about something." Her tone was light, but it didn't cover her anger very well. She glared at Vince and said, "If you don't want to take me."

"I do," he said bewilderedly. She was already going through the door, her shoulders a stiff, straight line.

Vince looked at Colin and asked, "What's wrong with her?"

"How do I know?" Colin yelled. He glared at Vince and said, "You wouldn't back me up."

Vince shook his head after the kid had gone. The whole family was down on him, and he had hardly opened his mouth.

CHAPTER III

DOBIE NERICH

H E SAW HALLIE twice the following day, and she didn't mention the dance. He thought dismally, she's sorry about the whole thing. But she hadn't said she wouldn't go, and he went doggedly ahead. He went downtown and bought a new shirt and pair of trousers. He inquired for Simas at the hotel, and the Captain hadn't arrived. That worried him, and he pushed it to the back of his mind until after the dance.

He shined his best pair of boots and as he moved about the room, the

leg was tender. He thought, maybe a dance or two—

His breath caught in his throat as she came out of her room. The dress brought out the dancing lights in her eyes, and her shoulders were bare and softly rounded. She saw the look on his face and said with satisfaction, "I hoped you would like it."

He felt as tall as a building as he went down the street with her. People were converging on the school-house ahead of them, and he could hear the scraping of a fiddle. "I'm going to try a couple," he said excitedly.

She laughed up at him and started to reply. Her words froze before they were said. A figure had stepped out of a doorway and stood squarely in their path.

Hoyt Morgan said in an expressionless tone, "I was just coming after you, Hallie."

She said furiously, "I told you last time I wasn't going with you any more. I told you not to come around."

Morgan's eyes swept Vince's face, then went back to Hallie. "You don't seem to be too choosy," he said harshly. "It ain't ended, Hallie."

He turned and stomped away, his boot heels beating out a savage refrain on the wooden walk.

Vince looked at her and said soberly, "What are you up to, Hallie?"

She looked as though she were going to cry. "Nothing, Vince," she said earnestly. "I went with Hoyt a few times until—" In the gathering darkness, he thought she colored, and she left the rest of the sentence unsaid. "He thinks he has a right on all my time," she went on. "Dad doesn't want him coming around, either. He doesn't think Hoyt works enough for the money he has to spend." She glanced up at Vince, and her lips were trembling. "If you don't want to go—"

He said softly, "You trying to run out on me?"

She took his arm, and he grinned at the pressure of her fingers. Hoyt Morgan as a kid and Hoyt Morgan

now were two different things. Vince could feel no reason why the brief ties of the past should bind him now.

He danced the first dance with her, and he was stiff-legged and a little awkward. When it finished, he said, "You find yourself another partner. I'll just look on."

She said, "I'd rather sit with you." The music started again, and he saw the responsive sparkle in her eyes. He grinned and said, "You tell a nice lie. I'll get a pleasure out of watching you."

He sat on a bench along the wall, watching her dancing with another man. He felt no jealousy, only a building pride. There had been something in the way her eyes had warmed after he had refused her offer to sit with him, that told him he had been wise, that he had built strongly for the future.

He saw Morgan stop her as she came across the floor, saw her shake her head, and knew she had refused Morgan a dance. She walked on toward Vince, and Morgan turned his head, staring long and hard at him.

She spent her time between dances with Vince, and he never enjoyed an evening more. Even Morgan's glowering scrutiny didn't bother him. During one of the dances, he saw a big man come in and talk with Morgan. Several times he saw them glance in his direction, and a slow anger started. The man Morgan talked to, was huge, with long arms and big, powerful-looking hands. His face was heavily bearded, and little, intense eyes peered out above the beard. Dobie Nerich, Vince thought slowly. The name came to him suddenly like the instinctive uneasiness and dislike a man feels when a rattlesnake is near. He stared steadily at the big man. He was wrong about the past being dead. He was glad when the two turned and left the room.

IT WAS NEAR the end of a dance that a man touched him on the shoulder and said, "Goddard is out-

side. He wants to talk to you."

Vince thought it odd Goddard should send for him in such a manner, then he remembered Goddard's displeasure of the night before and sighed. Goddard did not want to jump him before all these people. He said, "All right," and followed the man outside.

The man said, "He's over here." He led the way across the street, and Vince limped after him.

Morgan stepped out of the shadows, and Vince saw Dobie Nerich behind him. There was a stiffness in Morgan's figure that warned Vince and tightened his muscles.

He said mildly, "I'm looking for Goddard, Hoyt."

Morgan's voice was thick with anger. "You're getting out of town. You're leaving tonight." The lashing fist pushed the words forward. Vince had been expecting it. He had recognized the setup the moment Morgan had stepped out of the shadows. His left forearm caught and knocked aside the blow, and foolishly, he still tried to stop this thing.

"Wait a minute, Hoyt," he protested. "There's no need of—"

The second blow came too fast, or he couldn't move quickly enough to avoid it. The fist crashed into his mouth, chopping the rest of his sentence into shreds. His head rocked back, pulling his body with it, and he heard Morgan's sullen, furious swearing. His head was filled with ringing noises, his eyes swam, and his mouth was filled with the taste of blood. He wiped a hand across his mouth, smearing the blood from cut lips, and said coldly, "You want it this way, Hoyt."

He slipped away before the infuriated rush, driving a fist hard into Hoyt's belly as the man passed him. He pulled an explosive grunt out of him, and his anger fed on the satisfaction of having hurt Morgan.

Morgan was a heavier, blockier man, and Vince couldn't move as fast as he wished because of the stiff leg.

He gave ground, buying time with it, time that slowed some of Morgan's furious rushes. His fists cut and slashed sapping away some of that enraged strength.

MORGAN stopped and panted, "Stand still, damn you." His face was a pale blur in the semi-darkness, and Vince heard the rasp of his breathing. A man could recklessly burn up his strength and speed in a few furious minutes, or he could spread it out to cover the situation. Vince decided Morgan had saved but little. He pushed off the good leg, getting leverage behind the blow. He sledged Morgan full on the mouth, and Morgan spit curses and blood. Vince didn't give him time to recover. He rained in blows, and each one that landed was like the bite of an ax against a log, chipping away an additional shred of strength. He was hit, but Morgan's fists lacked the terrific kick they had had at the start. Twice, Morgan clawed at him, instead of hitting, and Vince's shirt front went with the last raking grab. Morgan's nails tore through the material, plowing furrows in the skin beneath.

Morgan sobbed for breath, and his wary arms kept sagging on him. He stumbled under a punishing blow in the belly, and Vince thought he was going down. He saw the bloody, wrecked face, saw Morgan's reeling efforts to stay on his feet, and said, "Hoyt, this is no good. This doesn't settle—"

He was seized from behind and jerked around, and the surprise choked off the rest of his words. He struggled in the grip of Dobie and the other man, and in the heat of the fight with Morgan, he had forgotten all about them. Dobie had a grip on his right arm, hammer-locking the hand up towards Vince's shoulder-blades. His chin was pressed against Vince's neck, and Vince felt the harsh scrape of his beard. He threw his body about in a threshing arc, and the struggle

threatened to pull the arm out at the socket.

The two men forced him back against a building, and Dobie said, "Here he is, Hoyt."

Morgan's breathing was jerky and labored. He weaved in front of Vince, briefly studying him. Vince saw the mouth, blood-smeared and thinned to a cruel line, saw the eyes wild with their hate. He tried to jerk his head from the path of the fist, and it slammed into his cheekbone. The agony threatened to tear off the top of his head, and Morgan's enraged face faded into a foggy blur. He took three more punches in rapid succession, each of them slamming his head back into the wall. He lashed out with his boots, whipping his body around, trying to throw off the men holding him, and each time Morgan waited until they had him upright again. Then that savage fist would land, jolting an additional bit of Vince's senses away. The injured leg sent dull waves of pain flowing through his body, and the roar in his head was magnifying into proportions he couldn't stand. There was a great sullen cloud of blackness hovering at the rim of his consciousness, and he prayed for it to move in and blot out this senseless torture.

Vaguely, he heard a voice, and it seemed to come from a thousand miles away. He heard it again, and this time it seemed stronger. "That'll be enough of that," the voice yelled. "I said hold it."

THE HANDS holding Vince dropped away, and he staggered and almost went down. He backed a step and leaned against the wall, head hanging on his chest, trying desperately to hold onto his fading senses.

Morgan said, "Stay out of this, kid."

"You try to put me out," the voice said, then went into a string of savage curse words, describing Morgan, Dobie, and the other man.

Vince lifted his head. The pounding in it had lessened until it was only hammering at the base of his skull. He saw Morgan glaring at Colin, saw Dobie and the other man warily watching the kid. Colin held a pistol in his hand, and his face worked with anger. He said, "A fair fight's all right. But what you were doing—" His face twisted, and Vince thought he would pull the trigger. Morgan thought so, too, for his face grew alarmed, and he fell back a step. "Now wait a minute—" he started.

Vince said huskily, "Thanks, kid." He took a forward step, forcing the protesting leg to bear his weight. He took another one, pivoting on it, and slammed Morgan in the side of the face. His hurt and anger were behind the blow, and it had a terrible force. It knocked Morgan across the walk and into the street, and his face went out from under him. Vince heard people running to the scene. His legs wobbled and threatened to buckle under him, but he started doggedly toward Morgan. Morgan pawed feebly at the dusty street, trying to get up. Vince wanted him to get up, he wanted to knock him down as many times as the man was able to get to his feet.

Before he could reach him, a hand seized his arm, half pulling him around. His fist was cocked, he was ready to let it ride, thinking that one of Morgan's men was back in this thing. He saw Hallie, her face all twisted, and for a moment, he thought it was anger, directed at him.

"Vince," she said brokenly. "What happened?"

The fire went out of Vince, and he was only tired and hurting. "He sent a man in saying your father wanted to see me. Then he started it."

Colin said excitedly, "After Vince whipped him, those two grabbed him. Morgan was knocking his head off when I came up." His tone had a

conscious swell of pride. "I stopped him, didn't I, Vince?"

"You stopped him," Vince said soberly. "I'd have been in bad shape if you hadn't." He was in bad shape now, but he didn't want her to know it. He saw the sparkle of tears in her eyes, heard a low-throated growl from the watching men, and even in his weariness, he knew the growl was not directed at him.

Morgan was getting to his feet. His eyes were still a little vacant, and his face was slack. Hallie whirled from Vince and stood in front of Morgan. Her voice was low and vibrant with anger, but it carried clearly to the watching people. "You filthy animal," she said passionately. "Don't you ever dare to speak to me again." Her hand rose, and the slap against Morgan's cheek sounded as clear and distinct as a pistol shot. He rocked back under it, then settled, his face tightening, his eyes clearing. It was an ugly face that looked at her. The face turned slowly toward Colin, then to Vince. The eyes were maniacal with hating, and Vince felt cold fingers of uneasiness ripple down his back. She had called him down before all these people, and Morgan would never forget or forgive her that. He turned and pushed through the ring of watching people, and Dobie and the other one followed him.

Hallie took Vince's arm and said, "I want to fix your face."

Vince tried to grin, then held it. His face felt as though it could stand a lot of fixing.

Her fingers were deft and sure as she cleansed and bandaged the worst of the cuts. He was stiff and sore all over, and he thought gloomily, if Simas doesn't come soon, I'll be wrecked for good.

SHE MISINTERPRETED his thoughts and said, "Dobie didn't set Morgan on you tonight. That was his own doing. He was crazy because—" She broke off as though she suddenly realized what she had been

going to say and colored. "I'm sorry, Vince," she said in a small voice. "But he had no reason to think—"

He grinned despite the pain of his battered face. "Sure," he said softly.

She looked at him squarely, and it was a warm, rich moment. Goddard broke it up, when he came into the kitchen. He scowled at Vince and said, "You keep pushing it along, don't you?"

Hallie hotly turned on him, and Goddard said wearily, "I know, I know. I asked all about it. Morgan got what was coming to him. But there's too many people being pulled into this. Morgan isn't a forgiving man. Now, you're in it—and Colin." He paced the floor and said, "Colin pulled a gun on Morgan and Dobie. Do you think Morgan can easily forget that? Particularly when it got him an additional beating and your slap. Colin thinks he's a man now. The young fool is strutting around. Morgan will wait and back him against a wall, then—" His words died away, and Vince could see the worry deep in the man.

He said, "Maybe it would be best to get him out of town for awhile. Maybe if I took him with me—"

For an instant, he thought Goddard was going to explode. Hallie said warningly, "Dad," and Goddard choked.

The silence lasted a long while, then Goddard said in a grumbling voice, "After I've repeatedly told him he couldn't?"

Vince relaxed. He knew it was won. It was the only sane answer. They would be gone long enough for Morgan to cool down, and it would keep a brash, young kid from further affronting the man.

Colin came into the room, and Goddard said, "I'm sending you away with Vince. You'll take orders from him. You understand?"

Vince grinned as Colin's yell of exultation shook the house.

CHAPTER IV

HORSE SIGN

HE SLEPT late the following morning and managed to stop his groan as he got out of bed. The sharp pain of his hurts was gone, but the stiffness was worse. He dressed and limped out into the kitchen. Hallie smiled at him, but he saw the concern in her eyes and shook his head at it.

Colin sat in a corner, his face sulky. Hallie jerked her head at him and said, "He's mad because Dad says he can't go out unless you or Dad is along." Her face brightened, as she went on, "Dad talked to Captain Simas this morning. He just got into town. He told him you were here."

She turned her head at the knock on the door. "Maybe that's him now."

She went to the door and came back with a short, square man with a rough-hewn face. Simas' bearing and manner were all Army, but Vince liked him. He had liked him when he had first seen him in Santa Fe.

Simas looked at Vince's face and whistled. "You been trying to catch a few wild horses with your face?" he asked softly.

Vince painfully grinned. "It looks like it, doesn't it?"

"Goddard showed me the sorrel," Simas said. "I heard he dumped you. Maybe one of my troopers can handle him."

Hallie said indignantly, "You or none of your soldiers could ride—" She broke off at Vince's laugh and colored.

Simas threw her an admiring glance, then looked back at Vince. "If you can furnish me horses like the sorrel, I'm authorized to buy a hundred of them at a hundred dollars apiece. They don't have to be any better broken than the sorrel. We can take them from that point, but soldiers aren't much good at rounding up the wild ones."

Vince took a deep breath. A hundred horses at a hundred dollars a head—that was ten thousand dollars. Added to what he had, a man could buy the ranch he was looking for, a ranch that would suit anyone. He was staring at Hallie, as the thoughts tumbled through his mind.

Simas said with dry humor, "It's hard to talk business with so many distracting influences around. Did you hear anything I said?" He grinned as Hallie's face flamed a bright red and she fled out of the room.

Vince said, "I heard it. You'll get your hundred horses."

Simas said, "Good. I'll be back through here in a month or so. Hold the horses for me."

A sudden thought struck Vince and he asked slowly, "Would you buy horses from anybody?"

Simas' eyes sharpened. "If they met specifications. I came to you because I heard you could get me the kind I wanted. But I'd buy from anyone."

"Did you ever buy horses around here before?"

Simas shook his head. His eyes were sharp with unasked questions. "I'm not the only officer buying horses, and this isn't the only point we buy them." He waited a moment, then saw Vince intended asking no more questions. He nodded, shook hands, and left the house.

Vince watched him go down the walk from the front window. He hadn't learned anything about what had happened to those other horse hunters. It wouldn't be that simple or easy. His eyes narrowed as he saw a man, across the street, step out from the shadow of the building wall. The man threw a final searching gaze at Goddard's house, then went down the street with elaborate carelessness. He went in the opposite direction from which Simas had taken, but Vince knew he had been intrested in the Army captain. He stepped out on the porch and watched the man out of

sight. He had never seen him before.

He told Goddard about it, when the marshal came in. He described the man as best as he could, and Goddard shook his head. "I don't know him. But Simas coming here pointed your business out to whoever's interested. You couldn't have kept it hidden much longer anyway. When you start hiring and outfitting, it'll come out." He said gloomily, "I'm in a bind. Morgan's nasty drunk this morning. If Colin stays around town, Morgan will jump him. If he goes with you, I don't know what will happen." His eyes were piercing sharp. "Watch every step you make. Here's a list of men I'll personally vouch for. Hire any or all of them."

IT TOOK Vince three days to make all his arrangements. He hired eight men, paying sixty dollars a month, when forty was considered good wages. He promised them a bonus if the drive was successful, and he was satisfied as to their loyalty. He bought a wagon and stocked it with provisions, and he was ready to leave in the morning. He would head for the great plateau area called Alta Mesa. He had been across it twice, and he knew there was good grazing and water there. The Alta Mesa was a favorite range of wild horses. It was picture country, rich in color and game. It was the kind of country he loved, with its brooding, solitary grandeur. Ordinarily, he would have been content to live in it for months at a time, but a girl with a pair of steady gray eyes had changed that. Now, he was impatient to finish the drive and get back.

They made quite a cavalcade riding out of town, ten riders, their spare horses, and the wagon loaded with provisions and duffel. Vince stood up in the stirrups and turned, throwing Hallie a last wave. She and Goddard stood in their front-yard, at the outskirts of town, and the memory of her answering wave stayed in Vince's

mind for a long time. Goddard's last words had been, "Watch Colin, Vince," and Vince had nodded sober agreement. He grinned now at Colin, riding at the head of the line. The kid's excitement had made the last couple of days drag for him.

He thought, Colin wouldn't think as much of wild horse hunting when this was over. It was hard, sweaty work, and a man was in the saddle every minute of the daylight hours. It would either knock it out of his head or set it there forever. There was an exhilarating sense of freedom in this kind of life. If a man liked excitement and loneliness, then he was cut out for it. Perhaps Goddard had sensed that in the kid and had been afraid of it.

Vince's thoughts shifted to Morgan and Dobie Nerich. He had half expected trouble the last few days, and it hadn't come. Morgan had been in town, Vince had seen him twice, and there had been no recognition in Morgan's face. But they were safely out of town now, and Vince could relax a little. He thought irritably, Colin's safety was a responsibility; it was making him edgy.

He saw Colin drop back and ride with Jose Mendoza. Mendoza had been strongly recommended by Goddard as a man who knew every inch of the wild horse country. He was Mexican with a strong strain of Indian blood. He would come in handy not only in the actual catching of the horses, but in talking to the Indians. The Alta Mesa country reached into Arizona Territory, and Vince knew they would probably encounter scattered bands of the Navajos.

He remembered his first wild horse hunt and grinned in sympathy at Colin. The kid was pumping an old head, garnering and storing away every shred of information he could.

They saw horse sign the second day. There were hoof prints around a water hole and many droppings. All eyes were sweeping the country now, eager for the first sight of wild horses. Vince

stared for a long time at a dark butte, rising to his right. For an instant, he thought he had seen a flash of light, such as the sun might make striking a pair of glasses. Even though he did not see it again, he was not satisfied. He looked at the others, and there was no unusual wariness in their faces. He was the only one who imagined he had seen that flash, and he pushed it to the back of his mind.

They saw their first band just before dark, a small group consisting of a stallion, a dozen mares, and four or five yearlings. Colin wanted to break down into the little valley after them, but Mendoza muttered, "It is not worth while."

VINCE saw the disappointment spread over the kid's face and said, "It would take as much time and work to round them up as it would five times that number. From here, it looks as though there's only three or four we would want, anyway."

Vince hoped to find a band of horses large enough so that in one drive he could select the number of animals he wanted. Mendoza said there were reports of such a band, but this was another day's ride farther. Such bands were rare, Vince knew. Most wild horse bands consisted of twenty-five to thirty animals. Wild stallions were fiercely jealous of the mares with them, and they savagely resented the approach of another stallion. But now and then several such bands threw in together, as though by common consent.

While they watched, the stallion threw up its head and tested the breeze. It stood in uneasy immobility for a long moment, then it whinnied shrilly and whirled. Its hoofs drummed into the earth, and the sound carried faintly to Vince and his group. Then the stallion was in full flight, followed by the mares. Vince watched them race away, tails and manes streaming. They had smelled an alien, easy instinct had warned them. Vince

looked from face to face, seeing the same, intense absorption there that told of the inner excitement filling the men.

They made camp that night and ate the evening meal. Jackson had shot four young jackrabbits which made the dumpling stew. Vince finished his cup of coffee with a long pull and leaned back contentedly. He looked at Colin across the campfire, and the kid's face was glowing, as he talked to Mendoza.

The blackness settled down, and the solitude of the little group seemed complete. The breeze stirred the sand with a faint, slithering sound and far on the top of some distant butte, a coyote yapped disconsolately. It was a setting designed to soothe a man, to bring peace to him, and in the midst of it, Vince thought of that flash of light. He thought irritably, if someone is watching you, they won't move now; they won't move until after your round-up. They'll let you do all the work for them.

The remuda was picketed, and after debating with himself, he decided against a guard. He dug out a hollow for his hips, rolled up in his blankets, and rested his head on his saddle. He should have been asleep the moment his head touched that saddle, but he wasn't. He kept turning and tossing, trying to find a more comfortable position. It was as though he were waiting for something to happen, and he swore angrily at himself. It was a little early to be borrowing trouble.

The campfire embers winked out, and the dark masses of the sleeping men blended into the greater mass of the earth. Vince finally dropped off into uneasy sleep. He didn't know how long he slept, but the night had the feeling of being late. The air was thin and cold, and the stars seemed paler. He looked across to where Colin slept, and he saw no softly blurred mound there. He stared hard, trying to be sure he wasn't imagining things, then swore deep in his throat, and

crawled out of his blankets. He walked around the dead campfire and stared at the empty bed. For a moment, panic assailed him, and he forced himself to think calmly. Excitement had awakened the kid, he had gotten up and was somewhere near the camp.

Vince walked to the picket-line, and the horses snorted and stamped at his approach. He spoke softly, quieting them and went down to where Mendoza was sleeping. He touched Mendoza, and Mendoza awakened like an Indian, instantly and completely. Vince squatted down beside him and asked, "What were you and Colin talking about last night before you went to sleep?"

Mendoza told him in his mixed English-Spanish dialect. They had talked of wild horses, and Mendoza had told Colin of the Caballo Padre, the biggest stallion. His watering place was not more than a dozen miles away, and he led more than a hundred mares. The Caballo Padre was very wild, and it took a clever hunter to even find him. Mendoza finished with, "I tell him all this."

Vince's swearing rumbled in his throat. Colin had been wild with enthusiasm. Vince could guess what had happened. Colin had ridden in the direction of the stallion, wanting to be the first one to spot him. Even if the kid found them, he could spook the entire band and make them much more difficult to handle.

"Could we find him?" Vince asked. The uneasiness was stirring in him. He had promised Hallie and Goddard to keep an eye on the kid.

Mendoza shrugged. "Amigo, it is a big country. And it is dark now."

Vince accepted the summary. They could do nothing but wait for light, then if Colin hadn't returned, they might be able to track him.

Mendoza stiffened in a listening attitude. "I hear horses," he muttered.

Vince listened and could hear nothing. Mendoza had said horses. It

could be Colin returning and driving horses ahead of him. Vince dismissed the idea. A lone rider could not herd wild horses ahead of him in the dark.

THE STILLNESS of the night was suddenly shattered by the whipping crash of a rifle. Vince snapped to his feet at the sound, running toward his blankets. All around him, he heard the startled yells and swearing of awakening men. He snatched up his rifle and whirled in the direction from which he had heard the rifle report. He heard the drumming sound of receding hoofs, then silence.

He moved up beside Mendoza and waited in a stiff, rigid poise for a long while. Behind him, he heard men asking questions, but he did not turn his head.

"It is not an attack," Mendoza muttered finally. "That shot was to call our attention, then they run away. Two horses I heard out there."

The first sullen false light of dawn was in the skies before Vince moved. He left half of the men to guard the camp and took the remainder with him. If it had been a ruse to draw him away, he did not want the camp unprotected.

They made a little crescent, moving through the steady light. Vince did not know what he expected to find, but his heart was thudding, and his senses were painfully alert. It was hard to contain the fear inside him. He wished Colin had been in camp.

A hundred yards separated him from Mendoza, when he heard the man call. He turned his head and saw Mendoza beckon him over. Then Mendoza squatted down, and what he seen was hidden from Vince by sage-brush.

He moved toward him, then stopped with cold shock. A body was stretched out at Mendoza's feet. He did not have to see the face to know who it was. The vague dread inside him since Colin's departure crystallized, giving him the ugly answer. He stood beside Mendoza, staring down

at the sightless eyes. There was surprise and pain stamped on Colin's lifeless features. Mendoza partially rolled the head over, and Vince saw the ugly wound in the back of the head.

Mendoza shrugged and said, "Maybe he knew a tiny instant before. No more than that."

Vince's throat was tight and dry, and his heart ached. He had not known this kid very long, but he had grown to like him. Because the youngster stopped a dirty beating, he had gotten this. Vince thought of Hallie and Goddard, and the pain inside him was as sharp as a knife slash.

Mendoza said, "He was killed a long way from here. Then they bring him back and dump him."

Vince saw the clotted blood on the head. The wound had quit bleeding some time ago. He had not imagined that flash of light; they had been under someone's baleful eye, and if he had spoken about it, he might have stopped this. In the midst of his self berating, a sane thought crept in. If not now, some other time. In a country this big, a determined man would find his opportunity.

Mendoza had heard about the fight in town. He glanced at Vince and said, "Maybe you next, Amigo."

"Maybe not," Vince said harshly.

CHAPTER V

NO PROOF

THEY CARRIED Colin back to camp, and Vince saw the cold rage in the men's eyes as they looked at the body. He heard the muttered swearing which is the only outlet when other satisfaction is denied, and he had to talk hard to keep them from riding out and trying to find the kid's murderer. As Mendoza had said, it was a big country, too big to search with nothing definite to go on.

He checked that first wild impulse

toward reckless action and said dully, "We've got to take him back."

"Si," Mendoza said quietly. "Senor Goddard will want to know of this. The rest can wait here for us."

Vince nodded. He hadn't planned on anyone making the ride back to town with him, he would be grateful for Mendoza's company. A man and his thoughts would not be pleasant companions on such a trip.

They tied Colin across a horse, and Vince swung up into his saddle. He looked down at the hard, watching faces and said an unnecessary warning, "Watch yourselves." He moved the horse forward and heard Mendoza and the pack animal fall in behind him.

He made the pace as fast as the pack horse could stand it. They pushed hard all day, and it was still well after midnight when they arrived in town. Vince left Mendoza with Colin's body, while he walked slowly to Goddard's house. He knocked hesitantly on the door, then getting no response, rapped harder. He heard light footsteps coming toward the door and thought in agony, not Hallie. Don't let it be her coming to the door.

It was Hallie. She cautiously opened the door a crack, then seeing who it was, threw it wide, and the light behind her showed her face tight with anxiety. Vince had no doubt that Morgan had killed Colin, and he had a sudden insight into the tortured channels of Morgan's mind. Even if the opportunity had presented itself, Morgan would not have killed both Vince and Colin at the same time. He would leave one or the other of them to carry the news back to her, and the remaining one would suffer more because of her suffering.

He said, "Hallie, I've got to see Ron."

She clutched his arm, and he could feel her trembling in her fingers. "What's happened, Vince? Is it Colin?"

She read the confirmation in his

face, for her own face went white and stricken. She whispered, "No," as though there were no greater sound in her, then she covered her face with her hands, and he saw the sobs shaking her shoulders. The sobbing was soundless and the more terrible for the lack of it.

He seized her shoulders and said desperately, "Hallie, Hallie."

He heard heavy footsteps crossing the floor, then Goddard's voice still thick with sleep demanded, "What is it?"

Goddard saw the sobs shaking Hallie, he saw Vince's face bleak with despair. He said in a lifeless voice, "Colin."

IT WAS hard to find the words with which to tell them, and there was no easy words. "He rode away without telling any of us. We hardly knew he was gone until they—they brought him back."

For a terrible instant, Goddard's eyes blazed at Vince, and Vince saw the accusation there. "Maybe," he said dully, agreeing to that accusation.

The blaze died in Goddard's eyes. His voice was dead as he said, "No one could have stopped it. If it hadn't happened out there, it would have happened here."

His face was harsh-cut as he went on, "You didn't see anyone?"

Vince shook his head.

"No proof," Goddard muttered. "We only know, and we can't prove it. A coroner's verdict will say he was killed by a person or persons unknown." He was talking to himself, thinking like a lawman.

Vince said savagely, "Do you think that will stop me?"

Hallie looked at him, her eyes tear swollen. "Kill him, Vince," she cried in near hysteria.

Goddard said in that peculiar dead voice, "We'll leave her at her aunt's." He looked at Vince, and for an instant, his face was a twisted mask. "Did you think I was stopping because I have no proof?"

Vince held Hallie a long moment before he left her with her aunt. He said, "We'll be back as soon as we can." She clung to him, and in that clinging was the expression of her need for him to return.

"He won't be there," Goddard said, as he swung up into his saddle.

They made a silent, grim ride to Dobie Nerich's ranch. Repeated halloos finally awakened a grumpy cook. The man limped out of the little room attached to the kitchen. He was surely until he found out who it was, then his surliness vanished to be replaced by some secret, inner amusement.

"None of them are here," he said. "Dobie took them all to buy some cattle. If the price was right, they're gonna drive them back."

The mockery in the man's tone set Vince's teeth on edge. He took a step forward, and Goddard grabbed him and pulled him away. He didn't say anything until they had mounted. "He doesn't know anything," Goddard said wearily. "He has a general idea of where Dobie is and what he's after, but that's all."

VINCE PUT questioning eyes on him, and Goddard said fiercely, "He's out there somewhere around you. I've thought Dobie had a hand in the disappearance of those other horse hunters. But it was out of my jurisdiction. It isn't now," he said viciously. "By God, it isn't now."

Vince remembered what Mendoza had said, when Vince had proposed looking for Colin. "It's a big country," he said dully. "They'll be hard to find."

"They'll come to us," Goddard said harshly. "After you've collected your horses, they'll come to us."

Vince's eyes gleamed. If Goddard's suspicions about Nerich were right, then he had the only solution. They could waste weeks in trying to find Morgan or any of the rest of them. But when the horses were ready to deliver, Dobie and Morgan would make their appearance.

He stared hard at Goddard. Goddard had said, "Us." Goddard was going back with him, and he didn't know of anyone he would rather have.

The funeral was a bad thing. Vince led Hallie away from the bare, sun-baked little plot, and if he thought he loved this girl before, he knew it now. Her eyes were red and swollen, her face devoid of any color as she clung to him. That fierce spark of independence was missing as she whispered, "Vince, be careful. I couldn't stand it, if—"

His arms tightened about her. He said flatly, "We know now what we're up against. I'll be back, Hallie." He bent his head and kissed her, and the responsiveness of her lips was a sweet, yet fiery thing.

Goddard said impatiently from his horse, "Come on."

Vince walked toward him, defiance on his face. He saw no particular objection in Goddard's eyes, only an impatience. Mendoza was grinning broadly at him.

Goddard grumbled, "I knew a long time before you did. When a woman nurses a man through a sickness or hurt, it's usually fatal—for the man." He allowed himself a bleak ghost of a grin, then his face hardened with the black, inner thoughts.

Vince looked back and lifted his hand. He hated to leave her this way.

Goddard said, "She'll be all right. I've asked some of the boys to look after her. No one will get close to her." He set a hard pace, forging ahead. His talking was over.

Vince had a minor rebellion on his hands when he told his men of Goddard's proposal. Goddard roared at them, stopping the muttering. "Where would you look?" he yelled. "If I could go to them, do you think I would be sitting here? We've got to make them come to us. And horses are the only thing that will pull them."

Vince saw heads sullenly bob a slow agreement. They were accepting Goddard's words; they weren't happy with them.

THEY SPENT four days hunting and saw one small band. Mendoza kept muttering, "The big herd. It should be here. But sometimes they are frightened and move." His face brightened. "In the next valley lives one of my countrymen, Roque Ceron. He runs the sheep there. He will know if Caballo Padre is around."

Vince said wearily, "We might as well camp there for the night."

Ceron's home was an adobe house in a fertile, watered spot, making a green oasis in the surrounding brownness. No one was in sight as the riders approached. Mendoza rode on Vince's left, frowning at the quietness. "They should be here," he said, as though talking to himself. "It is not shearing time."

Vince stared at the house. The quietness wasn't normal. Lonesome, isolated families, such as this one, welcomed visitors. There should have been barking dogs, children dancing up and down, women peering cautiously from windows or doorways, and the men of the family coming forward, lifting their hand in salute.

They were two hundred yards from the house, when the nasty, wheeing crack of a rifle sounded. Vince heard Goddard cry out, saw him reel in the saddle, and grab desperately for the horn. He kicked his horse sideways to Goddard's animal, crying out, "Hang on. Hang on."

He grabbed Goddard's reins and whirled the animal, spurring hard away from there. He caught distorted glimpses of the rest of his men, racing frantically away in a scattering fan, bending low over their mounts' necks.

He halted out of rifle range and helped Goddard out of the saddle. Goddard's face was gray and screwed tight with pain. Vince's hand came away covered with blood. He thought of Hallie, and he wanted to yell with his fear. Not Goddard, too. Not coming immediately upon the heels of Colin's death.

Goddard said through clenched teeth, "It isn't inside. But it burns like hell."

Vince removed the coat and shirt. Goddard was bleeding profusely, the clothing was covered with blood. Vince mopped blood away before he could see the wound. Goddard was right, the slug had not entered the body cavity, and the relief threatened to unhinge Vince's knees. The bullet had plowed along a rib, digging a nasty, painful furrow. It wasn't serious, but it would cause Goddard painful inconvenience.

"Fan out," Vince snapped at the men gathering around him. "Surround the house." He saw them move slowly forward on foot, rifles ready. His eyes blazed with fierce satisfaction. They had stumbled onto Dobie Nerich and the rest sooner than expected. He scowled puzzledly at the now quiet house. If those men were inside, then where were their horses? The small shed to the right could contain only a few head.

Mendoza had stayed behind, and he watched as Vince hastily bandaged Goddard's wound. He shook his head and said, "Things are not right." He started forward, waving his hat, and shouting in Spanish.

Vince yelled at him, and if Mendoza heard, he did not turn his head. Mendoza passed the farthest of Vince's men. He was in the clear now, and each step made a better target of him. Vince said with angry worry, "The fool will get his head blown off." A quick and ugly suspicion crossed his mind. Perhaps Mendoza knew the men in that adobe hut, perhaps he was leaving Vince and joining them.

Goddard was sitting up, his eyes squinted as he keenly watched. He shook his head at Vince, not saying anything.

When Mendoza was fifty yards away from the house, Vince saw a man leave it and approach Mendoza. They held a long and earnest conference, and the sights of Vince's rifle never left the two.

Mendoza turned and signaled vigorously, and even at this distance Vince could see the grave concern on the man's face. There was no mistaking what Mendoza wanted; he wanted Vince and the others to come on in.

Vince looked uncertainly at Goddard. Goddard said, "You won't find the ones you expected there. They've had trouble at that house. Go on," he said softly. "We'll cover you."

Vince moved slowly forward, gripping his rifle. As exposed as he was, all the readiness in the world wouldn't stop a slug. His skin was tight with painful anticipation of a rifle bullet.

CHAPTER VI

"MANY MEN COME"

AS HE NEARED, he saw the man, talking to Mendoza, was Mexican, too. The man's browned, leathery face was heavy with worry, but the eyes were two fierce coals.

Mendoza spoke rapidly, half in Spanish, half in his broken English, and Vince had trouble following him. "They think we are enemies, too," Mendoza said. "They have had bad trouble here. While Roque and his esposa were away this afternoon, many men ride up here. One of them attacked Roque's daughter. This they find when they return. I think I see a woman duck from a window. Women should not be shooting at us."

Ceron bobbed his head, the angry words flowing from his lips so rapidly Vince could not catch them. But there was no mistaking his deep distress, and fury raged inside Vince. He turned and lifted his rifle high, waving his men on in. He saw Goddard limping slowly along behind them.

They made a ring around Ceron, and he spoke more slowly. Vince heard the enraged murmur grow as they understood him. "Many men come, Senores. My daughter she do not

know how many. My wife and I were many miles away with sheep."

Goddard asked harshly, "Americans, you mean?"

Ceron bobbed his head. "Si. My daughter she say yes. They had beards and much whisky. We thought you were those men returning. We tried to kill you."

Vince heard the swearing from his men, low and distressed and angry. He said hesitantly, "Is—is your daughter—all right—?"

"My wife is attending her, Senor. She is a capable woman."

Goddard asked in a low, fierce voice, "Would it be possible to talk to her?"

Ceron looked at the badge pinned to Goddard's bloody shirt, and his eyes brightened. "You are a posse, no? After those men? I think it best you talk to her."

Goddard jerked his head at Vince, and Vince followed him inside the house. The girl couldn't have been over seventeen. She lay in bed, her mother hovering protectively over her. The fierceness in the mother's eyes softened when Ceron told her who Vince and Goddard were.

Fear and shock still gripped the girl, and it was difficult for her to fashion her words. Goddard spoke softly to her, and the gentleness in that granite faced man was something to see. But he had a daughter not much older than this girl, and Vince knew he was thinking of that daughter.

"How many were there, Miss Ceron?" he asked gently.

"I do not know how many remained outside," she said slowly. "Twelve. Maybe more. Two of them came to the door, the big one with whiskers and the much shorter one." Sobs were very close to the surface, and she choked them back.

"Did they say anything?" Goddard prodded gently. "Did they call any names?"

She thought at length on that. "I was much scared—it is hard to remember. The big one had much

whisky. I could smell it. He pushed his way inside and grabbed me." Her face suddenly lightened "A name. Yes, the shorter one called him a name. He said, Robie, don't be a damn fool."

Goddard's eyes glowed like wind-fanned embers. He leaned forward, his voice tight as he asked, "Could the short one have called him Dobie?"

THE GIRL drew an anguished hand across her face. "Maybe, maybe," she cried. "The big man held me and glared at the other one. The shorter man said no more but went outside—" The sobbing choked off the remainder of her words.

Goddard softly touched her shoulder. "We will kill the big man," he said simply.

The girl's face was hidden, buried in her mother's arms, as Vince and Goddard left the room. Outside the house, Goddard said in a hard voice, "Dobie Nerich. Drunk and bored waiting for you to collect your horses. And he happens along here."

Vince's jerky breathing carried a hurt. He kept thinking of Hallie, and for the first time he knew the feeling of wanting to kill a man. He said huskily, "The shorter one was probably Morgan. He didn't make much effort to stop him." It wasn't much to remember in Morgan's favor—the weak protest, the girl had repeated.

Goddard said dryly, "Morgan works for him." He looked at the rest of the men, waiting for them, and frowned. "Now we'll have trouble in keeping them from going hell-bent after Dobie."

Vince glared at him. There would be no horse hunting until Dobie Nerich was stamped into the ground. How could any man think of anything else now?

Goddard said patiently, "We could spend weeks and never find him. It's still the only way to bring him to us." His tone lashed at Vince. "I want him and Morgan as bad as the rest of you do."

Goddard argued for a long time with the men, and the stubbornness didn't leave their faces. Ceron stood off to one side, puzzledly watching the argument, and Goddard called him over. He asked, "Where do we look for this big man?" and Vince knew Goddard realized he had lost the argument.

Ceron shrugged, the hopelessness big on his face. "If I knew, Senor, would I be here?"

Goddard's eyes swept the watching men. Ceron knew the country, and if he didn't know where to look, how would they? Goddard looked back at Ceron and explained about the horses, that he thought Dobie Nerich and the others were only waiting until they were collected. A glow started in Ceron's eyes. "Si, si. It would bring them to us. It is the only way. Last week, Amigos, I saw el Caballo Padre. In a little valley not too far from here."

Goddard stared at Vince, and Vince reluctantly nodded. If Ceron thought Goddard's plan was best, Vince couldn't set himself against it. But it went against the grain to calmly go about normal business, with this other thing eating at a man's mind.

He asked Ceron, "Shouldn't we leave someone here to guard your wife and daughter?"

Ceron shook his head, and his tone was bitter. "A man does not return after this, Amigo. Besides, my wife will be watching. It was she who shot Senor Goddard."

Vince looked back as they rode away. The little adobe house looked lonely and unprotected. He saw Ceron look back, then stare straight ahead, his face set in hard, bitter lines.

THE FOLLOWING afternoon, they spotted the herd from the brow of an overhanging cliff. The herd was three or four miles to the south and appeared as mere dots grazing slowly over the valley floor. Vince felt the hard excitement pounding within him. He had never seen so

many horses gathered into a single band. Those profuse dots would number better than two hundred head. He looked around at the shining faces, the eyes gleaming with the same excitement he felt. Their thoughts and actions would be occupied now.

The stallion had picked his range well. The flat valley contained abundant grass, and three streams cut through it. The valley, beneath Vince, narrowed into a canyon, which ran for several hundred yards, then ended against the steep face of the cliff. It would make a natural corral, and the open entrance could be closed by a few men on guard or perhaps by stretching ropes. Vince judged the valley to be almost a circular basin, perhaps six miles in diameter. If they could drive the band at top speed around the basin, until they reached the canyon mouth, they would have tired horses to handle with most of the fight taken out of them. It would take break-neck riding and a constant change of fresh mounts, and Vince accordingly mapped his campaign.

It was too late that afternoon to start the run, and after the evening meal was over, Vince drew a diagram of his plans in the sand. Goddard and Jackson were to be the supply men, handling the fresh horses. Jackson grumbled about it, he would have preferred to have been in the chase. Goddard nodded. That wound of his would stand no hard riding. Vince designated points in his sand map at where he wanted fresh mounts.

"We'll run them until they're ready to drop," he said. "You two pick up the winded horses, get them water, and a chance to eat some, and keep replacing them."

The terrain would be helpful to his plans. The wild herd would race around the valley, cut off from escape in most places by the steepness of the surrounding cliffs. Vince and his riders would run the herd around the basin as though it were a great race track. At any time, the riders could cut across the circle or cut an arc on

the herd and not waste time and effort in the actual running the wild horses would have to do.

They made their start before dawn the following day, carefully working their way around and behind where they had last seen the horses. Men kept dropping out to take their places, ready to dash out when the herd swept by, to run at it, and keep it moving at top speed with fresh horses. Before it was fully light, Vince and Haversill were well behind the herd. Ahead of them, they heard uneasy snorts and the scrape of hoofs on rocks. Vague, blurred shadows began to take on definite outline and stand out as individual horses.

Then the light swelled over the eastern rim, and Vince saw the black stallion, the Caballo Padre, a few hundred yards ahead of him. It stood with legs braced in uneasy steadiness, its head held high, little spike ears pointed forward, its nostrils testing the morning breeze. Vince kept that easy forward pace toward him. The stallion snorted, reared, and pawed the air. All around him, mares had stopped grazing, their heads lifted, as they waited in uneasy wariness for the stallion's decision.

The stallion's whinny rang out sharp and clear like a trumpet. Then he whirled, his fore hoofs slashing into the soil. The wind whipped back his mane and tail, and he was in full stride, streaming down the valley.

VINCE swept his hat in wide arcs and yelled with sheer exultation. Better than two hundred horses were galloping madly before him and Haversill, and they spurred after them. They slowly turned the herd in the first arc of the great circle, and other riders spurred out and took up the chase as Vince's and Haversill's horses grew winded.

There was no respite for those wild horses and none for the riders chasing them. The wind whipped a man's face as he rode behind them, it plastered his shirt tight against his body and

filled him with a wild exhilaration. Vince scrambled through the shallow streams, climbed the gentle raises of the valley floor, then thundered down on the other side. When a horse began to labor, he swung out of the saddle, running toward a fresh mount. It was grab the horn and swing up, and they were off again. A man took a beating in a chase like that, but he would not know how tired and trembling his muscles were until the drive was over.

They ran the herd all through the morning and well into the afternoon. The swung them, then, towards the canyon at the end of the valley. There was no fight, no run left in the wild horses. The great, reaching strides were only a shambling shuffle now, and even the stallion could not find more than a slow gallop. A few had broken through the ring of riders, and Vince let them go. The great mass of the herd was threading into the mouth of the canyon.

Vince pulled to one side and watched them. They had pressed close together in mutual fear and exhaustion. The stallion still trotted out ahead of them, but like the others, his head hung low, and his coat was lathery with sweat. They were in the last stages of exhaustion, and there would be no trouble in corraling them.

Vince saw two men dart out from protective brush and close the gap behind the herd with ropes. He was stiff with fatigue as he climbed down from the saddle. But they had done it, in one huge drive they had corralled more than enough horses to fill the contract. Other riders drifted in, and Vince saw their stiff, wooden-like motions that spoke of utter weariness. Goddard came over and looked at the herd, packed into the small canyon. The flame was in his eyes, too. No man could look on that many horses without feeling a swelling in his heart and a tightening in his throat.

Goddard said, "We've got them this far," and the grim note in his voice brought Vince sharply back to reality. All during the chase he had not

thought of Dobie Nerich or Morgan, or of any of the other men, who might be watching them with covetous eyes. He asked worriedly, "Have you seen any sign?"

Goddard shook his head. "Nothing. But I feel like there's something crawling up my back."

VINCE stared at the distant hills. That same feeling was with him. He said broodingly, "They'll probably wait until we do the rest of the hard work. They'll wait until we've broken them and gotten them ready to bring in."

He sent Goddard, Ceron, and Mendoza to higher ground, to wait there with ready rifles, watching all approaches to the valley. He did not think an attack would come during the day, but from now on, every moment had to be guarded. He shook out his rope and headed toward the corral. He cut quietly through the wild herd, and the horses were too tired to do more than draw a few feet away from him. He drew near the black stallion and built his loop. It slipped through the air with a soft, whispering sigh and dropped over the sweat stained neck.

There was one last explosive bit of strength left in the stallion. Its eyes rolled wildly, and it reared, slashing out wickedly with its fore hoofs. Its shrill, angry neighing cut through the air, and for an instant, the herd panicked, running wildly in all directions, then bunching together again as the canyon walls stopped them. Vince's horse threw its weight against the stallion, pulling the front hoofs back to the ground. It kept the rope taut, draining the last fading resistance from the stallion. It stood there trembling, and slowly its head drooped.

Vince worked up the rope, keeping up a soothing, gentle monotone. He reached out and touched the horse, its muscles quivered under his fingers, and that was all.

Two men came up with shorter ropes, swapped ropes with Vince, and

led the stallion away to hobble it. Other riders were working through the herd now, cutting out and roping the best of the animals. The scrubs were hazed toward the rope barrier at the mouth of the canyon and released, and they found energy enough for one last frenzied dash away from the terrifying place. When an animal was roped and subdued, a man hobbled and led it away, to put it with the growing bunch that Vince considered cavalry caliber. It was the beginning of the animal's education, and the first topping would follow shortly after.

CHAPTER VII

SOME MEN NEED KILLING

THEY QUIT work when it was too dark to longer see. The last few hours' work was only a sample of what would follow. Each horse had to be roped, tamed a little, saddled and bridled for the first time in his life, then broke. When it was over, each horse would have been ridden once or twice. They would by no means be gentle horses, but any rider with a little skill and nerve could ride them. The cavalry liked their horses full of fire, and Vince grinned wearily as he thought, they were going to get a big handful of just that.

He picked four men as guards on the first shift to midnight. He cursed the necessity, for these were tired men. He laid out a beat for each one, and they patrolled it slowly, for men as weary as they were could go to sleep standing on their feet.

He came back to the dying fire and rolled a last cigarette before turning in. Goddard squatted before the fire. He looked at Vince and said softly, "Ceron's gone."

He saw the flash of alarm wash across Vince's face and said, "He wouldn't be content to just sit and wait. There's too much Indian blood in him. Maybe it's a good thing to have him out scouting around. Maybe he will be able to spot which direction it will come from." He was silent for

a long moment, then said harshly, "I hope he finds them. There won't be any room for mistakes."

Vince rolled up his blankets, and the worry kept sleep away. He worried about how many men Dobie Nerich had with him and where he was. Would an attack come soon, or would it wait until the hard, sweaty work of breaking the horses was over? What direction would it come from and what time? He rolled over, grunting angrily. A thousand questions like those could drive a man crazy.

He knew nothing else until Goddard was shaking him awake. He sat up and shivered as the cold night air bit at him. "Time to walk a little," Goddard said gruffly.

Vince knew how he felt. And yawned. He got sleepily to his feet, went and relieved Jackson, and Jackson said, "I'm dead."

Vince knew how he felt. And Jackson would feel no better in the morning. Four hours sleep wasn't enough for tired muscles that screamed out for more.

Mendoza had one of the beats, and Vince briefly spoke to him about Ceron. He saw the gleam of Mendoza's teeth in the night. "Si, I knew," Mendoza said softly. "He is a good man for us to have out there. He can see more than any of us walking here."

Vince nodded and turned. He could hear the scrape of hoofs below him as a tired horse moved, he heard a dry cough coming from a sleeping man. His hands gripped the rifle, and he tried to flag his dull senses into alertness. Methodically and slowly, he moved through the dark night, so many steps one way, so many another.

The roping, tying, taming and breaking went on for ten days. There were minor sprains and bruises, for in that many broncs a man was bound to find one that could send him flying. Ceron came in twice during that time. The hot fire was still in his eyes, though there was a weariness in the

way he moved. Vince said, "You see anything?"

Ceron vaguely shook his head. "I have the feeling of men being around, but I have not seen them. The feeling tells me they are here, they are only waiting." He looked at Vince, the smoldering plain in those dark eyes. "You keep breaking the horses. They will let you do much work for them."

Vince grunted. Ceron believed as Goddard did. Belief didn't make the waiting any easier.

TWO MORE days would see the job completed. They had a hundred and fifteen horses they had kept from the herd. Vince had culled them carefully, and he did not think Simas would reject any of them. It would be quite a task hazing them back to town. But tying the lead mares to some of the tame stock and holding the black stallion between two tame horses, they should be able to do it.

He would be glad when it was over. Men's tempers were getting ragged, and they spoke irritably to each other or not at all. The short hours of sleep and the incessant toil was beginning to demand its price.

He slapped savagely at the hand shaking him awake. He was to go on guard at midnight, and he knew it couldn't be that time yet. Goddard's voice said in his ear, "Ceron just came in. Vince, you hear me?"

The sleep fog faded from Vince's mind. He sat up and said, "What is it, Ron?"

"He'll tell you," Goddard grunted.

Ceron was drinking a cup of coffee. He took a time with his swallowing, and Vince impatiently waited.

"Yesterday," Ceron said, "I found horse droppings."

Vince snapped, "The country's full of horses." Did Ceron think that was news? All the horses they had turned loose were somewhere around.

Ceron's grin had a wolf quality to it. "Amigo," he said softly. "This horse had been eating grain."

Vince sucked in his breath. "Ah,"

Ceron said. "Now you see it. Mexicans and Indians do not feed grain to their horses. And we have none."

"Go on," Vince said curtly.

"I followed the trail of that horse," Ceron said. "I rode right into a white man's camp. The leader of those white men was a big one, a big man with many whiskers." The hatred in Ceron's eyes was a fanatical gleam.

"Dobie Nerich," Vince breathed.

"Si," Ceron said softly. "I convinced them I was just a poor Indian on my way home." His teeth bared in a mirthless grin. "They did not know me. I was not there when they came to my home. At first, some of them wanted to shoot me. I begged very hard. I told them the other men, the horse hunters wanted to shoot me, too. I say the horse hunters are drunk, celebrating their big, good fortune. Everywhere is much whisky, and the hunters would rather shoot an Indian than give him a drink."

A SLOW gleam started in Vince's eyes. Ceron's clothing was nondescript range wear. He wore moccasins, and with his dark skin and black eyes, he looked as much Indian as he did Mexican. It wasn't hard to think that Dobie would take him for some wandering Indian. Vince said softly, "How many men, Roque?"

"Sixteen. Before I left, the big man made me draw in the sand everything about the camp." With a short stick, he drew a heavy line in the sand. His tone was soft and deadly. "Amigo, he likes this arroyo leading down into the valley."

Vince turned his head and stared at the arroyo. If he wanted to hit an unsuspecting camp in this valley, it was the approach he would take. Dobie would have numerical superiority, but the surprise would be on a different side than he expected it.

Goddard said quietly, "They're coming to us, Vince." There was a heavy, chill quality in his voice, and Vince knew this was the moment the man had been living for.

Vince moved out and alerted the horse guard, telling them what was ahead. By the time he came back, Goddard and Ceron had awakened the other men, and they huddled in the chilly night. There would be no fire, no warming cup of coffee. The hills above might be ringed with hostile eyes right now.

Goddard went to the wagon and came back with his arms filled with jugs, molasses jugs. Some of them were empty, some filled, and from just a little distance, they looked just like the kind of jugs used for whisky.

"We need some dummies," he said. His face was hard and cold. He wanted to pull Dobie Nerich and his men all the way in.

They gathered dry grass and stuffed it into spare trousers and shirts, then laid hats on the upper end of the grotesque figures. They sprawled the dummies over the area, as though they were sleeping off a big spree. Some lay partially in bed-rolls, a few lolled against trees, hats pulled low, looking as though their chins were on their chests. Others were tumbled on the ground as though they hadn't quite been able to make it to their bed-rolls.

And the "liquor" jugs were placed conspicuously near the sleeping figures. A man didn't have to get too far away to feel the illusion of a tremendous celebration after a successful hunt. Vince had seen camps that looked exactly like this one did. When Dobie Nerich looked down upon this one, Vince hoped the open invitation of big gains at no cost would draw him unsuspectingly all the way.

They walked to the arroyo they thought Dobie would use. There was no exhilaration inside Vince, only a heavy, cold numbness. They had set another trap, but this time it was for man, and the thought pounded at a man's mind with harsh hammer strokes.

Goddard said softly, "It never sets well. But some men need killing. Worse than any animal. That bunch

out there hope to murder ten sleeping men."

They picked their positions on higher ground, about half-way down the wash. They scrambled up the sides, finding cover behind rock and brush. Goddard lifted his voice and called to all of them, "Don't shoot until I do. I look for them right after dawn."

Vince crouched between two boulders. Dawn was still a long way off, but already his eyes were beginning to ache with the strain of trying to see through the darkness. The ache in his fingers spread through his hands, until he realized how hard he was gripping his rifle. He forced himself to relax, this waiting could kill a man.

THE BLACKNESS thinned to an early, sullen gray, and a bush, twenty feet away, that he couldn't see before, came into vague view. He could see Goddard's blurred form, lying behind a rock to his right, and as the light strengthened, he could pick out other forms on the other side of the arroyo. The sullen gray gave way to a lesser shade, then the rising sun poured tints of pink and gold into the morning. Across the arroyo, a man stirred restlessly, dislodging a small pebble. It rolled down to the arroyo floor, and its clatter seemed unnecessarily loud and harsh. Vince hissed sharply, and the deadly quiet was unbroken again.

Vince thought he heard the soft sighing of the wind and looked around. But there was no wind, not a blade of grass or leaf was stirring. He looked at Goddard, and Goddard was making the soft, sighing sound and jerking his head toward the high promontory that over-looked the entire valley. Vince stared in the direction, and his eyes could pick out nothing unusual. Then movement pin-pointed it for him. He saw a tiny blob move back from the skyline. It had been the faintest kind of movement, gone so quickly he wasn't positive he had seen it. But that tiny blotch against the

light could have been a man's head, a man's head cautiously raised over the crest and surveying the camp below. He looked at Goddard and saw confirmation in his face. Goddard's words carried to him as the faintest of whispers. "They'll be coming now."

The waiting was on them again, the waiting that stretched a man's nerves until he wanted to howl under the strain of it. Half of the force was on one side of the arroyo, half on the other, scattered out for a distance of a hundred yards. Dobie Nerich and his men would ride into a deadly cross-fire—if they came. The worry ate at Vince as he lay there. Perhaps the camp screen didn't look real to the scout. Perhaps Dobie would pass up this morning and hit them at some unsuspected spot, as they took the horses to town. It was big country, lending itself to countless numbers of ambushes. And if surprise were taken away from Vince, those extra men of Dobie's would count heavily.

Goddard's face was gray and haggard under the waiting, and Vince wondered if the same thoughts were running through his mind. He stiffened as he heard a sharp, clear click, the click such as a horse's hoof makes striking a stone.

The sound of his breathing seemed painfully loud as he waited. Then he heard another click, then a series of them. The first horseman came into view at the mouth of the arroyo. He was a big man with a beard that covered most of his face. He rode with easy, sure grace and held a ready rifle across the pommel of the saddle. Vince's eyes blazed as he stared at him. Goddard's suspicions were justified, Dobie Nerich was here, and the ready rifle was proof of his intentions.

Other horsemen followed Dobie down the arroyo in a close, compact line. Vince slowly counted them. Ceron had been accurate—there were sixteen of them. All of them had rifles ready.

They came down the arroyo at an

easy walk, the hoofs of the horses clicking sharply against the stones. They were close enough now that Vince could hear the creak of saddle leather and the snorting of horses. He saw the grins of satisfaction on the faces of Dobie's men and knew what was going through their minds. Better than ten thousand dollars of horses waited for them—and drunken men would put up little or no defense.

Morgan kicked his horse forward and rode with Dobie. Vince saw him say something to Dobie, then throw back his head and laugh. That was the man who had murdered a seventeen-year old kid because the kid had hurt his pride. Vince glanced at Goddard, expecting to see the rifle butt snugged against his shoulder. But Goddard was waiting, waiting until Dobie and the others were squarely in the middle of the trap.

They came on down the wash, and the valley was spreading out before them. Another hundred yards, and the camp-site would be in unobscured view, close enough for them to perhaps detect the falseness of the scene.

The rifle was against Goddard's shoulder now, but instead of shooting, he yelled, "That's far enough, Dobie. Drop those guns."

Horses were so sharply reined up that they reared and wheeled. Vince saw the shock of utter astonishment wash across the faces of the men below him. He heard their quick and savage cursing, and he knew the surprise was complete.

CHAPTER VIII

THE MAN BEHIND THE BOULDER

MORGAN was the first to recover. He lifted his rifle and fired, and the bullet gouged at the boulder at Goddard's left, then wheeled off into space.

Goddard's answering shot came as

quickly the shots almost sounded as one. Morgan's horse went down, and Vince couldn't tell whether Morgan had been hit or not. Shooting downhill made for difficult accuracy, the bullet could have been too low, striking the horse instead of Morgan.

Rifles barked from both sides of the arroyo, and the rolling reverberations of their reports hammered against the ears. Horses reared and neighed in shrill fright, and the scene on the arroyo floor was a confused, shifting melee of struggling horses and men. Vince caught Dobie Nerich in his sight, pulled the trigger, and the horse was jerked from beneath the man. He cursed as he levered in another shell. He had shot too low, he had killed Dobie's horse instead of the man. He shifted his sights, trying to pick up Dobie again, and Dobie was protected by a constantly shifting screen of horses and men.

The wash rocked with the roars of the rifles. Some of the fire was returned by the trapped force below, but in the main it was wild and disorganized, the fearful, instinctive action of men who had no other course. Vince heard yelling, high with its note of fear and swearing with the same note in it. A rider threw up his arms and suddenly came all loose in the saddle. The horse seemed to run out from under the man, and the body hung in the air for a long moment. Then slowly, it fell, bouncing along the arroyo floor in a queer lifeless manner. Vince's sights settled on a ducking, spurring rider, and with the rifle's crack, the man was knocked out of the saddle.

Slugs whined overhead, and he thought he heard Goddard grunt. He turned his head, and if Goddard had been hit, it wasn't bad, for the muzzle of his rifle was swinging around, hunting a new target. A slug bit into the ground ahead of Vince, kicking sand and grit into his face. He swore as he wiped at the stinging particles. His eyes cleared, and he heard an agonized

yelp from the other bank of the wash, saw a man lift and stand against the incline of the slope, his arms extended as though he were desperately trying to grab for support.

Then the arms dropped, and the man broke at the middle. He fell slowly at first, then as the slope seized him, faster and faster, rolling and tumbling all the way to the bottom. From this distance, Vince couldn't tell which one of his men had been killed.

A HALF dozen riderless horses galloped madly about below, and Vince saw another rider topple out of the saddle and sprawl heavily on the rocky ground. The body jumped twice under the vengeful fire poured into it from the slopes above.

He fired again and knocked a man out of the saddle. The man went down in a tumbling heap, but jumped to his feet and ran limpingly to the protection of a great boulder. Vince's slugs kicked up gravel around the man's feet, but he didn't stop him. He heard the sharp crack of several rifles, and the man flung out from behind the boulder. He had been covered from Vince's fire but exposed to the fire from the other slope. Vince didn't fire again. There was a queer brokenness to that shambling stride that told him the man was going down for good. He was already seeking another target as the man fell.

A half dozen prone figures were scattered about the arroyo floor, and Vince saw two riders spurring madly out of the wash. Rifle slugs searched for them, but the last Vince saw of the riders, they were still in the saddle, and he doubted that either of them had been hit. It made two less, for they were running, their only intention to get as far away as possible.

Dobie was on foot somewhere down there, and Vince hadn't seen Morgan since the first moment. He saw the evil winking eyes of rifle flame, and he heard another of his men cry out in pain. Some of the return fire was effective.

Two riderless horses tried to climb the steep embankment, pawing frantically at the slippery incline, scrambling up a few feet, then sliding back again. One of them turned and went up the canyon, galloping wildly, stirrups drumming against its sides. The other tried to go downhill, and its bridle reins snagged in the brush. Vince saw it rear and lunge against the restraint, but the reins held, and the horse stood in trembling fear.

Vince thought he saw movement from a jumble of rocks near the horse and shifted himself for a better view. A bullet whanged into his protective rock, splintering chips and driving one of them into his cheek. The sting and shock of it filled his eyes with water, and he shook his head, trying to clear his vision. When he could see again, he saw a man running with a twisting, darting motion. He knew that massive, bulky figure. Dobie Nerich was making a break for it, running toward the horse caught in the brush. Vince fired twice. He saw the sand pock in front of Dobie, but the man's stride didn't falter.

One of Dobie's men, seeing Dobie making a break for a horse, sprang to his feet and rushed in the opposite direction. The diversion helped Dobie, swinging some of the rifles on the heights above from him to the other running man. A half dozen bullets punctured the man, dropping him in his tracks. But Dobie had succeeded in freeing the reins, and he was in the saddle, spurring downhill. He could dash by the horse herd held at the mouth of the canyon and on out into freedom through the valley.

Curses choked in Vince's throat, as he saw Dobie getting away. He forgot about the hidden marksman as he jumped to his feet. He ran downhill in long, springing bounds. Dobie had reached the brush at the end of the arroyo, and while rifles still spat at him, the screen of brush made for poor shooting.

Other of Vince's men had the same thought—to stop Dobie Nerich. He

could see them springing into view all over the slopes of the arroyo and racing madly downhill. A bullet slammed into Vince's foot, and for a moment, he thought the entire foot had been shot away. He went down hard, the sand particles gouging at his face. The shock and numbing impact were still in the foot, but there was no sharp, stinging agony, no flood of pain through the leg as there would have been had the bullet hit flesh. He looked and saw that the slug had cleanly taken off the heel of his right boot, throwing him to the ground. That came from the marksman he had forgotten about.

He yelled, "Look out. He's over there."

IT WAS doubtful anyone heard him, or realized what was happening until Jackson went down. Jackson's stride broke, he hit the ground and slithered a half dozen feet. That focused attention on the marksman. Vince saw his men stop and fire at the cover surrounding the marksman, driving him deeper into it. But in the meanwhile, Dobie was getting farther away.

Vince pushed to his feet and ran on with a limping, bucketing stride. His breathing was a gush of liquid fire, and he sobbed as he ran. He would never catch up with Dobie on foot, but doggedly he kept on.

A riderless horse burst out of the tangle of brush ahead of him. It had raced down the arroyo, then unreasoning in its panic, it had whirled and galloped back. Vince made a sprawling leap at the dangling reins, caught them, and was almost jerked off his feet. He dropped his rifle and couldn't recover it. He managed to haul the horse to a stop and walked up the reins. He got a hand on the horn, and as the horse twisted away from him, sprang into the saddle.

He turned the animal and spurred down the arroyo. Back of him, rifles were still spitting, but the reports were sporadic instead of continuous. The

yells grew fainter as he put distance behind.

Luck had picked him a good horse. He knew it had speed before the first hundred yards had been covered. He burst out into the valley floor, and he saw the fleeing man not too far ahead of him. He settled down to hard riding, spurring and quirting the horse, and in the next ten minutes he materially cut down the gap. He regretted the loss of his rifle; it left him at a disadvantage with only a hand-gun against Dobie's rifle. Dobie Nerich was worrying. Every so often, he turned his head, watching that narrowing gap.

It took a fast horse a considerable time to cut down even a small lead. Vince wasted no shots in trying to pick off Dobie. At the distance and from the back of a galloping horse, a hit would be sheer luck. Twice he thought Dobie was going to fire at him from the way the man swivelled around in the saddle and raised the rifle. But each time he turned back and urged the horse on. He seemed to be veering to the left, and there was no escape that way, for the cliffs rose sheer ahead of him. Vince was less than three hundred yards behind him, when he saw Dobie's intentions. Dobie was steering toward a slight elevation, covered with boulders and rocks. Even as Vince realized what was in Dobie's mind, the man jerked the horse to a skidding halt and leaped out of the saddle before the horse was fully stopped. He fought for his balance a half dozen stumbling strides, then he was running strongly for the breastworks of rocks. He reached them, and Vince saw him throw himself behind them.

VINCE WAS tempted to throw himself from his horse and seek cover, too. Thinking frantically, he decided that would do him no good. It would mean a long stalk, considering he could even get close enough to Dobie to effectively use his pistol. His best chance was to keep closing in,

gambling on the fact that a man on a running horse made a difficult target.

He heard the snarling crack of the rifle and saw the spurt of muzzle flame. The bullet hit in front of his horse, throwing up a smaller geyser of sand and grit. Vince leaned forward until his head touched the horse's mane. The sheer foolhardiness of his charge must have unnerved Dobie. Vince heard two more shots, but he wasn't hit. He heard Dobie's wild yell and guessed what the man was going through. There was something about facing the oncoming rush of a horse that would dismay any man. He was less than a hundred yards away when Dobie's bullet struck him. It went through the fleshy part of his leg and into the horse's back. If he had been walking or standing, the shock of it would have knocked him down, but mounted he felt only the quick and piercing sting, followed by the fingers of pain that flashed up his legs.

The horse had been hit much harder. Vince felt the faltering run through it. It stumbled, almost going to its knees, and Vince leaped out of the saddle. The leg buckled under him, and he went down hard. The horse's legs folded under it, and it dropped to the ground, threshing sideways as it did so. It made a bulwark between Vince and Dobie, and its fall saved Vince's life. He heard the bark of the rifle again, heard the savage thwack as the bullet struck the horse. The horse threw up its head, its death scream echoed with piercing intensity through the valley, then it was still.

Vince lay there, not daring to move. His hand hurt with the intensity of his grip on his pistol. Dobie was on higher ground, and Vince didn't know how well the body of the horse covered him. There was no chance to crawl to better protection, all he could do was to lay here and wait.

The waiting seemed an eternity, and his ears were painfully attuned to catch any sound. He thought he heard a noise, such as the scrape of a boot

against the ground might make. Cautiously, he raised his head. He could sense the wary footsteps as vibrations through the ground, rather than hear them. The waiting had finally gotten to Dobie, and he had to see if Vince was dead.

Vince could plainly hear the footsteps now, and he drew in a deep breath. He lifted himself, looking over the withers of the dead horse, and Dobie wasn't a dozen feet away from him. He carried the rifle ready, but a rifle muzzle doesn't swing up as quickly as a pistol. Vince saw the shocked surprise twist his face, saw the mouth slacking under it. He fired at the face, and Dobie's head jerked back under the impact of the bullet. For an instant, a horrible red grin seemed painted on Dobie's face, then his head fell forward on his chest as though his neck no longer had the strength to support it. The rifle fell from his hands, and Dobie pitched forward.

THE RELEASE of tension left Vince weak. He sagged back against the dead horse and remained there for a long time. Then wearily he put the gun away and looked at the hole in his leg. It was still bleeding a little, and the flesh around the wound was purple and ugly. He tore off a shirt sleeve and stuffed it into the hole. With the rest of the sleeve, he bound the wound tight. He pushed to his feet and gingerly took a few steps. The leg would support him though protesting every movement. He looked around for Dobie's horse. He saw it far up the valley, head lowered, grazing. Its fright had been run out, but Vince still knew that catching it was beyond his capabilities. He had to walk back to camp, and he didn't know if the leg would stand it.

He started out, and every few dozen steps he had to stop and rest the leg. He heard the sound of hoofs before he saw the animal or rider, and for a wild moment the fear coursed through him that it was one of Dobie's men making

his escape good through the valley. He crouched down, and as the horse and rider came into view, his breath left him in an explosive grunt of relief. The rider was Ceron, and he saw Vince the moment he straightened. He waved his hat in wild, happy sweeps and galloped toward him. He sprang down and put an arm around Vince's shoulders. "Amigo, you are not hurt bad? We were afraid when you did not come back."

Vince shook his head. "It's through the leg. Walking's a little tough." He said slowly, "The big man with many whiskers is dead."

For an instant, Ceron's face was raw and violent, then it calmed. He said simply, "I am sorry it was not me who killed him. Still, it is good." He looked long at Vince, and there was gratitude in his eyes.

Vince asked, "The others? How about them?"

Ceron's eyes were sad. "Jackson is dead. Gillmore, too, was killed. Goddard was hit in the shoulder. The man behind the boulder shot very well. We captured him and three others."

Vince remembered the hidden marksman, the deadly accuracy of his fire. He thought he knew who the man was, and he felt an odd heaviness about his heart.

"They are waiting for us," Ceron said. He helped Vince into the saddle and bounded up behind him.

They didn't speak all the way back to camp, each man trying to pick a path through his thoughts, and each coming up against an impassable barrier. They knew what had to be done, and the knowing made it none the less pleasant.

THE FOUR men were sitting on the ground, their wooden faces staring impassively at their feet. Goddard and the others surrounded them. Vince saw the bloody bandage at Goddard's left shoulder, saw the pain lines etched sharp and deep in his eyes. He looked

at Vince, and the relief flashed in his eyes.

Morgan looked up, and that impassiveness broke into a twisted grin. He was shot in three places, and some indomitable courage held the man together. He stared at Vince, taking in the bloody bandage on his leg, and his voice had a heavy undercurrent of scorn, as he said. "So Dobie couldn't run all the way."

Goddard jerked his head at him, and Morgan laboriously climbed to his feet. He followed Goddard and Vince a few paces away, and Goddard said harshly, "You're horse-thieves and murderers, Morgan. You killed Colin. And there was a girl—"

Morgan said softly, "That was Dobie's part. Not mine. I shouldn't have listened to Dobie. I could have killed Vince a half a dozen times. But Dobie said the hunt would fall apart, if Vince was gone. He said to wait, then I could kill him." An ugly, short curse broke past his lips, then his face was controlled again.

Vince saw what had driven Morgan all these years. A deep and endless pride, that could not admit besting in anything. He remembered how Morgan had dominated other kids; and he knew that pride was as relentless as a whip. Hallie and Vince and Colin had affronted that pride, and in the queer, twisted warps of Morgan's mind, there was only one answer.

Goddard said, "You killed other horse hunters. You know what's coming. We're not taking you in. Any jury would find—"

Morgan's lips twisted in that mocking grin. "Don't go into a long speech, Goddard. We know what to expect." He hesitated, then said, "I kinda hate to go out that way. I wish some of you could have shot a little straighter." For an instant, his eyes were naked and pleading, and Vince couldn't look at the appeal in them.

Goddard said with the heavy wear-

iness of a man who was tired in both mind and body, "We'd better be getting on with it."

They went about the details quickly, fighting them with the savage urgency of getting a nasty job done. Four horses were brought up and held under a tree. Hands were tied behind backs, and ropes were knotted about the necks of the four men, the other ends tied to stout tree limbs.

One of the prisoners broke, a strangled sob shaking his body, and Morgan snarled at him. Then the silence was there again. The last ugly step was to be taken, men wanted to get this over with, and still they faltered before that step.

Vince slowly drew his pistol. Childhood memories flooded through his mind, memories that would not be barred. Morgan had asked for one last thing, simple to him and so very difficult for the man on the other end.

Goddard yelled, "Giddap," and four quirts lashed across the rumps of startled horses. Vince never got a chance to shoot. He heard the heavy blast of the six-gun and saw Morgan topple out of the saddle. In that tiny space between where living stopped and dying started, he saw the gratitude on Morgan's face. Then his body dangled grotesquely along with the others.

Goddard lowered the smoking pistol and muttered, "He used to play around the house as a kid. He used to—" He turned and walked away, a beaten quality to his movements.

All of them left the scene, left with a slow, studied indifference that fooled no one, the indifference covering an insane desire to break into a mad run.

Vince limped after them. They would break camp today and start the long trip back to town. His face brightened. Hallie was waiting for him. There were better days ahead for all of them.

GOLD IS WHERE YOU

FIND IT

by JOHN PRESCOTT

Brother Rosalio:

YOU ARE wondering, perhaps, why it is I do not come to the mountains with Hernandez and the sheep this spring. It is simply that I have an enormous experience, in the course of which I become a very rich man. It may also interest you to know that I come quite close to becoming a defunto as well, and it is only the kind and watchful Madre who intervenes to save my life, and permits me to tell this tale.

I will relate to you how it occurs.

You will remember how our father—honor to his bones—seeks always to impress upon us the scorning of foolish and wasteful projects in the seeking of our fortunes. You will recall how he used to say that those who are born to the soil should seek their living from it, and not pretend to the station of a rico, which can never be attained but through dishonesty, perhaps, and pain.

Especially has he wariness of schemes and plans for quick and easy money, and so you may imagine my astonishment when I come upon an old and yellowed derrotero of Yuma's gold among his personal effects.

At first I think our father's life has been a pious lie—for here are questionable instructions to money for the digging. But it then occurs to me that this treasure must exist in truth, for of all men who ever breathe the blessed air, our father is no gambler. Even when emboldened by mescal or tequila, he would not risk a peso on a game of chance.

The gringos thought a derrotero was a map telling the location of hidden treasure. Only Isidro knew it was a devil's talisman . . .

So, then, you will understand why the derrotero seems to have a certain authority about it, but even so, as one should do in matters of that sort, I take it to the Padre at San Xavier.

Now the Padre, as you know, is a tower of strength and Godliness, and there is not a demon that can prevail against him, and I think that he will scorn the derrotero as a trap of worldliness. But standing by the mission wall, with the morning sun streaming beautifully and bright upon the white-wash, and upon his head—did you know that he has lost his hair?—I think that I detect a most unchurchly interest. Only for a moment, though, and then he lifts his eyes to heaven, and presently he speaks.

"Isidro, my son, the Lord has placed a choice upon you, as He does to men from time to time. He has seen fit to test your worth by placing this derrotero in your hands. Should you do His bidding you will go about your business with the sheep, and live as other Christians do, and eschew these dreams of avarice. On the other hand, the devil always seeks a novice for his legions. . ."

And once again the Padre lifts his eyes to heaven.

"But, Padre, my father's life is pious, as you well know, and surely not in



league with any devil; and yet he has the derrotero, too. How can this be?"

THE PADRE ceases his communications with the angels. "Ha! It is one thing to have it in one's possession, as a curio, perhaps, and quite another to employ it to one's profit. For, I tell you, Isidro, that your late-lamented father led a life approaching sainthood, and if he had the derrotero he used it as a devil's talisman, with which to put his powers of resistance to the test. There is no harm—but good—in that."

Rosalio, as you can tell by that, I receive scant satisfaction from the Padre. I understand his giving me a choice, but I would much prefer an out and out command that I leave the derrotero where I find it. As it is, for a time it remains a source of mockery to me, now tantalizing with the riches it describes, now terrifying with the unknown horrors which might lie in wait for anyone who seeks them. Then one day, when I am nearly to the point of burning it, or tearing it to shreds, or feeding it to Sancho, the lead-goat—he will eat anything—two gringos come to call upon me.

How to describe these two? The one is large, broad as a mustang's rump, as high, almost, as a viga in the mission ceiling, but with the look of a sheep between his eyes. The other one is small, smaller even than myself, with quick white hands, and a face as thin as paper. But such eyes! Eyes to sear your sacred soul!

These two come to me in the winter pasture just previous to Hernandez' going to the mountains with the sheep, and in all truth, until their coming, I am prepared to go as well. But what a difference this visit makes.

Well, first of all, the small one talks of this and that and everything and nothing; and we stand upon one foot, then the other and I have the notion that his conversation is a long way off from the reason that he seeks me out. Then the big lump, who is all the time observing, says, "Get on with

it, Henry; fish or cut bait."

And Henry, who is the small one, becomes enraged at this interference, but presently he ceases to speak in riddles, and we all go to Mario's Cantina for tequila. It is very warm this day, so you will understand that such a thing is necessary.

When we are in Mario's the one named Henry resumes again, and now it is I learn why they come to see me. It is their fortune, he explains, that they hear about my derrotero. I cannot imagine where this is because I do not tell more than a dozen men about it, but you know how things like that can be.

"I'll come to the point. I know you got a way-bill for Yuma's gold, but from the looks of you, you ain't got the price of an outfit to dig it up."

"It is true that I have this derrotero," I reply, and what harm is there in admitting what he already seems to know? "I have it from my father, who comes by it I know not how."

"Well, it may not be any sort of a way-bill at all—for every true one there's a dozen fakes. I'll have to see it 'fore I can say for certain."

Now he hits me in my family pride. "True? There is no question of it. My father is the most honorable of men, and he would have no lies about him. Of course, it is a true one."

"I'll have to see it just the same; you got it on you?"

Naturally, I have it in my pocket, and I show it to him. I am not yet certain of these two, but how will I get help to dig the treasure if I do not share the derrotero?

This gives him pause for study, and while he is looking at it I regard the other, who I learn is Alfred. All the while we are in Mario's he is gazing around him vacantly, but as I turn my head to him I see him raise his huge foot and bring it down upon a poor cucuracha, which is smelling along the floor. Squish!

For myself, I would never kill a cucuracha, for it is my understanding that ill fortune attends the works of

those who do, but this one does not appear to be aware of that, for his face shows much delight.

Then it is that Henry resumes the talking, and I know that he is satisfied. "How does a third sound to you, Isidro? We put up the money for the gear, and you take us to the gold with your derrotero, or whatever it is you call this map?"

It is I who have to think this time. Always, it seems, I know this moment will arrive, and long ago I am sure I have the answer, but now I must consider. I think very much about the Padre at San Xavier, and what he has to say about the matter, and then I contemplate our sainted father, and how poor he always is, and how there might have been a difference if he only follows his derrotero. And last I think of the sheep and the eternal herding of those creatures. It is they, I think, which cause me to decide.

"Very well," I say to him at last. "With those arrangements, what is there to lose? Only time, and what is that?"

WELL, ROSALIO, in a few days we are ready to depart. We are to go from Tucson, but for some reason, obscure to me, they decide upon a less populated departing place. Even so, it makes no difference, for they make the necessary arrangements and when we take the road we have with us six burros, a number of male-tas, in which to put the ore, picks, shovels, and such other things as are required for the expedition.

At the first night's camp I produce the derrotero once again and we peruse it. It is very old and ragged, and baldy worn in places and it has the look of being studied many times before. It makes upon them a profound impression, though; and they regard it as one might a holy relic.

Pretty soon they question me, and I tell them all I know, which, to be truthful, is no more than any other in this country.

I tell them how I know that, in the

days now gone, a certain Yuma is a one-time gringo soldier, who leaves his army, and joins the Yuma Indians as a trader. I further tell them that he succeeds one time in becoming friendly with an Arivaipa Apache chief—a tribe related to the Yumas—and how, at last, he gains the secret of the Arivaipa gold cache, only to be later killed by other warriors whose suspicion he arouses. These things are not written in the derrotero, naturally, but Yuma's route is well laid down.

To shorten it, they are satisfied again that the derrotero is a true bill and in the morning we proceed. According to the map, we are to go to the site of old Camp Grant, at the joining of the San Pedro River and Arivaipa Creek, and then go beyond the long-dead camping ground of the Apache people, some ten miles distant. From that position Yuma's gold lies six miles further on, secreted in an arroyo of the Arivaipa Hills.

As we go forward, I am watching these two very closely. From the beginning I do not like their appearance, but with such a lure as Yuma's gold I am compelled to take a chance. The small one continues to do the thinking and the talking, and the large Alfred sits upon his burro like a bulto, and rides sullenly along. It occurs to me that he would enjoy the making of decisions and directions, but it also seems that he lacks the wits to do so. Because of this, there is frequent anger between these two, but the small one lashes at him like a whip.

Take the matter of the water, if you will. As you well know, the country into which we ride is rough and twisted and as dry as any on the earth. When we come to the Arivaipa Creek we fill our water bottles for the last time, but we are not so very far beyond it when the fat one feels compelled to have a drink. I do not doubt his need for it, for one of such vastness must require it in quantity, but Henry will not let him have it.

He exclaims, "Put that bottle down,

you fool! You just filled your guts at the creek. Ain't no tellin' how long we got to last on what we got."

"I'm just goin' to have a small one, Henry," Alfred explains; and he is nearly about to do it, too. He even has the bottle to his lips, but like this whip, of which I speak, Henry seizes it and takes it from him.

"I say you ain't goin' to, and I mean just that!"

Well, I am afraid of what will happen. Each of these has a revolver in his belt, and for a small time I think I may have some burying to do, for there is in the eyes of Alfred the slightly primitive delight which I observe when he stomps upon the cucuracha. But only for a moment is this so, and then Henry is all smiles and pleasantness again.

"Now, Al," he speaks smoothly, "you know we can't afford no chances. We got to save this stuff 'cause there's no sayin' when we'll find another creek." Then he regards me with a question. "How about it, Isidro? Is the Arivaipa the last water 'tween here and the gold?"

I cannot say for certain and I tell him so. "There may be a creek of some kind in these hills, but I think the time of year is bad for them. You see how warm it is becoming. I am afraid they will be dry. Of course, we can hope for a tinaja."

"I suppose them rock wells can be depended on, providin' we can find one. God knows the Apaches had to drink when they were here."

Now the big one looks at me, brooding-like. "Ain't there no springs on that way-bill? Seems to me that Yuma feller'd put 'em down."

"No, Senor. There are none upon it. Perhaps, because he knows the country well he does not think it necessary. The only thing he draws with certainty is where the gold is found."

The fat one smiles at me; how to tell you how he smiles? He has amusement in his face, but also something else.

"But you're certain-sure the gold is there?"

"It is on the derrotero," I explain.

"It better be where that derrotero says." And one more time I am reminded of the cucuracha.

So, YOU see, my brother, how things are when we come into the Arivaipa Hills. It is now that I consider most of what the Padre says to me, and even it is that I think he may be right. Perhaps, as well, our sainted father knows what he is about in keeping the derrotero as a curio, not seeking out its wealth. For we are not yet near to finding it, and already my comrades have bad blood. But, of course, a faint heart does not succeed at anything, and so I am determined to persevere. I say to myself that we shall see. And so we do.

That night we spend in the beginning of the Hills, and commence our searching in the morning. It is very warm in the morning, as it is in that country in the spring, and despite the beauty of the budding desert flowers everything is disagreeable. They fight very much about the water, and the large Alfred has a bad mood upon him from the start.

Well, Rosalio, the derrotero explains to us there is a gulch to be found, and that the gold rises from it in what those who have a knowledge of such things are pleased to call a chimney. The one named Henry tells me that such a thing can be discovered only by coming upon it directly, and not traced in the manner that float gold may be followed to the mother lode.

Be that as it may, we set out to find this gulch, but very soon we see that land is full of them. Though I think we have it clearly indicated on the derrotero, it soon develops that one arroyo appears exactly as any one of a hundred others. It is not only that way with those, but with the hills as well, and I think in wonder, how, in

a country of such vastness, everything looks alike. In a country where is nothing, there is suddenly too much of everything.

Presently we are standing in yet another gulch and I see Henry looking at me queerly. I see the fat one leaning on his spade and glaring at me. For some reason, which I cannot explain to you, I feel a chill, though the air is very warm.

Uneasily, I indicate the arroyo where we stand with a gesture of my arm. "I think the derrotero explains that it is here. Observe how the cross rests upon a point above the meeting of a pair of draws."

"And perhaps you will observe how there are ten thousand such draws here about us," Alfred replies, and he takes a step toward me.

For once I am glad that Henry turns his anger on him. I do not feel good about these things before, but now I think he maybe saves my life.

"You big ox!" he cries in rage. "How can a stumphead like you tell what is on the way-bill? A simpleton who can't even read his name! All I want from you is digging. If Isidro says this place is it, we try it. You understand?"

In my time I see murder in a man's eyes often, but never with such a deadliness as this. I think perhaps the fat one will tear the other as one might snap a sotol stalk, but for all his grim appearance he is like a camp dog who lacks the courage to match his bark with bite. He even seems to cringe, and you know, Rosalio, I will take my oath that the hair on Alfred's neck is bristling!

But presently this passes and we dig some more. When I say that we do everything but move the very hills I am not fooling. I think I never dig like that before, and we expand all the hours between noon and sunset in futile excavation of that arroyo; and in not a very great while the earth appears as though ten thousand prairie dogs have been at work.

And all the time, of course, the fat one grumbles. He is a man of staggering power, and never do I see the ground fly as when he flings it with his spade. You would think a man would revel in such extraordinary strength, but he seems to find no pleasure in it.

At last he throws his shovel on the ground, and gasps with breathing. The sweat is running on his face in rivers, and gathers in little lakes about his waist where his trousers are gathered by his belt.

"To hell with it! There's easier ways to get at gold than this!"

"We're done with that kind," Henry says. "Go on, keep digging. There's still a lot of ground in this arroyo."

The fat one looks around before he speaks again. He regards the earth before him, which he so plainly loathes; he observes the sky above him, which is hazy now, and where a strange breeze is awakening in hesitating gusts. He contemplates the burros with distaste.

"I said the devil with it, and that's what I mean. There's no more gold in this hell's acre than there is fresh water. I'm done with diggin'."

It is wrong to intrude myself at this point, but I am driven to it. It seems we are so close we cannot fail.

"But it is on the derrotero, Senor Al! It is the derrotero of my father, who in his life, is a man renowned for honesty. Surely it is here! Or somewhere."

To further exalt the importance of what I say, I once more unfold the derrotero and put my finger upon the cross, at the same time extending it to him so he can plainly see. For a moment he glares upon it balefully, and then, before I can withdraw, his mouth emits a great cry, and he seizes it!

Rosalio, when I say that he is a creature gone from reason, I am not exploiting the facts to the fullest of their truth. You will have to pardon my poor descriptive powers, for I am

unable to set down exactly how it is. Everything occurs so quickly—and how strange that is for one so large. But, as I say, he wrenches the derrotero from me, and before my very eyes, and though I cry in protest, he rends it into a hundred pieces, and casts the tatters into this curious wind of which I speak.

Then instantly, and with a blinding speed, he grasps me with his one hand—by the throat this is—and draws his monstrous arm back to strike me with the other. I am aware that I am begging mercy, and I am aware, as well, that Henry shouts, "Al! Al! No!"

But it is all confused and whirling, and presently his fist propels itself upon my face, and I have a numb sensation of flying like a bird. For a short time after I commence this flight everything is night, becoming day, then both together. I hear the sound of bells, and perhaps a castanet or two. But shortly there is nothing whatsoever.

HOW TO explain, my brother, what it is to return to life again? For a great time I am certain I am dead, and I am seeking in my mind for the proper way in which to carry myself before the Madre, because, of course, it is to her that I address my prayers, and she will surely greet me up in heaven.

But in a while, or maybe it is longer—who can say?—I come alive again by little bits and pieces and there is no Madre there to take my hand. Instead, I find that I am lying on my stomach in the bottom of the gulch, the ground of which is now quite cold because of the night which falls about me in my absence. By the careful opening of one eye, I observe the lonely stars above me, and in some little time I see the shapes of Henry and the fat assassin humped about a mesquite fire not very far away.

The wind is howling strong and

loud above the arroyo where we are, and sand and dust is whining in its grasp; but there is an area of calmness in this place, and I can hear them speaking.

"You witless rum-dumb, Al," I hear Henry saying. "In all my days I never see the likes of your stupidity. And if I live to be a hundred I never will again."

Alfred is heaped in a big pile with his knees drawn up, and his voice is whining like the wind. "Aw, lay off, will you? You been singin' that song ever since I clubbed the greaser. If you got to talk, think of somethin' different."

"I'll damn well sing whatever song I please, and you'll listen to it."

"Well, what difference does it make? We'd of finished him soon's we found the gold anyway. And he said this was the place."

"Well, damn it, Al, we didn't find it yet, so you jumped too soon. Just like you did with that digger up the Salt."

"But, Henry, that one'd found something. You saw them nuggets."

"But you done him in before he took us to the lode! That's what I'm drivin' at. You're too damned thirsty! If you got to kill these guys, wait 'till they make it worth our while!"

Rosalio, my ears are larger than the paddles on the prickly pear, and I am chilled, more chilled, than the night already makes me. I am fast awakening, and I am aware that the danger to me is greater now than ever. For, you see, my brother, I am witness to the confession of a murder!

I wonder what I am to do. I lie still and quiet as a stick and I think of many things, but I do not have the answer. The burros, they are very near, but I know I cannot escape on one of them without detection. It all seems very hopeless, and I curse myself for not heeding what the Padre has to say to me before.

It is then that I become aware of the bruising on my body. The fat one

nearly breaks my face and when I fall I am deposited, it seems, upon the sharpest rocks to be found in all that wide and endless land. Moreover, the sand and dust are blowing in my eyes and mouth and there are times when I fear that I will sneeze. Such a thing, of course, would be disastrous, because I do not wish to draw attention to myself.

Well, in a little while these rocks of which I speak become unbearable, and even though I might create a sound I have to move them. Very cautiously, I insert my hand beneath my stomach and draw one out. It is really not a large stone, but as I relate, a very sharp one, and because of its annoyance I hold it in my hand and regard it in the firelight.

Rosalio, it is gold. I have been flung upon the top of Yuma's chimney!

ALL AT once I have a plan. Do not ask me, brother, how this comes to me, for I cannot tell you. It is simply there. One moment I am marveling at this rose quartz which I hold, and in another I see not only the golden wires within it, but a method of deliverance. You know, Rosalio, I think Madre puts it in my head.

Very slowly, and with this nugget in my hand, I raise myself. I wish to pretend that I am badly damaged, and halfway from my head, and in all truth this is not difficult to do. I have been sadly handled.

When I am on my hands and knees I commence crawling toward the fire. I make many noises to achieve this much and I see that Alfred and Henry regard me with surprise. You may say that I am loco to do this thing, but since I am as good dead already what can be lost by attempting this plan I have?

Pretty soon I am in between them, and I ask for water.

"Senor Henry, I am on fire inside. Please to give me some."

I do not know but what the large

Alfred will seize me once again and finish what he starts, but he does not. He simply sits upon his blanket and watches me as though I am an object for which he now has just a passing interest. Henry, on the other hand, while he provides me with the water, observes me in a careful manner, as though he wonders if I hear the exchange between them of the miner on the Salt.

I sit on my heels and drink the water slowly, and watch them both around the edges of the bottle. I am still between them, but slightly back, and my hand is shadowed by my body when I extend it forward and slip the nugget just beneath a fold of Alfred's blanket. When I accomplish this I return the bottle to Henry; and now he speaks to me.

"Isidro, Al is a quick one with his temper, and he did not mean to hit you as he did. Were you unconscious long?"

I take my head between my hands. "Until this very moment I am in the silence of the grave."

Henry leans a little closer to me. "Isidro, can we find the gold without the derrotero? Are we near enough?"

It is now, my brother, that I commence my gamble. "To be sure," I say. "I swear we can. In fact, it may even be that we already do so and we are not aware of it."

This time the fat one stares at me. "What?"

"Well, it can be," I say. "We dig considerable."

"To damned much. I already said I'm done with it."

Henry now is looking at the big one. You will recall, Rosalio, that I am back some ways by now and so Henry's view of him is without an obstacle. The flames from the mesquite fire make hills and hollows of the fat one's face, and prodigious mountains of his chest and belly. I wait and wonder, praying constantly, I tell you, and at last the glint of rose quartz catches Henry's eye. He

reaches out and grasps it.

"What's this?"

"What's what?" And now it is that Alfred sees it, too.

Henry turns the nugget in his hand, carressing it; his way is very reverent and so soft his voice has now become. And his eyes are like black beads deep inside his skinny head.

"Ah, Al, what a sly one you are. And me thinkin' you a shadow-brained hulk all this time. But, what a slippery one to find the chimney without us knowing of it, then ripping up the way-bill in that fine rage of yours. Planning to do me in, too, were you, Al? So nobody'd have the gold but you?"

The fat one's voice is spiney like an ocotillo. "Gimme that thing, Henry! Lemme see that thing! I never seen it before!"

Slowly, Alfred raises to his haunches, but Henry backs away.

"Not so quick, Al. Tell me where you got it first. Which arroyo? This one? Or did you find it in another?"

Alfred is now upon his feet, and so is Henry. They are facing one another, just in front of me. Al is in a crouch, like a big, black bear, and from nowhere, it appears, Henry has produced his gun.

They are not observing me just now, and I back away some more. Like the bear, of which I speak, the fat one swings his arms out wide, and Henry's gun is plain to see. It is aimed directly into Alfred's ample stomach. Sapristi!

"Lemme see it, Henry," Alfred demands in an awful voice.

"Keep away," Henry replies to him. "Keep away from me!"

Then, Rosalio, it happens. The big bear lunges straight for Henry and the gun barks once, then many times, as Henry is folded and crushed into the vast arms, and between them there is nothing but the flash of the muzzle and the gun roaring and Henry screaming, "Al! Al!"

And when the gun stops there is

such a silence that I never hear before. before. Like a broken Santo, Henry slips beneath the grasp upon him and lies in twisted wreckage on the ground, and in another moment Alfred sways and falls upon him.

BECAUSE of the sand storm, which is even then beginning, I am a long time in coming back to Tucson with the burros and the meurtos. In fact, Rosalio, were it not for the guidance of the Madre I am in grave doubt that I find my way at all.

And perhaps, my brother, you are wondering what I do with Yuma's gold, and the simple truth is that I leave it where I find it. It has come to me, Rosalio, that such wealth is not for me, and in gratitude for deliverance I do not disturb it from its resting place. It is such a little thing to do for thankfulness.

Yet you wonder how I count myself a wealthy man? There are many here who jeer at me for leaving treasure in the Arivaipa Hills, and there are many more who shake their heads on learning that I give the reward, which I receive for Alfred and Henry, to the Padre at San Xavier, for the helping of those who are less fortunate than I.

But, once again it is a little thing to do for gratitude, and through the giving of this sum, far greater than I will ever have again—they were very bad, those two, it seems, and worth considerable as corpses—I am, instead of being poor, a man whose riches are not counted on the earth, but up in heaven.

And, Rosalio, the Padre lit a candle for me!

So, my brother, now that these wonders have occurred, I am once more satisfied to lead the life so valued by our honored father. In a little while, now, I will join you in the mountains with the sheep. And may the Madre guard you as she has guarded me.

Your Brother, Isidro.

HANGMILL HARVEST

by ROBERT L. TRIMNELL

**Maybe Lopez would just take his stolen cattle back—
or maybe he'd make the kid's pretty young wife pay
for them.....**

THE WINDMILL reminded Deck Sunder of a gallows, and the six blades, rotating slowly in the hot night breeze up out of Mexico, were the size and shape of buzzard wings.

No, he told himself. The windmill has four posts, and it's too high.

Yet, a man who'd spent most of his life with the shadow of a gallows

stretching out after him, thought of those things. Of the windmill blades, silvered in the moonlight, following each other like the effortless flap of buzzards hovering over a gallows.

Other things bothered him that night. The yucca stems stabbing up at the sky were like jailhouse bars. The moaning of the cattle in the arroyos yonder to the south set his



nerves to jumping, and the lamp glow in the window of the 'dobe seemed to follow him like a searching eye.

"Hell!" He jerked papers and tobacco from his shirt pocket. His short, iron-hard fingers bruised a quirky into shape. He scratched a match head with his thumb nail. The burst of flame made his horse quiver. He felt that through his knees, and knew the pony had been uneasy too.

The light from the 'dobe window blinked off, then reappeared. Someone had passed before it. Deck whistled his match out and cupped the cigarette in his left hand. He shifted his stocky form in the saddle and his right hand found its natural rest, the gunhandle arching up at his right hip.

A horse was clopping toward him. His muscles taut but motionless, Deck waited. Even when he saw it was Bunt Hallet, he didn't relax.

"Deck, maybe you better go help out," Bunt said. "The kid ain't so smart as he thinks, but his wife's suspicious of everythin' that wears pants, includin' the kid." He saw then how stiff Deck was holding himself. "Deck, don't tell me your back is crawlin'? You're the one showed me every road sign on Wet Belly Avenue."

"Sure, sure. Only Wet Belly Avenue used to have a lot of peaceful Mexico behind it. Now, every chili dipper with a hogleg and a peso worth of cartridges, is out to make his fortune. Glorious Revolution!"

"We don't have to cross back over."

"You don't. I do. Arizona and me ain't been friends a long time now." He shrugged. "You stay here. I'll go down and see if Al needs some help."

He nudged his pony and it stepped off along the ridge to the trail down to the 'dobe. As he went he wound his left hand into the animal's mane. He found that helped him feel trouble as soon as the horse did. Also, it took some of the loneliness away. The coarse, slippery feel of the mane, the heat of the neck underneath—they were old friendly things to him. He

had little enough else to make him feel any warmth inside. A footloose man whose movements north of the border must be at night—he got that way. His horse became much more than transportation. For that, his spurs were unroweled, the bit straight, and he never had to hobble the animal for fear of its wandering. Bug Eyes, as he called the critter, knew a hundred and eighty pounds could hang no more gently on its back.

HE SWUNG off under the windmill and both he and the horse drank from the big tin tank there. Above, the gears creaked. He looked up and saw the blades flopping slowly around after each other. Buzzard wings. And the arms of the supports, shooting up at the moon; well, a gallows had only two supports, and the windmill four, so there was that difference.

He heard the voices within the 'dobe now. He went over and knocked on the door and said, "Deck."

Al Worden opened the door, so he knew Al was playing it polite. The bleak, hawk-nosed face was smiling. "Well, Deck! Come on in!"

Al's thin lips were bent in a quarter-moon grin. He held out a bony hand at the young couple seated at the table. "Mr. and Mrs. Johnson. This is my partner, Decker Sunder."

Deck nodded at them, breathed a "howdy", and sat down. The boy was dark with curly hair and a wide, flat-bottomed jaw. The girl was blonde and fragile, but Deck didn't miss the look in her eyes. Snaps of anger there. She wouldn't have any. The boy was willing to take a whack at the deal, but not she.

"Understand," Al said, "the owner of the herd is dead. Perhaps—" He glanced at the girl, then looked down at his boot toes. "I hate to mention such things in front of lady. I regret it. But you must know what revolution in Mexico is like. It is horrible, Mrs. Johnson. The *hacendado*, the landowner and rancher, that is, was

cruelly murdered, along with his entire family. The peons began selling the herd to the revolutionary army. That was when we came along. We offered a better price." He showed the palms of his bony hands. "Here we are."

Deck rubbed his mouth with the hairy back of his hand. He always had an impulse to laugh when Al spun out a windy like that, putting on airs and grammar. Especially now with the girl's eyes calling him a liar. She was clenching her fingers angrily on the table.

The boy said, "The important thing, Mr. Worden, is the price." There was a certain slyness in his eyes, a pursing of the lips, meant to show that *he* wasn't taken in by the lie, but he was going to act like he was.

"We had ten dollars a head figured as the price. Four hundred cows." Al Worden's voice was tentative now, haggling.

The girl stood up so suddenly she had to clutch the back of her chair to keep it from tumbling over. Deck licked his lips. She wasn't as frail as he'd thought. Some years back he'd have made a play. How many years? Ten, maybe. He was hell on wheels then. Fists full of money and swag-ger in every step. The ladies loved it. Well, maybe they weren't *ladies*. Anyway, that was before he first saw the world from behind bars. Bars sure put caution into a man.

"We are buying no stolen cows!" the girl snapped. "None!" She stood behind her chair and gripped it until her hands turned white.

"Chances like this don't come every day, Mrs. Johnson," Al cooed.

The boy said, "It's all right, Jen. Like Mr. Worden says, we won't find many chances like this. Think of it! Four hundred head, and within a year, four hundred drop, and they'll have our JJ mark on them, even if the cows are a little—" He didn't add the last word.

Wet, Deck thought grimly. He closed his eyes and tilted his chair back against the wall. He heard the boy say the price was too high, and heard Al coo something in reply, and knew the girl was going to lose. He worked his mouth and found it tasted bad. Sour.

Poor damn kids. They wouldn't pay much, but they'd have only a few days to enjoy their new possessions. The hacendado, Don Rafael de Lopez, was anything but dead. He'd be hot on the trail by now. Maybe Lopez would just take the cows. Maybe not, and that would be bad. Some of his vaqueros were Yaquis, and they weren't always content with just shooting people.

Vaguely, he heard Al say he'd heard about the inheritance the young Johnson couple had just received, and he was glad to find somebody with cash.

Deck stopped listening and looked at Al. Leaning over the table that way, with his beak nose pointed at the boy. Like a damn vulture. Talking honey sweet at them and all the time thinking what a big joke it was that in a couple of days Don Rafael would come riding in on them, crazy mad. Al would chuckle about this for a long time to come.

Deck glanced at the girl. Jen, seemed the boy had called her. What was the name of that girl—but that was a long time ago. She was like this one, in a way. Gold in her hair and fire in her eyes—and she said a man who rode too wide a trail had best keep on riding.

He awoke suddenly, realizing it was all over. The girl was crouched into a big chair weeping into her cupped hands. The boy's black brows were knitted craftily. Pleased with himself. Five dollars, Deck heard was the price. The boy admitted now that he kept a good store of cash on hand, in case something like this turned up—with Mexico blowing its roof off, somebody was going to do well. By the time the Mexican brands association was working again, well—

BY DAWN the cows were counted over and Al's saddle bags were bulging with the take. The Al Worden gang was ready to ride. Al, Deck, Bunt Hallet, and Pudge Gonzales. Al shook the boy's hand and said, "You won't regret this, Mr. Johnson!"

The boy smiled craftily. "Tell the truth, I think you've done yourself out of a good thing. But I guess—well, you footloose fellows don't want to be tied down by a bunch of cows. Look, drop in for dinner one day."

"We'll do that!" Al grinned, and swung into the saddle. He led them off in a bee line for the border.

"Wish we could of seen that windmill by daylight," Deck grunted.

They had stopped to water the horses at an alkali hole. They sat in the scant shade of a red arroyo wall, with the sun like a flaming curtain in front of them. "Damned windmill looked like a hangtree to me."

Al squatted beside him and took a flask of tequila from his pocket. He looked into the oily liquid and laughed. "I wouldn't be surprised if Rafael got the same idea."

Deck sat up with a start. He hadn't thought of that.

Al was gulping at the tequila, his lean adam's apple bobbing. He drew the bottle away, gasping, rubbed his bony hand across his eyes. He laughed, still choking. "I bet—hey, who wants to 'et ten dollars that Rafael hangs that kid?"

Deck looked squarely into Al's eyes. The cold, hungry gray eyes of a vulture. Deck thought, God knows, I'm no saint. But damn it—

"Nobody want to bet?" Al rasped.

Bunt and Pudge were rolling cigarettes and watching the horses water, as though they hadn't heard. After a moment they looked away from the horses and at Deck. Al looked at him too.

"Al, I was thinkin'—there's a town ahead. I could leave a note, have somebody take it out to those kids. Tell 'em to clear out before Rafael—"

"You want to bet Rafael won't hang the kid from his windmill?" Al said, and it was no longer a joke. He'd swiveled around still squatting. His bony hand was loose, next to his gun holster. Eyes fixed on Deck, eyes that could laugh at death, torn and decayed death. They were not laughing now. Deck thought, those eyes looked like silvery windmill blades. Blades following each other around, and suppose, suppose a rope were tied to the shaft, and the blades caught a breeze, turned, slowly winding up a rope on the shaft, and a man's neck was at the end of the rope, slowly being squeezed. A golden-haired young woman watching—screaming—

"Yeah," he said. The word barely choked out. "Yeah, I want to bet."

Al spat. His lips hung loose now. Relaxed. Hand at ease. Gun loose in the holster, and Al the fastest gun snatcher on either side of the border.

"Deck." His voice dropped, wheedling now. "I'd let you go, Deck, warn them. But once you told them, things not be so good for us. It might hurt our reputation down south."

"I'm going." Deck was seeing the girl's eyes now, and a windmill, reflected in each of them.

Al nodded slowly, his lower lip still hanging loose. "Okay, Deck. Go."

Suddenly Bunt yelled, "Give him a chance, Al, thirty foot! Give him a chance. Deck's been okay."

"Okay, Deck, I'll give you a chance. Thirty foot," Al said.

That was no chance, Deck thought. But he stood up and turned his back to them. He began pacing down the arroyo, counting to thirty. Al wouldn't shoot him in the back. He'd want to do it facing, so he could watch Deck die.

Deck felt his heavy shoulders sag. He was not afraid. He'd faced too much lead in his time for that. He just felt bad at not being able to warn the Johnsons.

He decided to try shooting through the holster, without drawing. He'd

won that way before. With a little luck—

28, 29 30. He turned slowly. Al was twisting his boots in the loose rocks of the arroyo bottom, to get a good stance. Lower lip still hanging down loosely. His shoulders sloped a trifle to the right. Right hand in a claw, but loose.

"Come on, Deck. You're first." Al threw back his head and laughed. But with the same movement his hand became a streak of jumping bones, and almost instantly it seemed, flame burst through the sunlight in a long red streak.

The laughing trick was a new one, but Deck reacted automatically to the grab. His own square fist banged his gunhandle down and the muzzle up, his thumb hacked the hammer and the holster exploded. A piece of leather zoomed over Al's head, leaving a trailer of smoke.

That was all he saw. A hammer struck his body, spun him, and his head went down and rammed into a mule's kick. The red hot iron spit impaling his chest gradually lost its heat and then vanished as the blackness flooded in.

HHE DIDN'T expect to come out of it. He'd surrendered everything, thrown himself away. But his body seemed to have other ideas.

Stars were winking at him. He focused his eyes, looked around. There were still three men down the arroyo. The iron rod that skewered him was back again, but not hot now. It wasn't through the middle, either, as he'd figured, but under his right arm. He felt all that. Then one other impression. The three men were different.

They wore high-crowned hats with enormous brims and little tassels hanging down.

To his left stood a tall, lean man with a high chin and a black gash of mustache above it. A thick nose that showed some Indian blood. Deck had seen the face before, through

binoculars, when they were watching the movements of cattle on the chili side of the border. Don Rafael de Lopez.

"I lack the pleasure of an introduction," Lopez said, in Spanish.

"Deck Sunder." He thumbed at his belly. "Rafael Lopez." He thumbed at the Mexican.

Lopez fingered his mustache. "It is fortunate that we find you. So bad that you are hurt and alone out here."

Deck nodded. He rolled to the left and his hand roved his side. A hole between two ribs and other, bigger, with raw edges, behind. Stiff with dried blood. He felt his holster. It hung loose and empty, ripped to shreds by the gun buck.

"Has it passed you, a movement of cattle with a chicken foot brand?" the Mexican asked.

Deck shook his head. "I been up north visitin' friends." He met the man's eyes to make a lie convincing. He wondered how much Lopez knew. Everybody in Sonora knew the Al Worden gang. But would Lopez know his face?

"Perhaps, if you are well enough to ride, you would join us in the search?"

"A pleasure to accompany the Senores," Deck answered. He climbed painfully to his feet and went over to the alkali hole and drank the muddy, stinking water. A pleasure to accompany them. For he had a hunch Lopez would only leave him behind after doing with a knife what Al's bullet had failed to do.

THE PAIN was not so bad. Forty years on the border made a man barrel-cactus tough. And he had his own horse, and the good feel of its mane, slick and coarse in his fingers. Funny Al hadn't taken the horse. Maybe he had, but the animal had come back. That was a nice thought. It wasn't usual in a range-bred critter.

There were six of the Mexicans, riding in a long drag. They did nothing to indicate that he was a prisoner. Mexicans wouldn't. Just rode three in

front and three behind him. Such nice polite people, always smiling when they stuck a knife in your back.

He'd knotted a wet hankerchief and plugged the wounds with it. That eased it a little. But he didn't feel the stabbing pain much anyway. His mind was full of a picture of the blonde girl's face. In her eyes, the windmill the buzzard-wing blades turning slowly as they wound a rope on the shaft, lifting.

He didn't worry about the boy. It wasn't so difficult for a man to die. But to watch a woman seeing her man strangled—that was hard.

"*Aíee, la marca, la marca!*" one of the Mexicans was shouting.

They wheeled up to where a couple of cows and a calf were bedded down for the night. Don Rafael's chicken-foot brand was sprawled over their rumps. The Mexicans swung into movement again. After a few minutes Deck began seeing familiar groups of yucca, the stems stabbing up at the stars. They were closing on the Johnsons' dobe headquarters.

In a few minutes they came upon the main body of the herd. Don Rafael smiled. He was riding close to Deck. "It is well, eh, Senor Sunder? But now we must exact payment. One cannot allow the theft to go unpunished."

"It shows itself clearly," Deck answered, speaking Spanish automatically, but with the girl's pale face before him and buzzard-wings blades whirling around in her eyes. He glanced up at the stars. Late, very late. He must have been unconscious a long time in the arroyo.

Suddenly it was before them. The little square 'dobe on the flat, sandy bed of the canyon. The windmill towering above, barely creaking. Little wind tonight. A man would die slow.

The Mexicans fanned out. There was no light in the cabin. Deck rode his pony to the tank and let it drink. He tried not to look over at the 'dobe. He drank and wet the bandana, and retied it on his wound. He wondered

how many of them he could shoot if he had a gun. An idle thought. His gun was somewhere in that arroyo.

"Hell you want out there!"

The voice was from the cabin. The boy's voice. The door clapped open and he came out, a rifle in his hands. Deck glimpsed the girl behind him in a white night dress. Sleeping peacefully, thinking of their new herd. Now—

"Please to throw that rifle away," Don Rafael said. He waved his hand about him. The boy blinked, lost the last layer of sleep. The six Mexicans were fanned out, each with a rifle in his hands. The boy stared wildly about him. The girl tore the gun from his hands and threw it down.

Deck remounted and rode up between two of the Mexicans, so they wouldn't have to come after him. There wasn't much more time for moonlight, but now it was bright. Silver on the girl's thin face. The boy was red with anger.

"What's the meaning—"

Don Rafael cut him off. "My cows, Senor. You seem to possess cattle with the chicken foot brand, and I cannot but assure you that they are mine, and that we Mexicans do not view lightly the theft of our cattle."

Deck licked his lips. They saw him now, and both were staring with open mouths. He met their stares. The girl recovered first, sagged back against the doorway. She was about to speak to the boy, but cut it off. She wasn't the kind to say "I told you so." An all-right girl.

"You!" the boy howled at him. "You—you—"

Deck brushed a hand across his mouth, found it was shaking. Maybe Rafael would let the girl alone. Why say anything? If he talked, it would amount to the same thing, except that two men would hang.

The boy seemed to have lost his power of speech. He looked from one to another frantically, his lips jerking, trying to make words.

A sound caught his ear. Far above,

a loud creak from the windmill shaft. A breeze was rising. That meant morning was coming.

SUDDENLY it seemed as though the windmill had spoken to him. He licked his lips. He glanced quickly at the others.

They were following his eyes, staring up at the turning blades though there was something curious about them. There wasn't—except to Deck. The blades were curious, and it struck him then as funny. He laughed. Then he saw that the man next to him held his rifle cradled loosely in one hand.

"Watch it up there," Dick yelled.

Again they looked up. Deck grabbed a rifle and kicked his pony over against the Mexican next to him, knocking him aside. In an instant his horse was breaking, and he dropped down beside its barrel for protection, his arm hooked on the saddle horn. The horse raced for the tank, hurried by the shouts that broke out behind. A rifle snapped and Deck's exposed left leg became a long splinter of agony. He flung himself clear, rolled, came up behind the tank.

He levered a shell into the rifle and stumbled up against the tank, kneeling even though his left leg was writhing with pain. He leveled the rifle over the tank at them.

As his head came up a rifle cracked and his neck jerked to the left as a long hot hook ripped through the flesh of it. He couldn't move his head back around straight again, but managed to lay it down on the rifle stock and sight. He triggered off a quick one. The rifleman dropped his gun, groaned, clutched his right arm.

"No more shootin' Rafael," Deck growled. "Call it quits and take your cows. Leave these kids alone. They got sucked into a wrong deal. I was one of them that robbed you."

"The others?" the Don said quietly. He had dropped his rifle into its boot and was sitting at ease.

"You'll find them when you see them," Deck growled. "Just git, now, and leave these kids. Take your cows. Forget the others."

The Don smiled whitely in the moonlight. He nodded. "We go. As you say, we will forget 'the others'." He reached down behind him and stripped off his saddlebags, held them up for Deck to see. Gray, lumpy saddlebags. Al Worden's saddlebags! "Yes, we have already dealt with the others. And they were so polite as to tell us of the arroyo where you lay, and about—" He waved his hand toward the Johnsons. "Vamonos, 'manos!" he yelled, and whirled his horse.

His men wheeled after him.

Deck heard his rifle splash into the tank. He tried to hold on, but his neck and shoulders were dead. That bullet in the neck. Then the Johnsons were crouching over him.

"So, they got Al!" he mumbled to himself. "They got Al, and the saddlebags." Aloud, he said, "All you lost is two thousand dollars, kid. Pretty cheap."

The girl was crying. She sobbed, "What made you do that?"

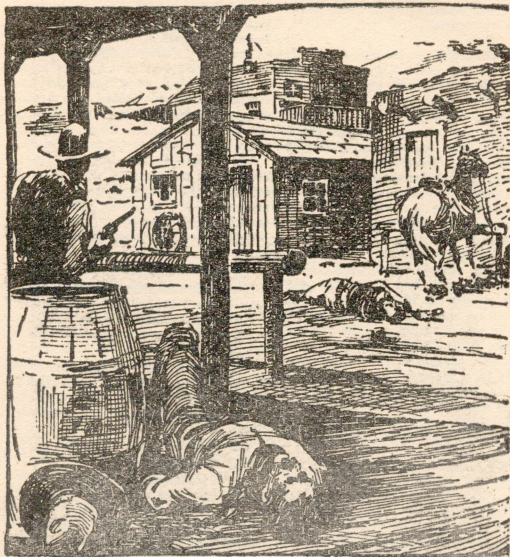
He was slumped back against the tank. Above, the shaft was creaking and the blades slowly following each other around. They didn't look like buzzards' wings now. Looked like windmill blades. The first rays of sunlight caught them and pinked them.

"When I saw it first it looked like a hangtree. See?" Words came choking out. Something was happening in his neck, freezing his voice. "But it's a windmill, suckin' up water. Four posts. I think I've always been afraid of takin' my last look at the sky from between two gallows posts."

Words stopped coming. He could see the six blades were glinting gold with the rising sun. The breeze increased and they moved faster.

Bringing new life up out of the soil, as an old life dripped away into it.

THE HATE RIDERS



CHAPTER I

RUCKUS AT THE RAWHIDE

TIME HAD run out for Blake Ramsey and Giff Downes. Their long search in the mountains had brought them empty-handed and baffled into the savage, beautiful

Shekomeko basin with its spruce-buried lakes, dim canyons and buoyant streams. But giving up came hard and so, as they neared the town, they had agreed to one last try before striking north through the Colorado Rockies, on the long way home.

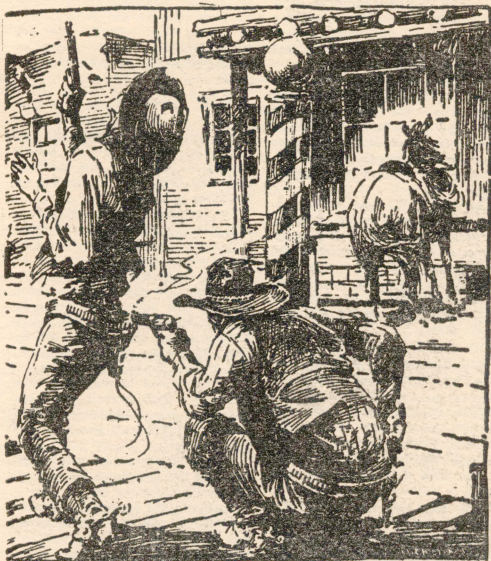
Dusk was a melancholy curtain inching down on the basin when they came up the broad sage valley and

★ **WHAT GRIM PURPOSE DROVE THESE HOLSTER-**

BRAND NEW GRIPPING BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

by AN OUTSTANDING WRITER:

ROD PATTERSON



The ways of violence, never changing in the New West, followed a familiar pattern. A man coveted his neighbor's gold, his cattle, his land, his wife—or he was compelled to fight to save his own. And if he was lucky he survived, or, unfavored, vanished with the smoke of his own guns. . .

entered Fronteriza's main street.

They rode between the rows of

adobes and board-sided stores that, except for a haze of yellow light behind

HUNG HELLIONS DOWN EVERY DARK TRAIL? ★

windows and doors, had no affinity with human warmth and hospitality. The hewn lumber buildings were graceless hulks, the adobes resembling nothing so much as ungainly objects spewed from the earth's bowels and left to crumble in the elements.

The hum of men's voices came from a pair of saloons that faced each other across the dust—The Blue Hole, The Rawhide—and from the dining room of a solitary inn before whose squat mud walls the two men dismounted to tie their horses among others at the rack.

They studied the street with a subdued vigilance, as if searching for the heart-beat of the town, feeling for assurance of life and movement behind the scabrous, bullet-spattered walls.

Giff Downes, a serious-faced, stocky man in dusty-blue denim, said irascibly, "Still figure we lost him over on the pass."

"He couldn't cross the malpais on a dead beat horse," Blake Ramsey said. "So he must have come this way."

"If he didn't hit for the hills. This country's a hundred miles deep," Giff said. "Take all winter to smoke him out." He slapped his hat against a knee. "All I want is one clean shot."

"Not that easy for him, Giff." Blake frowned at the empty, darkening street. "Let's make the rounds."

They parted, Giff rolling off under the nearest arcade toward the Blue Hole; Blake cutting across the dust to the Rawhide.

For long weeks they had performed this dreary litany. In taverns, in towns, in remote cow camps and nester squats, they had voiced the question that became a chant—receiving one response or another; then riding on through the high, empty country under the Great Divide.

Blake Ramsey was a quiet man, tall, slow-moving, taciturn, whose weight lay solid across his shoulders

and through his chest. On his long-jawed face were scars, one at his temple, another beside his mouth. These scars, the tight lips and stubborn jaw, his somber eyes, were the signposts of the man. They were the marks of the toughness thirty years of life had beaten into him.

As HE approached the saloon he was aware of the town's prolonged silence. Like a subtle warning, a tension sent its thready feeling through his mind. He was suddenly like a dog bristling at the shadow of something very real.

The pressure of the mountains, their massive indifference and mystery, seemed transferred in essence to this lonely town.

When he pushed through the batwing blinds, he saw ten or a dozen riders in the place, some sitting in chairs at tables along one wall, others standing against the raw pine bar. In their immobility and watchfulness, they seemed like effigies of men.

No one moved or spoke until one man with a dark sardonic face made a complete swing at the bar and gave Blake the full impact of a bold and pushing stare.

"You're in the wrong crib, neighbor. Try the one across the street," the man said slowly.

Blake checked his stride. If he was affronted by the man's remark, his face never revealed it. His eyes remained cool and self-possessed.

"This one suits me," he told the man, moving on to the bar.

He called for bottle and glass and, when the fallow bartender placed both before him, he poured his own drink and took it, barely touching the glass to his lips.

"Get moving, stranger," the tall rider said in the same slow tone of voice. He moved his elbows back and hung them on the bar's edge, let forearms and hands drop down so that they dangled slackly above his exposed shell belt and gun. "Get mov-

ing, and I mean now."

The voice fell into silence and the silence remained while Blake poured our another jolt and fetched a silver piece from his purse to pay for two. He ignored the rangy figure on his right, and spoke quietly to the waiting barman.

"Know a man named Marriner?" he asked.

The barkeep glanced uneasily down the counter, saying after a pause, "No, never did."

"Black hair, gray at the temples. Dark eyes. Not young and not too tall. Got a tattoo on his chest and rides a star-faced roan with a martingale."

"Never heard of him," the barman said, and moved farther down the bar, taking Blake's bottle along with him.

When Blake said sharply, "Bring it back, John," the barkeep looked around, frowning, and shook his balking head.

"That's all the drinks you can have, stranger."

Blake eyed him implacably. "Bring the bottle back," he softly repeated his command.

"Ben Luckinbill calls the shots 'round here," the man said in a panicky tone.

Blake swung his glance hard against the lank rider's dark angular face. "He don't call 'em for me, John. Bring it back," he said.

"Maybe," Luckinbill said softly, urbanely, "I ought to make it plainer. Neighbor, you ain't wanted. Now get out!"

"I like it fine," Blake answered him, a quality of anger edging his tone. "Even like your company, bein' a mighty easy man to please."

"All right, Quarles," Luckinbill drawled to someone in the line-up beyond Blake.

BLAKE GLANCED around and saw a man of huge proportions step away from the bar and stand with

his arms crooked out. He had incredibly small bullet-blue eyes set close together in a ruddy face and a head of sorrel-colored hair that was as matted as the coat of a hard-wintered buffalo. A big man in every way, he seemed even heavier because of his barrel-shaped torso and spindly legs.

Luckinbill drawled, "My bodyguard, stranger. Now, before I give him the word, I've got a question to ask. This Marriner. Where's he from?"

Blake looked back at the speaker. "Scarcely your affair," he said. He felt good—savage but good.

Luckinbill took the rebuff with a smile. "Unbutton your jacket, friend. Let's see what you got pinned to your shirt."

"I guess not."

"Quarles has handled bigger boys than you, neighbor."

"Let's see him try it on me," Blake invited. He moved his gaze toward the bartender, "Bring that bottle over here," he said in a gritty tone though his smile remained.

Boots and spurs came around behind him as he spoke. He moved halfway around to face Quarles, then waited with that rolling grin, both of his elbows now resting slackly on the bar.

The big man did not speak. Suddenly he reached out a hairy paw. Blake never made a move to stop what happened then. Quarles threw back the lapels of Blake's coat, one after the other. The move wrenched a metal button off.

Then Blake sighed. His movement was so swift that no one in the saloon knew what happened until it was over. Blake struck out savagely at Quarles—a contemptuous, chopping blow that squashed the big man squarely in the face. Quarles went pop-eyed trying to duck the punch, but he was too slow.

Blake's knuckles raked him with the sound of an ax sinking deep in a log. Quarles' head snapped back with the look of a broken neck. He fell

backward, stumbling, staggering, and went crashing to the floor, knocked kicking, knocked out cold.

Meanwhile the barkeep inched down behind the counter and shoved the bottle within Blake's reach. "Have one on the house," he croaked. "Have two."

Blake made a pushing gesture. His elbow hit the bottle and it fell on its side. Whisky gurgled over the bar but the barman made no effort to set the bottle on its base. Blake turned and walked across the floor and out through the swinging doors. On the street he paused to let his fury fade.

He thought about Ben Luckinbill, wondered about him with a kind of grudging admiration. He believed he had read the man's character accurately. He was an outlaw, at least in the respect that he recognized no rules except his own. Unaccustomed to resistance, he had nevertheless held his temper in check. Blake recognized that Luckinbill could easily have passed a signal to his men and the whole outfit would have rushed Blake like a pack of surly hounds piling a cornered buck.

That Luckinbill was a killer seemed likely, but he was a planner, a waiter before he was a killer. This made him twice as dangerous to cross. That he was a power in this town, in the country, also seemed self-evident. Just what this power meant Blake could only guess.

HE FOUND Giff waiting for him under the arcade only a stride or two from the saloon. "Mighty strange country," the stocky man observed in his dour, skeptical way.

"The remark," Blake said with some truculence, "stands as it is. Anything about Marriner over there?"

"Nary a word. But I met an old galoot and bought him a snort. Heard a story. The big outfits in the basin summer-graze their beef up in the hills, or have till the last couple years.

They had to quit when a few haywire outfits moved in and took over some old homestead sites. They started pushin' and shovin' and the basin boys shoved back. There's been a lot of rustlin' and thuggery and a dog-fight now and then, and there ain't a law court or a sheriff within a hundred and fifty miles. And all this means me and you have sure enough hit the jackpot for bad luck. This place is hotter'n a geyser that's ready to blow!"

"Giff, I'm ready to bet we've found our man," Blake said grimly. "He'll be ridin' with one of the outfits, maybe the ones in the hills. Well, we'll stick around a while. He's bound to get careless and come out of his hole for a drink."

"Ain't much of a hand at watchin' a rat hole," Giff retorted.

"We'll wait if it takes us all winter."

"Sure, but—"

"But we'll have to bust up, Giff. Waggin' tongues won't help. You better be the one to stay in town in case he sneaks in some night, and he will if there's any women around."

"But what about you?"

"I'll star pitch outside till the weather drives me in. Pay a few calls and beat some brush."

"I been offered a job already," Giff told him. "Pot washer at the hotel. A woman runs it, the old man said. He works for her, and they been short of help all summer."

"Take the job. It'll give you a reason for stayin' in town," Blake said. He thought a moment. "If Marriner is in the country, Luckinbill must know about it."

"Who's he?"

Blake told him briefly about the trouble in the Rawhide.

"All we want is one man," Giff warned when he finished. "Not a blamed cattle war!"

"Maybe you figure Marriner's goin' to come lookin' for us?"

"No, but—"

Blake said harshly, "All right, Giff. You ought to know you can back out and hit for home any time you're ready."

"Who said anything about backin' out?" Giff demanded resentfully. "All I'm arguin' is we can't be sure he's here, and we better make sure 'fore we stick our neck out for trouble." His broad face wore a melancholy scowl. "Blake, I'd give an arm for a clear conscience. It's my fault what happened to Kate. I worked her too hard—like a man. Didn't show her enough what she meant to me. Never told you before but we had trouble just about the time we pulled for Montana."

"Cut it out," Blake said gruffly. "I knew about it. How could I help it livin' under the same roof? Hell, she was my sister!"

"Set too much store by a woman's goodness," Giff cut in, stubbornly. "They'll go bad, too, like a man. Maybe slower, but for the same reasons."

"We've been over this trail a dozen times," Blake tried to comfort the man. "It was me got you to go along on that drive. My idea to hire the woman to stay with Kate. Should have known my own sister well enough never to leave her on her own that long. I got more to sweat out than you have, son."

"No." Giff's blue eyes softened their look of remorse. "All right," he said with a sigh, "I'll grab the hotel job. Take care of yourself."

"The same to you," Blake smiled. They parted for the second time that day.

CHAPTER II

WILD AS A WOLF DEN

WHEN TWO men had returned from Montana, they had found Kate Downes missing, their ranch deserted. The

tragedy had begun at the spread on the edge of the Colorado desert; it had ended in a remote Nevada mining camp weeks later where they had found Kate dead and listed in the burial records under her own name: Katherine Downes.

They had located the doctor who had attended her. "She died of pneumonia, resulting from exposure and neglect," the doc had told them. "The man pulled out—deserted her. You could tell she'd been a fine girl once."

The story had been a knife turning in Blake's heart. Giff had gone on a crazy drunk. When Blake finally got him sobered up, they had picked up Dade Marriner's trail, had followed it back to Colorado, then southward to the mountains of New Mexico.

They had a fair description of Marriner. He was swarthy handsome. He had a taut, bony face, a brown sun-etched complexion. Not an evil face but a reckless one. He was a good rope hand, a good horseman, something of a drunk; but above all he had a deceptive gallantry with women unusual in a man of his background and experience.

At first unaware that vengeance followed him, Marriner had dallied on his way south. Later he had sensed pursuit or had seen his pursuers, and he had taken headlong flight, stopping only to rest his horse.

In the beginning Blake and his brother-in-law had been driven by wild anger. But, as the days passed and Marriner seemed able to stay one jump and a cold campfire ahead of them, their reckless fury cooled. In its place came a sustained and savagely disciplined purpose.

But Dade Marriner's trail had finally petered out in the Shekomeko, that vast bowl under the snowy ranges, a snarled wilderness of tumbled rock mesas and prairies, of clear-water lakes that caught the timeless image of the snowy peaks and the massive solitudes of pine and spruce.

WHEN BLAKE and Giff parted on Fronteriza's street, Blake drifted along beneath the arcades on the Rawhide side. He had wanted to play the game quietly for a while, at least until he and Giff had located their man, but it would never be possible now. Luckinbill's men would be waiting and watching him, waiting for him to make a break.

Blake smelled trouble. He felt it through his skin as a pressure. The ways of violence, never changing, followed a pattern. A man wanted his neighbor's gold, his cow, his horse, his wife, his land—or he was compelled to fight to save his own. He fought with brutality and survived, or vanished with the smoke of his own guns, tucked in for the long sleep while his enemies stampeded on across his forgotten grave.

Rolling up a cigarette, he moved along the beaten sidewalk. Shadows shifted beneath the arcade opposite, keeping step with him, slowly when he moved slow, faster when he went faster. He was being watched already; weighing him from the darkness yonder, from the blackness of alleys along the street, were perhaps a dozen men.

He passed dark dwellings, passed a store with a light shining out of its open door. He saw a young woman inside the mercantile, her profile toward him. She was full-bodied, vital, feminine, her red-gold hair worn away from the temples and drawn to a coil at the base of her neck.

He pulled his glance away from her and went on, careful to demonstrate his indifference to the eyes that still followed him from the shadows yonder.

A chill wind rolled through the town, bearing the smell of winter off the peaks. He held a match to his cigarette; the small flame glowed on the surfaces of his narrowed eyes, on the taut skin that seemed stretched over his cheekbones.

A group of riders stood near the

Rawhide. They talked there a moment, then moved inside the saloon. The old signals of trouble flashed through the town; the old ways of violence began working down along the street.

That a trap was building, Blake felt sure. He saw two men peer over the swing doors of the Blue Hole and then pull back. He discovered other men in an alley opposite where he stood, these figures motionless, their presence revealed only by the glowing coals of cigarettes.

Now, faintly heard at first, Blake caught the solid arriving drum of hoofs outside the town. The sound swelled closer.

Blake leaned a shoulder against the mud wall of a store, watching the street, one end to the other, his interest lifting little by little though caution held him quiet in the shadows.

He had about finished his smoke when the sound of riders rolled against the falsefronts. Fifteen or twenty horsemen appeared suddenly out of the darkness downstreet, leaning far over as they made the turn into town coming at a long high lope.

An old man led the column, sitting high and easy on a big bay horse, a giant of a man with a blowing silver beard, who rode like a stiff-backed general, the bridle reins held high as he brought the party to a halt before the hotel rack.

They made a shifting panorama of sweating horses and grim, sardonic men whose dust-filmed faces showed but dimly beneath their flapping hats; rifles jutting from under saddle skirts; holstered revolvers slapping lean thighs; yellow coils of new rope swinging from the side jockeys of their California saddles.

The party dismounted and tied their horses, and the old man took them in a body into the hotel dining room.

No sooner had the door closed on the last figure than a signal ran the street. One soft shout followed another.

er, jumping from alley to alley toward the saloons.

Blake's gaze swung with the shouts. Suddenly he saw a lone man jump from the swing doors of the Blue Hole and come pelting down the street under the arcades. The thud of his boots was audible and Blake even caught the grunting gasps of the man's lungs.

Then a gun shot slammed behind the Rawhide's doors. Another followed it swiftly. Blake heard both bullets tear into the running man; he heard the man's outcry as he pitched to the ground, rolling out from under the arcade into the dust.

IN THE silence following the echo of the two shots, no one made any move in the direction of the dead man. And this was the brutal indifference of the town completely told.

But now the face of the town began to change. Small incidents began happening along the street. A door slammed shut. A few lights were whiffed out as by descending palms; a man appeared in the alley next to the Blue Hole and then ducked back as suddenly as though jerked by a rope.

Blake heard the vague stir of riders in the darkness beyond the saloons; heard men calling harshly to each other. His guard lifted, yet he stood fast in the shadows, held there by the conviction that the trap was about to be sprung by Luckinbill.

Suddenly a voice, anonymous and unlocated, howled: "K n o c k 'em down!"

On the heels of the shout came the clanking of saddle gear and a following rush of hoofs. A dozen riders bulged out of the shadows beyond the saloons and came toward Blake at a dead run. The sound of those riders was dull and heavy, then growing to incredible proportions as they swung along the street. And now the guns began to speak.

At the same moment Blake saw the

young woman step from the shop, saw her appear squarely in the line of fire. She glanced toward the sounds of hoofs and shooting, then wheeled toward him, walking briskly, holding up the skirt of her dress with one gloved hand.

She was scarcely a dozen yards away from him and seemed serenely unaware of her danger. Blake yelled a warning, then ran toward her as the riders went roaring past him with blazing guns.

He reached the girl and seized her, throwing her roughly against an adobe wall, then pinning her there with his own body and arms outflung to shield her from the flying lead.

Behind him was a rush of boots as the bearded old leader of the basin men brought the entire outfit into the street from the hotel dining room. Blake saw the group rush off toward the Blue Hole, drawing pistols as they ran.

The girl struggled against Blake's body, gasping, indignant. "Be still, woman!" he said. "Do you want to be shot?"

She kept trying to see his face; the flash of her eyes was very close; and he felt the firm contour of her figure near him, so near the strike of her heart mingled with his own.

"Please!" she pleaded. "I will not be harmed. I know them all!"

"You're crazy!" he said, and believed it with all his heart.

The clear sharp reports of weapons pulled his gaze toward the saloons. Men could be seen spilling from the Blue Hole, and from the Rawhide, firing revolvers and rifles into the street. There was a rush of other riders out of the shadows. Men and horses thrashed around in the center of the street while clouds of dust billowed against the arcades.

All this was vague. Nothing was stable, nothing sure. The street between the two saloons was an arena,

the center of indescribable turmoil and confusion.

The dust cloud washed toward the hotel, rolling on like fire smoke. The young woman had ceased her struggles of her unlady-like position against the wall with Blake roughly pinning her there.

And then, out of the rolling cloud of dust, the running figure of a man appeared. He came sliding along the store fronts toward Blake and the girl, bending double as he ran, the glitter of a revolver in his hand.

Blake worked his own gun out from under his coat. He glimpsed the man's face through the haze—not a young face but mature of mouth and jaw; a rim of gray along the edges of black, tousled hair. The man was grinning. It was a reckless sun-scorched face, the black eyes and mouth stretched taut with the lust of the fighting.

Blake lifted his gun on the man, then held his fire, for the man whipped himself around and dove headlong into an alleyway.

Blake said to the girl, "I'll take you out of here!" And he grasped her by the arm and hurried her into the street. He didn't look at her because there was no time.

They had covered half the width of the street when a horse and rider came rushing at them out of the dust haze, the man in the saddle leaning forward, flogging the horse with the loose ends of his bridle reins.

Blake pushed the girl toward the yonder walk, took snap aim at the rider and fired one shot. The horse swung away violently, almost unseating its rider who grabbed hard at the saddle horn and saved himself.

Blake went on, seeing the girl near the hotel wall. "Here!" she cried to him. "Follow me!"

She turned and flung open one of the hotel's two doors, stepping off the street into darkness. Blake jumped through the doorway after her, and

closed the door, driving home the iron bolt.

IT WAS black in the room that smelled of lavender. Then a match spurted up its tiny flame. The girl held back a lamp chimney, touched the flame to the wick.

Ochre light flowed softly over the room's interior. Blake saw a spinet desk, a bed, a pair of easy chairs, curtains fluttering at a side window.

He put his gun away and took off his hat, seeing the girl as she turned to face him, seeing the striking quality of her prettiness—the brownish green eyes under arched brows, the long lashes, the full-curving lips, the complexion of her skin unsullied by powder or rouge.

She was excited. Her breasts lifted and fell to the quickness of her breathing. She gave him a long studying glance and, for a moment, he thought he saw faint mockery in her eyes. Then she said, "Well, thank you. There was no need for your action but it was nice having your concern."

The remark angered him a little, but he held his tongue, finishing his deliberate, if slightly rude inspection of her attributes.

Her dark dress, flaring in the skirt, tight in the bodice, was shaped to her form, clinging to the fullness of her upper body and to her hips.

But her sleek red-golden hair was glorious. In the lamp light behind her it seemed to pulsate, to grow and recede like a nimbus until the air around her head was suffused with radiance.

As she removed her black elbow length gloves, she gave him that long studying glance and, for a moment, some remark seemed balanced in her mind; then she shrugged her shoulders and only smiled. Her dress was cut square and showed the vital sweep of her throat and her shoulder tips.

Something in her eyes; something in that faintly mocking smile aroused the male in him. She had touched his

vanity with the approval implicit in her gaze. He knew this to be a fact and it made him smile his long tough smile.

Meanwhile the sounds of the fighting continued. Men ran the walks outside, the thud of their boots seeming almost in the room.

"I'm Sky Robson," she told him then. Her voice was modulated, soft. "I own this place. Sit down and smoke," she invited him. "Keep me company for a while."

Sky!

He lowered his lankness into one of the leather chairs, dipping his tobacco sack from his coat and beginning a cigarette, finally lighting it and saying, "An uneasy sort of town. Wild as a wolf den."

She nodded toward the street. "The usual condition in this town. They fight as easy as they breathe."

"Who's the old man with the white whiskers?" He leaned back, taking his moment of unaccustomed ease.

"Gustav Yeager, the leader of the basin cattlemen," she told him. "In his way, as much of an outlaw as Ben Luckinbill." She studied him with a speculative scrutiny. "If you remain here you will have to declare yourself," she said. "Nobody can stay in the middle."

"I judge you're able to," he reminded her, blandly.

She smiled, a remote change in her eyes, a darkening. "I am a woman. I have friends on both sides."

"A handy arrangement," he remarked. "Playin' one side against the other?"

"My father built this town," she told him coolly. "Once he controlled the country, too. Then he died and Luckinbill and Yeager took over the cattle range. They've split the basin into two camps."

"A lot of savages," he said. "Why does a woman live in such a jungle?"

"I own this inn. I must live, you know. Where else would I find a home and recognition?"

CHAPTER III

A FOOL, OR GREEN

HE SENSED depth in this woman. She would have the power of hatred as well as the power to love. She could be cold and aloof and she could be full of fire. She challenged the male in him, aroused within him a deep, restless hunger. He felt suddenly that she had dared him silently to break her composure, as if, weary of boredom, she desired release.

He heard her say, "You and your friend must be more careful. You were watched when you rode in to-night."

"By you, ma'am?"

"By others who have no trust in anyone." She was silent then, and they both fell to listening. The sounds of the fighting were fading, muffled to a whisper by the thick adobe walls of the inn. "You wonder about me," she told him softly, "and I wonder about you. Who you are. Why you're here."

"I see no reason to speak of it," he said shortly.

"It doesn't matter," she smiled again, but coolness was there in her tawny eyes. "But you should have come more cautiously."

"When I want something," he answered, "I come by the front door and ask for it."

"I judged that to be your style." She kept looking at him, studying his dark scarred face, approval of him growing in her glance. "What could possibly interest a man like you?"

Was she mocking him? He couldn't be sure but the steady scrutiny of her eyes stirred him to do a brash thing. He threw down his cigarette, crushed it in the bowl on the stand at his elbow. He came erect and went near her, very deliberate, very quiet. She faced him with that shadow of a smile.

He saw the veiled heaviness come

to her eyes, saw her head go back slowly. Her breasts lifted and fell with her quicker breathing.

He put both hands to her shoulders, then lowered them until they rested at her hips. He swayed her toward him and put his lips to hers.

Her mouth was vital, her body alive and vibrant, yielding and yet firm. He released her in sudden embarrassment. "I ask your pardon," he muttered. "The trail can make a man a fool."

"Is that the reason?" Her tone was oddly bitter.

"You pull a man against his will."

"As easy as that?" She watched him, waiting for him to speak.

He fought the impulse to seize her again in his arms.

She said again in a low tone, almost a whisper: "Why are you here?"

He turned from her without a word, lifted his hat from the bed, stepped to the door. When he had drawn the bolt, he looked at her again, lamp-light making the lines around his mouth and eyes seem deeper, stronger than before.

"I'll see you again," he said flatly, and he closed the door behind him, facing a darkened and deserted street. Within him was unrest and a deep-seated doubt, about the girl, about his own integrity.

But he knew one thing, if nothing else. The memory of Sky Robson, the passion of her embrace, would stay with him wherever he went and for the rest of his days.

HE GLANCED both ways along the quiet street, seeing nothing to warn him of danger. The lights from the windows of the adobes fell on the dusty street, now empty except for a scattering of ponies, patient and small, under their high wide-skirted saddles, and for one dim figure wandering and swaying through light and darkness under the galleried arcades.

He moved to mount his black road horse at the rack near the inn, then

caught the sandy scuff of boots behind him. His hand dropped under his coat as he turned, but it was only a bent old man who came toward him from the shadows beside the inn.

"Your friend," the old man said, words fizzing through toothless guns, "says to come and git your supper in the kitchen."

Blake shook his head. "Not this time. Tell him I'll be back."

"Stranger, don't let her make you proud." The oldster peered with a bright-eyed wisdom, a gray and seamy slyness on his face. "You're on'y one more apple in the bar'l. Sky's got others dancin' on her string. You lined up yet?"

"No, I'm not lined up," Blake answered curtly.

"I'm Rufe Greevy. I see a lot and know a lot," the old man wheezed. "You was in the Rawhide tonight. Nobuddy goes there that ain't lined up—with Luckinbill. Stranger, you'll never git old, like me."

"Why not?"

"You'll be dead. That's why."

Blake waved the remark away impatiently. He untied his bridle reins, pulled them over the black's head, and stepped over his saddle. "So long, old man," he said, and rode on out of town.

When the lights had dropped behind him he urged the black into a trot and, during the next hour, rode into the broad expanse of the basin, alternately trotting and walking.

Open range stretched before him at every hand, broken by the endless clumps of sage, by patches of timber and the darker growth along the streams.

But as the trail climbed to a higher level and the full moon rose above the snowy peaks, the timber thickened and soon he was riding under the pines.

It grew colder. Now he was in the Piutes, the range of rocky hills he and Giff had crossed earlier that day and had been unfavorably impressed

by the high timber-and-canyon-snarled region, not knowing that it was the range of a footless lot of cattlemen.

Over a low round shoulder along the edge of the pines, the pine needles sparkled with frost and, where moonlight fell in long slanting beams through the trunks, the pine straw shone like bronze. The black's hoofs made no sound on that thick carpet.

SINCE LEAVING the town he had been increasingly disturbed by his thoughts about Sky Robson, about Greevy, too, and the old man's warning. But uppermost in his mind was the memory of the dark rider he had encountered under the arcade during the fighting. He wondered if it had been Dade Marriner.

Neither he nor Giff had ever laid eyes on the man they trailed. All they had to go on was the description given them by the gold camp sawbones plus meager details gleaned from strangers to whom they had talked in recent weeks.

There was, of course, one sure identification—the heart and cupid's arrow tattooed on Marriner's chest. If they found a man with such a mark, they would have Dade Marriner. But finding a tattooed man posed an endless chain of problems, all of them concerned with time and patience and tenacity.

The moon rode high as he climbed higher into the Piutes, now moving through the tall black spruce, now skirting dense jumbles of brush and pines, aspen windfall, house-sized boulders from the higher slopes.

A canyon yawned blackly ahead. A white stream dropped from it, slashing down between the rock walls and vanishing in the lower timber. He stopped to water and blow his horse, and here thought he heard the scudding of other horses though the sounds were too remote to be located.

The canyon offered a sheltered spot to camp and wait. He led the black into its shadows, found a patch of swale. He unstrapped bedroll and

bags, off-saddled and put the horse on picket to graze.

He moved back near the canyon's mouth, spread out his bedroll, made a meal of dry biscuit and dried beef, washed it down with the creek's cold water, and lay down to rest. An idea occurred to him and he rose again and gathered wood from a great tangle of blow-downs in the canyon.

He built a fire larger than his need for warmth, and lay down again, head on his saddle, watching the fire, lulled by its spreading heat.

Through an uneasy drowse, broken as it was by strain and weariness, he heard the sudden clear strike of a horseshoe on stone.

He was fully awake, fully alert, and he listened with every sense, hearing at once the sighing grunting breaths of a climbing horse.

He threw off his blanket and reached for his rifle, flicking a cartridge into the magazine, his interest and caution rising together. He kicked a few pine branches into the fire for more light, then pulled back into the deeper darkness.

A VOICE called sharply beyond the canyon's mouth. "Hullo, camp!" It was a female voice!

He answered, "Ride in," and stood with his rifle lifted, puzzled to see a girl on a sorrel pony draw in out of the shadows.

She sat, staring across the fire, her hands resting on her saddle horn to prove the friendly nature of her visit but there was nothing friendly about her expression.

She was young. She wore a woolen shirt under a leather coat, and corduroy riding breeches, her head hatless. In the orange glow of the flames, her narrow face had a grim quality. Her black eyes were grim under straight black brows. Blake saw the severity, not pretty, of black hair parted in the middle like an Indian's, and drawn too tightly away from her temples.

He saw the primitive line of her throat, the cruel angle of the cheek-

bones, the bitter austerity of mouth and chin; and heard the cool insolence of her voice saying across the fire, "Saddle up and come with me."

He knew she had not come here alone and pictured three or four riders waiting in the moonlight beyond the stream. "Better tell me who you are," he suggested evenly.

"Never mind," she said sharply. "Ben Luckinbill wants to talk with you."

He kicked another pine branch into the fire, his rifle lowered but at full cock. She had stared at him intently as he left the shadows. Now she curled her mouth scornfully.

"You're either a fool or green. You stay off the trails all night, then make a fire to give you away."

He said, "How'd you know I stayed off the trails?"

"Clegg, our segundo, followed you from town."

He eyed her coldly. "You're Luckinbill's daughter?"

She gave him a harsh excuse for a laugh. "Sal—his wife." Watching him intently, she added, "Get your horse."

"Maybe I will. Where we goin'?"

"To the spread. You've heard of Hat Ranch?"

He shook his head.

"You're new all right." She weighed him with her eyes. "And no doubt on the run, like Ben said."

"Maybe I'm just ridin'."

He turned and made up his bedroll, lifted saddle and cantinenses, and gave the fire a sideways kick that sent the burning sticks into the stream, and went after his black. When he came back on the saddle, she seemed relieved.

He'd been right about her having company. There were three riders waiting back under the pines, their faces indistinct in the darkness. Sal led the way on her sorrel. They turned deeper into the timber and, within the half hour, raised lights out of the hills ahead.

The hoofs of the party thudded

across a meadow whose dead and dying grass looked tawny in the moonlight. They pulled into a bare ranch yard that held a log house, a stable, a scattering of shed-like buildings, a peeled-pole corral behind whose rails a dozen saddle ponies moved and nickered a welcome.

Blake saw the dim shapes of men near the stable, saw others in the shadows under the house's deep gallery. He dismounted and strolled beside the woman toward those on the veranda. There were three of them, taking their ease, chairs tipped back against the logs.

Sal brought Blake before Luckinbill whose face showed as a dim disk in the darkness. "Here he is," she said shortly. "But why you'd want such a fool is beyond me."

"Never mind, Sal," the ranchman said snappishly. To Blake, he said in an almost friendly tone, "Set down. Time we got better acquainted, don't you think?"

Blake said with mild scorn, "Why send a woman on a man's job?"

Luckinbill laughed softly. "You'd have taken a pot shot at a man, that's why."

Blake said in a lightly provoking tone, "Maybe I wouldn't let petticoats stop me."

THE LANK man ignored the remark. "Let's put our cards on the table. Is this Marriner you asked about, a friend of yours?"

Blake nodded, dropping into the barrel chair the other had kicked out from the wall. He was glad to dispose of the question as simply as that. He was more than relieved to see that Luckinbill was ready to accept the explanation.

Luckinbill curtly introduced him to the two men near him. "John Clegg, my ramrod." He indicated a compactly solid figure with a poker face. "On the right, Sam Ogden, my horse wrangler."

Blake felt the pressure of their

stares as Sal Luckinbill left them, fading back into the big dim house.

"Half of my outfit is on the run," the ranchman said succinctly. "You ought to feel at home. What's your summer name?"

"They call me Slim."

"Slim," drawled Luckinbill, "if there's a man named Marriner in the basin, it's news to me." When Blake said nothing he went on severely, "I need men, all I can round up. There's a riding job on Hat if you want it."

"At gun wages?"

"You'll find me fair. More than fair. When things work out for me you'll get your pick of a piece of basin range and enough cows to start your own outfit, if you want 'em."

"Sounds like a big deal."

"It's big enough," Luckinbill answered shortly. "I like the way you handled yourself in town. At first I took you for a federal officer. Glad to learn you ain't. But you're a scraper and I need men with nerve."

"Don't hooraw me, Luckinbill."

The other gave him an affronted stare, then murmured, "Well, how do we stand?"

"You've hired a man," said Blake.

"One other matter," Luckinbill said after a pause. "What about that hombre you were with in town tonight?"

"Man I met on the trail. He's ridin' through."

Luckinbill seemed satisfied with the explanation. But his next demand destroyed Blake's feeling of assurance.

"What were you doing with the Robson girl? You were seen with her at the inn."

"Your boys played hell," Blake said curtly. "I got the woman to leave the street while the shootin' was going on."

"A fair answer, Slim. But stay away from town unless I give you the word." He turned to the rider on his right. "Ogden, take him to the dice-house. See his horse gets grained. See he gets his coffee. Show him his bunk." He detained Blake long enough

to add, "In my absence you'll take your orders from John Clegg."

Blake nodded taciturnly, then followed Sam Ogden off the gallery. As they walked around the corner to a pineplank extension that had been slapped against one end of the house, Ogden said admiringly, "Seen you bat Ed Quarles. Had to laugh."

"It was funny?"

"Yep. Looked as easy as knockin' bottles off a fence. I've watched Quarles bust all a man's ribs with one hug. You had some guts to tackle him, Slim."

"No more'n average. Trick's to hit fast and first. Quarles is slower'n a spring thaw."

"You batted out his pet gold tooth."

The rail-thin rider had a kind of wary affability. Blake liked him. In the bunk-house, Ogden showed him his bunk and a row of pegs for his gear. "That's Quarles' shakedown yonder," he pointed out. "Good you ain't got him behind you or overhead."

"I sleep light."

"On Hat," said Ogden, "you do it with an eye open."

Blake put the question then. "How many outfits up here in the Putes?"

"Three. Hat, Anchor, Skull," the man replied. "Against three in the basin. We got 'em outnumbered now. Orter be as easy as spittin' down wind. 'Fore snow flies, Ben says, we'll have 'em runnin' down the trail, or settin' up on their hind laigs beggin' for bones."

They went back to the corral where Blake off-saddled and fed his black from the feed bag Ogden brought out from the stable. Toting his gear back, Blake said, "Much obliged."

Ogden laid a hand on his arm. "Keep clear of Sal. She's pizen with the stopper out. And Ben's got her in place of his blood."

"She Indian? She looks it."

"Part. Ben got her down near the Pache reservation, they tell it. Her mother was half Injun, her old man a rum-runnin' renegade. She's a spit-

cat, Slim; got sparks in her claws."

They went on to the bunk-house where Blake stowed his gear. Then Ogden showed him the kitchen door. "Coffee's on the stove. Any time you want some, he'p yo'rself."

CHAPTER IV

"YOU OUGHT TO BE KILLED!"

BLAKE FOUND Sal Luckinbill working in the low-beamed room that smelled of greasewood smoke and Mexican cookery. She stood at the big black range, stirring a kettle of chili and beef.

As Blake ducked his hat to clear the low outside doorway, the woman glanced around at him, then went back to her stirring. She didn't look at him again until he had reached a cup down from the shelf above the stove. Then she said, "Sugar's in a bowl on the table."

He filled his cup from the blackened coffee pot, and sat down at the table with its coal oil lamp and green shade. He rolled himself a cigarette, waiting for the scalding drink to cool. Then, suddenly, she was before him, leaning across the table, with both hands upon it, so near he could see the texture of her skin and the droplets of perspiration along her upper lip. The green lamp shade gave her olive complexion a ghastly look. Her black eyes were narrowed and intense.

"Do you always sit and never say anything?" she demanded in a quarrelsome voice.

She hung over the table, sullen, fierce, unknowable.

"How do I know," she said flatly, harshly, "you aren't a spy Gus Yeager sent to lay a trap?"

He met the coldness in her eyes impassively. He said nothing.

"Ben's a fool," she whispered. "You're not like the others." She raked him with her gaze as he suspected she would like to rake him with her finger nails. "They're drifters

and high-line riders and fly-by nights. You're different."

"Maybe," he suggested in his dry drawl, "you consider your judgment's sounder than Ben's."

"I know it is. But how do you know Ben don't agree with me? How do you know somebody won't stick a knife between your ribs some night?" "If 'somebody' means you," he told her, "I'd be expectin' it."

She whipped straight, rigidly facing him, a whiplash curl to her mouth.

"You ought to be killed!" she said.

He thought grimly: *How could any man handle her?*

Then he noted a change come over her features. She smiled down at him thinly. The smile, though not pretty or genuine, softened the hard mask of her face a bit.

"I'm sorry I used the rough edge of my tongue on you," she said. "I've got a temper, Slim."

He was in complete agreement with the truth of that remark, but not ready to lower his reserve for fear of a tantrum that might bring Hat piling down his neck.

Then she said something that took him off guard and made him stare. She murmured, "Slim, maybe I know the man you're looking for."

Recovering, he felt a surge of elation. He was silent a moment, then drawled, "Dade Marriner?"

"Not the name he's using now." She watched him coolly, shrewd speculation in her eyes. "But he's here—in the basin. I can tell you where."

"Why don't you?" he inquired as gently as he could.

"Before I do," she said slowly, distinctly, "I want a promise from you."

He waited, disciplining himself to silence, to seeming indifference.

"I want your promise you'll leave the country if I tell."

His mind worked swiftly with the meaning behind that. Then he said, easily, "Why be afraid of me, Sal?"

She tightened her mouth, the smile fading. "I will say this," she told him

coldly, "and nothing more. I expect some time to be running Hat, running every outfit in the basin. When that day comes I don't want men like you around."

THERE WAS a compliment implied in her words but he wasn't quite sure what it meant. "All right," he said gravely, "I'll leave within twelve hours if you'll say where I can find Marriner."

"Break your word and I'll have you shot!" she snapped.

She sure would, he thought. He nodded, indicating assent.

Real relief flowed over her rigid face. She said, "I'll tell you later. Not tonight. Meet me here after supper tomorrow."

Blake tried to detain her but she wheeled and left the kitchen. He had no idea how she had come by her knowledge of Marriner or whether she had been lying for a reason of her own; but at that moment he didn't care. He had been thrown off center by the woman, puzzled and angered and uncertain.

When he returned to the bunk-house and entered it through the open doorway, he saw three men seated beside the plank table, intent on a hand of draw poker. One of these was Sam Ogden, another the giant Quarles. Three Hat hands lay on their bunks and one of these men was the foreman Clegg. They watched him curiously, even inimically.

But the red-jowled Quarles, whose mouth showed a bruise the color of crushed blackberries, threw down his cards and sat back, openly staring at Blake who went to his bunk and sat down upon its edge.

Blake sat with elbows propped on his knees, crouched forward, his hat low, his gray eyes steady on the men at the table. His face showed a bleak impassivity.

It was Clegg who said gruffly: "Slim, you'll get your orders tomorrow. Ben said to let you sleep tonight."

Blake gestured assent, then leaning back on his bunk, thrusting his hat far back and feeling for papers and tobacco sack, still quietly watching the men by the table.

Ed Quarles' concurrent behavior was significant. The big man gently pushed his chair back, slowly swung his gaze around the bare untidy room, then put his glance again on Blake.

He stared at Blake with a beady-eyed steadiness, his cut lips turning with the look of tasting something bad.

Blake sighed, "All right, bucko." He threw down the makings impatiently and came slowly to his feet.

Quarles made a growling sound deep in his throat. He stood up massively, arms swinging club-like beside him. Ogden and the second rider laid down their cards, got up and wandered out of range, clearing the center of the room except for table and chairs.

Blake sauntered toward Quarles who faced him with open hatred and suspicion. On Blake's face was a somber look of boredom, almost an indifference. Then he sauntered no longer.

REACHING the table, he jabbed down abruptly and tipped the table against Quarles' legs. Quarles jerked out bottle of his hands to knock the table out of his way, but Blake flung it away with a crash, then jumped at the other man.

He hit Quarles stingingly on the jaw, knocked the man into a backward stagger. Quarles looked amazed, then furious. With a snarl, he lowered his head and charged back, both arms reaching wide, the right one swinging like a windmill.

Blake struck out again, clubbing the man in the temple. Quarles stumbled against a chair. His boots tangled with the rungs and he fell with the chair, crashing down on the floor.

Blake saw the man roll clear, saw the right hand stab down after the holstered gun on his hip. Blake

stepped forward with a reaching stride and crushed a boot heel down on Quarles' wrist. Quarles howled with agony.

Quarles rolled suddenly against Blake's legs, trying to upset him. Blake dropped straight down, ramming both of his knees into the big man's groin. Quarles cried out in his pain and rolled the other way.

Blake got back to his feet, waiting, a look of grim mastery on his face. He watched Quarles come up off the floor with a lunge. The man dove at him from a low, bent-over crouch, springing suddenly at Blake's middle with reached-out arms and clawing hands.

Blake led him close, then took a step forward as Quarles' powerful arms seized him about the hips and then Blake brought his right knee up savagely into the man's lowered face. The blow mashed against Quarles' nose and cheekbones and he toppled backward to the floor as though sledgehammered. He lay on his back, gasping, sobbing for breath and, after a while, he rubbed the back of a hand across his mouth and nose and stared with glazed eyes at the streak of blood he had drawn away.

The others in the bunkhouse were watching the door when Blake turned around. Blake discovered Sal Luckinbill looking in from the yard. On her dark face was an expression of purest pleasure. Shocked by that look, Blake knew she had been watching the fight from the start. He stared at her, saying rancorously, "Sal, a bunkhouse is no place for a woman!"

She waved it away scornfully, wheeled and disappeared.

"She ain't no ways human," exclaimed Sam Ogden. "By God, she ain't!"

Blake had breakfast next morning with part of the crew in the mess shack adjoining the kitchen. No one paid him any attention, and even Quarles ignored him.

The meal finished, all hands went out into the flashing sunlight of a

mountain morning. Ben Luckinbill was waiting on the saddle of his claybank in the yard. He showed the men no affability whatever. He made a cold and distant figure on his horse, a man lost in a world of his own dark thoughts. He lifted a hand with a strange, stiff upward jerk and brought it down against his knee.

"We've got to look for a raid from the basin crowd," he told them. "But I'm ready for it. Once we get 'em in the hills, we can mow 'em down." He singled John Clegg out of the gathered crew. "Relieve the night guards and make sure there's a man with the cattle. I'm heading for Skull and a powwow with Carney. Be back late afternoon."

"What about Slim?" Clegg wanted to know.

Luckinbill glanced absently at Blake. "Send him up to the Rocks," he ordered, "with grub for a week. I'll decide later where he'll fit in best."

BLAKE FELT anger. Luckinbill's command upset his plans. They meant he would be unable to meet Sal as he had promised, therefore would not hear the news of Marriner's whereabouts. He had to admit that Luckinbill couldn't have arranged things better if he had wanted to isolate Blake permanently from the others at headquarters. The thought awakened in him the feeling that he *had* walked into a trap. But he couldn't be sure.

With the ranchman's departure, the crew scattered to saddle and cinch up for the day's work. Blake ranged across the yard to the corral and cut his black out of the bunch of ponies behind the rails.

Ogden joined him a while later. The thin rider led a fully loaded pack horse behind his dun. Blake, in the saddle, commented sourly, "Got enough stuff in that pack to last a man a month."

Ogden scratched under his stained hat brim, an unlit cigarette hanging

from his mouth. "We had a man up on the Rocks a while last winter. He got snowed in and nearly starved to death."

"Where's this place they're sendin' me?" Blake asked coldly.

"Up yonder." Ogden waved vaguely to the west. "Two hours ride about." He grinned at Blake's bleak look, explaining, "You can see fifty mile with a glass. If the basin outfits head our way you'll see their dust an hour before they hit us."

"A fat lot of good I'd do if I spot that."

"Relays," the thin man said. "Smoke signals, jes' like the 'Paches. You'll send one up and somebuddy here'll see 'em. They'll tell Luckinbill and he'll send the word to the others. We'll have forty riders waitin' for Yeager's crowd when they show up."

They left the ranch flats and went up over a twisted trail through the flanking pines and spruce, climbing steadily over the barrenness of a broken rock ridge farther west. Within twenty minutes they were riding over what seemed to be a gigantic devil's slide.

The place called the Rocks was high up on the highest tier of timbered hills some five miles from the Hat headquarters. They reached the shelving table shortly before noon after a steady climb that soaked men and horses with a lather of sweat despite the chill of the rarefied atmosphere.

Sheltered on two sides by the caprock, the cabin sat in a dense jumble of second growth pines and spruce, aspens and upended ledges of red sandstone. It faced a breath-taking view to the east of the Shekomeko valley, blue distances of lakes, streams, prairies, and the far range of snow-capped peaks.

Behind the cabin was a crude corral of poles, a stand of black spruce, a caved-in stack of baled hay that was partly covered by a weathered tarp.

While Ogden unloaded the pack

pony, Blake corraled his black, hung the saddle in a rear lean-to, and began his inspection of the cabin's interior. It consisted of a single room, floorless and dank with the musty smell of all closed buildings. The two windows were paneless, boarded over, the shutters spiked to the logs. There was a pair of bunks along one wall, a rusty stove, a deal table and two chairs; a shelf holding tin plates, cups; and several pans dangling from nails; a smoke-blackened coffee pot and a big frying skillet sat upon the stove lids.

Ogden came in with an armful of groceries, a dog-like grin on his face. "You're goin' to have a lot of nuthin' much to do to take up time," he commented. He handed Blake a set of binoculars in a leather case. "Here's yo'r eyes."

Blake, feeling sour and sorry for himself, took the glasses and flung them on a bunk. But he brightened almost at once. What was there to prevent his leaving this god-forsaken place any night he chose was the way he finally reasoned. A three-hour ride would bring him in town for a gab with Giff at the inn. Another idea occurred to him.

Expressing it involved some risk but he felt somehow that he could trust Ogden. He had to chance it anyway. He said, smiling at the man to disarm him: "A favor, Sam. Tell Sal I'm rememberin' our talk."

Ogden wore a sudden scared look. "Hol' on!" he stammered. "Whut'd I tell you about that *dulce*? You ain't gone an'—" He broke off, sighing, "By God, you have!"

"Just say," Blake continued blandly, "maybe I'll be down to see her tomorrow night, around midnight maybe. Tell her to wait back of the corral in the trees. Tell her on the quiet, will you, Sam?"

"Ben would skin my hide and hang yours up to dry if he found it out!" gasped the other man. But he saw Blake's grin and he had to grin himself, thinly. "You shore have got the

guts for anythin'! All right, I'll try an' tell her, Slim."

CHAPTER V

MAN NAMED MARTINE

WHEN HE had gone riding back down the rock slide, Blake finished stowing the stores. He chopped firewood, gathered green pine for the smudge hole out front, cooked himself a quick meal, then hunkered down outside on a flat stone, with the binoculars sweeping the basin far below. He remained there all afternoon, smoking, watching, thinking.

When the sun dropped behind the pines at his back and night's chill edged in off the sullen rocks, he rose and threw hay to his gelding and the pack horse, then went inside the cabin to build a fire.

He was feeling almost cheerful, warming himself at the stove, when he heard a sound. Outside the cabin something stirred among the rocks.

He jerked his head up, turning away from the stove, alert and listening. His revolver and belt hung from a nail near one of the bunks. His rifle was nearest; it lay on the pile of blankets and supplies near the table.

Two candles set in the necks of bottles on the table flickered as he bent and lifted the rifle. He brought his head around and whiffed out both candles, standing in darkness, still listening.

He went to the door and drew back the wooden bar, pulling the door inward slowly, cautiously. The hinges groaned faintly. In the clearing was a blackness like that of eternity before creation.

He stepped softly through the doorway, moving to the cabin's corner. A figure was there, a slight figure that slid toward him along the logs. He raised the rifle, saying, "Got you in my sights! Stand out where I can see you!"

The figure stiffened, then moved

out from the wall and came toward him unhurriedly. Peering down the rifle barrel, he recognized Sal Luckinbill.

Her face was indistinctly seen in the darkness but there was no mistaken the slender shape in leather coat and riding pants, a flat-crowned hat topping her black hair.

She came before him, her shoulders back, chin high, and he could only guess what was in her eyes. "A mighty risky thing to do, isn't it?" he growled.

"Are you going to make me stand out here?" Her voice was sharply critical.

He motioned toward the door that stood ajar. She entered the cabin ahead of him. He caught the scent of a strange perfume, a musky scent he remembered from somewhere in the past. He placed his rifle back on the pile of supplies and raked a match on the table top, lighting the candles.

She faced him when he turned around. Her eyes held the shine of something—maybe plain excitement. He wasn't quite sure what it was. He said, "Where's your horse?" in a casual tone to show her his mind was not concerned only with the reason for her visit.

Her mouth tightened visibly. "Down under the rocks," she answered coolly. Then, deliberately, she unbuttoned her coat and dropped it over one of the chairs, loosened the chin thongs of her hat and flung it on the nearest bunk. She kept eyeing him strangely.

And at that moment, seeing that look, he knew why she had come. All the protesting voices of conscience and morality could not have convinced him otherwise. He said, roughly: "Won't your husband be missin' you?"

SHE CAME a step closer, one hand resting on the table. Her wide cheekbones, the slightly slanting eyes, the curve of her throat, the primitive lips, gave her the look of belonging here in this wild country.

"Why worry about Ben?" she asked in the critical tone she had used before. "I go where I please and when I please."

"So?" He was troubled inwardly, faintly uneasy. Then: "Did Ogden tell you?"

"Yes, but you are a fool to trust him. He is no sounder than the rest of them."

"Let me be the judge of that," he said softly.

She inched a bit closer, her hand still on the table top, her black eyes steadily held to his. She was smiling.

All right, he thought grimly, Let's see how far she'll go.

Her lips were parted, and the look on her face was a promise, an outright invitation. In her slightly narrowed eyes was clear surrender.

He had been kissed before in deceit and betrayal and had no attention of losing his head again in such a madness. He was sure that she detested him, perhaps feared him too. Why this was so he had only the vaguest of opinions, and he didn't care very much anyway.

He made no move to seize her in his arms as he knew she fully expected. He kept looking at her, tall and taciturn, almost indifferent.

A flicker of passion crossed her features. She stiffened before him, her lips compressed to a straight thin line. He had humiliated her with his refusal of a kiss, and he knew what was said of a woman scorned. Pale fury burned at him from her eyes and he guessed she would have shot him if she had a gun.

He knew he had been wrong in so bluntly repulsing her and tried to undo the damage lest she might leave without telling him what he wanted to know. He hardened the line of his mouth with a smile and said as gently as he could, "You should have let me take the risks. Your comin' up here this time of night might ruin everything for me."

His change of manner and tone puzzled her. She watched his face,

probing for an answer, her anger visibly diminishing. She told him harshly: "I came to tell you what you want to know about that Mar-riner. I came tonight because it may be too late tomorrow."

He shrugged. "Maybe you better tell and then ride home." He tried to keep urgency out of his voice but she caught its undertone.

Her eyes turned triumphantly wise, as though suddenly she understood something not clear about him before. Then she blurted, "His name is Martine—Dave Martine."

He waited, and when she fell strangely silent, he said sharply, "Tell it all!"

The slyness came to her eyes. "Maybe I'd be a fool to tell you."

He cursed himself for his ineptness. He tried a shot in the dark. "Why are you afraid of me, Sal?"

She laughed shortly at that, saying, "I'm afraid of no one, but I know what I want." In a sudden burst of confidence, she added, "I'll boss this range soon. And when I take Hat over I mean to have men behind me I can handle. You're not that kind."

He couldn't help a thrust. "What about Ben? He goin' to step down for you?"

"Men have a way of dying in this country. You've seen that."

He hadn't bargained for that and it startled him, turned him cold. He saw her in that moment, saw her naked of all pretence, a cold-blooded woman without scruples or mercy, a female with ambition for power and a ruthless disregard for any humane impulse, to whom even killing could be justified.

IT LEFT him at loss for words, left him numbly staring into those cold eyes. He had, he knew, been thrown off balance by her sudden frankness and, in trying to pump information from her, had done little more than confound himself.

He made one more try. "Let's have

all of it. I'll keep my part of the bargain."

She watched him with a dark and speculative stare. "All right," she breathed, "I'll tell you what you want to know."

He fought his eagerness and impatience, forcing composure to his eyes.

"Martine rides for Gus Yeager," she told him. "I knew him before he left the basin two years ago. Used to meet him now and then. We understood each other pretty well. He was a dogie-man then, ran a sticky rope outfit in the Short Hills. Then he had to leave the country for a while. He came back three days ago and Yeager hired him for his gun."

"How do you know he's the man I call Marriner?"

She gave him her hard-mouthed smile. "He's got a tattoo on his chest—a heart and arrow. Is that enough?"

Blake looked at her, believing now, turned grim by the knowledge she had given him so callously.

"I saw him in town this afternoon." Her face held a frozen tension now but she kept her voice low, saying: "He's having a spree with a couple of Yeager's men. And they'll be drinking all night. You'll find him either at the Blue Hole or at the inn."

He said sharply, "The inn?"

She laughed. "Sure. He's been rushing the woman who runs the place."

He kept staring, bracing himself against her as against evil. He did not speak again. And then he turned his back to her, walked to the stove. He was lifting lids, throwing wood in the firepot, when he heard her leave. Glancing around toward the open door, he saw that he was again alone.

Blake sat before the hot stove a long time after Sal had gone, his head buried in deep thought. He intended giving her an hour's headstart before saddling his horse and heading across the hills to Fronteriza. Journey's end, he felt, was near at hand. Fulfillment of his pact with Giff was close; and within a matter of hours they would

be moving north through the Rockies on their way home.

He made up a cigarette while he waited out the time he had allotted himself and when he had smoked it down to a butt, he rolled another. He was about to light his third when he heard sudden movement behind him. The door groaned. Frozen fast to his chair, he sat a second with the cigarette unlit in his mouth.

Then he moved his head in a three-quarter turn and was staring into the bronzed quiet face of Ben Luckinbill!

THE LANK rancher's body was blocked against outer blackness. On his meager lips was the coolest, the calmest of smiles. He held a revolver in his hand, the long barrel angling toward Blake, the hollowed-out hole of its muzzle only a stride away.

Blake never moved. Blood emptied out of his heart, rushing away through his arteries and veins, leaving a cold void inside of him. He did not move for a long time. He could not move.

Then Luckinbill spoke, his tone unhurried, soft even: "Where's Sal?"

To deny was futile; so was trying to get at his rifle or revolver. Blake knew it. He knew that he was as good as dead as he said, "She left a half hour ago."

"Too bad," sighed the tall man. "Figured I'd be in time to catch her here. She must've gone back through the Chimneys."

Blake made a dismal last attempt to save himself. "It ain't the way you figure it," he said in a dreary tone.

Luckinbill's smile stretched thinner. "Nice of you," he drawled, "to speak a good word for Sal. She'd thank you if she could."

"How'd you know she came up here?" Blake said bleakly.

A cold flame flickered behind Luckinbill's eyeballs. "Sam Ogden told me."

Blake licked dry lips. So Sam had sold him out?

"Had to bust his arm to make him talk," said the other sparely.

Blake saw the gun in Luckinbill's hand move as the man thumbed the hammer back with an oily click. He thought, *Well, here it comes.* Then, strangely: *Wonder if Giff'll ever know.*

Luckinbill seemed to have read his mind. The tall man said, "Your pardner's dead. Somebody shot him in town tonight."

That knocked the wind out of Blake in a short hard gust. After a silence, he said in an icy voice, "Who did it?"

"One of Yeager's boys. Man named Martine. You know him?" he ended with a swift surprised demand.

"I know him," Blake answered tonelessly. Then with a slow-drawn breath: "Mind if I light this smoke?"

"You ain't got that much time," said Luckinbill with his steady smile.

Blake saw the trigger finger begin to tense.

Time stood still, then across the twilight of Blake's consciousness, flickered light. The pale flash seemed everywhere and then came the rifle shot.

Time began again as the iron echo of the shot impinged itself on Blake's sensibilities, and he left the chair with a piston-driven lunge, reaching out to sweep the candles off the table.

Activated by his own reflexes, he was only vaguely aware of what had happened; and even before his hand swept back to strike at the bottles he saw, as in slow-motion, a peculiar thing.

He saw Luckinbill's head rise with a jerk as though the rifle report had been delayed in reaching his ears. The man frowned, drawing his lips into a bloodless knot. But then he was falling into the room. His shoulders cupped forward; a spasm crossed his face. His revolver slipped from his hand and, as his face passed downward through the candle-light, it

seemed almost serene, then his body struck the floor.

As the body thudded down, Blake's hand swiped both candles and bottles off the table top, and darkness plunged around him. There was a momentary silence, a quiet of stunned ears and numbed wits, and then he was groping for his rifle, lifting the weapon and jumping against the nearest wall, accomplishing all this with a single motion.

He knew nothing except that he was alive. The knowledge sang through him wildly. He slid to the door, raising the rifle on the outer blackness, waiting for a revealing sound in the clearing. None came. Nothing happened.

After what seemed a safe interval, he went into the clearing and made a careful search. He turned up nothing. Returning to the cabin, he lit a candle and went down on a knee beside Luckinbill.

He felt no emotion whatever as he stared at the gray still mask that had been a face. Rising away from the body, he went around gathering up his things. Now he felt a great sureness, a certainty of hope and determination, and a grim belief that Sal Luckinbill had fired the shot.

Remembering the woman's icy calmness in mentioning the demise of her husband as a likelihood convinced him that she had struck her first blow for control of Hat and of the basin.

Outside again, saddling up his horse in the corral, he considered Luckinbill's statement about the death of Giff Downes. He felt heartsick at the thought but the feeling was tempered by the chance that Ben had lied deliberately in an effort to pile torment on torture and to gloat upon his victim's suffering. Luckinbill had been that brutal a man.

Leaving the pack pony behind the rails, he thought: *He'd drift for the home corral and bring 'em on the run. And they'll swear I killed Luckinbill!*

CHAPTER VI

THE WAY MEN DIE

TURNING the black down across the rock slide through total darkness, he tried to add up what things seemed sure. The first was that, if Sal had shot her husband in the back, she had fled to prevent Blake from identifying her as a murderess. The second probability was that this action, too, had been deliberate: that she had saved his life, not by accident, but by design, knowing that he would be thought the killer and would be compelled to make a run for it.

It scared him though, just thinking about a how close a call he'd had. Sal might have held her fire a second too long. Death had looked him in the face even as she had drawn a bead on Luckinbill.

Riding a horse down that devil's rock slide was tricky work in the dark but, by the time he had descended a hundred yards along the face of the slide, the moon rose above the timber and was a help.

He turned through the pines on the lower slopes and skirted Hat's headquarters two or three miles to the west, not wanting to stumble over one of the nighthawk guards or a line camp.

Twice during the ensuing two hours, he thought he had lost himself in the dense jungles of brush and slabrock, deep in those untamed hills; but along toward eleven o'clock by the moon he crossed over the basin's lower reaches and came to a north-and-south-running trail. He turned north and soon raised the lights of Fronteriza on the sagebrush plain ahead.

He rode into the main street, feeling the need for haste yet holding in check that feeling. Though anxiety over Giff kept prodding him, his habit of strict self-discipline made him

deliberate in his every act. He dismounted in the street's extreme shadows, tying the black near a darkened adobe, and moving on toward the trading center of the town.

As he had foreseen, most of the settlement's noise and light came from the two saloons. There was a group of saddle ponies at the racks in front of both cribs, though the street, for the most part, was empty, the dwellings in somnolent darkness.

Even the inn seemed deserted until, approaching along the walk, he saw dim light within its dining room. He was about to enter it when he heard a soft voice hail him.

He turned, guard rising, and saw a dim figure moving toward him from the line-up of ponies along the rail. The man limped and seemed familiar somehow. Then he recognized Sam Ogden.

The rail-thin man came close, peering, uneasy. "My Gawd!" he said with hollow-voiced alarm. "Thought I was seein' things! They said you was daid!"

Blake was startled. He saw the man's cut mouth and bruised cheekbones, the swollen eyes, the left arm held in a bandana sling across his chest.

"Dead? Who told you that?"

"Ed Quarles did. He come back to the ranch braggin' he'd drove yo'r tack fer you!"

"Quarles said that?" Blake stared in utter befuddlement.

"Always claimed he don't know beans from lightnin' bugs. Now I know he's off his haid!"

BLAKE WAS beginning to understand something and it didn't make much sense, was almost too improbable to believe. Forgetting about Giff Downes for the moment, he demanded harshly, "Who pounded your face and broke your arm?"

"Luckinbill," Ogden told him in a nerved-up way. He winced at the

memory. "Had to ride here so's the doc could set my arm. But whut happened, Slim? Why ain't you daid?"

"Did Luckinbill leave the spread after he beat you up?"

"Right off. And Quarles pulled out a half hour later."

"Did Quarles know where Ben was headin'?"

"Nobuddy but me knowed that." Ogden peered strangely. "Whut you drivin' at, Slim?"

"Nothing," Blake replied, "Only Ben got a bullet in the back that was meant for me. Figured Sal had done it, but it was Quarles."

Ogden stared, mouth sagging. "Ben kilt?" Then he moaned, "Slim, you sure?"

Blake told him, explaining in a few words what he thought had happened at the cabin, as much for his own understanding as for Ogden's. Quarles, he figured, had ridden up the trail behind Luckinbill, not knowing his boss was ahead of him. He had reached the clearing in time to see the rancher standing in the cabin doorway, silhouetted against candlelight. He had shot Luckinbill in the back, believing he had squared his grudge against Blake.

Blake was certain now that Sal had gone back to the ranch. He was sure, in the light of what Ogden had told him, that the dim-witted Quarles had fired and run, unaware of whom he had killed.

Ogden was quaking with fear. "Now whut's gonna happen? If Sal's in the saddle she'll have me gutted and hung for meat!"

Blake agreed with the truth of that guess. "I warned you to speak with her alone."

"Tol' her whut you said in the kitchen when I got back. But Ben must'a been list'nin'. He collared me outside the house and slugged me."

Blake said, "Sam, it's goin' to get mighty warm 'round here for you and me."

Ogden was a badly frightened man. "Me? I'm makin' some far apart tracks." He pointed toward the line-up of ponies. "My eyes is so swole I kin hardly see to ride, but I'm goin' to drag it fast!"

Blake watched him limp off hurriedly, feeling momentary regret, knowing that he had been responsible for the man's predicament. He would genuinely feel Ogden's loss for there had been a warmth in him, a kind of plaintive gentleness.

INSIDE the inn, Blake found only dim lamplight shining on deserted tables, and complete silence. Weaving between tables and chairs, he ranged toward a slivver of light he saw below the kitchen door.

When he kicked open the door and stepped into brighter light, he saw Rufe Greevy squatting on a stool near the stove, plaiting a salt-and-pepper maguey with round-shouldered intentness. As Blake's spurs came clanking in, the old man peered around and up and said, "Oh, you? Wondered if you'd ever make it."

"Where's Giff?"

"Meanin' yo'r pard? He got hisself shot up a while ago."

Blake opened his mouth to ask the dreaded question. The old man answered it before it was spoken. "He'll pull through, the doc says. Sky's got him in bed." He jerked a thumb toward another door. "Thataway. Go on in, you wanten."

A load of worry rolled off Blake's back. He blew out a breath of relief. "Old-timer, this calls for a drink. Got a bottle in the house?"

"Kin fetch one from the saloon," grinned Greevy.

Blake threw him a silver dollar, and went down a corridor toward a slit of light beneath another door.

His spurs announced his coming, and the door swung open as he reached for the latch. Sky Robson stood before him, welcome like warm light in her eyes.

"Hullo," she greeted him and stood aside.

He was immediately aware of the power she had to stir him. Hers was the strength so seldom found, the quality of steadiness so striking in a woman. It was like a hidden well-spring, a sweetness that, once tasted, will draw men through danger and hardship. It was a mystery, like honey drawing bees.

As she smiled, something passed between them that needed no words to express. She took his arm and led him into the room's bright light. He heard labored breathing even before he saw Giff, under blankets on a bed.

Giff peered, then faintly grinned. "Fine weather we been havin'," was what he said.

Blake stood beside him, staringly noting the pallor of Giff's face, the marks of pain on his stubbled cheeks. Giff's hand wandered from under his blanket and touched his chest. "He almost had me hoppin' for my harp." "Marriner?"

Giff assented with a nod. "Saw him as plain as I'm seein' you. It was him all right. Was workin' in the kitchen supper time. He looked in the woodshed door and opened up without a word!"

Blake looked around at the woman. "You saw him? The man that shot Giff?"

"Nobody saw him except your friend. But I know no one named Marriner," she replied.

"His real name's Martine," Blake told her bluntly.

He saw her look of shocked amazement then. "Why, I know a man by that name. He rides for Yeager." She met his eyes, her own widening as with resentment. "Why do you stare at me?"

When he said nothing, she told him defiantly: "I am acquainted with many basin men. It is my business. Martine is only one of my customers."

"You've been dealin' with a slimy lot," he told her harshly.

"Martine is not the kind of man who'd shoot another in the back!" she flared at him.

"It's the way men die in your country!"

A FLUSH stained her cheeks. She met his stare, momentarily at a loss for words.

Blake said to Giff, "He's still in town. I'll settle it. Tonight."

"Do that," sighed the other man. "Let's get it over with."

"You'll be safe here till I come for you?"

The girl spoke sharply. "Of course he will. No one would dare touch him in my house!"

"Lady," Giff groaned, "I got shot in your house!"

Sky appealed to Blake, insisting, "He will not be harmed again. I had the doctor report your friend had died."

Blake smiled thinly. "That was smart." He added, "I even heard it clear over on the hills three hours ago."

"The basin," murmured the girl, "is one big whispering gallery. It is frightening."

She turned and left the room. Not sure he hadn't been too gruff with her, he murmured, "She's only tried to help."

Giff spoke. "Learned anything out in the hills?"

"Marriner's in town for the night, that's enough," said Blake. "Rest easy." And he followed Sky down the corridor.

She was waiting for him, quiet and aloof, in the deserted kitchen. She didn't speak. Neither did he.

He walked toward her slowly. The glow he saw in her eyes was like a sustained wave of warmth flowing over him and through him. He read the goodness on her still face, knowing it had been there when he had seen her first, a goodness he had been too blind to recognize.

Then she said, "I wanted you to come."

He put both arms around her and drew her against him. Her head went back. He saw the veiled softness come to her eyes, saw her lips rise quickly, eagerly.

He kissed her without shame or embarrassment. Then she pushed out of his embrace and stood looking at him, her color high against her cheekbones. And she brushed her finger tips swiftly across his mouth.

"And I don't even know your name!" she breathed.

CHAPTER VII

CROSS-RIPPED

SMILING, he told her.

Then they both heard the sudden swift rush of riders on the street. Startled, they stood close together, heads lifted in strained, strict attention. Then Sky cried, "Oh, it's come!"

Blake felt small panic race along his nerves. Afterward guns began howling through town in short savage bursts. The firing seemed to lift and swing about the inn itself, smashing at the mud walls, pouring thunder along the street and down its alleys. It was a destructive sound; for an instant it shook him to the very roots of his courage.

Bullets flailed the town from end to end. He heard their strike in adobe, in wood, against metal; heard glass cascading. He heard men yelling and caught the quick cries as they were hit by lead and knocked off their horses.

The shouting and firing went on, running at random through town. It broke out first at one point, then another, each burst telling of men trapped. Riders raced by the inn and swung around outside the settlement, galloping in again from another quarter, shooting as they came.

In the inn's dim kitchen, they felt

surrounded by all that smothering uproar. And then they heard boots come clumping in from the dining room. Blake drew his gun.

The door burst open and Rufe Greevy came hurrying in with a stalking lurch, his sunken eyes ablaze. "It's the hill crowd and Yeager's boys!" In his excitement and alarm the words whistled and fuzzed through his toothless gums. "They're a-killin' each other fer keeps this time!"

And he wheeled and went stomping back to the street to watch the fight.

Blake slipped his gun back under his coat. "About all I can do is keep 'em from breakin' up your furniture," he said to Sky.

She nodded tensely and they remained close together, listening. They were standing like that when they heard footsteps in the dining room and accepted them as Greevy's coming back, and they didn't look that way until a voice said dryly, "Well, ain't this jest fine?"

A dark man sagged in the dining room doorway, a shoulder propped against the door's frame, with his thumbs hooked negligently in the armholes of his vest, the lapels of his dusty coat thrown back far enough to expose his shell belt and revolver.

Blake stared at the stranger. And Sky stared, too saying, "Martine!" in a gasping tone.

The dark man's posture was studiously inoffensive, almost insolently so. And he was grinning at Blake with white teeth as he drawled, "Lotsa fun in town. Last night was tame compared."

Blake waited while the pressure of tension built up in the room. The man was the same one he had seen under the arcade the night before—black brilliant eyes, gray-edged black hair, the taut good-looking face: Dade Marriner!

"You're that Ramsey," Martine drawled. It was a declaration not a question with any room for doubt. "Been hearin' it around you're lookin'

for me," he added. "That right?"

Outside the inn, the gunfire and shouting swung back and forth with unabated violence.

BLAKE, still silent, knew what was coming. Martine's eyes told him as plainly as though he had shouted it.

Then Sky gave a full-voiced cry of warning and was pointing rigidly at something behind Blake. Blake glanced behind him, saw a thick-set blond-haired rider blocked in the wood-shed door. He had come in silently from the hotel's rear yard.

Blake's glance snapped back to the man in the dining room door. Sky wheeled out of his line of sight, crying, "He's got you whip-sawed, Blake!"

The man in the shed door, sneered, "Lady, git out of the way!"

"Stub Clark," Sky said swiftly. "So you're going to shoot another man in the back!"

Her voice hit out at the man and it hit hard. Clark swore at Sky, telling her, "Ain't you got the pepper on yo'r tongue! Step aside, ma'am!"

And Sky shot back, "I will not! I'm not afraid of a coward!"

Blake knew by all this, and by watching Martine's taunting eyes, that he was worse than trapped. He couldn't make a fight out of it without endangering Sky. He had a heart-heavy knowledge of what it meant to him, too. The best he could manage would be to keep his back to Stub Clark while he tried to maneuver away from the girl and still keep facing Martine.

But there wasn't a spot in the room that offered shelter, even if he could reach it which he doubted. There was only the heavy work table on his left, a couple of chairs, and the stove which was behind him.

Alone he didn't stand a chance of hitting two men when one of them was behind him, not even if he fired and moved with split-second reckoning. He would have to try and get

Martine, and wouldn't dare do that unless he could be sure Sky had moved out of the line of fire. And how could he know that with the girl, too, behind him?

He was sunk! Cross-ripped! Done!

Meanwhile, as these thoughts raced through his mind, Sky was talking to the blond rider in the wood-shed door, talking fast. Blake didn't catch all of her words because he was too intent on watching for a flicker in Martine's eyes that would betray a lightning draw. But he knew she was flogging Clark with a tirade of bitterness and venom, using words that ordinarily would have shocked him red. She was lashing Clark as with a whip. "Coward! Sneak! Yellow!" were some of the milder names she called him.

Finally Clark hollered. "Oh, shet yo'r mouth! Git out'a the way you don't want'er git shot!"

"I won't—I won't!" screamed the girl. "And if you touch me I'll—kill you!"

"Aw," laughed Clark, "you ain't got a gun!"

Blake thought ruefully she didn't need one. She was doing fine by momentarily distracting Martine from his deadly purpose. But then Martine quit watching the scene at the wood-shed doorway, although at no time had he actually taken his gaze from Blake's. Now he pulled his shoulders away from the door, and his arms and hands came down slowly toward his belt. He held them out from his flanks a bit, the hands slack or having the illusion of slackness.

Blake took that moment to say, "With all the luck you couldn't kill me any quicker than I can kill you!"

Martine's grin stuck, though not so brash as before. His eyes were streaky as he said, "Keep talkin'."

Blake's stare had been holding the man as if by a pair of hands on his shoulders. Now Blake tried a bluff. "I can beat you to the draw, Martine. All it takes is the edge!"

But Martine laughed. And his grin

had washed away as by a hand slapping down across his face. "Talk," he drawled. "I like to see you crawl!"

Behind Blake was a sudden scuffle. That was Stub Clark yelling, "Why, you—" and then a string of oaths that ended with a grunt.

WAITING was futile. Suicidal. Blake knew it as he made his draw. But even as his hand flicked down and up, Martine's had already slipped his revolver clear.

Blake tried to turn, tried to take snap aim. He saw the blooming flash of Martine's gun, felt a large lazy blow in his thigh that spun him straight, then he was sinking to his knees as if dragged, and wild thunder dinned between the walls. He fired at Martine and then was down, sprawling against the floor...

Martine was hit. He swayed against the wall, his left hand clapped hard to his side, but his gun was coming down again, leveling off...

Blake lifted his own gun—it seemed to weigh a hundred pounds. He thought, *He'll do it now!* without actually thinking it.

And Martine seemed sure of it, too, but was over-eager, over-confident, and in some pain, because he fired twice more to Blake's once. Both of his shots missed, fanning splinters off the floor only inches away from Blake.

Right in the gut! prayed Blake as his finger squeezed. The gun jumped a little as it spoke.

Martine bent forward as if kicked in the belt. His weapon dropped with the sound of a crowbar to the floor. Then, with both hands clasping urgently over his stomach, he swayed out from the wall, made a half turn, and fell heavily.

Blake got his head around in time to see Sky grappling with Stub Clark in the wood-shed doorway. The man was trying to fight her off one-handedly, at the same time trying to aim his gun at Blake. His mouth was contorted as with superhuman effort, his

square face twisted out of shape. But the girl hung on and she was quick and strong and furious and wouldn't let him get that aim, and wouldn't be beaten off.

She kept stamping on Clark's feet, kept clawing her fingernails across his face, drawing blood with every raking swipe, and then she set her teeth in the arm that held the gun.

Clark howled in agony and tried to break clear but the girl stuck like a spitting cat riding a frightened hound, kicking, stamping, hitting him in the shins and below the belt. Clark's face turned a sickly green.

Desperate, panicky, he drove his free elbow brutally at the girl's chest, breaking her grip. Twice he struck with that driving elbow, and she was knocked back the second time, half way across the room.

Blake already had his gun aimed at the man. But he held his fire because Clark whipped himself around and dove through the doorway, went out of sight into the woodshed as if jerked by an invisible wire around his waist. Blake heard the fading thud of his running boots.

Sky came around the table and dropped to her knees beside Blake, hovering over him in murmurous concern, with her hands touching his face, a question in her eyes she seemed almost afraid to put in words.

He smiled faintly. "Bullet broke the thigh bone, I reckon. I'm lucky. Born lucky," he added as an afterthought.

She ran her hands down over his leg, searching tenderly, gently. He held it flat to the floor, feeling pain begin. He knew he could not rest his weight on it. His good knee was drawn up and he supported his body on it and on his left arm and hand against the floor.

He felt a bit dizzy but kept looking at Sky in a strangely intent way. Her dark dress had been ripped off one shoulder by Clark. He saw the warm curve of shoulder and throat,

saw the tangled condition of her hair, the deep cut on her chin. She was disheveled, untidy, but beauty glowed from her eyes like light.

He was never to forget how she looked to him then. She folded her arms around him as though he were a child she loved and wanted to protect. She whispered endearments in his ear. It was only later that he knew he had passed out cold and limp with her arms still around him.

BLAKE WAS sitting in a blanket-covered chair in his room at the inn—the room that had been his hospital for over a month. He was in a deeply restless mood brought on by his long sojourn indoors. The tang of winter struck through the panes of his window, and the town lay silent under the year's first snow.

His leg had knitted well. The doctor had said he would limp only a little, and he did not mind. His recovery had been brightened, too, by Giff Downes' miraculous comeback. But now, like Giff, he was impatient to be on his way to the ranch in Colorado.

He had heard with satisfaction from Rufe Greevy, from Sky also, that the fighting in the Shekomeko was finished. Gus Yeager had been killed in the ruckus that night. Luckinbill's crew had been wiped out, many of the hill outfits crippled and driven back. Sal Luckinbill had closed Hat Ranch and had disappeared, no one knew where or cared.

The deaths of only two men mattered to Blake—that of Marriner, or "Martine" which was the name the burial records showed, and the death of Sam Ogden. The latter had been hit by a bullet during the first minutes of the fight, had never made good his flight for freedom.

Now Blake rose stiffly from his

chair and tried out his wounded leg. He was bending the limb, flexing muscles and joints, when Sky entered the room.

"Is that wise?" she asked him, frowning.

He straightened to face her. "You've been duckin' me," he accused her sternly. "Why?"

She shook her head gravely. "You're not to use that leg till I tell you to," she said.

His gray eyes looked morose. "Sit down," he ordered. "I want to talk with you."

She sat on his bed, her skirts spreading like a fan around her. Her face, tilting toward him, was serene.

He bent toward her. "What about the inn? Will you sell it or leave it when you go?"

She watched him for a moment, her face subtly changing, its softness giving way to cool severity. "What makes you feel I could leave it all? Would you wish to leave *your* home?"

Dread arose within him. He said, stubbornly, "Under certain conditions, yes."

"And what are those conditions?"

"Oh, hang it all," he groaned, "you know I'm in love with you!"

"But Blake," she murmured, "you never told me."

"I'm tellin' you now," he said gruffly.

Then she smiled and, at the same time, he saw the close-held glint of tears. He heard her say, "Sell everything. Or leave it. I don't care."

As he bowed his head to kiss her, her arms came up to receive him, and suddenly he knelt before her, his own arms reaching to bring her close.

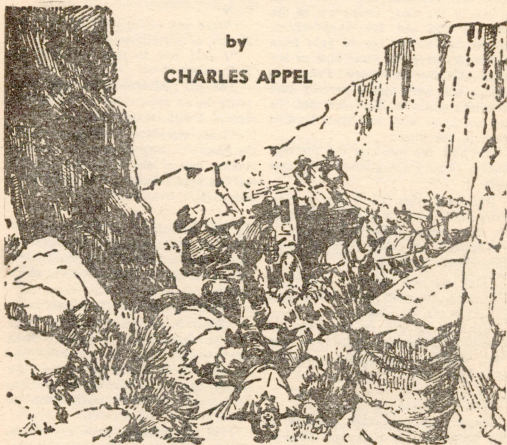
"Everything I have is yours," she said. "Everything you are is mine."

●END



COURTSHIP OF THE COLD-DECK KID

by
CHARLES APPEL



GARY PRICE finally saw the girl he was looking for at exactly ten minutes after six of a Saturday evening in late August. He dropped his brimful cup whose contents of scalding coffee he had just lifted respectfully to his reaching lips back into its saucer as though the muscles in his arm had suddenly gone limp.

He stood up and said "Hello" at once, without thinking about whether

this would be such a big moment for her too, without giving a thought about what effect such a broadside-approach would have. Without, in short, thinking.

She had the perfect small features but in that sort of stubby, high-cheekboned, wide-eyed, wide-mouthed way. She had all the blonde ringlets piled on top of her head. She had the strength, the indifference in the firm line of her small-boned jaw and chin.

She was the one all right. No fists nor guns nor the law nor the power of Fate itself, could stop Gary Price now.

She had the perfect, soft red lips. She was the one all right.

She was dressed like a lady not a cowgirl, in long, blue, white-ruffled dress and tiny blue hat, so she went to one of the three tables not to the counter. She put her eyes—which, caught then full-on by the light from the street, were the same blue as her outfit—briefly on Gary Price, as though she were ninety percent sure from the sound of his voice that she did not know him, and then lowered them to the menu.

She held the menu in the prettiest fingers Gary Price guessed he'd ever seen.

But damnation, *there was a ring, from which jutted a giant diamond, on the third finger of her left hand!*

The devil with that, Gary, however, immediately decided.

"Did you just arrive in town?" he said next. Standing right where he'd got down off the stool.

She kept her eyes on the menu, obviously debating what attitude to take. And, deciding, raised her eyes and smiled and said,

"Yes, I did."

"Oh. Well, fine."

There was one other puncher in the restaurant. One the last stool at the far end of the counter, he'd kept his arms around his plate and his eyes on his food. He brought his gaze only half around to speak now, so that the effect was of talking over his shoulder, out of one side of his mouth.

"Why don't you let the lady alone, mister."

"Huh?"

"I'd like steak and sliced tomatoes and fried potatoes," the girl said to Lee Joy, the proprietor, who'd come to take her order. Lee was an amiable fellow, always smiling, never mixing into his customers' affairs, seeming now to not know that anything unusual was going on, or to assume that everything was fine, all very friendly and pleasant and sociable.

Gary Price remembered his hat in that moment and whipped it off reaching it toward a hook on the wall without taking his eyes off the girl, so that the stetson ended on the floor.

"Were you visiting somebody hereabouts, or something—?"

"*I told you to stop bothering the lady, mister!*"

The girl had opened her gold satin purse in an appearance of being preoccupied with its contents.

"I say were you visiting somebody in town?" Gary repeated, abruptly taking one of the other three chairs at the young lady's table and sitting down in it.

THE BIG puncher at the counter had suddenly, violently leapt up and come to Gary Price, yanked him to his feet by a great fistful of shirt-front.

"What are yuh, deaf, mister?"

"What in the devil's eating you? Let go the shirt, and I don't mean next week." Gary Price's voice had no rancour in it. He very seldom got angry, and such an event as this was far from sufficient aggravation to bring him to such a point.

"Oh please don't have any trouble!" the girl said. "I'm fine. I'm not bothered at all!"

"You see?" Gary said reasonably to the big puncher, who had not released Gary and was glaring apoplectically at him. "So unhand the shirt, for god's sake."

"*Don't swear in front of the lady!*" The puncher, at the point of being mollified, now was riled up again, and he twisted the fistful of Gary's shirt until it ripped.

"Hey, for god's sake," Gary said, looking down at his torn shirt. Then he gave the puncher a sudden hard shove that was exceptionally successful because the fellow tripped back over a leg of one of the chairs. The puncher grabbed at the stools,

missed, tried to get his feet under him, got them tangled up, and finally sprawled hard against the counter, banging his head against it, having managed somehow, in the course of his demolition to bat the edge of his dinner plate so that most of his food was strewn along his torso when he came, at last, to rest.

"Oh heavens," the girl groaned, getting solicitously to her feet.

"He shouldn't have ripped my shirt," Gary Price said, estimating the damage done to the garment.

Then, bethinking himself, Gary stepped around the table and held the girl's chair for her.

"I'm sorry your dinner was interrupted," he said with a wide, gracious smile.

"Oh no, I don't think I want anything more to eat," she demurred, her eyes concernedly on the prone puncher. "Is the poor man hurt?"

The puncher, however, was rapidly becoming not prone. Lee Joy had leaned to help him up and he had already dispensed with the restaurant proprietor's assistance by shoving him roughly back. His face, too, if apoplectic before, was raw-purple with rage now, forebode uncivil events to come.

"Now watch out," Gary said to the puncher. "Calm yourself."

The puncher threw a big fist that caught Gary on the shoulder and turned him half around with its force.

Gary chopped the side of his hand down on the back of the puncher's neck as the man came in.

The puncher staggered a moment from this, but then brought an uppercut from near the floor with surprising speed.

Gary didn't know where he was for half a minute; it was like, he thought, having a mule catch you unawares with a kick in the chin. When he saw straight again, though, he stopped a new assault by the puncher, with a sharp deadly right cross.

The girl picked her way between the scattered chairs and tables with the help of Charlie, and so reached the boardwalk safely.

Gary's right cross, that is, was ordinarily deadly. Using it on the big puncher, however, was like using it on a deep-sunk fencepost. The puncher showed no sign of being affected at all by it. He came on flailing both fists, hitting Gary half the time.

Gary drove his left with all his weight behind it deep into the puncher's middle. This didn't have the desired effect either.

The puncher lifted Gary's chin again with an uppercut. He set Gary back on his heels with a roundhouse right. He doubled Gary over with a murderous left to the belly. He blasted Gary into a corner full of broken furniture with another terrible right....

"HELLO," Gary said to the girl.

She jumped as if she'd been shot. As you might if a person suddenly spoke behind you whose funeral you had attended the day before.

"Oh! Hello."

"Who is this?" the man with the girl growled.

"I wanted to apologize for leaving you stranded yesterday," Gary said, "but you see I was knocked unconscious."

"Why, this is a gentleman I, uh, met at the restaurant yesterday," the girl explained lamely to her escort.

"Gary Price is the name. I'm a cattleman. I own a small spread ten miles out of town."

The girl's escort frowned suspiciously at her. "What is this. I thought you said you met this ranny yesterday. How come you didn't know his name?"

"Maybe I ought to explain—" Gary began.

"You keep out of this, fella," the man shot at Gary. He was tall and dark and powerfully-built and his

very voice seemed to push back the person at whom it was directed.

"But I'm responsible, after all, for—"

"I think we'd better be getting to the stage station, Harold," the girl interposed nervously.

Harold shifted the big cigar he was smoking, violently across his big white teeth, glowering at Gary.

"Oh, were you leaving town?" Gary said quickly to the girl.

"Yes, we are. Shall we get over to the station now, Harold?"

Harold was finally able to tear his dark eyes off of Gary Price, as the girl pulled at his arm.

Gary thought, *What the devil, I'll never see her again if I let her get away now—*

He said, "I'll walk over to the station with you."

"Look, fella." Harold had whirled back with an unreasoning fury reminiscent of the big puncher of the evening before, his voice booming along the Sunday-morning-empty main street. He examined Gary's patched-up, black-and-blue, swollen features in detail. "You don't want that map of yours marked up any more than it already is, do you?"

And this is the son who gave her the nugget-sized diamond—

"Why, who would mark it up?"

The big cigar was chewed viciously back to its original corner, with a whisk like a mountain lion switching its tail.

"Harold, will you please come?"

"I said who would mark it up."

Harold swung then. He'd taken a full minute to debate what would be the most effective course to take, and had evidently decided on one neat, all-out finisher. Gary ducked, expecting something like this, but not quite quickly enough, so that the blow brushed the side of his head enough to knock him off balance, so that before he could get hold of himself, he found himself sitting down.

And every time he tried to get up, Harold had the big fist waiting to slam him down again. He finally had to admit to himself that there was no point in this maneuver.

"You had enough, fella?"

From the ground Gary said, "Sure."

"All right then. Let that be a lesson to you."

Gary didn't say anything. Harold started across to the stage station, taking the girl's elbow in his big fingers. Gary got up. He couldn't make up his mind what to do next. All he knew was that this was the girl he'd looked for all his life, and that he'd never be able to get her out of his mind, and that that would make an intolerable situation.

The stage came up over the high end of the town, like over the horizon from nowhere. It galvanized Gary. Once she was on the stage, she'd almost certainly be gone forever—

So as Harold helped the girl into the stage, Gary opened the door on the other side and in a bound was inside and on the backwards-riding seat.

Harold froze with a terrible ominousness, his glare a terrible thing indeed.

"You can't prevent me from being another passenger," Gary said to Harold.

"Oh yes I can." Harold's voice was even lower than a growl now. "Oh yes I can."

"Oh no you can't," Gary said.

"Please, please don't stay!" the girl plead with Gary.

"Get out, fella."

The driver, going up on the high seat beside the grizzled gun-guard, intoned, "All'tl a-board!"

"Get out, fella."

COMING to for the second time within as many hours, Gary Price remembered only vaguely what had happened. He did remember Harold's great ham-hand suddenly reaching into the coach for him, but that was all. Somebody, finding him lying in the

middle of the street, had sent word out to his place, and one of his three cowhands had come and got him. The third pail of ice water tossed at his face brought him around.

The girl, he thought then.

"What the devil happened to you, Boss?"

The girl. He was never going to be able to forget her.

"You feel all right, Boss? You want I should call the medico?"

Gary Price said, flannel-mouth-thickly, "Did just the one stage come through here today?"

The squat puncher pulled his head askance.

"You know the stage only comes through here twice a week, Boss. ...Mebbe I ought to get the saw-bones—"

"Where does the stage go from here?"

"Where? Where could it go but north, to railhead. ... You kiddin', Boss?"

Gary Price finished buttoning his fresh tan shirt. He tightened the belt up a notch on the fresh tan trousers. *No, he knew he'd never be able to get her out of his mind.*

"I'll be back. Take care of things, Shorty. And go in town and tell Lee Joy I'll pay him for whatever furniture got busted up."

"Where yuh goin' now? You look like you oughta be in bed instead of in saddle."

Gary Price got his horse. He pushed it for all the speed it had in it out the railhead trail. About five miles along the way, he came upon the stage and reined in. The driver and gun-guard were standing in the apron with their hands above their heads. Three masked men on restless horses covered them and the stage with two six-guns apiece. A fourth was hauling the ironbound chest out from under the driver's seat.

Gary Price grinned from ear to ear. *Thanks, pals, he thought, addressing*

the affection toward the outlaws. Because he might never have caught up with the girl in time without their intervention.

They didn't go, though, as soon as they had the chest. One of them, the one who'd been covering the stage, was stepping down from his sorrel.

"The hell with that," Gary heard another of the outlaws say. Gary had turned onto a brushy knoll from which he could watch unseen and even hear a little.

He could see the outlaw speaking into the coach. Then he saw the girl get out, her face ash-white with fear. *Hey, Gary suddenly thought, and put a hand involuntarily to his gun.* And when Gary saw the outlaw motion the girl toward the sorrel, and saw another of the outlaws drill the stagedriver through the forehead when the unfortunate fellow started to lower his hands, Gary's thoughts became of how good he was with the .45, which was not very good.

He waited until the outlaw had the girl on the horse, to act. He smashed down off the knoll and held his fire until he was among the outlaws—there were four of them and five bullets in his gun; he could afford to miss only once.

Gary missed with his first shot. The outlaws, however, non-plussed, missed with their first ones too. Gary calmly aimed his second shot, and took out one of the renegades. He whirled his bucking, in-reined horse and flipped a lucky shot through another outlaw's neck. He missed his next try. And his next, wide.

He grabbed the leather of the girl's mount and spurred his own, yelling to her, "Hug your horse!"

She understood, put her cheek tight to the flat of the sorrel's neck, hugging it. But the animal stumbled almost at once, and Gary had to swing the girl off just as it somersaulted lethally wounded.

The remaining outlaws were taking

careful aim now—the one on his feet and the last mounted one. They were both drawing beads on Gary's back as he jabbed steel at his animal's flanks with the girl clutched to him.

The stage's gun-guard, fortunately, was also taking careful aim. With his .30-30. He blasted off the top of the standing outlaw's head with his first shot. He levered and triggered his second shot before the last outlaw could turn a muzzle on him. This second shot was bloodily effective too....

He must not have been more than two minutes clear of the gun-battle before all that was in Gary's head was: *I'm holding her. Her. Hard against me. With my face almost touching hers. With my face actually touching her golden hair....* She was holding him too. She had her arms around his neck, very tight, like a frightened, silent child....

PRACTICALLY everybody in town, that afternoon, came up and shook Gary Price's hand. "Nice goin', Mister!"... "Yuh done what's been too big a job for every peace marshal in these parts!"... "The Governor hisself 'll prob'ly be writin' to yuh, Mr. Price!"... "How 'bout cleanin' out the gamblers and gunmen and crooked lawmen in this town next, Mister?"

Everybody, that is, except the crowd at the south-side saloon. Must have been a dozen hard-eyed hangers-on who lined the veranda of The Red Eye and silently watched the feting of Gary Price. And except certain specially concerned individuals, such as:

The sheriff; who said flatly, "Congratulations, Price. But you'd oughta leave law work to lawmen." "Sure," Gary replied.

And the owner of the gambling hall (and half the town); who said slowly, "You're quite a one-man vigilante committee, Price." "Sure," Gary replied absently.

And Harold; who said acidly, "I regret to state that I owe you a debt

of gratitude for saving my fiancée." "Sure," Gary said.

And the girl; who said, "I—I don't know how I can ever thank you enough." They were standing on the boardwalk in front of the stage station, and there were people all around, milling, shoving, staring, but somehow Gary Price felt alone with her. The way she gave him her blue, blue eyes did it. Because this was the first time she had really looked at him.

So he suddenly got the crazy idea that he could have taken her in his arms, right there on the street, in front of everybody, in front of her fiancée, and she would have let him kiss her.

So that was what he suddenly did, took her in his arms and kissed her. Full on the mouth. And she did let him. Because her head tilted a little to receive him, and her soft, red lips parted a little.

Harold's "gratitude" transmuted to wild fury like a bronc finding a burr under his saddle. He was unleashing his great right fist at Gary's head even before he could aim it. Which was what saved Gary. The knuckle bludgeon breezed past Gary's temple and carried Harold, with its violence, ahead onto one knee on the boardwalk.

The sheriff came forward to intervene. The owner of the gambling hall came forward to restrain the lawman—"Let them fight it out," the tinbadge said, winking significantly.

One of the hardcases on the veranda of the saloon said, "Let's go," and they, to a man, poured toward the ruckus.

Seeing Harold coming at him, seeing the first of the hardcases eyeing him belligerently, seeing the sheriff moving away, Gary Price quickly set the girl aside. "What the devil," he muttered. *One minute a man is a hero in this town, the next minute they want to murder him.*

"Pardon me, Ma'am, but you'd bet-

ter step into Lee Joy's. It ain't goin' to be safe out here in another minute."

The girl, hearing the familiar voice, whirled from distractedly watching the trouble building in the middle of the street. It was the puncher from the restaurant the day before.

But "Oh" was all she could somehow manage to say. And her eyes went back at once to the plight of Gary Price. The big puncher followed her gaze. The line of his mouth hardened as his eyes rested on Gary Price.

But this grim cast softened a little as he watched. Because Gary Price was taking a pretty bad beating. From Harold and the dozen-odd hellions from the saloon, who, every time Harold blasted him, shoved Gary back for more.

"Oh no," the girl moaned.

The big puncher blinked once, looking down at her in puzzlement.

He said suddenly, "You like that ranny, Ma'am?"

"Oh yes I do," she blurted. "Yes I do."

The big puncher blinked again, at Gary Price this time, who was at the moment flat on his back in the deep dust of the street with the toughs booting him and Harold waiting again for him to rise. The big puncher hiked up his jeans, tugged his stetson down hard on his forehead.

And waded in.

He shoved three of the nearest hard-cases in the face. He poleaxed Harold with his notable uppercut. And when the sheriff approached, he growled, "You stay out of this, you two-faced tinbadgel!"

And when one of the toughs was going to gun-club the big puncher from behind, the girl suddenly rushed forward and shoved him off balance.

And Gary Price jabbed his bootheels at the backs of the sheriff's knees as that worthy yanked out his gun.

And when the gambler drew his gun too, thus giving the signal to the heli-

ons to do the same, the whole town exploded—with every male citizen within gunshot palming his .45 and taking one side or the other in a showdown that was long overdue....

"MY PARENTS really arranged it. It had always been sort of understood that Harold and I would someday get married, and because I never met anybody—anybody like you—I was going to go through with it. That's what I'd come on for, to make the arrangements. You see, Harold's father and my father grew up together and came West together—"

"Are you comfortable riding like this?"

"Oh yes, very comfortable. And they wanted to sort of combine—"

"Because I could put both arms around you if it would support you better."

"Well, I guess that would help. They wanted to combine—"

"How's that?"

"Oh fine. Lovely. Combine the two—"

"Who wanted to combine what two what?"

She whirled around in the saddle, behind which he sat bareback, so that her face was directly in front of his.

"Oh darling I just *told* you—"

He kissed her, since her mouth was right there like that.

"Told me what?"

"Oh you're hopeless," she murmured huskily. Then, touching his bandaged face, she added, "Your poor face."

They were almost at Gary Price's place now, and the half moon glinted off some of the flat surfaces of the buildings. They'd been able to get married at this hour of the night—or rather, early morning—because the Justice Of The Peace couldn't sleep with all the gun-thunder up and down the town, and was just as glad to have something to do.

The hammer of hoofs suddenly penetrated to them, and a moment

(please turn to page 130)

GUN AT HIS BACK

CHAPTER I.

GOLD-PLATED 30-30

FOR ROLFE KINCAID, parting with this last silver dollar was going to be about the same

as selling your gun for two bits, or maybe trading a silver-mounted saddle for a pint of Colonel's Rye. What it was really like, he decided, was accidentally cutting off your trigger finger while whittling a toothpick out

**DRAMATIC
BOOK-LENGTH
NOVEL**

by
DEAN OWEN



of a pine splinter. In short just plain, downright tragic.

In any ordi-

nary town, an ex-cowman with a patch on his pants would have been able to buy a nickel beer and load up on the free lunch.

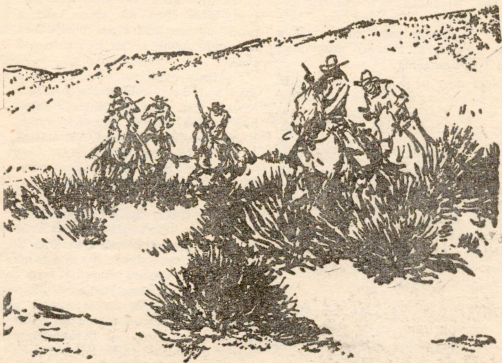


SOMEBODY HAD KINCAID'S NAME

But Empire was no ordinary town. It had slept for a dozen years hard in the scab rock Nevada hills until a drunken teamster had piled his outfit over a washed-out cutbank and yelled "gold" when he started to dig himself out with a shovel. That was three months back and Rolfe Kincaid, who

at twenty-seven had acquired his own brand and lost it because of the dry years, had figured he was due for a change of luck.

Tall, black-haired and belligerent enough to bat down the ears of anyone who so much as jostled him, Kincaid fingered his lone silver dollar. He



In the girl's eyes, Kincaid was like most who drifted into Empire these days, men with the mark of the saddle on them, men in whom gold lust had blotted dreams of a few acres and an iron of their own. But to the others, Kincaid was just a stranger, dangerous enemy, boot-hill-bait!

stared sourly at the noisy crowd that jammed the newly-erected Golden Slipper. Silently Kincaid cursed the town and the men in it. Men like Gil Devon who stood at the far end of his long plank bar mentally figuring up his profits. All powdered up from a fresh shave, was Devon, and wearing a Frisco suit. Devon's hard gray eyes

showed amusement as he watched the suckers buy his watered whiskey and try to buck his games. In a place such as the Golden Slipper you needed no incentive of a free lunch. Take all and give nothing. That was Devon's motto as it was Empire's.

A moment of temptation was tight in Kincaid as he stared at a spinning

ON A BULLET — BUT WHO?



roulette wheel. It had been done—a stake run up from a silver dollar. But it wasn't likely, not with the kind of wheels Gil Devon would be running. And, besides, Kincaid couldn't afford to lose. Breakfast he'd had day before yesterday. The last time he'd eaten an evening meal was lost in a hazy memory of stomach grumbings and belt tightening.

Next door he had spotted a small cafe, so making up his mind suddenly, he moved that way. Although it was only ten o'clock in the morning, Empire's dusty streets were choked with freighters hauling in supplies from Carson City, stage coaches with their loads of hopefuls, saddle horses and men. It was a jubilant crowd that reminded Kincaid of the time in St. Louis when he had sat on his father's shoulder and watched a town go crazy when the telegraph carried the news of war's end.

SHOVING his way into the cafe he found a seat on a three-legged stool at the far end of the counter. He laid out his dollar, keeping a finger on it for a moment to feel the smooth silver of the Carson minted coin. It was his last true friend.

"All the grub a dollar will buy," he told a starched blue apron. He didn't look up. He didn't want to see the owner of the frilly apron. Like most boom town waitresses this one probably had a face like a busted clock. In a place like Empire the good-lookers soon got tired of caving in their arches carrying grub to hungry prospectors. The good-lookers went for some of the easy money behind a curtained window of one of the joints down on Ferguson Alley. Either that or they got married. One or the other.

Therefore, some minutes later when he saw a platter bearing a thick steak, three eggs and a mound of fried potatoes before him on the counter, he thought he'd better look up and thank the blue apron. For a dollar, in Empire, you'd ordinarily be lucky to

get two hotcakes a man could sink his teeth in, and considerably more fortunate if you got a spoonful of syrup to go with them.

His eyes moved up the blue apron to an oval face. The face had blue eyes, bluer than the apron, and a turned-up nose and a red mouth. The face didn't look at all like a busted clock.

Suddenly conscious of his patched shirt and dirty levis and a hat that Nevada sun, rain and his own sweat had turned into a shapeless lump, Rolfe Kincaid swallowed. He started to shove the platter aside.

"Reckon you didn't hear me, Ma'am," he said. "A dollar is all I've got."

Just as firmly the girl pushed back the platter. "You look hungry," she told him in a low and very musical voice. "And you didn't try to tell me a fancy story about your belt buckle rubbing against your backbone. Eat."

She turned down the counter to a small stove. Under the blue apron she wore a gray dress that fit her nicely across the hips. Rolfe Kincaid took his eyes from the girl's trim figure and did as she had ordered. He ate.

Never had food tasted so good. The tiredness left his muscles. Content once again, he showed a sharper interest in the girl. He saw she had pushed up the sleeves of her dress; her arms were smooth and lightly tanned. As she worked at the stove she brushed aside strands of sorrel hair that had started to curl against her damp forehead. From the drift of talk he learned her name was Ella Kane and that she ran this place.

BEING a prideful man, Kincaid debated how he could best tell the girl that he would be back and settle up with an extra two or three dollars, whatever she figured the sumptuous meal was worth.

But when he had his statement all framed, there was no chance to get in a word, for Gil Devon had entered

from his Golden Slipper next door and begun to talk earnestly to Ella.

"...need the right-of-way across the Spur for the road," Kincaid caught Devon saying. "The syndicate won't take up the option on the California until the road is finished."

Kincaid stretched his big ears, for mention of the California was enough to make any man in Empire break out in the cold sweats. It had been found some weeks ago by Jasper Lucombe. Back in the Tucson country, Lucombe had been a neighbor of Kincaid's, a busted dirt farmer who scratched bean money by raising enough produce to haul into town every other week. Lucombe like Kincaid had caught the fever when news of the Empire strike had reached Tucson. But unlike Kincaid, Lucombe had prospered. The Washoe Syndicate in Virginia City, so the story went, was ready to lay out a half million in cash for the California.

Kincaid bent his ear a little more, wondering where Devon fitted into this. He watched the big man fiddle with a chain of gold nuggets strung across the front of his Nob Hill vest. His sideburns that crawled through the talcum of his freshly-shaven cheeks were a new-rope yellow.

Devon said, "You'll come in for a fair share of the California if you give me that right-of-way, Ella. You're not running enough cows on the Spur to make much difference anyhow."

Ella's blue eyes darkened. "I like to see this country prosper as well as the next person, Gil."

Kincaid frowned. So it was Ella and Gil. They seemed downright familiar. He felt disappointed that a girl such as Ella appeared to be, would have any truck with a smooth whiskey peddler and gambler like Gil Devon. At least enough to call him by his first name.

Ella Kane was saying, "The road's not what bothers me. It's the way you're building it."

Devon spread his large pink hands, and the movement stirred the front of his coat so Kincaid could see the heel plates of a revolver in a shoulder sling.

"It's the only way you can get men to work," Devon said defensively.

"I don't believe in convict labor," Ella snapped, and turned to her stove where a batch of spuds were frying.

Devon chewed his lower lip a moment then said, "Convict labor or not, Ella, the road's going to be built. I'm not passing up my cut of a half million dollars."

Ella's eyes sharpened on Devon's bland face. "I thought Jasper Lucombe owned the California."

ONLY BY a slight tightening of his gray eyes did Devon show his displeasure. "I'm financing Lucombe till the syndicate pays off."

"Keeping him drunk," Ella said firmly, "letting him act the fool. Maybe your plan is to steal the California—"

Gil Devon's heavy shoulders stiffened. "That's beside the point, Ella," he said, trying to keep his voice level. "Do I get the right-of-way or not?"

"No."

Blood darkened Devon's cheeks. He clenched his big hands into tight fists. "I own this building. I'll need it in order to expand the Golden Slipper."

"So it's like that." Ella gave him a tight smile.

Devon's cold reserve broke. "You know how I feel about you." He put out a hand to touch her bare arm, but she drew back from him.

Coldly she said, "Take over this place any time you want to."

Angered at her aloofness, Devon said, "I want it tonight."

Turning on his heel, he walked out.

When he had gone, Kincaid said, "You got troubles, Ma'am?"

In the act of stacking dirty dishes in a pan, she gave him a direct look with her blue eyes. "Troubles? No." She shook her coppery head. "I can

still breathe. I enjoy the sun and the hills. Nobody has troubles until they're dead."

Rolfe Kincaid felt like crawling under the tub of dirty dishes. It seemed that her eyes told him she knew he was like a lot of other men who drifted into Empire these days. Men with the mark of the saddle on them, men who had sold out a dream of a few acres and an iron of their own to come chasing a golden phantom at Empire.

Kincaid had been feeling sorry for himself. He didn't feel sorry now.

"If there's anything I could do—" he stammered, blushed as she turned to stare at him again. "I mean to pay for the grub."

"What could you do?" she asked softly, and stepped through a curtained doorway that led to a back room.

Her words stung like a quirt lash across his face. She was right. What could he do? He looked down at his empty belt. His gun had gone in exchange for that last sack of beans and flour that was to see him through till he made his strike. Last night he had come down from the hills with nothing but new callouses on his palms and that lone silver dollar.

Outside he was caught up in the human tide that surged along the walks; clerks and gamblers and cowhands. Men with steel in their eyes; men with sunburned faces that had come out from behind a Frisco desk to hunt for the glittering dust. Bright promise in the eyes of the newcomers. Dejection on the faces of those who, like Kincaid, had searched in vain.

Above the slatted doors of the Golden Slipper he saw a crowd surging toward the bar, led by a little gray man in a hard hat and a preacher's claw-hammer coat. Jasper Lucombe had been unimportant back in Tucson; burned out like the yellowed dust on his barren acres. Here he was a leader of men, the center of a joyous throng. Every hour on Devon, for this was no time for

the hour Jasper Lucombe bought drinks for the house.

Now he was flinging down a handful of gold coins on the bar. Sweating bartenders set out bottles and the crowd cut Lucombe off from Kincaid's view.

SHOULDERING his way through the crowd, Kincaid felt a cold tightening in his stomach. Deliberately he had stayed away from Lucombe since coming to Empire. It did something to a man's pride to see a former neighbor rise to such a position of sudden affluence. Especially if that neighbor had once envied you as a right smart young cowman. This was none of his blamed business, Kincaid told himself, but he felt a certain loyalty. After all, you don't holler "Hello" at a man when you pass his shack, or bring out his mail from town, or maybe slip him a half sack of flour you "had to get rid of before the bugs found it," or give him a bottle for doing a chore you could have done better yourself. Not without building a certain tie.

He managed to catch Lucombe by a skinny elbow, but his hold was instantly broken as hands grabbed shot-glasses off the top of the plank bar.

Using his elbows, Kincaid cleared a path. Men glared. Somebody cursed him. But nobody at the moment wanted to challenge this big black-haired man who seemed determined to get Lucombe's attention.

"Jasper," Kincaid said, and the sound of his voice must have penetrated the fog in the half-drunk ex-hoeman's brain. He turned his little wedge of a face around.

"Kincaid!" he shrieked happily and hugged the big man. Then, narrowing his eyes, Lucombe stared at the torn shirt, the gunless belt, the worn pants and boots. He wiped his nose on his sleeve. "Looks like you ain't been so lucky as me," he said soberly. Then he grinned. "But you got the Bar Three to go back to."

Kincaid didn't have the heart to tell him he no longer owned the ranch. By main force he led Lucombe away from the bar to a deserted section occupied by covered gaming tables. The crowd did not protest, for they had their free drinks. Next hour on the hour, however, if Kincaid still had Lucombe in tow there might be trouble from the habitually thirsty ones.

Kincaid came to the point. "That's not your money you're spending. It's Devon's."

Lucombe stared up at him a moment, then laughed. "Sure. Devon's my partner."

Now that he was about to voice his suspicions, Kincaid knew how foolish it sounded. He was groping for words, when over the top of Lucombe's head he saw a string of gold nuggets across a flowered vest. Gil Devon had come up swiftly, the benchmade boots that held his big feet making only a whisper of sound on the board floor.

Devon's cold gray eyes watched Kincaid's face, but he spoke to Lucombe. "Some mail just came in from Virginia City. Thought you might be interested."

Jasper Lucombe's eyes blinked. "From the syndicate?"

"Why don't you go upstairs and have a look?"

Lucombe grinned at Kincaid and danced a little jig. "If the syndicate has sent my half million dollars, Kincaid," he cried, "I'll buy you a gold-plated shotgun!"

WHEN LUCOMBE had scurried off into the crowd and climbed a stairway at the end of the bar, Devon said, "What were you telling him when I came up?"

"That I was glad to see him. He used to be a neighbor of mine."

Devon's gray eyes lingered on Kincaid's beaten gear. "Must have been mighty poor country where you hail from."

Kincaid wanted to lay his knuckles

on one of those powdered cheeks. Instead, he started to walk around Devon, for this was no time for trouble. He had no gun and the place was full of Devon's men.

Devon's thick pink fingers touched his shirt sleeve. "I noticed you in Ella's place awhile ago. You've got long ears, cowboy. If you want to keep 'em maybe you'd better forget you ever knew Jasper Lucombe. And forget what you heard me telling Ella."

With the flat of his hand Kincaid knocked the pink fingers from his shirt. Devon's heavy shoulders settled beneath his black coat and for a moment Kincaid thought, *This is it*. But at that one moment one of the bartenders called to Devon and without a word to Kincaid, the big man wheeled and headed that way.

Kincaid walked the streets all afternoon. At each hour he'd look in at Lucombe setting up drinks. Lucombe was staggering drunk by this time. Several times Kincaid was on the point of getting Lucombe aside and asking him for a loan. Lucombe would probably give him a fifty dollar gold piece. But it did something to Kincaid. He was, after all, a cowman. To ask an ex-plowman neighbor for a loan, went against the grain. In the eyes of a cow rancher the man with a hoe was only one notch above the status of the coyote.

Lucombe could go to the devil, Kincaid decided. He'd tried to warn the man that Devon was crooked as a manzanita branch.

Kincaid was standing at the edge of the crowded walk looking through the lighted windows of the cafe, watching Ella Kane at her stove, when a voice said, "Want to make three dollars?"

Kincaid turned. The man who had addressed him was Curt Bowers, Empire's deputy sheriff. A lank man with a reputation as black as the inside of a coal bucket, Bowers would grin at a prisoner with his gold teeth and at

the same time kick him in the belly. He chewed a quill toothpick. At his belt he wore a .44 in a cut-down holster.

When Kincaid hesitated, Bowers said, "I'll make it four dollars." He dropped four silver dollars into Kincaid's hands. "You look like you've got a strong back, cowboy."

Kincaid pocketed the money and let Bowers draw him into the shadows of an alley. With this money he'd buy another meal at Ella's. Then he'd get out of Empire, find himself a riding job and start all over. Although he hadn't been impressed with Bowers the few times he had seen him around town, Kincaid put his conscience to rest. After all, Bowers was the law. And four dollars was four dollars. The odors of food from Ella's Place were more tantalizing by the minute.

"Follow me," Bowers said.

There were three other men, bigger than Kincaid, whom Bowers had also hired for this mysterious job. They looked down-at-the-heel like Kincaid.

Kincaid was surprised when Bowers entered Ella's Place.

Like a general directing troops, Bowers said, "Two of you boys grab the counter. You," he jerked his head at Kincaid, "get a rope on a stove leg and drag it out. Everything goes outside on the walk—"

CHAPTER II

ON THE ROAD

TOO STARTLED to speak for a moment, Kincaid finally found his voice. "Hey, wait a minute—"

His voice was lost by the clump of high-heels on the floor as customers, seeing Bowers and evidently aware of the gold-toothed deputy's reputation, scrambled for the doors. Behind them strode the blue-eyed Ella Kane. She carried a leather jacket over her arm. She was wearing a man's shirt and levis. In boots she seemed taller. Her eyes flicked to Kincaid's tight face.

"Bite the hand that feeds you!" she cried, and slapped him hard across the face with her open hand.

Then, as if she had been eager to take out her anger on someone and Kincaid was the likeliest prospect, she actually smiled. "Good night, Mr. Bowers," she told the deputy. "Tell Devon he didn't need to go to all this trouble. Because I'm leaving Empire—for good!"

When she had gone, Bowers gave Kincaid a slanted, gold-toothed grin. "A blamed she-cat. Devon will take the starch out of her." He was staring after Ella's trim figure just vanishing in the crowd that had gathered around the door. Bowers added, "Devon will tame her. He'll do it with a ring on her finger or without. It don't make no difference to him."

The row of gold teeth afforded Kincaid a perfect target. He took advantage of it. He was not aware of the force of his blow until he realized Bowers' shoulders had splintered the thin wall of the cafe. The deputy had skidded to a sitting position on the floor, his shoulders against the broken wall. Dazed, he watched blood from his mouth drip down the side of his pants leg.

Two of the biggest men Bowers had hired instantly seized Kincaid by the arms. When Kincaid tried to squirm out of their grasp, somebody hit him behind the ear.

Bowers was on his feet, wiping his bleeding mouth. He drew his gun and to the men holding Kincaid said, "Don't let him go."

He hit Kincaid across the face with the barrel, the gunsight laying open the skin to the bone.

Kincaid didn't remember anything else. He woke up, dripping wet. For a moment he thought he had fallen into a river, and made clawing motions with his hands as if to swim.

"Acts like a damned fish," a heavy voice said.

He lifted his aching head. His clothes were soaked. Somebody had

thrown a bucket of water over him. He saw Bowers and, behind him an excited crowd. Pain shot clear to Kincaid's heels when he turned his head and saw a chain of gold nuggets across a flowered vest.

Devon jerked a pink thumb at Kincaid. "Lock him up," he ordered Bowers. "Tell Max to put him on the road."

Kincaid tried to rise, to punch that face and knock loose some of the talcum. As he was coming up off the floor, Devon kicked him in the stomach.

WHENEVER Kincaid had seen prison gangs working on a road he had always felt sorry for the poor devils, no matter what crimes they might have committed. Sweating out their sentences with a chain around their ankles. He wondered who was feeling sorry for him. Nobody, he reckoned. The judge had given him ninety days. Kincaid had been unconscious when the sentence was passed. But big Max Robely, who ran the prison camp, had told him about it just to keep the record straight.

Robely was six feet three inches tall. A rugged, vain man he changed his shirt twice a day and trimmed his heavy brown beard and mustache each night by the light of a kerosene lantern in front of his tent. Twice during that first week a girl had come out from town with the supply wagon; a girl from one of those curtained places on Ferguson Alley. At night in the big prisoner's tent, Kincaid would lie on his cot, his ankle chained to a log with a ring in it. He'd listen to Robely and his girls. Robely fancied himself a singer. His bass voice would keep the prisoners awake half the night. The girls would giggle and tell Robely what a great man he was.

Kincaid hadn't looked at himself in a mirror, but he figured no woman would want him now. That mark on his face would probably turn into a scar. When he finished with this busi-

ness, he intended to make Bowers eat that gun, bullets and all. Then he'd figure on some payment from Devon for that kick.

All day he sweated with a shovel under the hot Nevada sun, while a professional powder crew blasted down sections of cliff. There were twenty prisoners and ten guards. Never before had Kincaid realized how much work there was to building a road.

At the start of his second week, as the road inched higher into the maze of rocky peaks, a wagon brought a familiar figure out from town. Kincaid, working a hundred yards from camp, stiffened when he saw Jasper Lucombe jerked roughly from the wagon seat by one of the guards. Lucombe's hands were manacled. He looked ill and shaken as Kincaid, dropping his shovel, moved down toward the camp. Kincaid's progress was slow. You couldn't move fast with a twenty foot length of heavy chain dragging the dust from your right ankle.

Devon, spurring up on a palomino, was shaking his fist at Curt Bowers. "You've no right to bring Lucombe out here!" Devon shouted.

Bowers, his deputy badge catching the reflection of the blinding sun, had been driving the wagon. Now he swung down. "Lucombe broke the law," Bowers said loudly. "He got drunk and started to raise hell with a shotgun. Judge Gateshaw gave him ninety days!"

Lucombe stood with head bowed, his knees trembling. The bearded Robely had stepped out of his tent. Now he shouted at one of the guards and Lucombe was led away to have his ankle chained.

As Lucombe moved off into the maze of tents, Devon shouted: "I'll have you out of here, Jasper! The Governor will hear about this!"

When Lucombe had disappeared, Curt Bowers grinned. His lips were still cut and his grin showed a missing gold tooth. Devon, lifting a pink

hand in a guarded salute to Bowers and Robely, turned his horse and rode back toward Empire.

AT THAT moment Bowers saw Kincaid coming down the road in a cloud of dust kicked up by the dragging chain. He whispered something to Robely. The bearded head guard nodded and strode to meet Kincaid.

"Back to work!" Robely yelled.

Kincaid stood his ground. "Lucombe's an old man! This work will kill him!"

Two guards had come running at Robely's signal. One of them yanked hard on the chain fastened to Kincaid's ankle. Kincaid pitched headfirst into the dust. As he lay prone the other guard drew his club, hit Kincaid with it across the bottoms of his boots. Biting his lips at the shock and the pain, Kincaid glared up at Robely.

Bowers had come to stand beside Robely. The deputy said, "If Kincaid should try to escape, kill him."

Robely, as if reading something in the deputy's eyes, nodded. "Yeah. Kincaid is liable to try and make a break for it—any time."

It took three guards to drag Kincaid back to his shovel. As he worked the rest of the afternoon he knew he had received a sentence of death. Somehow Robely would fake an escape. Kincaid could almost feel those bullets tearing into his back. If only he'd kept his mouth shut. First, he stuck up for Ella Kane. That had cost him ninety days. Then he had tried to help Jasper Lucombe. That would earn him a slug between his shoulder blades. His mouth felt dry. And it wasn't from the heat or the dust. He was scared. With no gun he was helpless. Robely could take his own sweet time about killing him.

For supper they had a concoction that tasted like stewed mule. Kincaid's stomach turned over at the odor, but nevertheless he ate. As they

shuffled toward the bit tent where they were housed at night he managed to walk next to Jasper Lucombe.

To Kincaid's question of what had happened, Lucombe only shook his gray head dazedly. "I was drunk. I woke up in jail and they brung me here." It seemed as if the life and the spirit had been kicked out of him. He had a bad cut over his left eye and he walked hunched over as if somebody had stomped him in the ribs. "But Devon will get me out," he added.

"Devon framed you here," Kincaid said through his teeth.

Lucombe blinked his eyes. "You heard how he talked up to Bowers."

"They're all in this together."

Lucombe rubbed a trembling hand across his grizzled jaws. "But why they doin' this to me?"

"Devon wants the California."

But he's my partner," Lucombe protested.

Kincaid snorted in disgust. "You hoed too many carrots in that Tucson sun. It cooked out your brains."

Seeing them talking together one of the guards booted Lucombe in the pants. The old man fell to his knees. Kincaid took a step forward, then saw Robely, holding a sawed off shotgun, at a corner of the prisoners' tent.

He'd like me to start a fight, Kincaid thought. He'd blow my head off with that shotgun

Several times that night Kincaid tried to talk to the other prisoners, get them in a mood for violence. But they were a gutless lot. Drunks mostly. It was odd when you thought about it, Kincaid reasoned, that Devon didn't send the young tough ones to build his road. Instead, he sent old men like Lucombe. Kincaid was the only reasonably healthy member of the crew. Maybe for some reason Devon just wanted it to appear that he was trying to rush through a road so as to meet the Virginia City syndicate's deadline.

According to the stories he'd heard, the road had to be completed before the option on the California was picked up. It began to look as though maybe Devon had no desire to hurry things at all....

THE NEXT day just after the noon break for a piece of sour beef and a dipper of water, he saw a rider at the edge of the pines. Shielding his eyes against the sun, Kincaid saw that it was Ella Kane in her levis and man's shirt. She pushed her roan down the slant, pulling up before Max Robely. "You tell Devon," Ella warned, "that if he keeps on he'll have this road on my land. I won't give him a right-of-way."

Robely, holding his shotgun under the crook of his arm, grinned. "Then we'll have to trespass."

She lifted her rifle. "Not while I've got this."

Then her hazel eyes swung to Kincaid, standing tall and gaunt his black hair mantled with dust. He didn't know whether she recognized him or not. Last night he had looked at himself in the cracked mirror back at camp. His beard was half as long as his thumb, the mark on his cheek a rusty-red scab. No, he decided, she didn't recognize him, for she looked away. And if possibly she did, there was no interest in her blue eyes.

Robely was saying, "You're some hunk of woman to be livin' all by yourself up at the Spur. Don't you ever get scared?"

For an instant her very red mouth tightened in anger, and she half lifted the rifle as if she'd slam the barrel against his head. Then, her eyes flicking to where Kincaid stood with the other watching prisoners, she smiled at Robely.

"Got any hot coffee? I could do with a cup."

Kincaid watched her and Robely ride down the hill to camp. *So that's the kind of a woman she is after all.*

CHAPTER III

THE LID OF HADES

TURNING, Kincaid saw Jasper Lucombe slumped on a rock, holding his head. Now that Robely was gone, Kincaid felt he could take a chance and walk over to the old hoeman. The guards were staring off down trail where Robely and the girl had disappeared. Charlie Quince, a runty man with a scar on his chin, was saying something to the other guards. They all laughed.

Kincaid reached Lucombe's side. The old man did not even glance up. "You got to get out of here," Kincaid said under his breath, "or they'll bury you in these mountains."

Lucombe kept shaking his gray head. "I never was so blamed tired in my life."

Kincaid looked around. The other prisoners had started shoveling loose shale that had been knocked down by the morning dynamite blast. Putting a hand on Lucombe's bony shoulder, he whispered, "I'm goin' to make a break. You're goin' with me."

Lucombe shrank back on the rock as if Kincaid had suddenly been taken with the plague. "I ain't goin' to budge."

"That's what Devon wants," Kincaid snapped. "Work yourself to death, then he'll own the California."

Lucombe began to shake his head again. "You're wrong about Devon."

"I been wrong about a lot of things but not about that skunk."

Lucombe licked his lips. "Devon is goin' to get me out of here. He told me to sit tight."

"You're sittin' tight on the lid of hades—"

Kincaid didn't finish. Charlie Quince had quit joshing with the other guards. Now he stepped behind Kincaid and rammed a rifle muzzle against his spine. "No talkin'," he snarled. "I'm tellin' Robely. You'll draw ten extra days for this."

Kincaid swallowed in his dusty throat. For a moment he thought Quince would blow a hole in him with that rifle. But instead the runty guard jabbed him harder with the rifle. Kincaid picked up his shovel and got back to work. One of these days, he vowed, he'd settle up with this whole crowd....

That night when he was so tired he felt like dropping in his tracks, he heard the sound of laughter coming from the headquarter's tent. He stiffened, lifting on an elbow. It was Ella's voice. She was laughing at something Robely had said. Kincaid felt cold in the stomach. Taking a chance that a guard would see him and beat out his brains, he lifted a corner of the tent.

What he saw through the tied-back flaps of Robely's tent sickened him. Ella sat on Robely's lap, her face against his bearded cheek as she continued to laugh. Between them a candle glowed on an unpended box. Beside the candle Kincaid saw a bottle of whiskey and two tin cups. Ella was reaching for one of the cups when Robely caught her by the chin. She offered no resistance when he pulled her face around to his.

Ella said, playfully, "Gil Devon would be furious if he knew we were together."

Robely grinned through his beard, but his eyes looked a little worried in the candle light. "He'd kill me if he knew," Robely said, a strange breathlessness creeping into his voice. "But I always says if you're goin' to hell you might as well go with perfume in your beard."

He kissed her.

Ella said, "Let's drink. Let's have lots of drinks."

DISGUSTED, Kincaid dropped the tent flap and lay back on his cot. Sweat broke from his forehead. He lay in the darkness, listening to the snores of the other prisoners, the pound of his own heart.

He was right after all. Only two

kinds of pretty women in this country. Those who were married—and the other kind. He wondered how Robely's tent would look with fancy curtains and a bearskin rug and maybe a piano. It would be right in keeping with everything else Kincaid had witnessed here this night.

Before he knew it, he had fallen into the deep, stinking well of what passed for sleep, in the big tent heavy with the rancid odor of man sweat. Then a movement beside the tent brought him instantly awake. As he rose to an elbow, he saw a dark figure squirming under the tent flap. A moment later he knew it was a girl, because in crawling under the tent she moved against him, and no man ever had a soft body like that.

Now she was peering at him briefly as if to make sure of his identity. Then, while he lay rigid, he saw her crawl to his ankle. He heard the scrape of metal against metal. The spring hasp of the padlock opening. A prisoner tossed restless on the adjoining cot.

The girl put her face close to Kincaid. "Follow me," Ella Kane whispered, and glided out of the tent.

Holding his breath, Kincaid swung his feet off the cot. No iron chain held his ankle now. His heart beat wildly. He started to move toward the front of the tent where he knew Jasper Lumcombe slept. But how to get the old man free. And would he go even if he had the chance?

He heard Ella whisper a warning from outside. He limped for the tent wall, slipped under it into the inky blackness. To his left the high mountains were silhouetted by a rising moon, that soon would spread its light over the campgrounds.

A huge bearded figure suddenly swayed in the entrance of the head-quarters tent. "What you doin' out there, Ella," Robely's drunken voice said. And he started to stagger toward the spot where the girl stood rigid.

Ella cried: "Run, Kincaid!"

Instantly he was darting for the

brush on her heels. Behind him he could hear the camp roar into life. Men shouted. A gun blasted a streak of orange flame in their direction. Looking back over his shoulder he saw Robely plunging out of his tent. Blind drunk, Robely tripped over a guy rope and pitched headfirst to the ground.

Kincaid's right ankle, weakened from wearing the heavy padlocked chain all these days suddenly gave way. He sprawled to his knees. Gravel dug into the palms of his hands as he broke his fall. Ahead he saw Ella swing back, get an arm around his waist.

A heavy caliber rifle opened up from the camp, the slug hammering at the bole of a pine. From the sound of it Kincaid knew it was a Sharps. A bullet that size would take a man's head off. When he thought of what it could do to Ella, he shuddered. Again he fell as the ankle gave out. Ella helped him to his feet. He could feel her hands on his wrists. Then she had pulled them over the lip of a cutbank as the Sharps reached for them again. Behind them Kincaid could hear the confusion, shouting prisoners, the bellow of guards beating the brush.

"Get out of here!" he ordered Ella.

INSTEAD of obeying, she scrambled to her feet, fighting a tangle of catclaw until she reached his side. "Lean on me," she commanded.

Limping, he reached a clearing where two tied horses, frightened by the firing, were trying to kick loose. Waiting until the girl was mounted, Kincaid pulled himself into the saddle of a sorrel. To have a horse under him again, the breath of freedom hard against his face. He felt like shouting. He saw the girl streaking for the mouth of a canyon that opened darkly in the moon-swept cliffs ahead. The sorrel plunged, and without spurs and a weakened ankle he was almost unseated. It was sheer luck that kept him in the saddle and got the horse lined out after the fleeing girl.

Suddenly from the corner of his eye he was aware of a figure looming suddenly in the brush at his right. A swinging shaft of light told him somebody was there with a lantern. Then in the glow he saw Charlie Quince's face, saw the scarred chin, the snout of a lifting gun.

"Robely!" Quince shouted above the turmoil in the camp below, "I got the son—"

Quince fired as Kincaid desperately tried to ride him down. As he heard the roar of Quince's gun, Kincaid felt a shudder beneath him. The flash of the gun had blinded him. The sorrel was going down, taking the shot intended for Kincaid squarely in the head.

Kincaid kicked free of the stirrups, and as he struck the ground on his shoulders he heard Quince scream. The scream was broken off abruptly when the dead sorrel pinned Quince to the ground.

Dazed, Kincaid sat up, spitting out a mouthful of gravel. From the corner of his eye he saw a flicker of flame in the dried brush where the smashed lantern had set it afire.

Scrambling to his knees, Kincaid saw the lifeless shape of the sorrel horse. Projecting from beneath the hindquarters of the dead animal he saw Quince's flattened legs. They didn't move.

As if from a great distance he heard Max Robely shouting: "There he is!"

A blast of short gun fire fell short of Kincaid and sent a shower of fiery splinters high into the air as the bullets cut the burning brush.

STILL dazed from the fall, Kincaid shot a quick glance down a draw where Robely and the guards were scrambling to reach him. They were still beyond six-gun range but that could change any minute.

Kincaid tugged at the dead Quince's ankles until he had dislodged the body from beneath the horse. When he saw the guard's skull he wanted to retch. Gingerly he took the gun from

Quince's dead fingers. Now he turned, aware of a new sense of power with the feel of the butt, still warm from Quince's hand.

The flat and lethal voice of the Sharps spoke up again and he heard the thud of the bullet into the carcass of the sorrel.

He waited for them, his teeth bared. They wouldn't club him now, by God, Kincaid vowed, and thumbing back the hammer stood his ground till one of them got close enough to give him a good target.

"Kincaid! Over here!"

The voice came from behind him. Turning, he saw that Ella had ridden back for him. And it was the sound of her startled cry that cleared his head. In that instant he knew he was forty kinds of fool to be standing there in plain sight. She spurred toward him, kicking loose a stirrup for him. Kincaid caught it as her mount swept by. He felt her strong fingers tight in the back of his shirt, steadying him.

It was probably the pines that saved them, because as they hit the trees a blast of lead clattered like hailstones against the trunks.

For a mile they rode in the darkness, Kincaid managing a precarious hold with one stirrup and a hand on the saddle horn. When Ella halted the the blowing horse on a bluff, he strained his ears for the first sounds of pursuit. His ankle pained like a boil. His hand that clutched the saddle horn was slippery with sweat. Dropping to the ground he sucked cool Nevada air into his lungs.

Ella said scornfully, "What were you trying to do back there? Die like a hero?"

Kincaid glared up at the oval of her face. Even the words angered him, but there were more important things to consider. Tensely he waited with drawn gun expecting any moment to hear a shout that they had been discovered.

Instead, only a faint murmur of shouted commands in the distance.

"They've stopped to fight the fire," Ella called over her shoulder. She had ridden to a ledge that overlooked the site of the prison camp. Kincaid was surprised that they had climbed so high in that short time. Now he could see the shadows of men at the edge of the flames trying to beat out the fire.

Standing beside Ella, Kincaid was aware of her scent. It disturbed and at the same time angered him for he was recalling what he had witnessed between this girl and Robely.

Suddenly he said "Why'd you help me escape?"

FOR A MOMENT she stared at his lean profile as if not understanding his harsh tone. Then she said, "I learned you got into trouble because of me. You struck Cut Bowers when he made an insulting remark."

His lips tightened. "Sometimes just bein' a woman is a mighty slick way of getting things done."

From far below, the flickering firelight threw a faint glow across her pale face. "Maybe," she cried, "I wasted time and a good horse on you!"

"I'm sorry about the horse," he conceded.

The girl said bitterly, "I've lost more than a horse. And without tears. I won't cry over this." She moved to her mount. While he still stared down at the shadowy figures in the valley below, she said, "Are you coming or are you going to wait until Robely quits fighting that fire and comes to get you."

He wanted to say something clever and biting in answer to her sarcasm, but the words would not come. Especially did he lose his power of speech when he rode behind her, clinging to her soft warm shoulders. Her hair smelled of lilac.

Gradually the pines thinned, the cliffs rose to frightening heights against the dark sky. It was through a gap in the solid rock walls, no wider than a wagon bed, that they rode an hour later. Ahead in the moonlight

that slanted over the Nevada peaks he saw a barn and a corral and log house. Suddenly he felt tired and hungry; and the hunger was not altogether for food. What the devil, he thought as he let his hands slip down from her shoulders along her arms. Robely and his gang would have a time putting out that fire. Likely they wouldn't be taking his trail till sunup.

At the corral he swung her out of the saddle, feeling her lightness in his arms. She stepped back from him, brushing a strand of coppery hair from her forehead. She peered at him intently a moment, then said, "I'll fix you something to eat. Then you'd better ride."

When she had gone into the house he stripped the saddle from the horse and turned it into the corral. In the kitchen he saw her at work before the stove frying bacon and eggs. She wore the blue apron he had first seen in Empire. She had found him tobacco and papers one of the ranch hands had left. You couldn't hire riders these days, she explained. Everybody who could swing a pick was prowling the hills and looking for gold.

"What about Devon?" he asked, trying to keep his eyes from the curve of her bosom against the apron front.

"Just an ambitious man who thinks gold can buy anything," she answered.

"Maybe you could use some help," Kincaid suggested, trying to find some enjoyment in tobacco dried to the consistency of yard dust.

"You'd better get across the California line before sunup," she advised him sharply.

"Walking?" he asked her dryly. He was conscious of the throbbing pain of his ankle. His right shoulder hurt where he had fallen from the sorrel.

As if reading his mind, she said, "I've got three mounts left. You're welcome to one of them."

"Thanks," he said, and set about tackling the meal she placed before him. "Reckon I will use that horse—in the morning."

CHAPTER IV

DYNAMITE—TWO KINDS

AS HE ATE he asked her how come a woman like her had tried to run a cafe in Empire.

"I thought it was one way to keep the ranch," she explained. "Cow ranching is a man's job. My brother and I used to run things pretty well." Her voice broke. "He died last spring. We had smallpox up here in the mountains."

Kincaid wasn't listening. She had removed her blue apron and draped it over the back of the chair. Somehow in their flight the buttons had been torn off the front of her shirt. Apparently she hadn't been aware of this until she saw the sudden intensity in his eyes. Glancing down, her cheeks flamed. She quickly left the room, returning in a few moments with the shirt securely pinned.

Through a haze of blue tobacco smoke he watched her. Trying to appear casual, he tilted the chair back against the wall and yawned. "You get some sleep," he suggested. "I'll keep an eye open for visitors."

She frowned, saying he was the one who needed sleep. But he was adamant. He kicked off his boots. His ankle felt a little better.

He gave her a reassuring grin. "I'll put on a pot of coffee. That'll keep me awake. I'll sleep tomorrow."

She moved to a door that evidently led to a bedroom. As she walked his throat tightened. Those boys' jeans she wore fit as if they'd been sewed to hip and thigh.

She opened the door. Her hand was on the key when he warned, "Better not lock it. I might have to get you out of there quick."

She tilted back her head, staring at him through the fringe of her lashes as if trying to make up her mind about something. He thought she might be smiling softly. He couldn't be sure because the lamp on a shelf

beside the stove didn't throw enough light to that far corner of the room. She murmured, "Goodnight," stepped into the room and closed the door.

He sat rigid in the chair, but could hear no sound of a key turning in a lock.

For a long time he waited, hours it seemed. Then he was aware of the creak of bedsprings in the adjoining room as if a body's weight had settled on them. Then silence.

Rubbing the palms of his moist hands together, he rose and crossing the room in his sock feet, blew out the lamp.

He put his ear against the door, but heard no sound. Robely had been right, damn him, Kincaid reluctantly admitted. If you were going to Hell you might as well go with perfume in your beard. By all rights he should be putting the miles between himself and Devon's crew. But he couldn't get the lilac scent of her out of his mind.

Cautiously he opened the door, stepped into the room and closed it behind him. His breath was tight in his lungs as if he'd just run uphill with a sack of rocks on his back.

Sweating, he was ready to put out an exploratory hand when he was suddenly aware of a thin edge of lamp-light under the door. He cursed his having left his gun in the kitchen.

Suddenly the door banged open. Ella, holding a lamp in one hand, peered at him. She was fully clothed. There was the devil in her blue eyes as she threw him a folded blanket. "I happened to think you might get cold before morning."

The blanket hit him in the face. He clawed it aside, glaring at her. His eyes lowered to the revolver in her hand. Suddenly he hated her.

"Hope you don't walk in your sleep," she said, and cocked the gun. "It would be a shame to shoot you—by mistake."

She slammed the door.

Never had he felt like such a complete fool. If the bed hadn't felt so good to his aching body he would

have cut for the hills. But before he knew it he was asleep. In his dreams he saw Robely laughing at him.

WHEN HE awakened and entered the kitchen she was cheerfully cooking breakfast. He never did know where she had slept. In the parlor, probably. He was sorry he'd overslept. He wanted to be up and gone so he wouldn't have to look at her again. By daylight she looked even more desirable than she had last night. She still wore her jeans but had changed her shirt. This one was red and white checked, and it had buttons.

She had laid out a razor that had belonged to her brother. He didn't want to accept anything else from her, but his beard was crawling. After he'd shaved he felt better. As she cooked up a platter of hotcakes he saw that her eyes kept watching him.

"You look some better," she conceded. "Last night you looked tough. It's a wonder I wasn't afraid to let you in the house."

"If I'd been all duded up like Max Robely maybe you'd have—"

She narrowed her eyes and for a moment he thought she'd hurl the skillet she was washing in a big dishpan. "What did you mean by that?" she said, her lips barely moving.

"I saw you sittin' on Robely's lap."

She dropped the skillet back into the pan and put soapy hands on her hips. "So I sat on Robely's lap. If I hadn't, you'd still be wearing a chain on your leg."

Her eyes defied him to say more. Desperately he tried to find words to match his indignation and his hurt. Last night, for example, why hadn't she locked the door instead of giving him that smile with her eyes and then tricking him.

Her sharp laughter startled him. "So that's why you thought I'd be free and easy. Why, you poor, stupid fool."

ANGERED, he spun for the door and stalked into the yard. The

sun was high and bright overhead. He'd had no idea he'd slept this late. That's what twelve hours a day with pick and shovel did to a man. He was standing in the yard, staring at the bald cliffs that seemed to completely encircle the ranchyard when she came to the door. She wasn't laughing now.

"There's only one entrance here," she said, waving her hand toward the south. "The rest of the Spur is beyond the cliffs. Dad liked privacy." When he made no reply, her voice softened and she said, "Take one of the horses."

Again he wanted to find words that would make her realize how greatly he despised her. But his mind seemed empty. Without looking back at her, he stalked toward the V in the cliffs he spotted beyond the barn. He thought he heard her call to him but he didn't turn around.

His eyes were on that V in the rocky wall when the ground suddenly seemed to lurch under his feet, as if he were standing on a polished floor and somebody had yanked a carpet out from under his feet.

It seemed to be raining rocks and dust. Concussion beat against his eardrums. Covering his head with his arms, he lay flat on the ground. He cringed as a boulder half again as big as a beer keg thudded against the ground and rolled to within three feet of his head before it stopped.

Dazed, he pulled himself to his feet. For a moment he could see nothing because of the thick dust cloud. Then caught by the mountain breeze, it parted like a torn yellow veil. He was staring back the way he had come. Rocks littered the ranchyard. The front of the barn was smashed in. He shifted his gaze, feeling a sudden coldness along his spine. Half of the house roof was gone. Unmindful of his throbbing ankle he streaked for the house, leaped up the broken steps, yelling, "Ella! Ella!"

The wreckage of the kitchen sickened him. Then as he was trying to picture how she'd look when he dug her out of the debris, he heard a sound behind him. He turned, seeing her beside the barn. Her face was ashen.

Now that he could see she was unhurt, all his old resentment came boiling up in him again. She started across the yard toward him, quickening her pace.

"Earthquake," he said. "I was in Sacramento once when they had one—"

She had thrown her arms about his neck, burying her face against the front of his soiled shirt. For a moment he stood rigid, trying to fight the pressure of her strong body. Then, feeling a wetness against his neck, he knew she was crying. Now she was all woman. Not a blue-eyed she-devil. She was scared.

"It was no earthquake," she sobbed. "I saw them watching us through binoculars from the ridge. I tried to call to you. They—they dynamited the pass."

"Damn—"

He felt her shoulders tremble. "I thought you were dead. One minute you were out there in the open. Then there was that terrible roar and all I could see was rocks and dust."

He felt her shudder. His hands tightened on her shoulders. "Who did it? Devon?"

"Probably." She tilted back her head to stare up at him out of wet eyes. "We're trapped. There's no other way out."

"We'll find a way."

She shook her head. "We'll have to stay right here till Devon decides to come for us."

"The devil we will!" he said grimly, trying to make his voice sound very reassuring. As he stared at the sheer rock walls they seemed higher than ever. His courage drooped. "If Devon figures to walk in here, he'll wind up with a bullet in his head..."

CHAPTER V

THE CALIFORNIA

FROM THE window of his new office above the Golden Slipper, Gil Devon could look down on Empire's main street, see the crowds swarming the boardwalks. Everything of promise in Empire was new; beyond the single block of permanent structures were tents and clapboard shanties. Even the walls of Devon's office gave off the pungent odor of green lumber. So far as Devon was concerned there was nothing permanent in Empire. It was, make it while you can, then clear out. It was the late comers to a boom town who saw the bright bubbles burst. Devon had no intention of getting soap in his eyes.

Near the large new window overlooking the street, Devon had placed a small table. Across the table Judge Leroy Gateshaw grinned over the poker hand he held. These card sessions with Gateshaw were daily periods of concentration for Devon. While he concentrated on cards his busy mind formulated plans for gathering more of the yellow dust of Empire for his own needs.

Today, however, Gateshaw was winning. The slight, sandy-haired man Devon had managed to get appointed judge, was chuckling over the fact that already he had won forty dollars from Devon. Usually it was the other way around. A renegade California lawyer, Gateshaw had fitted well into Devon's plans. The Nevada authorities hadn't as yet gotten around to investigating Judge Leroy Gateshaw. By the time that happened Gateshaw and Devon would be hunting new trails.

For the past week Devon had noticed definite signs of unrest in Empire. As yet it was nothing you could put your finger on, but too many men had failed to find gold.

Eight thousand odd men who had come to get rich and failed could become ugly. They might start looking for a scapegoat.

Devon said, fingering his cards with his pink fingers, "Don't send any more prisoners to the road gang."

Judge Gateshaw's narrow, lined face grew additional wrinkles as he frowned. "Don't stop now, Gil. All it's costing you is their keep and pay for the powder crew."

"The road's gone far enough," Devon snapped. He and Gateshaw had been together in other boom towns. For a judge, Gateshaw was exceptionally well-heeled. In the top of his right boot he carried a Hopkins & Martin derringer. Beneath his coat he wore a bulldog pistol.

Gateshaw, raking in a new pot, said, "You'll never get gold out of the California unless you have a road."

"The gold we get from the California," Devon said, "won't come from a hole in the ground."

Judge Leroy Gateshaw grinned, showing his crooked yellow teeth. But his crafty eyes were tight on Devon's face. "Maybe you ought to tell me *all* your plans. It isn't right for partners to be in the dark."

Devon gave Gateshaw what was intended for a smile. "You'll know—in time."

Gateshaw dealt a new hand, stacking the deck in front of him when he had finished. "What about Jasper Lucombe?"

"If he isn't already dead from exhaustion I'll arrange to have Robely let him escape."

Gateshaw stared at his cards, then raised his eyes to Devon. "Better not let Robely make a crude job of it. I've heard talk around town that you double crossed Lucombe. A lot of the boys know you and I and Curt are working together. They think it's odd you'd let Lucombe get sentenced to the road gang when he's supposed to be your partner."

Devon threw down his cards.

"We've got another week here at the most. I've already lined up a buyer for the Golden Slipper. Some fool thinks business is going to keep up at this pace. He'll wake up when it's too late."

Judge Gateshaw wiped a hand across his narrow chin, staring at the green-topped table as if in deep thought. After a moment he said, "What about the California?"

"There's around eight thousand men in Empire. If we can get half of them to buy a share in the California we'll leave town with so much gold it'll take two pack mules to carry it."

Gateshaw shook his head. "Not enough men are going to lay out a hundred dollars a share for a mine they've never seen."

"But they'll pay ten dollars a share," Devon said softly.

FOR A moment Gateshaw looked shocked, then a dawning light appeared in his eyes. "I see. Some things I didn't understand are beginning to add up."

Footsteps sounded on the inside stairway that led down into the Golden Slipper. Curt Bowers, his deputy sheriff badge glinting dully from his shirt front, entered.

He gave the two men a spare nod, then looking at Devon said, "Robely's took the bit in his teeth again."

"What's he done this time?"

"Kincaid's escaped," the deputy said heavily, shifting the holstered .44 at his belt and sitting on the edge of Devon's desk. "I just got back from the camp. Robely's on his way in here now. I figured you'd like to know before he got here."

Devon nodded, musing, "Kincaid. He's the one who knocked out your tooth."

Curt Bowers instinctively raised a hand to his mouth that still bore the marks of Kincaid's fist.

Devon shrugged. "Kincaid will keep on running."

Bowers, still fingering the gap in his gold-toothed smile, said, "Thought

you'd like to know that Ella Kane helped Kincaid escape."

Devon's cheeks paled beneath the talcum. After a moment he said, "How did she manage it?"

"Some of the guards we've got don't like Robely. They talked—"

Devon glared up at the deputy, suddenly knocking cards and chips to the floor with a sweep of his hand. "I asked you a question," he said coldly.

Curt Bowers licked his bruised lips. "She—she got Robely drunk. Made him a lot of promises, I reckon. Anyhow she lifted his keys."

Devon settled back heavily into his chair, his eyes on the crowd in the street below. "Let's hear the rest of it," Devon commanded.

Bowers scowled, evidently not liking the tone in Devon's voice but lacking the courage to force the issue. Quickly he told how Kincaid and the girl had fled. "Quince got killed when Kincaid's dead horse flattened him. The lantern he was carryin' set the brush on fire. By the time Robely and the boys got the fire out Kincaid and the girl was gone. This morning Robely gave the Spur headquarters a look through his binoculars. He figured Kincaid and the girl were at the ranch so he dynamited the pass."

Devon's voice dripped sarcasm as he said, "Is that all Robely did?"

Curt Bowers shook his head. "Before he lit the fuse, he kicked Jasper Lucombe into the canyon. If Lucombe ain't dead he's penned up at the spur with Kincaid and the girl." Bowers added, "Robely figured you'd have the three of them right where you wanted 'em."

FOR A long moment Devon made no reply. He sat rigid in his chair.

Judge Gateshaw said, "I always did figure Robely was too damned sure of himself."

Devon rose to stand by the window, hands clasped behind his back.

Gateshaw jerked his head at the deputy. Quietly the two of them crossed the room and left by the out-

side stairway that led down into Ferguson Alley.

Devon was not aware that they had gone. One thing had frustrated him in this town—Ella. She was a cool one and her slight arrogance angered and at the same time interested him. When he told her he needed the cafe next door in order to expand the Golden Slipper he thought it would make her realize at last that he got what he wanted, that there was no use in fighting him.

A year ago he had first seen her when she came to Virginia City with her brother. When her brother died, Devon had made a special trip to Empire to console her. He had hired a buggy and had driven her into the hills. She had allowed him to kiss her.

Now that he had been drawn to Empire by the gold strike he had thought he could take up where he left off. But she would have nothing to do with him. One night she had told him that during the year since their last meeting she had learned the kind of man he really was.

And here she had been drinking with a man like Robely. And she had done, the Lord knew what, to enable Kincaid to escape. Now she and this Kincaid were holed up together at the Spur.

"I'll hang Kincaid, sure as there's a sun tomorrow," he said aloud.

A voice from the doorway said, "I been thinkin' of that. He killed Quince. It's reason enough to put a rope around his neck."

Devon turned. He had not heard Robely enter. Now the big boss of the prison camp closed the door at the top of the alley stairway.

Robely crossed the room, to lean against the desk. "Reckon Bowers told you all about it."

Devon nodded. Although Robely was big, Devon topped him by a good three inches. Where Robely ran to long hair and beard, Devon was freshly barbered, his cheeks which he

shaved twice a day white with a thin layer of talcum.

Devon took a cigar from a box on the desk and without offering one to Robely, bit off the end. "So Ella helped Kincaid get loose."

Robely's bright eyes flicked at Devon. Last night he had been willing to gamble for Ella's affections, but all he got was a kiss on the cheek and a lot of promises. From all that whiskey he had consumed his head felt as if someone had split his skull with an axe bit.

"Ella must have been pretty close to you in order to steal your keys," Devon said coldly.

Above his thick beard, Robely's cheeks paled. "I got drunk. I don't remember what happened."

Gil Devon's pink hand made a movement at the front of his coat. In his hand appeared an ivory-butted revolver. He stood rigid, holding the gun on Robely.

Robely stared at the weapon, then lifted his eyes to Devon's smooth face. "Don't ruin everything just because you got your eye on a pretty leg."

FOR A moment Devon watched him, then holstering the gun in its sling under his arm, he said thinly, "If I ever thought you laid a hand on her I'd kill you."

Robely swallowed. "I dynamited the Gun Notch this morning. Now you've got Kincaid and the girl and Jasper Lucombe. They can't move till you get ready to go after 'em."

Devon crossed the room to stare at a wall map of Nevada Territory. "So Kincaid and the girl are up there together," he said, without looking around. "And they can't get out till somebody lowers a rope or digs through the pass. A lot can happen before then."

Robely, helping himself to a cigar from the box on Devon's desk said, "If you're worried about the gal, you can sure put a gun on Kincaid and make him marry her."

Devon spun, flinging out his right arm so that the back of his fist struck Robely in the face like a thrown club. Instantly a gusher of blood spurted from Robely's broken nose. Dazed with pain he was thrown off balance by the force of the blow. He staggered back, back, fighting to regain his balance. Devon saw his eyes lose their pain and turn ugly. But it was at the moment the calf of Robely's right leg caught the edge of the low window sill. For an instant Robely clawed the air then the back of his head crashed through the window. The rest of his body followed. As he disappeared from sight the last thing Devon saw was the soles of his worn boots.

It seemed an eternity that Devon waited until he heard the crash of Robely's body on the boardwalk. Now he could hear shouts and the sounds of running men. For a moment he stared down at the cigar Robely had taken. It was smashed now where Devon's fist had flattened it against Robely's face. Stained with Robely's blood.

Devon peered down through the broken window. Robely lay on his back, surrounded by a group of curious men. At first he thought Robely was dead, then he saw the man reach awkwardly with his left hand for the gun that miraculously had not fallen out of its holster.

Sweat beaded Robely's face; his eyes were wild. Devon saw him lurch to his feet. A piece of white bone had torn through the collar of Robely's shirt.

The crowd broke as Robely, running hunched over like a man in deep pain, made the bottom step of the outside stairway.

A COLD anger tightening his shoulders, Devon flung open the door at the head of the stairway and stepped back. Instantly Robely's gun hurled a bullet through the opening. Devon waited, hearing Robely shout:

"Ella Kane's a tramp, Devon! You hear that? Last night I had—"

Devon showed himself in the doorway, and Robely, unable to halt his scramble up the steps in time to line his gun, took the full force of the shots Devon poured down on him. When Devon's gun was empty, Robely lay dead on the stairway.

Devon's cold gray eyes searched each upturned face in the alley below. "Robely was crazy drunk."

So far in Empire the death of a man like Robely was of little concern. Men had gold on their minds. It was only when their frustrations at not finding the yellow dust turned inward that a man had to look out.

But this was not a lynching crowd, Devon saw with relief. Already they were drifting away. Two of them pulled Robely's body off the stairway and carried it behind the feed store.

Reloading his gun, Devon shoved it beneath his coat and licked his lips. It was good he had gotten rid of Robely. Things were coming to a head here in Empire and he had no further use for the man. Besides, it would now save him the thousand dollars he had promised Robely together with a further cut from the profits of their venture.

A man of quick decision, Devon descended to his Golden Slipper by the inside stairway. Stepping to the bar, he said, "Drinks on the house."

Written in soap across the huge backbar mirror Devon had brought down from Carson City, was a notice: **STOCK IN THE CALIFORNIA MINE \$100 PER SHARE.**

The crowd, scrambling for the bar to get a free drink, quieted as Devon picked up a damp rag and rubbed off the last zero.

"You aim to sell stock in the California for only ten dollars a share?" one of the men demanded.

Devon shrugged his heavy shoulders, pausing a moment to gauge the temper of these men. "With Robely dead I'll never get the road finished

in time to meet the deadline unless I get some cash. The Virginia City Syndicate that's buying the California won't wait. So, if any of you boys want gold dust without breaking your backs with a pick, here's your chance."

They watched as he moved to a huge iron safe, unlocked the big padlock with a key on the end of his chain of gold nuggets. When the doors were opened he removed a cardboard box filled with bright and shining green stock certificates. With this under his arm, he cleared a poker table and sat down. To the expectant crowd, he said, "Line up, boys. Who's first?"

Devon began to sweat as the men, bunched along the bar and around the gaming tables, hesitated. Then the tension broke as a fat man in a stained gray suit moved toward the table. "What in hell can a man lose for ten dollars?"

Two more trips Devon had to make to the safe for additional stock certificates. This was only the beginning, he knew. When men working the hills heard the news they too would be ready to buy stock in the California.

During a lull in the buying, Devon called Curt Bowers to his side. "Take some men and get Kincaid and Lucombe out of the Spur."

"Alive?" Bowers drawled.

"Lucombe doesn't matter. But I want Kincaid here in Empire. I'm going to hang him."

Bowers rubbed his jaw. "What about the girl?"

"Leave her where she is. I'll pay her a visit later—alone."

CHAPTER VI

GAMBLE

AS THE haze of dust gradually cleared above the cliffs, Rolfe Kincaid saw the results of the dynamiting all too clearly. The V in the cliff walls had completely dis-

appeared to effectively seal them off from the outside world. The prospects of being penned up here with a good-looking girl like Ella ordinarily would have appealed to him. But today he had an edgy feeling in his stomach. It was all right to romance a girl when you weren't worried about some guy waiting to put a bullet in your back. For he knew that whoever had dynamited that pass would be looking in on them with a gun. And it wouldn't be long.

It was not a very promising situation. The kitchen stove was ruined, for the boulder that had torn through the roof of the house had flattened the stove into the floor. Kincaid found a piece of sheetiron which he propped up on stones in the yard. Ella had tied her hair back with a red ribbon. Despite their predicament she seemed cheerful as she set about preparing a meal. She had found a chunk of beef in the wrecked kitchen and a few potatoes and an onion. It would make a passable evening repast.

Despite a smudge of dirt on one cheek she looked sweet to Kincaid, and a little helpless. But as he watched the trim line of her thigh as she placed an iron pot on their makeshift stove, he was remembering what she had done to him last night.

Noticing the stern set of his brown face, she said, "What's the matter?"

"I'm just tryin' to figure why you acted so smart last night."

Instead of becoming angry, her eyes softened. "If you'd have gotten your way," she said, "you'd have headed out before the moon was down. That's the last I would have ever seen of you." She lifted a shoulder, let it drop. "I've seen men with other girls. I know what they think and how they act. After all, I had a brother, you know."

IF ANYTHING her calmness only further irritated him. There was no pretense to her. Here she was putting it to him straight. He wondered then as he stared at her supple

figure if those observations of hers were second hand like she claimed. Or had some drifter with a smile and a lot of fast talk caught her in the full moon one time and then hit the trail. Maybe it all added up to the fact that she was going to make the next man pay for her mistake. He'd be hanged if she was going to hook him.

The meal was tasty and Kincaid had to admit that she could whip up something that would sure make a man want to put his feet under a supper table of an evening.

"With grub like this," he told her, "you could've made a million dollars in Empire."

She only shrugged. "I'd have done all right if Devon hadn't wanted the building."

"It was a devil of a way to treat a woman."

"Oh, he offered me an alternative."

Kincaid glanced up from his plate.

"A wedding ring?"

"I suppose he would have married me. Although he wouldn't want to. It's the fact that I've been cool to him that makes him want me. He's the kind of man who thinks he can have anything he wants."

"Somebody ought to take a gun to him," he said thickly.

Her eyes darkened. "I wouldn't want you to be the one who kills him."

"Why not?"

When she lowered her head over her tin plate he could see color start up across the back of her neck. She was blushing. The thought made him uneasy. She was an odd one, he reflected. One minute she talked if she had experienced just about everything the world had to offer. Then the next minute she was acting like a kid in pigtails, her face turning red just because she'd been trapped into admitting that he was of some concern to her.

She said, "Devon has a lot of influence. If you killed him they might—hang you. I wouldn't want that."

Her words brought a pleasant warmth stealing over him. And before he could correct the turn of his thinking, he had caught her hand in his own. Now he stared at the back of it, seeing it was small-boned and lightly tanned.

No longer was she blushing as he looked at her; in her eyes he saw a strange brightness that quickened his heartbeat.

Secretly appalled by his own admission, he heard himself saying, "I'm sorry about last night."

She said with that direct way of hers, "I knew you'd try. Maybe I'd have been disappointed if you hadn't." When he started to withdraw his hand, she said, "I guess at first I felt sorry for you that day in the cafe. Just a hungry cowman who had spent all his money trying to find gold."

"Last night you were colder than January," he reminded her.

WITHDRAWING her hand she gathered up their plates and put them in the dishpan she had set on the broken porch. "There's a good living here—for a man and wife."

His throat tightened. So that was her game. Get him all buttered up and then make him stand up before a sky pilot with her. She wasn't going to corral him that way. Not that it wouldn't be all right to have a good-looking filly like Ella waiting for him at night. But he had few of these worldly goods. Only the clothes on his back, such as they were. His last dollar he had spent in her cafe. He wasn't figuring to marry anybody, let alone a gal who had a ranch and a few head of cows. When he had nothing.

She had turned from the porch to stare at him, her features very composed. "There are cows back in the hills," she said. "I can't move them myself. But if you'll go in with me we can get a herd to Empire and sell it."

He said, his voice dripping with

sarcasm, "How do you figure to get cows over these cliffs? Put wings on 'em?"

"They're outside," she said with a wave of her hand toward the north rim. "All we have to do is get out."

"Even if we could scale the cliffs," he said sourly, "how could we get horses?"

"We'd just have to borrow a couple."

"They hang horsethieves," he said.

"I'll take a chance if you will." She had walked to where he stood in the shade of the caved-in barn. He was aware of the slow hammerbeat of his heart as she halted to regard him out of her questioning blue eyes. Most of the afternoon he had spent trying to search for a way up the cliffs. There seemed to be none. He was thinking now that they were truly trapped here together. Twilight had begun to thicken along the pine-studded rim of their prison.

He blurted suddenly, "You better get some sleep."

She came to stand at his side. Now she didn't seem nearly as tall as she had that day in Empire. The tip of her reddish head was a little higher than his shoulder. And neither did she seem so self-sufficient as she had that day. Now she was truly feminine as she said almost shyly, "Kincaid, I don't know anything about you, but I like you. We're trapped in here, nobody knows for how long." She stared down at the dusty ground. "Some-time in her life a woman has to gamble on a man."

"Gamble about what?" he whispered hoarsely.

She did not look at him when she said, "If we get out of here, will you marry me?"

Instantly his mind flared into rebellion, all except one small corner that at the moment seemed to control his powers of speech. He heard the fateful words tumble from his lips. "Yeah, I'll marry you."

She moved up the porch steps. At

the door, she looked back at him, smiling faintly. Then she stepped inside.

The moment she was gone he unclenched his hands, aware that his palms were moist. All right, he decided angrily, she asked for it. He'd said he would marry her but there was no time limit. When they got out of here didn't mean anything. He'd wait a month, maybe, and let her squirm and think he was running out. It would serve her right for the way she had tricked him. If he didn't know better he'd have sworn she dynamited that pass just to trap him.

And yet, why should she want him? A down-at-the-heel cowman with ragged hair, a patch on his pants and halfmoons on the soles of his boots. Not when she could have a smooth gent like Gil Devon who could buy her perfumes and China silk and Paris lace.

He had one foot on the bottom step when a sound by the barn caused him to whirl and drop to one knee. Keyed up as he was, the sound of a boot striking a tin can had angled sharply to him across the ranchyard. Now, gun in hand, he waited, his eyes probing the deepening shadows.

SOMETHING moved by the edge of the barn. He cocked the gun he had taken from the dead Quince.

He was about to let go when he heard a voice whisper, "Pssst. Kincaid."

He lowered the gun when he saw Jasper Lucombe's graying head projecting from a corner of the barn. If Kincaid had seen Gil Devon riding into the ranch yard on an eight-legged palomino he couldn't have been more surprised.

Lucombe was beckoning to him. Quickly Kincaid crossed the ranchyard. "What the devil you doin' here?" Kincaid demanded of the old plowman.

Lucombe looked beaten down as he had the last time Kincaid had seen

him. But now there was an angry light in the pale eyes. "Robely shoved me in here, blast his soul. When the dynamite went off it knocked me cold." Lucombe gingerly rubbed a knot on the back of his head as big as a clenched fist. "I just come to a while ago. Come over this way when I seen smoke from your cook fire. I didn't want to butt in when I heard you and the gal talkin'."

Kincaid felt his ears burn.

Lucombe glanced back over his shoulder. "I seen somethin' over yonder. Looked like maybe some fellas movin' through the brush." He looked at Kincaid and lowered his eyes. "Sure ain't a time to be bustin' up anything between you and the gal but—"

"Get to the point," Kincaid snapped, feeling edgy at the old man's disclosure.

"One of them fellas looked almighty like Curt Bowers."

Kincaid's mouth suddenly went dry. Grabbing Lucombe by the arm he got him into the house, past the wrecked kitchen and into the parlor. Ella's face whitened when she heard the grim news.

When she had dug up a rifle for Lucombe and filled the pockets of her levis with shells for her revolver, they were ready to move. In the thickening darkness Kincaid had figured it was best to try and break out of the house. For a hundred yards or so beyond the barn he had seen the brush rustling. Unless Bowers had the house surrounded they had a chance to escape out the back door.

Lucombe touched Kincaid on the arm. "You was right about Devon. He's been playin' me for a fool. I can see it now. I must be a coward at heart, that's why I stayed drunk all the time in Empire. Devon knows I'm scared of him."

"Devon's bluffed a lot of folks," Kincaid snapped, and looked to the loads in his gun. "He aims to steal your mine," he added, snapping shut the loading gate of the .45.

"Whatever I get out of that mine."

Lucombe said seriously, "you'll get half."

"We'll talk about that later," Kincaid said, but the words gave a lift to his spirits. He was staring at Ella's trim figure from the corner of his eye. With his pockets full of gold he'd be the top dog in this layout. He'd marry her, all right, but she'd have to sell the Spur and live off his money.

Ella, standing on the back porch and peering out across the expanse of brush that stretched beyond the house to the cliff walls, said, "There's somebody out there, Kincaid."

INSTANTLY he was alert, cursing inwardly that rosy dream of a future with Ella were making him careless. Now he could see two men creeping toward the house. Purple shadows lay thick against the house, and the pair out there evidently had not seen the girl and the two men on the back porch.

From the front of the house sounded Curt Bowers' harsh voice. "Come out with your hands up, Kincaid. I'm arresting you for murder. You killed Charlie Quince!"

Kincaid licked his lips, aware of Ella's sharp indrawn breath.

"They can't take you," she whispered fiercely.

He put his finger against her warm lips, silently commanding her to silence. It was one thing to stand up to a bunch like Bowers and his men when you were alone. But with a girl it was something else again. Kincaid was aware of the hammerbeat of his heart.

To Lucombe he whispered, "Get her back in the house. They want me, nobody else."

Then he was running swiftly across the yard, hunched over like an Indian. Behind him he heard Ella's cry of protest. Two figures rose from the brush to his left. Startled the two men stared a moment. One of them a moon-faced johnny in a white hat yelled: "Here he is, Curt!"

And on the heel of his shout was

the crash of his gun. Kincaid felt the bullet stir the short hairs at the back of his neck. Instead of firing, he continued to run, trying to reach a small shed he had spotted from the porch. Another gun opened up, missed its target in the gloom of twilight. He could hear Bowers yelling from the front yard. Then the crack of Lucombe's rifle from the house, followed by the roar of Ella's revolver.

Kincaid swore. He had wanted to draw fire away from the house. His heart turned cold when he heard a blast from the guns in the front yard rattle against the walls, crash through window glass.

REACHING the shed, Kincaid instantly sped to the far wall in plain sight. The white-hatted man and his companion, a lank guard from the prison camp named Rawlins, had evidently expected Kincaid to hole up behind the shed. Now they came running full tilt to take him on both sides. Seeing him in full view startled them, but only for a moment.

It was enough to enable Kincaid to get in his first shot. He saw the white hat go sailing into the brush. He aimed an inch lower, right where a sweatband would cross a man's forehead. He saw the pale oval of the stranger's face, but the instant Kincaid's gun crashed, the face was gone.

Rawlins, seeing his companion go down, wheeled, his long legs carrying him to the far side of the house where he evidently hoped to join Bowers in the front yard. As he fled, he opened up, shooting under his left arm. Kincaid matched those gunflashes with his own, aware of bullets lashing the air around him. Rawlins' gun no longer searched for him. The sound of Rawlins' body striking the house made a dull sound in the sudden silence.

Kincaid licked his dry lips, aware that the hand that held his gun was moist. He moved forward. It was inky black now without even the hint

of a moon. From the front yard he could hear a man moaning. He wanted to know if Ella was all right, but he didn't dare yell or he'd give away his position. Funny, he reflected, how blamed quiet it was all of a sudden.

He moved forward, almost stumbling over Rawlins' body. Contact with the still form made him shudder. Rawlins was dead or out cold, he figured.

Otherwise he'd be shooting. He kicked Rawlins' gun into the brush and moved around toward the front of the house. A man groaned out there.

Sweat crawled down the back of his neck, soaked into his shirt. How long had it been since the three of them had been standing on the back porch? He couldn't remember. It seemed like an age.

Keeping to the deeper shadows beside the house, he inched forward until he reached the front porch.

Suddenly from far out in the yard someplace he heard a horse nicker. The sound was so startling in the silence that he rose to his full height so that his right shoulder was even with the porch rail.

A gun flamed almost in his face. In the sudden blast of sound and orange-blue fire his hands reached instinctively for the solid shape the brief flash had revealed. His fingers clutched a man's shirt, ripping it until his grip slid down a bared muscular arm. He heard a man yell. It was Curt Bowers' voice. Kincaid dropped to his knees and the sudden shift of his weight brought Bowers crashing through the porch rail.

Kincaid lost his grip. He tried to open his eyes, but his eyelids seemed paralyzed. *Blind from the searing powder blast in his face.* Desperately Kincaid fought that squirming figure, felt the numbing jolt of a gun barrel chopping at his shoulders, trying to reach his skull. He drew in his head like a turtle, lashed out with a fist as he felt Bowers' weight pin him to the ground. Bowers grunted.

"Kincaid! Kincaid!" Ella was screaming from the porch.

"Get away from him, Kincaid!" Jasper Lucombe yelled.

It was like trying to claw free from a maddened grizzly.

Again Kincaid found a wrist, clung to it with one hand. With his free hand he flailed it above him like a club, feeling the whiplash motion of his knuckles against the bony hardness of Bowers' face.

THE GUN roared and Kincaid felt the ground tremble beneath him. Somehow he managed to get a thumb under the firing pin. The pain of steel gouging his flesh drove him wild. Now his vision was clearing and he could see Bowers above him, a stocky shadow astride his own body, trying to wrest free his gun and finish the job.

Kincaid felt a new surge of strength with the return of his sight. Believing he had been blinded a gnawing chill had gripped him. But now he could see. Nothing was too bad when you could see. You had a chance to live.

He drove upward with a knee and Bowers groaned and lost his seat on the squirming figure of Rolfe Kincaid. But the blow to his groin had missed its mark. Bowers, on hands and knees, raised the gun he had finally torn loose from Kincaid's grasp. Kincaid dove in low, hearing the roar of the gun, feeling the clutch of lead and the searing powder flash the length of his spine. His momentum bowled the deputy over. As he went back, Kincaid, seizing him by his right arm, exerted all his strength. There was a snapping sound like the crack of a broken box slat. The sound was lost beneath Bowers' scream.

Dazedly Kincaid got to his feet, aware that Ella was clinging to him, trying to draw him to the porch. He brushed her aside with a sweep of his arm. "Get back in the house," he panted. "No tellin' who else is out in the yard."

Stooping, he retrieved the gun he had dropped when Bowers had fired almost in his face. Bowers threshed about on the ground, kicking up a cloud of dust as his spurs dug into the dry soil.

"My arm," he moaned.

Kincaid knew no sympathy for this man who enjoyed inflicting pain on others but could not stand the agony of a broken arm.

Jasper Lucombe said, "I was afraid to shoot, Kincaid. I didn't know where you was. Then when Bowers jumped you—"

Ella said, "Thank heaven you're all right."

Kincaid felt her warm hands against his face. He staggered and brushed a hand across his eyes. He had not realized how much energy he had used up in that desperate battle to keep Bowers from blowing off his head.

Jasper Lucombe had slipped away. Now he returned, saying, "They're all dead. Two in the back yard and one in front."

Kincaid jerked his head toward the dark bulk of the barn. "Somebody was moaning out there awhile ago."

"He won't moan any more," Lucombe said gravely.

Although it was possible Bowers might have more men back in the brush, it wasn't likely. Otherwise they would have put in an appearance before this. That seemed logical to Kincaid so he let Lucombe light a lantern. Only then did he notice the old man's right pants leg was darkly stained.

"You been hit, Jasper," Kincaid said thinly.

"Ain't the first time," the old plowman said, gritting his teeth. "Nothin' but a scratch."

NOW SEEING this graying man in his dusty black pants and torn Sunday shirt, Kincaid realized he had never really known Lucombe. Back there in the Tucson country Lucombe had been a broken-down plow-

man, and in Kincaid's book any man who dug up good grazing land for his damned truck garden couldn't touch the bottom rung of a ladder even if he was wearing a stovepipe hat. When Kincaid had seen Jasper Lucombe acting the fool in Empire he had felt more disgust than pity. Yet, despite the fact that he was a hoeman, Lucombe had also once been a neighbor. In a strange country neighbors stuck together.

He wanted to tell Lucombe that he had been wrong about him, but he couldn't find adequate words.

Bowers had passed out cold when Kincaid set his arm. Now with his right arm in splints and his left wrist tied to his belt, the deputy was helpless. He blinked his eyes at the unfamiliar parlor, then let his eyes slide to Ella's white face, then to Lucombe, holding a rifle. At last his gaze settled on Kincaid.

For a moment his lips were bared so that they could see the gaping hole in his gold teeth. "Wait till Devon gets here," he snarled, a measure of his old bravado returning.

"We're not waitin' that long," Kincaid said. "How'd you get in here?"

Bowers said, "Go to hell."

"We're goin' out the way you came in."

Bowers' eyes slitted dangerously. "You'll know when Devon comes in the same way."

Kincaid regarded the deputy a moment, then jerking his head at Lucombe said, "Take Ella outside."

Kincaid cocked his gun. Ella gave him a frightened glance but let Lucombe escort her to the door. The old man was limping badly.

Curt Bowers, seeing the blood on Lucombe's pants suddenly laughed. "Before Devon kills you I reckon you ought to know the truth about the California."

Lucombe turned in the doorway, sudden suspicion darkening his eyes. "You and Devon won't get a nickel out of it. These folks," he indicated

Ella and Kincaid with a jerk of his head, "are goin' to be my new partners."

Bowers' lips thinned. "You're right about one thing. I won't get a nickel out of the California. But neither will you."

Lucombe lifted the rifle menacingly. "What you mean by that?"

"There ain't ten cents' worth of gold in that hole in the ground." Bowers was enjoying himself. "When you come pilin' into the Empire that day with ore samples, Devon seen right off that it was fool's gold. But he shut you up and got you into the backroom and got you drunk. Then me and Devon and the judge had a look at this mine you'd found. You couldn't mine it without a road. So Devon, bein' smart like he is, had a gambler in Virginia City write letters that a syndicate had heard about the mine and wanted to buy it. But they wouldn't take it over unless a road was built. Devon figured to stall along with the road and then make out like he was runnin' short of cash and had to sell stock."

"Nobody would be that big a fool as to buy stock sight unseen," Ella Kane said, giving Lucombe a worried glance.

Bowers grinned. "Them gold-hungry fools in Empire thought the syndicate was goin' to pay half a million for the California. It was a chance to clean up, they thought. At ten dollars a share."

Lucombe's face had gone dead white. He looked sick around the mouth. "I'm nothin' but a goddam fool."

Kincaid was looking at Bowers. "Thanks for tellin' us all this."

"Won't do you no good," Bowers said. "Just makes me feel better to see your faces when you know you ain't goin' to get a slice of a bonanza."

Kincaid felt as if someone had kicked him in the stomach. One minute he'd been counting all the gold

he was going to shovel into Ella's lap. Now he was right back where he'd been when all this started. Just a busted-down cowman with a hole in the seat of his pants. He lifted the gun, sighting down the barrel at Bowers' face.

"I'm askin' you once only! How'd you get in here?"

Bowers stared, watching Kincaid's thumb yank back the hammer, hearing the smoothly oiled mechanism of the gun coming to full cock. He licked his lips, but the old bravado had not altogether left his eyes. "Sure, I'll tell you. But a lot of good it's goin' to do." His eyes narrowed. "We already had you figured for a hangin', Kincaid. Now we'll make it a good one."

CHAPTER VII

THIS WAS IT

GIL DEVON had another successful night peddling stock in the California Mine, and even now, as he stared through the blue smoke of his cigar, he could see the line of anxious men strung clear out into the street. Wary from the long hours of sitting at the poker table and watching the stack of gold coins grow, Devon was reluctant to quit until he had milked the last coin from eager stock buyers. In one thing he was right. Of the eight thousand men in Empire only half were falling for his scheme. These were the clerks and the cowpunchers and the drifters, men who had missed out on the Comstock and other strikes and hoped to realize their fortunes in the green paper they received in exchange for their gold. But the hardened prospectors, those familiar with boomtowns and the men they spawned, regarded Devon with suspicion.

It was this group that made him edgy. He glanced up, seeing a dozen odd mining men with their heads to-

gether. Now and then they turned to stare at him. Devon felt the nerves tighten in his arms as he saw them finally shove their way to the street.

Devon halted the buying long enough to glance at the face of a big gold watch he took from his vest pocket. It was late. By this time Bowers should have returned with Kincaid. Devon considered his position a moment, puffing on his cigar while the line of men waited impatiently.

That afternoon he had peddled the Golden Slipper to a saloonman from Frisco. A man who counted faces at the bar and considered them in the light of money to be banked in the safe. A fool, Devon considered him, who gave no heed to the future. In thirty days there wouldn't be twenty men at the Golden Slipper Bar.

Devon was about to resume the stock sale when Judge Gateshaw elbowed his way through the crowd. Never had Devon seen Gateshaw's small wrinkled face so worried. Gateshaw bent to Devon's ear.

"Sheriff Coombs, with deputies," the judge whispered. "Has warrants. And he wants Curt's badge."

With hardly a show of emotion on his smooth face, Devon said, "Get two horses and a pack mule. Meet me in the alley."

As Judge Gateshaw scooted for the side door, Devon swept the stack of gold into a canvas bag, and said to the waiting line, "Back in fifteen minutes, boys."

LEAVING the stack of certificates on the poker table, he climbed the inside stairway to his office. Once the door was barred, he moved swiftly. Removing a panel from the wall, he inserted a key into an iron door, opened it. From a drawer in his desk he got a stack of canvas bags. For the next quarter hour he sacked gold coins he scooped from the safe. These he put into two gunnysacks. Then, opening the door at the top of the stairway that led to the alley, he peered

down into the darkness. He saw Judge Gateshaw's slender form and called to him softly.

Devon was sweating and the judge panted as if he had been shoveling dirt with the road gang by the time they got the two gunnysacks loaded onto the mule. Then, mounting the horses Gateshaw had brought up, they rode slowly down the alley.

Hearing a commotion in the street, Devon looked back to see a tall, grey-haired man with a badge on his vest, purposefully leading a crowd into the Golden Slipper.

"Let's get out of here," Devon said and spurred his horse. But the heavily-laden mule held them back. Under his breath Devon cursed. Paper money had its virtue even though he mistrusted it and preferred gold. Now it was weighting them down.

When they headed out the north road instead of swinging south toward the California line, Gateshaw demanded to know where they were going.

Devon said, "You'll see."

Gateshaw, hunched over in the saddle, peered at Devon's solid shadow in the saddle. After a moment he said, "You're going to the Spur. It's that girl!"

"I'm not leaving without her."

Gateshaw began to swear. "We've got a sock full of gold and you're going to chance losing it for a petticoat."

Devon's voice sharpened, as he dropped a hand beneath his coat. "You ride with me or you'll ride alone."

Gateshaw stiffened at sight of the gun in Devon's hand.

"Give me what I got coming," Gateshaw whined. And when Devon made no reply, his shoulders sagged. "I'll ride with you, Gil."

Devon said, "You lead the way. I don't trust you at my back." In silence they rode for an hour.

Curt Bowers had informed Devon how he had planned to get down into the blocked off valley. Now Devon

moved along the north rim, urging Gateshaw forward whenever the judge took a notion to stop among the stunted pines. Far below Devon could see a pinpoint of light. The ranch house, probably. That meant somebody down there was alive more than likely. Ella would be there.

A voice from a nest of boulders ahead, warned, "Far enough, boys. Lift 'em!"

Recognizing the voice, Devon said, "It's me, Jake. Devon and the Judge."

Only when Devon and Gateshaw entered the rocky formation did Jake Parnell lower his rifle. A small, wiry man, he had been left on the rim with the horses. An inch-thick manila rope was tied to a pine trunk, the rest of it disappearing over the edge of the cliff.

"Where's Bowers?" Devon demanded, stepping down from his horse.

Jake Parnell looked worried. "Heard some shootin' about an hour ago. Ain't heard a thing since."

Devon's jaws tightened. "If Bowers has bungled this, I'll cut his throat."

SUDDENLY the rope began to jump along the ground, the bole of the pine swaying as someone down in the valley tugged at the other end.

"Bowers," Parnell said, and untied the rope and looped it on the saddle horn of one of the horses.

Still careful to keep Gateshaw in front of him, Devon said to Parnell. "How do you know it's Bowers? Might be some trick—"

"The signal was three tugs on the rope," Parnell said. "That's what Bowers just give me. I'll haul him up."

Parnell rode off into the darkness. Devon watched the yellow rope grind against a rock, biting the end off a cigar. He didn't relish that long descent into the valley to get Ella. But how else could he get her? His eyes swung to Gateshaw. He couldn't trust him up here alone with the gold. Neither could he trust Bowers, for that matter. He was pondering this prob-

lem when a bared head suddenly appeared at the cliff edge. A man's body came slithering across the ground. Suddenly the man released his hold on the rope, jumped to his feet.

Devon dropped the cigar he was chewing. It was Kincaid who stood before him. In the silvered light of the rising moon Kincaid's face looked ugly. He was grinning tightly as he suddenly sprang for the shelter of a rock outcropping.

Only then did Devon recover from his surprise. His gun sped from beneath his coat, began to buck in his hand almost before it had cleared the sling holster under his armpit. Judge Gateshaw's single-track mind was focused on one object, the mule with its precious burden. Almost before Devon had started his draw, the judge was swinging into the saddle, the mule's lead rope in his skinny hand.

But the judge in his haste put himself between Devon and the lank, hard-faced Kincaid. Nobody would ever know who shot him first, but suddenly the judge was doubled up on the ground, unmoving.

Crouching against a shoulder of rock, Kincaid tried to line his sights on Devon, but the wildly-plunging mule and Gateshaw's spooked mount spoiled his aim. The horse, buck-jumping to the rim of the precipice, suddenly plunged from sight.

Kincaid's throat felt dry. He had forced Bowers to tell him that only one man remained on the cliff. He had not expected to run into Devon and the monkey-faced little gent who now lay crumpled on the ground.

Behind him Kincaid heard the sounds of a hard-ridden horse. Hoofbeats drew nearer.

From the black shadows of the pines ahead Devon was shouting, "He's over there in the rocks. It's Kincaid. Get him, Parnell!"

JAKE PARNELL, riding too fast to slow his galloping horse, suddenly rounded the shoulder of rock. He got

a chance to use his rifle once. As the weapon slammed a shot next to Kincaid's face Kincaid fired. He saw Parnell roll off his mount and plunge headfirst to the rocky ground.

Straining his ears, Kincaid listened for sounds of Devon moving to a more advantageous position.

Kincaid held his breath. This was it, he told himself. Because glistening in the moonlight not ten feet away was a mound of gold coins spilling from the mouth of a canvas bag.

Kincaid grinned into the darkness. Now he'd be the boss, sure enough. When he had learned the California was a fake he had decided to ride on when he'd gotten Ella out of this mess. If he made a stake someday he'd be back. If not— But right here was all the gold a man would need.

A boot scuffed on a rock. The sound came from behind him. Kincaid froze. He'd been careless. Devon had been moving in a circle. Now Kincaid whirled, seeing the saloonman's blocky shadow, seeing the pencil of orange flame that jabbed like a finger.

Kincaid felt the bullet like a club against his thigh. As he was going down, he lifted the hammer, let it fall. Again and again. He was shooting wildly. If one bullet found its mark he'd be lucky. From the ground he saw Devon stagger, weaving from side to side. With a sigh Devon sprawled to the ground not a foot from where Judge Gateshaw lay with his knees drawn up to his belly.

When Kincaid pulled himself to his feet fire ran along his right leg. He scraped dried branches together in a heap, got pine needles to burning from a match end. When the fire flickered into golden brilliance he saw that Devon was watching him. The man lay on his back. Blood stained the front of his white shirt. Reloading his gun, Kincaid dragged himself to Devon, took the pistol from Devon's limp fingers and threw it into the brush. Then he prodded the body beside Devon. Gateshaw, he saw with satisfac-

tion, was stone dead. Prowling in the darkness he examined Parnell. He was dead.

It took some doing to find Devon's horse. The saloonman was the only one who'd had sense enough to tie his mount. Dropping the yellow rope over the cliff edge, he shouted down for Ella to grab on. Then he pulled her up with Devon's horse. Next came the cursing Curt Bowers, the rope tied under his armpits. Last was Lucombe, barely able to walk by this time.

"Me and you both," Kincaid grinned, and touched his bloodied pants leg.

Lucombe couldn't grin back. He was too startled at seeing all that gold.

Ella wasn't caring about gold or anything. Nothing, that is but Kincaid. She held him close.

Looking over her shoulder, Kincaid saw a movement on the ground. He froze in sudden terror. Of all the stupid blind fools, he was it. Here he was with a pile of gold and a pretty girl in his arms. Everything a man ever wanted and he was about to throw it away. Too late he saw that Devon had shoved up the bottom of Judge Gateshaw's trousers and was yanking a derringer from the top of the dead judge's boot.

The small double-barreled muzzle swung to Ella's back. In that instant, as Kincaid hurled her aside, he heard the flat roar of the small gun. Fully exposed, he tensed his muscles, expecting to feel the smash of the lead squarely in the center of his chest.

But slightly before the derringer spat its lethal slug, Jasper Lucombe shifted the rifle he carried under his arm. Devon fell back to the ground. This time he wouldn't move again.

Kincaid gave Lucombe a sick grin. "Pretty good shootin' for a hoeman." Then he passed out....

HE DREAMED of Frisco and Nob Hill and how Ella would look all fancied out, strolling down Market Street on his arm. He came awake, blinked his eyes at strange faces. A

gray-haired man with a star on his vest was talking to Ella.

Some deputies were scooping gold coins back into canvas bags. "Hey," Kincaid yelled weakly.

Ella dropped to his side, putting a warm hand over his mouth when he tried to talk. "That money belongs to men in Empire. Sheriff Coombs is going to see that it gets back into the right hands." Then Ella said, "Sheriff Coombs is seeing that a real judge is coming to Empire." She lowered her eyes. "A marrying judge."

Kincaid's jaws tightened. "I'll be hanged if I'll marry a woman that's got more than me."

Patiently Ella took his two work-roughened hands in her own. "You own these. That's all we need. I've got the cows and the land."

Kincaid scowled at the firelight.

Sheriff Coombs cleared his throat. "If you don't mind me buttin' in, I'd say you was starting about even. I knew Ella's brother. He was a hard worker. It's a man's job to run the Spur." He looked sourly at Kincaid, winked at Ella. "But maybe you ain't up to it, Kincaid."

Sheriff Coombs and his men waited with their prisoner, Curt Bowers. Ella's voice drifted to them.

"They're waiting to ride with us to Empire," Ella said softly. She started to help him to his feet. When he didn't offer any assistance, she said, "I've offered Jasper Lucombe a job. He's an old man. You don't want to see him sleeping out in the brush."

Kincaid grunted, "He doesn't know cows. He's a plowman."

"You can teach him. And besides, what's wrong with a truck garden?"

Kincaid stared up at the moon. A girl's face above him cut off his view. Suddenly he guessed there wasn't anything wrong with this whole deal. But how could a man think straight, anyhow, with that face smiling down at him? It didn't matter right then because the face had lips and he was enjoying them.... ● End

LAST BULLET

by **MARVIN
DEVRIES**

It took ten years for a man to leave his wild youth behind—but only a split instant to draw his gun. . . .

HOYT ERBE prodded his horse up the ridge with the quiet patience of a man who had ridden too far to waste himself on useless anger. Anger could wait until it had something to measure up to. "It won't be long, at that," he told himself, thinking how a man could wait ten years, and at the last let impatience goad him again.

He rode alone, and the past ten days had brought him far from his small horse ranch on Tumbly Creek. It had brought him back to familiar territory, and as old landmarks drifted past, or came into view ahead, impatience began to strike hard at him. "Time's funny," he told himself. "Ten years is nothing, and a day, or an hour, or a split second, is a lifetime. It doesn't stand to reason, but it's true."

Ten years was the time in which a man left his youth behind and, perhaps, changed out of all semblance to what he had been, at least if he set his mind to it; the time he tried to leave his seeded wild oats behind, or even his name, perhaps, to moulder in a false grave—while a split second was the time a man used to draw his gun. If a man knew how and when to use the right amount of time, he always made out. "I hope," Erbe said aloud.

Black clouds maneuvered into place, and a rising surge of cold air skirmished across the slant.

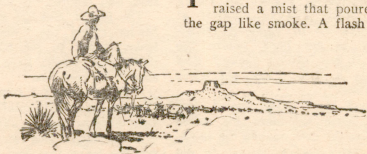
Erbe scanned the slope for possible shelter. He thought he could make out the squat bulk of a small building, but it started to rain down there before he got a good look, and he wasn't convinced.

His glance shifted to the rough tumble of rocks on his left where a shallow gap seemed to cut through the ridge, and he swung that way. Before he got anywhere near it, however, he saw another rider climbing the wall of the gap, and he pulled up again.

Then something on the far side of the gap caught his eye, and he looked that way just in time to see a puff of blue smoke leap off the far edge. An instant later, the spang of the rifle came his way, and the rider, who had conveniently swung his horse broadside to the far rifleman, toppled to the ground in a headlong dive. Then rain and hail poured down and blotted it all out of sight.

Erbe headed that way, he went a little further and found what he was looking for. The man lay on his back on the ground. His face was torn to pieces, and it didn't take a second look to see that he was stone dead.

THE SUDDEN weather-change raised a mist that poured out of the gap like smoke. A flash of light-



ning struck something nearby and spooked the horses. Luckily, both of them decided to go the same way, and he didn't try to stop them. Thunder crashed, and from the edge of the gap, less than ten feet away, a rifle spanged. The bullet slashed his boot and numbed his leg. His horse got the full charge and went down in a head-long dive, its neck snapping when it hit. Erbe jumped free, hanging onto the other animal. He didn't get a good look at the ambusher and he didn't go back for another try. With a wild throw, he landed in the saddle and dug out.

The horse went down the slope on a dead run. It hit the creek and turned right along a muddy trail that finally brought them to a log cabin, but it didn't slow down until it got under the leanto. Once under cover, it stretched its neck and chuffed with relief. Erbe slid down and off—saddled.

He placed the two gunnysacks against the wall and opened one of them. It was filled with neat, water-proofed packages, and the first one he opened contained a pack of ten-dollar bills as thick as a deck of cards. Another contained twenty-dollar bills, and still another fifty-dollar bills. A leather bag with a pucker-string around it was filled with gold eagles.

Satisfied with his sampling, he put it all back into the gunnysack, placed the two bags in a dark corner, and went into the cabin.

Hating the gloom, he lit a candle that stood on the table and noticed a note propped up against an empty whiskey bottle. "Make yourself at home, boys, all of you"—it read—"I'll try to get back before the storm." It was signed "Jake." And there was a P.S.: "Fix yourselves some coffee."

"A good idea," Erbe agreed, and gathered some hailstones for coffee water from the drift against the cabin.

Erbe didn't include himself in the invitation on the table, but within the next hour, the "boys" Jake was ex-

pecting arrived. They came one by one. "For the love of Mike, Jake," the first one boomed as he came in the door, "what kind of weather d'you call this?"

"It's bad all right," Erbe answered. "I got caught in it myself." He wondered what time, and his own careful intention, had done to his voice.

"I'm Meller—Tug Meller," the other went on, and held out his hand. "How-do," Erbe said.

"I feel like I know you, Jake, even if we ain't ever set eyes on each other before."

"Get by the stove there and have some coffee, Mr. Meller."

"Call me Tug, Jake." Meller had high cheekbones, and his face angled sharply to a small chin.

THE NEXT man to arrive was Port Lapeer. He had a solemn look and was dressed in a town suit, a white shirt, and string tie, all of it soggy and dripping. Tug made a great show of being glad to see him. "This is Jake, the banker," he said, pointing his thumb. "Lord, I wouldn't've known you, Port. You changed more'n I did, even if I've been in stir for ten years."

"I've changed inside, Tug."

The next man was Aug Telma. He was fat and asthmatic, and didn't respond to Meller's hearty ways, either. When he took his wet hat off, he showed a skull that didn't have a spear of hair on it.

"This is Jake, the banker," Meller said, and pointed his thumb again.

The fourth, and last man, to arrive Meller called the Creeper, and he looked sorry to see him. "I didn't think you would have the gall to come," he told him.

"Why shouldn't I come, Tug," the Creeper protested, mildly. "I got a right here as well as anybody."

Erbe stared long and hard. This was the voice that had called out in the storm. This was the man who had ambushed Jake with a rifle, the man

who had cut a gash in his boot and killed his horse with another shot.

"This is Jake," Meller said, disagreeably.

"Pleased to meetcha," the Creeper said, giving Erbe a brief glance. If he knew Jake was dead and that Erbe was an impostor, he apparently didn't intend to say so. Not right now, at any rate.

Some talk of old exploits followed, mostly between Meller and Telma. They mentioned stage takes and bank holdups in scattered parts of the country, all events that had occurred more than ten years ago. The treasure Erbe had rescued from the Creeper's greedy hands was apparently the total take of these outlaw exploits, and the figure Meller mentioned was a hundred thousand dollars.

THE GANG had broken up when Meller went to the pen to serve a ten-year sentence. For some reason that didn't come out in the talk, Meller trusted Jake implicitly, although he had never seen him. Through go-betweens, he had arranged with him to cache the treasure until he was released from prison. The division of this loot was the piece of unfinished business that had brought them together in this isolated spot where Jake lived. Meller had arranged it all, providing maps and instructions to all surviving members of the gang.

Port Lapeer looked honestly pained at all this talk of the past in which he had played a part, but Erbe doubted whether he actually was. He looked a little too sanctimonious to be real. Jake, evidently in anticipation of the reunion, had gone out to fetch the cache to the cabin. The Creeper, intending to grab it all for himself, had jumped the gun and ambushed Jake on the way back. Only the storm, and the sheer happenstance that Erbe had been in the vicinity, had balked him.

"Well, we might as well get down to business," Meller continued. "You got the cash here, Jake?"

Erbe nodded. He glanced at the Creeper, who shook his head, either in sheer fright, or as a warning to Erbe not to mention what had happened.

"But before we start," Meller went on, "I think we owe Jake a vote of thanks for caching this stuff for us. It was a lot to ask, considering that some double-crossing buzzard might make a try for it while I was in the pen. If I had my way I would cut him in for a share, but I realize his principles are against it. Is that so, Jake?"

Erbe, unacquainted with Jake's principles, pursed his lips.

"If you change your mind, Jake," Meller spoke up, as if he knew what the answer would be, "just speak up." Ignoring the Creeper, he turned to Aug Telma and Port Lapeer again. "There's one more thing, and that's about Fen Aller. As you all know, he's gone, God rest his bones, but by all rights he ought to get a cut of this, somehow. He used to give the ladies quite a run for their money, and I wonder if he's got any widders or kids around that might be in need. I was just thinking it would be a nice gesture."

"He had a sweetheart by the name of Rosalie," Aug Telma spoke up, "but I understand she threwed him over. I think you know something about that yourself, Tug."

Meller flushed. "Don't make any dirty digs at me, Aug. This ain't the time or place. She was a no-good, any how."

"I just mention it," Aug said. "It always surprised me Fen didn't make something of it. If you get right down to it, he was the big shot in this outfit. He could out-talk, out-ride, and out-shoot any of us six ways from Sunday. I sometimes get to thinking, an' it makes me shiver the way that guy could handle a gun."

Tug Meller shrugged peevishly. "Oh, I don't know."

"I understand he held off a law

posse two days **all** by his lonesome, an' they finally had to burn him out. Only, he didn't come an' all they got hold of was his bones."

"Well, let's let his bones be and get at this."

Erbe poured himself more coffee, and put another piece of wood on the fire. It sounded like the hail had let up, but it was still raining pitchforks. He got up to look out the window, then recollected it was rawhided over and went to the door instead.

"Don't go out, Jake," Tug said.

"Just taking a gander at the weather," Erbe said.

"Sit down," Meller said.

IT WAS an order, and there was a threat behind it. A tingle raced up Erbe's spine. This thing was going to explode in gunsmoke, and he wouldn't fare any better than the rest, regardless of whether the Creeper made any charges against him or not. It was in the cards, because every last one of them was here to grab it all, if he could make a go of it.

Tug Meller cleared his throat and tried to get down to business again, but at this time Port Lapeer interrupted to say he would like to make a statement. "I came here for a different reason than the rest of you," he announced. "In the first place, I don't want any of this cash for myself. It's got blood on it, blood, and sin, and tears—"

"Cut out that stuff," Tug Meller snapped. "I know you, Port. You're nothin' but a tinhorn sport. You never were anything else. What kind of a deal you got with your sin-killin' friend?"

"He needs funds to carry on his work," Lapeer stated. "That's the only reason I'm here."

"Well, you can give him your share."

"That isn't enough."

"I'll throw in an extra buck."

"No," Lapeer objected, "it **must** be all. All or nothing. Aug, will you—?"

"No."

"Creeper?"

The Creeper shook his head. Port walked to the door. "Then I'll leave now. I hope you'll all come to see the error of your ways." He opened the door, stepped out into the rain, and closed it behind him.

"What a faker!" Meller muttered. "Now we'll talk about you, Creeper."

"I don't have any queer notions like Port," the Creeper stated.

"It all boils down to the same thing," Meller told him. "You tried to jump the gun on us an' grab the cash before Jake could ever get it over here."

"I never did," the Creeper screeched.

"I know, Creeper, I trailed you. I was in the gap when you took your bushwhack shot. I saw Jake go down."

"It wasn't me," the Creeper screeched again. "I never set eyes on Jake till I came in here."

"If the sky hadn't busted open right then I would've plugged you when you came across. I warned you, Creeper. I warned everybody not to try anything like that. It leaves you out in the cold, Creeper. No cut."

"Just talk," the Creeper answered, the whisper coming back into his voice. "Just talk so you can hog it all."

"No, not just talk. I've been lookin' at that bullet hole in Jake's boot." He was looking at it now, seemingly waiting for the Creeper to pull himself together and get out of the place.

THE CREEPER, taking the risk of his life, clawed for his gun. It was desperate and clumsy, and Erbe knew before Meller made a move that the Creeper was a gone goose. An instant later, Meller's gun roared. The Creeper didn't get off a shot. He slammed against the far wall, as if trying to bore his way through the logs. Blood gouted from a hole in his chest. He clawed at his throat as if that was where the trouble lay. He tried to say something, but only a gusty whisper came out. Then he fell.

forward with a limp hard crash and lay still.

Tug Meller blew smoke off the tip of the gun barrel and holstered the weapon. "Put a pan under that damned drip, Jake," he muttered. "It bothers me."

Erbe shoved the empty coffee-pot under it. Aug Telma let out a gusty breath.

"Why didn't you speak up about the Creeper, Jake?" Meller went on.

"Oh, I don't know," Erbe said. "There wasn't much harm done."

"To tell the truth, I was a little surprised to see you when I got here. I saw you topple off your horse and I thought that was the end of you. I went lookin', but that storm was too much for me." Meller's eyes shifted to Aug Telma. "Any complaints about this?"

Telma shook his bald head. "No, just so it ain't catching."

"For a minute, it looked to me like you were going to side him," Meller accused.

"Not me. I never liked the Creeper, you know that." He squirmed uncomfortably, and rubbed his bare skull, as if he were straightening out his hair. "Let's get this business finished an' clear outa here. Looks like it's a fifty-fifty split now."

"It looks that way, but I think Port's keeping his hand in. He's running a whizzer, Aug. I think he figures only one of us is going to walk out of here alive with the cash. So, all he's got to do is bush up out there and wait. When that one man steps out, he'll let him have it. That's the way I see it."

Telma shook his head. "No. He wasn't puttin' on an act, Tug."

"Why don't you step outside and have a look, Aug?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Come on, we'll both go. He won't shoot when there's two of us. He always wanted a big bulge, you know."

Telma got up and followed Meller grudgingly. As soon as they got out-

side, Erbe stepped to the window and put his knife-point through the window, punching a hole big enough to see through. The storm had let up considerably. The hail was melting, and thinner clouds were scudding across the sky. Port's horse was gone. A circle of willow brush surrounded the yard. Tug and Aug separated, each taking one side, and both of them disappeared into the brush, evidently intending to get at Lapeer from behind if he was anywhere to be found.

IT TOOK them some time. Erbe thought he had it figured out where Port Lapeer would hole up if his intention had been what Meller suspected. He kept his eye on the place and thought he saw some movement in the brush, but he wasn't sure. Once, he caught sight of Aug Telma moving across a spot where the brush was beaten flat, but he didn't get another look at Meller. Once again, he thought he saw some movement in the brush where Lapeer might be holed up. A soggy-looking rabbit, flushed out of cover, hopped across the yard. All at once, a gun roared. The brush erupted, and Port Lapeer staggered into the open, a rifle in his hands. His face was twisted with fright. His legs wouldn't track. Erbe figured he was going to try to get back to the cabin, but he didn't have a chance. The hidden gun roared again, and Lapeer sprawled flat.

The befuddled rabbit came across the yard again. A horse in the leanto snorted nervously. A sudden gust of wind swooped down and sent a quiver over the puddles. At last, Aug stepped out, his gun still leveled at Port. He kicked the rifle away from Port's hand and then prodded the limp body with his boot. Then he holstered his weapon and called for Tug Meller.

He didn't get an answer, and he called again. "You were right, Tug, but I got him." He put on a little swagger and started toward the cabin. He was soaked again from his trip

through the brush. He took off his hat and whipped it against knee. All at once he stopped and looked sideways. "Tug," he called. "Tug." Sudden alarm shattered his voice.

No answer. But a puff of smoke blossomed out of the wet greenery where he was looking. Aug sagged to his knees, and his legs were lost in the muddy runoff that was finding its way down to the creek. His hat fell off and drifted away. He made a grab for it, but missed. "I shouldn't've come out," he called. "I knew it." Then he fell forward with a splash, crossways to the runoff, and the rush of water found a way around him.

Erbe left the window. He noticed a shard of mirror stuck in a crack in the wall and took a look at himself, trying to see what other men saw, trying to see what time and circumstance had done to him, what it had given, and what it had taken away. But it wasn't the place to find an answer. It probably lived somewhere deeper down where a man actually lived.

He went back to the table and was sitting there when Tug Meller came back, inside. "Sounds like the storm's letting up," he remarked.

Meller nodded. "I was right, Jake. Port was fakin'. He was bushed up out there with a rifle. Did you hear the shooting?"

"Yeah, I did, but I thought I'd do better to keep my nose inside. What happened?"

"He got Aug right off."

"Oh," Erbe sounded quietly surprised.

"But I fixed him good an' proper, the dirty bushwhacker. He won't bother anybody again."

Erbe sighed. "It seems like nobody can be satisfied with his own fair share."

"That's the trouble with them rats," Meller agreed.

"It's the trouble with all of us," Erbe said. "Them, and you—and me. Let me ask you a question, Tug—do you honestly think I'm Jake?"

"Why wouldn't I?"

"Because I'm not. I call myself Hoyt Erbe. My real name is Fen Aller, the guy you boys were talking about."

TUG GAVE him a sudden lopsided grin. "Okey. I knew. I think Aug and the Creeper did, too. They were likely tryin' to figure some way to use you. That's why Aug was soft-soapin' you."

"It must've been quite a shock after all these years."

"To tell the truth, I never did think a law posse could put the hooks into you."

Fen Aller shrugged. "I had some luck. They didn't know I had a pal. The bones they found belonged to him."

"How'd you know about this get-together?"

"I've been keeping an eye on you, Tug."

"Just like Aug, eh?"

"Yeah."

"I don't like that, Fen. I would've sent you an invite if I'd known you was still around."

"I'm doing all right without it."

Tug frowned. "I'm surprised you didn't dig out after Jake went down, and you got your paws on the cash."

"No, I wanted to see this, Tug. I wanted to see how you boys were ticking."

"Not much to see," Tug admitted with sudden stark candor. "The fire's gone, Fen. We're just pigs at a trough."

"Yeah, I noticed." He paused a moment, then added, "More than the cash brought me here. I happen to know you put that law posse on my trail, Tug. Aug had it about right."

"No," Tug shouted suddenly. "That's a lie, Fen."

Aller shook his head. "I know. Rosalie told me. You thought it was a smart way to beat my time with her."

"She's a lyin' no-good tramp. She—"

"No names, Tug. She's my wife now."

Tug gasped. The haze of shock and fear showed in his eyes. "I don't mean nothin' wrong, Fen, you know that. I tried to work this right. I asked everybody to come."

"So you wouldn't have 'em on your tail the rest of your life, Tug, that's the only reason. I saw what went on outside."

Meller pounded his fist on the table. "What d'you want? I ask you, what d'you want?"

Aller thought a while before he answered. "An hour ago I would've told you I came here to even the score with you about that law posse you put on my trail," he said, finally, "but now I know that isn't it. I'm cut from the same bolt of yard goods as the rest of you, and I want the same thing."

"We'll split, Fen." His voice was eager, wheedling.

"No. That wouldn't suit me."

"You got to be fair, Fen. You got to give a man an even break."

"That's what everybody says when they're on the short end."

"It ain't right. You kin outdraw anybody I ever saw. That's what you're banking on."

"You guessed it, Tug." He held out his open hand. "Time's a funny thing, Tug. It works for you and it works against you. It didn't do the business when I tried to make out I was somebody else. I reckon I didn't take enough of it. But all I need now is a little smidgin', and I've got it right here in my hand."

"All right. You can have the whole business. Take it all. I'll clear out. I won't bother you. I'll—"

"No. That won't work. You knew it wouldn't work with the rest of the boys. It won't work with you."

MELLER got up and took a turn around the room, holding his head in his hands. A complaining sound rumbled out of his throat. He walked to the window, his back deliberately turned to Aller, and took a look through the peephole Aller

had punched through the rawhide.

Aller didn't move. Only his remorseless eyes followed Meller around. His hand rested on the edge of the table. The stubby candle was sagging to nothing in a puddle of tallow. He felt sure of himself, remembering the old days when he could make Tug goggle-eyed with his gun-play. Tug was goggle-eyed right now, but he was maneuvering, trying to throw Aller off guard. "Don't give him too much leeway," Aller told himself. "Point-blank like this a man's got to do it right or everybody falls down."

Meller went on with his vapor. He took another anxious look through the peephole, as if he had some hope Aug Telma might come to life and give him a lift. He made all the dismal sounds and motions of being wracked with regret, and, no doubt, a small part of it was real. Then, suddenly, he leaped to one side, spun, and opened fire.

Fen Aller beat him by a mile, but the minute he heard the roar of Meller's gun, he knew a mile wasn't enough. Tug Meller went down with a lifeless thud, something Fen Aller took as a matter of course. He placed his gun on the table beside the candle, then let his arms drop limply to his sides. He should have played it faster, but something had stayed his hand, something he hadn't reckoned with. He had been counting the split seconds when he should have been counting the years. His time, he knew, was running out almost as fast as Tug's had. Time had cornered him in this leaky cabin, and was doling out only a little more of what it had to give. This much swam into his brain and swam out again with all the other puzzles and cranky whims a man carried around with him, and he still didn't know whether it was for him or against him. But he did know, before he toppled off the chair, that it played the field in ways a man never discovered by looking in a mirror.

THE END

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COURTSHIP OF THE COLD-DECK KID

(continued from page 91)

later a rider overtook them.

"Where the hell you think you're going, friend? Every man who can stand on his two legs is in town fightin'. This is showdown, friend, to decide whether guns or law rules this range."

"I did my share. I started the fight."

"Don't be funny, friend. Turn that horse around and start ridin'."

"I had all the fighting I can use for one day."

The tall rider swung down and came to Gary Price and dragged him off the sleek gelding like a child.

"I told you not to act funny, friend."

Gary sighed and uncorked his right cross once again. It staggered the other, but that was all; and sent raw pain ripping anew through Gary's sore knuckles and weary arm muscles.

"Oh no!" Gary's new wife moaned. "Not again—!"

Because the tall rider was smashing a fist with all his two hundred pounds behind it full into Gary's face, and when Gary woke up again there was the pearly edge of dawn around the horizon.

"Hello," he grinned crookedly up at his new wife, in whose lap his head was very gently cradled.

"You poor, poor darling."

"Elizabeth Price," Gary said wonderingly.

"And all because of me."

"Mr. and Mrs. Gary Price. Golly."

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