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ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE

DELL

All Star Issue!

★ Zane Grey
TAPPAN'S BURRO

★ L. L. Foreman
POWDERSMOKE EMPIRE

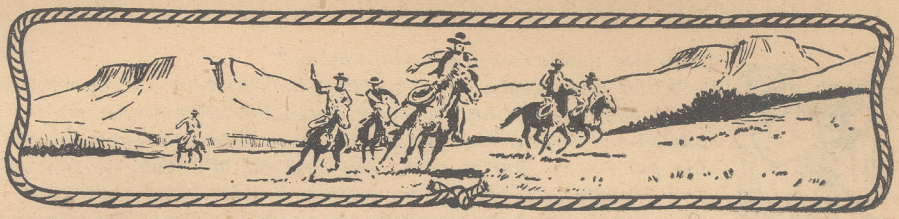
★ Les Savage, Jr.
TRAITOR TOWN

and

★ William MacLeod Raine
★ Tom W. Blackburn
★ Thomas Thompson
★ S. Omar Barker
★ Harry Sinclair Drago

Hushedly, she said, "*You* have the money! *You!*"

Powdersmoke Empire, Chap. 8



ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE

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"BIG MAC wants to see you right away!"

When Bain Foyle, Big Mac M'Cavan's number-one gun boss, hears these words he expects to catch hell. For Foyle has just busted one of Big Mac's pet edicts: no private shoot-outs among his henchmen. But it turns out that all M'Cavan, a frontier politico who calls himself an "empire builder," and believes it—wants is Foyle's help in setting up an independent "Rio Grande Republic." The potential big monkey wrench is powerful old Ebb Grimm of the Pronghorn—and Big Mac offers Foyle twenty thousand dollars for the delivery of Grimm, alive. As Foyle hits the trail for Pronghorn, he can't help thinking that twenty thousand dollars is a lot of money—enough to indicate that the job is suicidally dangerous! Sided by Fellowstone Gano, a gunman with a warped mind and a nightmare face, Foyle comes mighty close to cashing in during his opening tangle with the Pronghorn crowd—and then, miraculously, finds himself a patient in Ebb Grimm's home, being very efficiently nursed by redheaded Donna Reynolds, who sets Foyle's pulse hammering at one glance. Foyle and Gano locate Grimm's safe, where the Pronghorn war chest is kept, and proceed to loot it. Then M'Cavan's raiders strike; Foyle, forsaking all for Donna, changes sides and drives them off; Gano joins the opposition; Ebb Grimm comes home and is captured by the counter-attacking raiders, now led by Gano; and Foyle, gambling desperately to save Donna Reynolds and what is left of his honor, starts the return trip to Big Mac's domain—a journey that is to end in violence and whistling lead and sudden death.

L. L. Foreman, veteran Western author, tops his own hard-to-beat standards in "Powdersmoke Empire," a racing action yarn of the Old Southwest.

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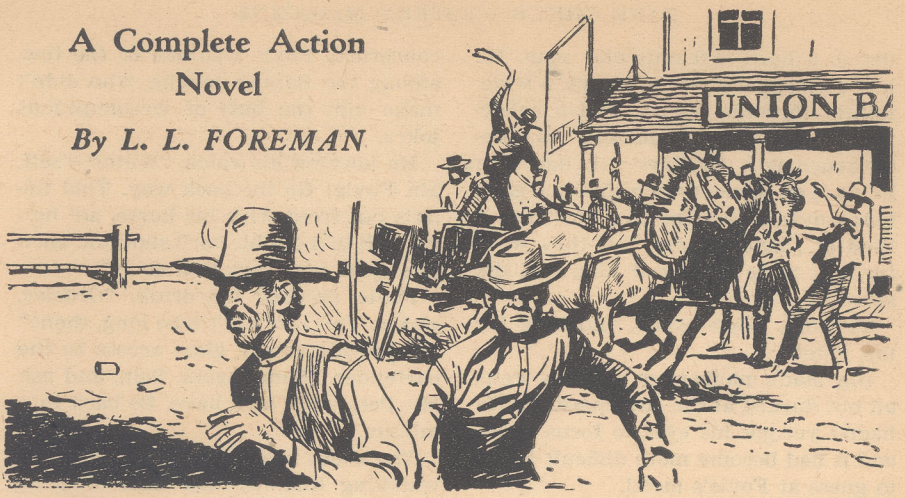


Powdersmoke Empire

CHAPTER ONE

Too Tough to Live

THE front door of the Starbuck Hall swung open a bare thirty inches, and in the backbar mirror Bain Foyle watched Big Mac's messenger, Deputy Pete, ease quickly into the barroom. It was a single door on one-way hinges, not a swingdoor, so Deputy Pete had to push it shut behind him. Then Deputy Pete had to blink and squint to get his eyes fixed, after the outside glare of sunlight, before looking around.

Everybody in the Starbuck knew Deputy Pete was looking for Bain Foyle. They all, including Bain Foyle, knew what kind of message he had brought from Big Mac. The barroom, already quiet, grew quieter. Sidelong glances touched Foyle fleetingly and whipped off to become blank stares at nothing.

Bain Foyle went on gazing into the backbar mirror, allowing himself a moment of wry wonder and recollection. As a boy on his father's small ranch down on the Nueces in Texas, he had never guessed that someday he would forget how to laugh. Life then had seemed simple and secure. Years after the collapse of that sunny illusion, when he wasn't a boy any more, a diamond-studded gambler's queen said of him thoughtfully, "That Foyle guy makes me think of a bad Indian I saw brought through Tucson once, in chains. Big, bad devil, cool as they come. But kind of sad, too, somehow. His eyes, they looked right through everybody like they didn't count for much. A man, all right. Know what I mean?"

"I know," murmured the gambler, and at the first opportunity he staged a neat gunplay, on personal principle. Foyle shaded him, though, and lit out —alone.

Bain Foyle now was tall, big-shoul-

dered, a hard and muscular man. He had a scrapper's ridged brows, a wide, faintly sardonic mouth, and a collection of small scars marked his sun-darkened skin. Men saw only hardness in his eyes. Some women—like the gambler's queen—thought they saw also a kind of sadness there, but they were inclined to be uneasy of him, just the same.

Turning, Foyle asked, "Looking for me, Pete?"

Big Mac's messenger, Deputy Pete, all but ducked at the curt question. He hadn't yet got his eyes to focus right, and it had become more difficult lately to guess at Foyle's mood.

"Yep, for you, Mr. Foyle," he reported. "Big Mac wants to see you right away." While older men answered to nicknames, and Mac M'Cavan was Big Mac to everybody, it was rare for Bain Foyle to be called by anything but his surname.

To stall off a peremptory summons from Big Mac was like flying against providence. Big Mac was the provider. But Foyle said:

"Tell him I'll be along later. I don't doubt he's already heard about the jigger tangling with me in here a while ago. Harvey Rose, the new man. That's his gun on the bar. He says he's getting another one an' coming back. I said I'd wait."

He had been drinking. He wasn't drunk, but the mood was in him to pull one more joke on Big Mac. "You tell him," he said, "I'll be with him soon's I tend to Mr. Rose, his brand-new shootin' star!"

Shaking his head worriedly, Deputy Pete sidled up closer. "Now, you know Big Mac's order. No more private fights in town! He specially warned you!" The little man was honestly concerned. Foyle was one of the few, among the Banner toughs, who didn't make him the butt of contemptuous jokes.

He lowered his voice. "Watch y'self, Mr. Foyle! Go the back way. That feller's out front with his horse, an' he's got holt of a double-bar'l shotgun. He'll blast you, you open that door!"

Foyle finished his drink. "*Gracias, amigo.* This shouldn't take long, then!" He slid his empty glass across to the bartender. "Same again, Sam, and ask Mr. Pete what he'll have. Be back in a minute."

The silent crowd at the bar split up, watching him. In this mad town of cutthroat politics and organized violence, Foyle stood high in reputation: Big Mac's top man, the Number One. Little Deputy Pete occasionally wondered if even Big Mac wasn't a bit afraid of Foyle, when Foyle's eyes got a certain look in them.

Foyle walked to the front door. He stood regarding it, while building with chill logic the picture in his mind of the man who waited for him outside. The hitchrack stood somewhat to the right of the door, at the edge of the boardwalk, facing the painted window. Harvey Rose wouldn't be waiting there. It was too far out of line to catch a man starting out, first shot. And the first shot would spook the horses dozing at the rack, making a second shot chancy.

No—Harvey Rose knew better. One shot, without warning and with the least possible risk of a slip. That was the favored way of his kind. Mr. Rose would have his horse standing broadside to the door. He'd be crouched behind it, using the saddle as a rest for the shotgun. He would want to make certain, too, that it was Foyle coming

out, before he cut loose.

This, the figuring ahead, so habitual that it cost no more than a few seconds, was the tariff Foyle paid for staying alive. Some flaming day he would forget, he supposed, and down he'd go like so many he'd seen. Unthinking rage—hot pride—the overconfidence of drink; for such luxuries the price ran high.

He pulled open the door, saying loudly for Rose to hear, "If Big Mac wants me—" and leaped aside.

The shotgun blast spattered the edge of the door and ripped on into the front of the bar. Harvey Rose's horse reared in abrupt alarm, knocking the shotgun upward. It tried to plunge off. Rose, expecting that, had taken the precaution to wrap the reins around his left forearm. He was a lean, quick-moving man, and he instantly planted his feet and hauled the horse around. Thoroughly upset now, the horse backed away in a series of hops.

Sliding in the dry dust of the street, his left arm busy, Rose tucked the smoking shotgun under his right arm, finger on the trigger, and leveled it desperately at the open saloon door. His first shot had gone bad, but he still had another load left to cover his getaway.

Foyle smashed the painted window with one stroke of a drawn gun, and fired. "Sam," he asked, watching Harvey Rose get up and stumble after his horse, "how much do I owe you?"

He swallowed a drink, paid his bill, and left.

When he was gone Sam broke a long silence. "That Foyle," he sighed, "is sure hell round here!"

The men along the bar nodded. "Too tough to live!" muttered one who had felt the rough edge of Foyle's cold temper.

"Maybe that's what Big Mac figgers!" blurted Deputy Pete.

They turned and looked at him in stony inquiry. They all owed allegiance to Big Mac, and not one of them ever went unarmed. He coughed and hurried out, scared by the fleeting insight that had inspired his remark.

In the heat-baked, dusty street, Foyle ranged a blank stare over the town. The prosperity and importance of Banner showed in its big false-front stores, wagon yards, and the brick mansion that strangers always bewilderedly mistook for the capitol building of the Territory. He spat, impatiently hitched up his gun belts to an easier hang, and gave his black sombrero a yank. He was sick of this whole damned place and all that it stood for. Three years was a long time in Banner.

No reaction, either uplift or letdown, touched him from the Rose scrape. The thing was too common. Rose, another fool puffed up with visions of becoming Big Mac's top man by shooting the incumbent, had come at him. He hadn't killed Rose because the man just didn't matter that much. It expressed his opinion, not only of Rose, but of most of the specimens Big Mac had been bringing into Banner these last few months. The old bunch would never have tolerated Rose and his shotgun. Long known as a gun fighters' hangout, the town had become a refuge for thieves, thugs, and back-shooting badmen—under the protection of Big Mac.

He recalled that Big Mac wanted to see him. "Hell with him!" he muttered. But he turned toward the brick mansion, snorting a short laugh of derision at his own words of defiance. Like the

rest, he belonged to Big Mac. Had belonged for three years, which was longer by far than any other man had been owned and trusted by the man in the red-brick mansion.

They were all gone, the others, the quiet-spoken gun fighters whose peculiar pride demanded that they give a man an even break. He would go, too, in time. Big Mac would drink a toast to his memory and look around for somebody else to ramrod the mob. He had turned in plenty of good work for Big Mac. Not so good lately, perhaps. Too restless.

Pacing up the path to the brick mansion, he wished suddenly to be riding away forever from Banner. As suddenly, the knowledge struck him that Banner had made him incapable of being anything but the gun boss for a political mastermind. An empire builder, was what Big Mac called himself; and believed it.

For satirical amusement, Foyle considered what would be the result if he were to tell Big Mac his plain opinion of him. Big Mac would simply be surprised and annoyed. He most likely would mention that all methods were justified when the goal was a good one. Then, no doubt, he'd pull a blinding-fast trick out of his bag, smiling affably—next day shaking his head sadly at the funeral:

"Too bad. Yes, indeed, he was a good man, the best ever." A fat sigh. A sentimental *ha-hoomf!* into a white silk handkerchief. The merciless Mick-on-the-make, with the moist eye. "Still, y'know, boys— When the finest dog goes mad. Turns its slavering teeth on you. Best to kill it quick, eh? Yes, indeed. But too bad."

Foyle moved his lips, giving a meager smile to his thoughts as he entered the mansion. He had seen that little act played, and had caught a grain of humor in it. Big Mac could never admit that a hireling of his might grow rebellious and dare to flare up against him. To his nerveless intelligence such behavior was irrational. It signified madness. Therefore, any man who attempted to cross him was mad and had to be killed. The policy of regrettable necessity included decent burial and a few kindly words, containing the gentle hint of warning to anybody else who might feel an urge to blow his conk. Big Mac loved ceremony best when it served a purpose.

The armed man inside the door nodded to Foyle. "He's waitin' for you," he said, keeping his face wooden.

"Hunnh," Foyle acknowledged, but didn't hurry. He remembered again the strict recent edict against private shoot-outs. No excuses. No exceptions. *Meaning me!* he thought.

He broke another edict by going into the office wearing his guns and without knocking. The armed guard at the main door took note of that, evidently, for Foyle heard him whistle.

A shade of coolness flattened Big Mac's usually cordial greeting. "Ah, there, Foyle. You're late."

Foyle hooked a chair forward with his toe and sat down, not waiting for the invitation. "Late for what?"

The huge desk, littered untidily as always with stacks of papers and spilled cigar ash, had a tier of sliding drawers built on it, topped by a row of open pigeonholes. From behind it Big Mac looked at Foyle and deliberately met his eyes. He must have immediately noticed Foyle's guns, for nothing ever escaped his deceptively lazy glance, but he passed no comment. Without breaking his gaze at Foyle, he reached

forward, took a cigar from the drawer where he kept them, and leaned back, lighting it carefully. The oversize swivel chair creaked under his weight, and that was the only sound for a moment.

This time— Foyle thought. *This time . . .*

But he felt himself growing smaller. He had taken orders so often in this room. It was he who, inwardly furious, outwardly unmoved, broke the locked glance.

Yet he knew, better than anybody else, the kind of man Big Mac was. He had seen fully the cynical hypocrisy behind the benevolent mask. The utterly unscrupulous machinations of the clever brain. The ruthless ambition that readily employed cheap and shameful tricks. The brutal vices, secret debauchery, weaknesses enough to rot the character of any normal man.

To look once at Big Mac M'Cavan was to believe that here was a man destined for greatness. He had the appearance of a great man, so rare in the truly great: the noble, craggy face, strong-jowled, leonine. The sweeping forehead crowned with a magnificent gray mane reaching to the shoulders. Immense size. Ponderous dignity. The gift of genial courtesy. His voice could throb in deep bass organ or rise to Olympian violin crescendo—depending on whether he was holding forth on hallowed American Womanhood or the Fourth of July.

"You picked a fight with Harvey Rose, I hear," he told Foyle.

Foyle replied, "He picked a fight with me, the fool."

"Kill him?"

"No, he'll live—somewhere."

"H'm! I'm pleased that you followed my warning that far." Big Mac turned on a smile. "That's—ah—an extenuating circumstance!"

Foyle rose abruptly to his feet. Big Mac looked at him, met his stare, and this time dropped the glance to his cigar.

Foyle said, "I'll kill the next one like him!"

Big Mac smiled on. "Now, now! You need action—I've kept you in town too long. Are you broke?"

Foyle shrugged. "Paying for a busted window took my last."

"Sit down," Big Mac commanded. "Listen! When I first came here, this Territory was practically still a no man's land. There was no political organization whatever. I was a newcomer. I didn't even have a dollar to get my boots mended! And now—"

"Now you've got new boots. An' half the Territory has got a political boss. You're halfway there, Mac!"

"Shut up and listen!" Big Mac's eyes shone. "Remember, I told you once I'd be the governor here one day? You believed me. You threw in with me. Believe me now, Foyle, I'll be more than that! Territorial governor? Chicken feed! I'm going higher—a hell of a sight higher! Want to go up with me, Foyle?"

"How much higher can you go?" Foyle asked.

Big Mac blew a cloud of blue smoke. "I'll tell you. This is in strict confidence, mind! The good old whisper, just between us, eh? All right. Listen!"

He creaked the swivel chair forward. "There's a pile of political discontent going to waste all through the Southwest. Not just in New Mexico, mind! All through this country! Look! The Mexicans don't love the rule of the grand and glorious Army of the United States of America! Furthermore, this

Southwest is full of foreigners—adventurers and outlaws—and unreconstructed rebels from the Southern States! You know that. You know the country."

"Full o' bandits an' scalawags, if that's what you mean."

"Foyle, they're men! Fighting men! A force, wasted! Some of us, in—ah—positions of authority, believe that the time is ripe to organize and use that force. Yes, indeed! For the freedom and glory of our beloved Southwest!"

Foyle scowled at the cigarette he was building. "I don't get it. Those long words choke me. Chew it finer, Mac."

Big Mac nodded indulgently. "Our great Southwest," he proclaimed in deep bass, "was surely not intended by the Almighty Lord—" he raised his eyes reverently—"to be ruled by ignorant men back East? No! Our standards are higher! Cleaner than those of the sordid money changers' temple! We have so decided—we of the Secret Committee, the men of honesty! New Mexico! Arizona, Texas! Yes, and the discontented border states of Mexico. Sonora and Chihuahua and Coahuila—they'll join us! Rebellion!"

Foyle made a wreck of his cigarette and flipped it over the floor. "Secession, begod! That's a word I do know, me from Texas! But this is bandit rebellion you're talking!"

"Rebels," observed Big Mac, "are called bandits—till they win. Then they're heroes. George Washington, Oliver Cromwell, the bloody Robespierre—history's full of 'em. All outlaws—till they won. And we'll win, too! Do as I say, Foyle, and I'll take you up to the top with me. Me! Future president of the Rio Grande Republic!"

"Lord God Almighty!" Foyle murmured.

"I've got a very important job for you, Foyle."

"I'm not so sure I want it, Mac."

Big Mac's laugh filled the room. It drowned to silence the listening guards outside the door. "You'll take it, Foyle! You damned-well will, and you know it!"

Chapter Two

Your Obedient Servant

RIDING north up the wide and interminable valley of the Pecos, Foyle scanned the country constantly. He gave close attention to its possible pitfalls, none at all for its bleak beauty.

The river ran like a gold-flecked blue ribbon, scintillating in the sun, flanked by its narrow margin of green grass and spreading cottonwoods, through the barren, burned-out hills sinisterly resembling a giant's dried mud pies studded with warped cloves. Far off to the west the Capitans ridged purple peaks against the monotonous blue sky. Eastward lay the long plains, furred over by the brownish-yellow of sun-shriveled grama.

Engaging most of his mind was the thought of twenty thousand dollars. That was the sum definitely set by Big Mac. A pile of money. As much as any man could reasonably need for anything—a long getaway, a wild fling, or a fresh start. A stake for anything.

"For Ebb Grimm—delivered alive here to me, in fair health and whole mind!" Big Mac had said. And Big Mac's word was good. It had to be good. Or men wouldn't give him their faith any more. Men's faith was his

stock in trade. That was the one thing he dared not cheat on.

"Trouble from Grimm again, huh?" Foyle had remarked. "Mac, that old Pronghorn country has got you licked, I swear! A standout crowd, that—then, now, an' from here yonderly! I'd admire to meet that Ebb Grimm. He must be a Texan! Unreconstructed! I'm a working cowman, says he, an' a free man—an' damn your carpetbag politics!"

"Damn you and him and your rebel sentiments! I tell you, Foyle, that Pronghorn country is holding us up! Ebb Grimm is the trigger up there. Bring him here to me! Alive, mind! Able to sign his name to what we tell him, see? Twenty thousand dollars, Foyle, hard cash! That man's dangerous!"

"Twenty thousand? Hey, look, Mac! Who else you got?"

"Ah, hell!" Big Mac, throwing away two inches of good cigar, picked a fresh one. "Foyle, you're too damn smart. Okay, we've had Red Murrell's bunch on his tail for months. Yeah—Red Murrell. You know him. He's got a hideout somewhere up there somewhere along Pintada Canyon. Lifting horses is his main game now. He's fallen down on this Grimm job. If you can locate him, tell him I said he's to give you any help you need."

"Anybody else?" Foyle asked.

Big Mac shrugged. "Oh, I've sent three or four up there, odd times. They never came back, not one of 'em. But then, not one of 'em was a Bain Foyle caliber of man. They didn't have your knack of getting things done. And this has got to be done, give you my word! We're pretty sure Grimm has talked the Pronghorn cowmen into making up a cash pool, a war chest, to hire a posse of scrappers from outside—ex-Texas Rangers and the like. He must have heard something of our plans. We've got to get hold of him and break that up. He's the big kingpin up there. We can make good use of him, once we put him in the right frame of mind. I want him here alive! Think you can do it?"

"For twenty thousand dollars, Mac, I'd make a stab to kidnap *you!*"

Big Mac blinked at that, then laughed. "That's the talk, boy! Here's a hundred to go on. Cigar?"

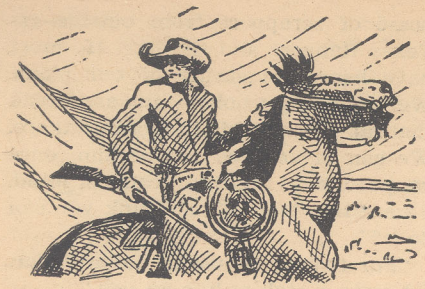
It was a lot of money to think about on the lonely ride up the Pecos. Foyle was used to being lonely, but he liked having something to occupy his mind and keep the ghosts out. The size of the reward for Ebb Grimm was a guarantee that the job was considered difficult and suicidally dangerous. Although Big Mac usually paid well and threw in a bonus for good work, he had never before made a straight offer of anything near such a large sum.

Probably the money was being put up by the undercover group that Big Mac spoke of as "we"—the men who planned to set up an independent Rio Grande Republic.

Foyle pondered on that. If such was the case their plans were past the talking stage. Well, many a smart man had come a cropper reaching for the moon. Unbroken success must have gone to Big Mac's head. He and his powerful backers were crazy.

President Mac M'Cavan! King Mac the First! Foyle shook his head. Maybe everybody was kind of crazy in one way or another.

"Just so their money's okay," he muttered, "they can put on tin crowns to play royal cassino for all I give a damn!"



Beneath the important pondering, he paid part of his attention to a man on a yellow horse coming along behind. The man must have left Banner some time after he did, although he didn't recognize the horse. Since morning, when Foyle first sighted him, the rider had shortened the distance between them, but appeared to be in no hurry to catch up, if that was his intention.

Foyle hipped around in his saddle, scanned the distant figure carefully, and frowned. It was possible that the stranger was hanging back to escape the dust of Foyle's shuffling big sorrel. Or maybe he just didn't care for company. On the other hand, it was somewhat queer that he should be taking this route, if he was from Banner. Nobody from Banner rode casually up toward the Pronghorn country. Banner men were highly unpopular up in Ebb Grimm's bailiwick.

Foyle didn't like having anybody behind him, even beyond rifle range in open country. He watched the man vanish in a dip of the trail. In a spirit of irritated speculation he decided to make a test. He reined his sorrel off the trail, heeled it to a canter around the nearest low hill, and there drew in. That jigger would notice his line of tracks, sure. If he had the right kind of savvy he would take the hint and ride on by.

Cuffing back his black sombrero, Foyle thumbed sweat from his forehead. He slid his carbine up and down in its saddle scabbard, built a cigarette, and patiently waited. That jigger had better pass on and not stare around too inquisitively, if he understood the correct rules of health.

The jigger didn't do that. Foyle was smoking a second cigarette when the muted clop of hoofs in the sand reached him. He pinched out the cigarette, rose in his stirrups, and scanned the trail.

The man on the yellow horse came to where Foyle's tracks bent off. He reined over, following them deliberately, and walked his horse around the hill.

"Mr. Foyle, I believe?" he inquired blandly. His voice was soft and light, like that of a child.

Scowling darkly, Foyle looked him over. He saw a squat little man with short legs and long arms. A broad nose, low forehead, and huge mouth made the face so strikingly ugly it had the fascination of a clown's grotesque mask. Eyes slightly slanted and a tawny skin gave it an Oriental cast. But the eyes shone a pale gray, not the black of a typical Chinese. And there was that smoothly assured voice without a trace of the sing-song that Foyle associated with pigtailed cooks and laundrymen.

Foyle returned curtly, "Yeah. Who're you?"

The gargoyle face smiled shallowly. "I, sir, am Fellowstone Gano, your obedient servant." A tinge of mockery crept into the statement.

Fellowstone Gano removed his hat. It had a flat crown, wide brim, and chin strings. His hair was coarse and yellow, as startlingly incongruous as

the pale eyes, against that Oriental visage. He smoothed it down with his palm, watching Foyle's expression, and uttered a liquid giggle.

"Weird-looking specimen, aren't I, Mr. Foyle? You see, in technical parlance I happen to be a very rare instance of biological Mongolism."

A deal of elegance, close to dandyism, hung about him. His shirt was of heavy yellow silk, and well made. His boots had the rich look of fine leather, and the Mexican spurs were silver. He wore a gun in a low-cut, businesslike holster. As he made the extraordinary remark about himself, he gazed at Foyle steadily.

Not having the faintest notion of what biological Mongolism meant, and doubting if it was worth knowing, Foyle demanded, "What's your business?"

A brightly expectant glimmer faded in Fellowstone Gano's eyes. He replaced his hat on his head and fingered the long chin strings thoughtfully. It was as if Foyle had in some way disappointed him. His wide and mobile mouth quirked downward at the corners.

"You are my business," he replied calmly. "I am your obedient servant. By order of Mr. Big Mac M'Cavan."

Foyle scowled. "What's Mac's idea? Hell, I don't need any servant! Wouldn't know what to do with one!"

"The idea, I believe," murmured Gano, "is to help you stay alive while you carry out a certain task that is—er—considerably fraught with peril! To that desirable end I am to give you such small aid as may be possible within my poor capacities. If not as a servant in the narrow sense of the word, you may find me useful as a backwatcher. It was with some such thought that Mr. M'Cavan sent me after you."

He coughed gently. "Mr. M'Cavan chose me for my rather special qualifications—or so I flatter myself. Also, he thought it high time that I should repay him for sheltering me in his house. Frankly, I'm wanted."

Foyle nodded. That counted up pretty straight. Leave it to Big Mac to make use of anybody he did a favor for. This odd little jigger with the outlandish name was probably a killer on the dodge. A strain of something utterly soulless and sinister lurked in his eyes. He was a man lacking in all the usual indications of age, too, Foyle noticed. Fellowstone Gano could have been twenty or forty. Or a hundred, for that matter.

Foyle lifted his reins, shrugging. "Okay, let's push on. No, don't ride behind me! Nothing personal, friend. I don't like it, is all. We'll ride together, if you don't mind."

Fellowstone Gano inclined his head. He glanced questioningly several times at Foyle as they rode along. It was some time before he asked politely, "Why so sad, Mr. Foyle?"

The question, unexpected as it was, barely penetrated into Foyle's silent meditations. "Me sad? Huh! What's there to laugh about?"

"Not much," conceded Gano. "Still, I'm able to laugh—and look at what I am!" His laugh came thin and tinny. "I'm a freak of nature, like a two-headed calf! A biological throwback to some atavistic ancestor, perhaps one of the howling Mongol marauders of Genghis Khan. Or an interesting example of congenital malformation due to glandular disturbance, depending on your anthropological viewpoint. Yet—"

"Why so sorry for yourself, Mr. Gano?" Foyle interrupted.

Anger glittered for an instant in the gray, slanted eyes. Then Gano laughed again, this time without the thin, choking restraint. "I don't believe you even know what I'm talking about! Or care. Do you?"

Foyle shook his head briefly. "To tell the truth, Gano, I don't. Look, if we're to do this job let's try an' get along together. So shut up, will you?"

"Sorry," Gano breathed. "They told me you were—er—a bit strange. And tough. I didn't understand. Yes, I believe we'll get along, Mr. Foyle."

"Okay, Gano. But drop the 'Mister'—huh?"

"Okay, Foyle."

They didn't exchange another word until they made camp that evening. Camp was a dry one, for the old trail that they followed was the forsaken Espejo and it angled away from the river. Few traveled it these days. They camped without a fire, although the air grew chilly after dark.

There had to be no knowledge of their coming. Their first object was to get up into the Pronghorn country—the great cattle land lying between the old Espejo Trail and the Estancia plains—without arousing notice. After that it would be best to proceed openly, acting the part of drifting cowpunchers from east of the Pecos. The Pronghorn Pool had to be smashed—for the glory of Big Mac and twenty thousand dollars.

Returning from staking out his yellow horse, Gano remarked, "Fine bright moon, isn't it? 'How oft hath yonder moon—'" He shivered, broke off that quotation, and murmured another. "'Till this outworn earth be dead, as yon dead world the moon.' H'm. Deep and somber is our mood!"

"Here, have a cigar," said Foyle. "One o' Big Mac's. I hate to waste it."

"Thank you. Do you actually prefer the chopped straw and horsehair that you call tobacco? Oh, well, every man to his own taste, however depraved."

"You go to hell!"

"I'll arrange to have the red carpet spread out for you there!"

"Okay," Foyle yawned. "G'night, friend."

There was a long silence. Gano shook out his saddle blanket, and, lighting the cigar, lay smoking, arms under his head. Foyle was close to sleep when he heard him say hushedly, "Good night—friend."

On the last word Gano injected a note of strange, lingering query: ". . . friend?" As if the word were new to him and he doubted its meaning. As if he had never used that word before.

The cigar was mashed viciously into the sand. Gano sat up, took a last look around, and got under his blanket. He hissed something that sounded like a curse, and then he breathed quietly, not stirring in the silence, his slanted eyes wide open, glaring palely up at the remote round glob of moon.

CHAPTER THREE

Banner Men Beware

IN THE town of Van Gaughn the keeper of the general store had no information for the two dusty strangers. He admitted to being a Pronghorn man from way back, and judging by his leathery face he had been a cowman until too many rough horses wore him down.

"Ebb Grimm?" he echoed. He raised a cogitative squint at the ceiling, his elbows on the counter. His drawling voice boomed louder than was necessary. "Of the V Bar, you said?"

Some men idling in the store quit fingering new saddles and Indian blankets. The women filed out, their shopping unfinished, silent for once under the compelling glances of their bowlegged lords and masters.

"Never heard of him!" declared the storekeeper. "Anything you need, gents?"

It was Foyle's doing, this inquiring openly for Grimm and the directions to the V Bar. There was nothing unusual about a couple of men drifting around seeking jobs. And if Grimm was recruiting gunhands, that made it the more plausible. Gano wasn't much sold on the idea, but he was willing to trail along—the obedient servant, with insolent eyes and sardonic hints.

"All right." Foyle slapped a dollar on the counter. There was no sense in calling the man a liar. "Give me—" he glanced along the counter and called for the first thing he saw—"a packet o' pins."

"What size?" asked the storekeeper, taking the dollar, and from Gano came a malicious chuckle.

That was too much. "The hell with it!" said Foyle, and walked out, Gano following him.

It was Saturday and just past the end of the month, payday. The town was fairly full of cow folks. Soon, as the sun went down, the women and most of the married men would be pulling out, buggies and buckboards loaded with supplies, homeward bound to the ranches. Foyle chose the biggest of the town's three saloons. The painted sign said it was the Union Bar. Not a common name, this near to the Texas Panhandle. A Northern kind of name.

The place held a crowd, but it wasn't noisy. Unlike the hard drinkers of Banner, these were working cowmen who conversed in easy tones and counted their drinks. They addressed one another familiarly, in the manner of neighbors who had been friendly for years. This Pronghorn country had been settled a long time. It wouldn't have been possible for two strangers to scout around in it without attracting sharp attention.

Still, Foyle wished that he had taken the trouble to get exact directions to the V Bar, before leaving Banner. His neglect of that simple forethought bothered him. It caused him to wonder if he was growing dull and careless. About all he knew of Grimm's V Bar outfit was that it lay somewhere north a few miles of this Van Gaughn cow town. He had no description of Ebb Grimm. Nobody in Banner had ever got a good look at the man. He could be right here in the Union Bar, among his friends.

"What name?" asked the bartender, filling two glasses. "Grimm?" He thumped the cork back in the bottle. He planted his hands flat on the bar and started to say something. He paused.

The big stranger was looking straight at him. He had mighty hard and chilling eyes. His Chinese-faced partner folded his arms, solemnly inspected the quietly listening crowd, and yawned like a horse, exposing fanglike molars and a huge red tongue. The cowmen stared, hypnotized by that monstrous gape.

More men came in. Some of them were those who had been in the general store. They exchanged nods with

the men present, and halted inside the swinging doors, gazing like all the rest at Foyle and Gano.

The bartender shook his head as if to clear it. He passed the buck to his customers. "Anybody know a feller named Grimm?"

He drew no response. The Pronghorn men stood silent, their eyes probing the pair and disliking what they saw. Finally a voice rasped, "Who wants to know?"

The owner of the voice was a heavy, red-faced man of middle age, standing with a group at the dice table. His glazed round eyes, like those of a bull, and the belligerent tilt of his head, were signs of a flaring temper. He was plainly a man of some standing here whose attitude could set an example, for his loud demand started a slow surge of movement. His group quit the dice table and ranged up along with him. The men at the bar eased away from Foyle and Gano, leaving them standing alone in space enough for a square dance.

Those at the door closed rank and stood pat. One of them called across to the red-faced man, "Who wants to know, is right! An' who sent 'em from where! Go ahead, Atchley!"

"Ask me!" hooted the bartender from a reasonably safe position at the far end of the bar. "I can spot Banner buzzards a mile off!"

A lanky rancher observed reflectively, "Well, after all, y'know, it was comin' time Big Mac sent us up another candidate! Maybe some dark an' dreary day he'll get real annoyed at us an' send the big Foyle joker! Wonder what the Chinaman's for? Hell, this ain't washday!"

Foyle and Gano picked up their drinks and swallowed them. It wasn't comfortable to stand there and be talked over by the surrounding mob. It was a lonely spot. These Pronghorn proddies weren't scrappers by trade, but they stuck together and were quick to jump. They had succeeded in defying powerful Big Mac right along and settled the hash of some of his best gunmen.

It looked like Big Mac would pretty soon be in the market for another Number One and his little back-watcher. Foyle swung around unhurriedly, leaned his back on the edge of the bar, and while he searched for possibilities he murmured to Gano, "It's a first-class job you're doin' to help me stay alive!"

Gano yawned cavernously again.

Atchley flapped a beefy paw. "I'll do the talking!" he told everybody. His type was not rare—a man who mistook a show of bad temper for toughness, and got away with it by the benefit of his age and a certain amount of prestige. He stamped forward and bawled, "In case somebody's deef here, I'll ask once more! Who wants to know about Ebb Grimm and the V Bar?"

Before Foyle could frame a retort, Gano piped up, "My fliend likee, please! Likee me too!" He bobbed his head and grinned ingratiatingly. "My fliend is name Mr. Jason. Velly good man! Me—Doctah Sling Bool Hi—velly good man too! Doctah of entomology. Also anthropology, ornithology, herpetology. You got bugs, please?"

After an astounded moment, a snicker broke out. A lean young cowpuncher choked, "Hey, Atchley, answer the question! You got bugs?"

Atchley, bewildered, batted his eyes. Redder than ever, he made a disastrous attempt to recover dominance by bellowing, "Who wants to know—"

The crowd roared. For the moment

the general mood slid into hilarity. Gano grinned like an amiable imbecile and wanted to shake hands with everybody. Men pushed forward, including those at the door, to get a close look at the gibbering little coot. The young cowpuncher shook him playfully by the back of his neck, and rode his joke further.

"What kind o' bugs d'you want, Chink? We got all kinds! Ask Atchley —haw!"

"I show! Likee bugs on window, see?" Gano twisted himself loose. "On window, outside. Bugs, yes. Entomological!" He trotted across the barroom, followed by guffaws.

When near the door, he spun around. All laughter ceased abruptly.

His inane grin was gone. In its place was the faint, false smile that he had worn when he introduced himself to Foyle. In his pale eyes was a glitter of wicked mischief that made some of the cowmen nearest him draw their breaths in sharply. He held a gun in each hand, one from his holster, the other plucked out from under his yellow silk shirt. He seemed suddenly to have grown about a foot taller. The monkey had transformed himself into a menacing, malignant gorilla, aching to commit a killing.

"Entomology entails anatomical dissection!" he said softly, dropping all trace of the halting sing-song. "I've had considerable experience in taking insects apart! If any specimen here doubts my dexterity, let him give me now a cause to display it! Just one tiny cause, that's all!"

He was deadly and evil. His face was the incarnation of malice, of cold hatred for them all. He had played the clown to them, at bitter cost to his ego.

Foyle stepped around the spellbound crowd, saying, "The joke's on you, insects!" It was on him, too. Seldom had he seen a jackpot tipped over so neatly—and without any help from him. The thought recurred to him that perhaps he was losing his edge, was slipping. That fatal time was bound to come, if a man stayed with the game.

Gano, swinging his guns, was inquiring, "What—no doubters? Not one?" He clucked his tongue. It had the sound of a hand-clap. "Mr. Jason, the sportive spirit here appears to be diminished! Shall we seek a more congenial clime? A cheerier atmosphere? Shall we, in short, get the hell out?"

"Let's go, Sing Hi!"

"Please, Mr. Jason, mangle not the noble name of Sling Bool Hi! Sing Hi, indeed! I may be a bug-chaser, but I am not a bird!"

They backed together to the swing-doors, two outcast gun fighters seeking the breeze, making dry remarks to sustain their arrogance. In the dead hush the younger men in the barroom breathed deeply, nostrils pinching and swelling, mouth muscles bunched. Some of the older men kept darting half-expectant glances toward Atchley. By those glances Atchley's standing could be estimated. He was the hothead most likely to start a blow-off, but only within narrow limits was he a leader. Nobody had command here. It was not a signal they waited for from him, but only for some kind of crazy play that might open up a chance for them to act. But Atchley did nothing, and nobody moved.

That fact made it clear that Ebb Grimm was not in this crowd. He would have been the one they watched, for a commanding signal. He was kingpin of the Pronghorn.

Most of this crowd must have rid-

den in from the roundup camps for Saturday night in town. They looked it. It was the time of year in this high country for the work to be heading along full swing. Ebb Grimm, by his name alone, somehow sounded like the kind of man who kept his crew sweating eighteen hours every day and wouldn't abide any high jinks and Saturday-night caperings. If he wasn't out with his crew, tonight he'd most likely be home at the V Bar ranch house nosing through his tally books and ledger. Foyle decided it would be a good bet, if he could locate the V Bar. It would have to be done fast. He and Gano needed a load of luck.

The luck arrived right then. All bad.

It began with a floorboard. Many hard-heeled boots for many years had clumped in and out of the Union Bar, and under the long punishment one of the floorboards at the entrance had loosened and warped. It rocked when trod on. In all likelihood the regular customers had gained a semi-conscious awareness of it, and stepped over it without giving it a thought. Gano had no knowledge of it, and he was stepping backward. His right boot came down on the faulty floorboard. It rocked. So did Gano. And in recovering his balance he caught his left spur in the tipped-up edge.

Mr. Fellowstone Gano, alias Dr. Sling Bool Hi, teetered, and vanished from Foyle's side. He took a backward header, knocking the doors wide, and tumbled surprisedly down three wooden steps to the boardwalk.

"What the hell now?" Foyle muttered, thinking it another of Gano's little tricks, although he couldn't see much reason for it. He halted, keeping the crowd covered. The two-way doors flapped back smartly, hit both his elbows a crack, and his cocked guns went off. The bullets split the top shelf of the backbar.

The Pronghorn cowmen jumped to the conclusion that he had gone trigger-crazy. There was no percentage in standing still for him to shoot at. They stampeded at him in a wild rush. He dived out, missing the steps and colliding with Gano on the boardwalk.

Bounding to his feet, swearing, Gano chopped two shots and punched a hole accurately in the center of each swaying door of the saloon. His face was savage. He waved a smoking gun. "Our horses!" he snarled, and one look told Foyle what he meant.

Their two horses were gone from the hitchrack of the general store where they had left them. Not only that, but there wasn't a horse left at any hitchrack along the street. Somebody had gathered them up and taken them off, just in case the two Banner pilgrims staged a break. The town was out to get them, and didn't mind going to some trouble to make it a certainty.

A voice rapped from a doorway, "Put 'em up, you sons! This is the sheriff!" Without further notice or pause a rifle cut loose. That sheriff craved lightning service. He got it.

Foyle dropped twistingly down on one knee, threw up a gun, and fired. He saw the sheriff heave into sight and reel back into his doorway. The saloon crowd remained inside for the time being, steadied by the bullet holes in the doors, and hoping for the bold sheriff to get in his lick with the rifle. Foyle made a lurching run into the alley across from the Union Bar. The wounded sheriff got off another hasty shot at him, shouting hoarsely, "Dammit, fellers, come out an' give me a hand!"

Already in the alley, Gano was shooting at the saloon, keeping the crowd to cover. His savage rage had passed as swiftly as it came. A dispassionate calmness smoothed his tawny face. His eyes shone like half-moons.

"Are you hit bad?" he inquired lightly, in much the same tone that he might have asked Foyle if he had a match.

"Leg. That damn sheriff's rifle!"

The sun had gone down. The dusk was deepening.

"That makes it awkward," Gano commented, keeping his eyes on the saloon doors.

"Makes *me* awkward!" said Foyle. "Say, I saw a corral as we came in. Back o' the freight warehouse. Bunch o' mules in there. Ever ride a mule bareback?"

"Allah forbid!"

"He's not on our side. Look, this caper's a bust, no maybe. You better sneak round to that mule corral while you can. These jiggers won't hang back much longer. They'll bust out in a minute an' then it'll be all over. You know it."

Gano shifted his eyes. He scanned Foyle's drawn face curiously. "We might both try for the corral," he suggested, but his voice lacked conviction. He raised his gun and slung another shot at the saloon.

Foyle's short laugh was harshly derisive. "Me try to ride a bareback mule —like this? Get out o' here an' don't argue!"

Gano grinned eerily. It was a tortured grimace that twitched one cheek and stretched his mouth all aslant. A smoky veil darkened his eyes. He put out a hand to Foyle, then quickly drew it back without touching him.

His grin turned shallow and false. The eyes mirrored once more the pale mockery. In mimic falsetto he singsonged cynically, "Me velly obedient servant! Me get! Goo'by!" He vanished soundlessly down the alley, hugging the wall.

Foyle hoped he'd make it. Only pure fools stuck uselessly to the finish, and they didn't work for Big Mac. Gano had stood up fine in the Union Bar jackpot. He had showed his stuff there, all right. But you couldn't look for such a man to be sentimental when it came down to a last chance at a getaway.

Foyle thought of Big Mac and cursed him. It crossed his mind that for Big Mac he was about to meet his end in a dirty alley, shooting it out with men he didn't know and who didn't know him. Bain Foyle—just another Banner badman, the fourth or fifth one to be sent up to the Pronghorn who never got back.

"Me?" he growled. "Hell!" He smashed three bullets into the Union Bar and dragged himself down the alley. His leg was like rubber. He was bleeding pretty bad. The sheriff's bullet had got him above the knee. He guessed the bone was broken there.

Gano had prowled left from the end of the alley, to work around to the mule corral. There was no sign or sound of him now. Foyle crawled to the right. The livery stable was along there, across from the general store. It was closed, but cracks of light showed from inside. If he could get at the liveryman. Hold a gun on him. Make him saddle a horse. He might manage to stay in a saddle long enough to get out of this town and find hiding. If the horse was gentle. If he roped himself on. If they didn't come after him too soon. He knew he was leaving a trail of blood.

Chapter Four

Renegade's Rodeo

FOYLE reached the rear of the livery after scraping through the pole fence into the yard. The tall doors that opened onto the yard were shut. They sagged on their hinges and met unevenly, and through the crack he could see that the bar was up on the inside. The liveryman had shut up shop and cautiously barred himself in until the disturbance was settled. Somebody was with him. They were talking, arguing over something.

He was about to insert a gun barrel into the crack and try lifting the bar, when he caught the sounds of a stamping hoof, a snort, and the faint creak of leather. The sounds came from close by. He moved on past the livery doors. He peered around the corner, and checked a deep sigh of relief.

In the lane leading into the livery yard stood a buckboard and team that had evidently been backed in off the street for safety. The two horses had their heads bent in his direction, sniffing uneasily, ears cocked, aware of his presence before he appeared. The smell of his blood made them nervous. His crawling advance scandalized them. The near horse crowded over against its mate.

He couldn't give them a friendly cussing to lull their mistrust. The men in the livery would certainly hear and raise the alarm. The horses sidled off toward the street, conferring in agitated snorts, wanting nothing to do with a blood-smelly hobgoblin that didn't walk upright and swear out loud. A noisy racket broke out in the street and switched their aroused fright in that direction. They paused to consider.

Foyle rose, hopped forward on his good leg, and floundered into the buckboard. He snatched up the lines, and the horses stood shivering but passive, recognizing the authority of human hands.

The racket in the street grew louder, concentrated somewhere down past the Union Bar. Men were running about, yelling. Some shots blared, and hoofs pounded a boardwalk like a drum. It could have been a merry Saturday-night rodeo—somebody having trouble with his mount, and everybody pulling for the horse. Foyle coaxed the buckboard team forward and took a look. He had to get out by way of the street, anyhow. The lane was too narrow to turn in, and it ended in the livery yard, at that.

It wasn't a fractious horse that was raising the riot. It was a Satan-striped Spanish mule, ornery by nature and no saddle to handicap him. Gano was riding; staying on top, anyway, toes clamped in, taking the bumps. He couldn't afford to let go, and there was always a wild chance that his long-eared steed might take a fit to leave town with him. He had got hold of a mule, but whatever had since transpired between them was obviously all the mule's enterprise. The crowd complicated his dilemma, surging about, shouting, trying to box in the scampering, kicking mule and at the same time keep clear of its hoofs.

A determined cowpuncher ran out at it, twirling a rope. The mule, knowing what that thing was, skidded half a turn in a boil of dust and flashed its hind hoofs at his face. The cowpuncher dodged them by a hair, but got tangled

in his loop and down he went. Exasperated, he sat up, dragging out his gun, and blazed impartially at the animal and the figure clinging to its back.

The mule took two jumps that landed it on the boardwalk near the Union Bar. Startled at the loud and hollow drumming under its hoofs, it leaped off, threw a high roller, and came down stiff-legged.

Gano's bobbing face dropped so low he kissed the mule's neck. But he still hung on.

Thoroughly mad, the mule uncorked a series of weaving bucks, shaking itself like a leaping fish. It tightened them up into a rapid display of acrobatics in which the object seemed to be to bite its own tail. Nobody could stay on the back of a Spanish mule without its permission, and not always then. Gano had picked the wrong mule; or perhaps there weren't any right ones. It wound up the business by swapping ends faster than a cat quitting an occupied kennel. That did the trick.

Tossed wide, Gano struck the Union Bar hitchrack and bounced off. He crouched in the dust, smothered in dirt and his nose running blood, a trapped target for the mob to blast to rags. The mule scooted back and forth, seeking an opening in the closing circle of men.

Foyle hit the excited team and let out an ear-splitting squawl. The team took off, snapping his head back. As the buckboard shot into the street both horses tried to swing north away from the roaring, frightening crowd. He hauled their heads around, lashing them. It was a fast and cramped turn. The buckboard yawed over on two wheels, the others spinning free. Banging into a porch post of the general store righted it, at the cost of the post, and Foyle sent the team full at the crowd.

Barely holding his balance on the bumping seat while whacking the horses, he got only a rapid impression of faces whirling aside, a confused jumble of bodies, arms and legs flying, and thuds against the buckboard. The team burst through into the open space before the Union Bar where the mule pranced and Gano crouched.

"Up an' jump, partner!"

If Gano heard the shout above the din, he didn't need the advice. It was that or be run over. He upped and jumped in one nimble motion. There wasn't much room for him between the Union Bar hitchrack and the buckboard. Rocking past, Foyle took a hurried look back and could see nothing of him in the kicked-up dust. He guessed Gano had missed and gone under, if he wasn't hanging to the rear axle and dragging. He couldn't stop to find out. He charged on at the other half of the crowd, the mule seesawing ahead, thinking it was pursued.

Breaking through this bunch was a livelier proposition. The others, their backs toward him, had been caught by surprise and followed their first impulse to scramble out of the path of a runaway team. These, though, had time to see what had happened and who was coming at them, and they didn't propose to scatter.

Stopping a panicked pair of strong horses, however, wasn't any casual pastime for men on foot in high-heeled boots. Particularly when the horses followed hard on the heels of a belligerent mule. And the driver laying about him furiously with the whip. Again came the mad turmoil of faces and bodies—but this time with hands

clawing at the team, and the faces were lighted spasmodically by gun-flashes.

The mule's progress loosened a hole in the crowd. The animal had gone frantic. It barged on through, and so again did the team, one man clinging stubbornly to the near horse and grabbing at its rein. Foyle reached far over and hit the man with the butt end of the whip. The man dropped off, rolling over and over on the ground. The raging cowmen hammered a flurry of shots after the jouncing buckboard.

An explosion of pain blinded Foyle. He rode upright on the seat, shuddering, every muscle taut, glaring into a dazzling white nothingness. Words formed in his mouth. He thought he spoke them aloud, but his lips were clamped shut.

Damn him to hell!

His curse wasn't aimed at the man whose bullet had found him, whoever he was, but at Big Mac, for in that instant the dazzling white fire brought with it a stark clarity. Had Big Mac deliberately sent him to his death? There had been those other Banner men, gun fighters of the old bunch, who became restless, unable to conceal a rebellious contempt of Big Mac after learning too much about him. They had gone, one by one, sent on mysterious missions—one-way trails, no return. And now he, Bain Foyle, last of that hard, reckless, but straight-shooting bunch, the top man—

The white flare clouded, darkened swiftly to black. He was falling a great distance. He was falling alone, yet in his ear was Gano's voice: "My fiend, you velly good man!"

WHEN Foyle rose painfully back to the surface of consciousness, he thought cloudily that his body was being forced up through layers of barbwire. It was the hurting that clawed and nagged him out of a dream. In the dream he had just shot a hawk with his father's old percussion rifle. His father, in one of the rare sober periods since his mother's death, was bawling the devil out of him for it in the grave, troubled way he had when he wasn't drunk

"Never did you any harm, did it?" demanded his father. He had read a good deal in the happier days, and he said, looking down at the dead hawk, "God creates the living. He created this wild bird. And along comes you, a fool boy with a gun, and—and—" he looked away, sunken eyes hopelessly drowned in memory of the loved woman lost—"slits the thin-spun life!" he finished in a whisper.

Bain, too, looked away, but only to hide his young intolerance. His father was getting queer in the head. Wouldn't kill anything, not even the thieving chipmunks that, grown bold in their immunity, scuttled and chattered under the floors of the house and raided the kitchen in broad daylight. Yet it was said that the old man had been considerable of a curly wolf in his time, and hung up a high reputation among shooters.

His father that night, drunk, staggered in and slapped him clear across the room. "Too cussed handy wi' guns!" he shouted. "I ever catch you again—!"

Light penetrated Foyle's eyelids. His will fought sluggishly against the impulse to open his eyes. He wanted urgently to go back to the ranch on the Nueces and tell his father that he un-

derstood him now. But the dream had dissipated in the waking throb of pain, and he remembered with a dull regret that his father was long dead. He was a man, not a boy any more. He was Bain Foyle, top gunman of Banner.

Memory raced on, disclosing Van Gaughn, the Union Bar, the hostile Pronghorn cowmen. The fight. The getaway. There, against a wall of blinding white, memory faltered and came to a stop. Nothing more existed for him beyond that.

Shocked to full pitch, consciousness swept away the cloudy lassitude and freed his mind to leaping speculation. A bullet had caught him in the head—yes—as he careened south out of town in the stolen buckboard. What had happened after that? Where was he now? He tested his injured leg by flexing the tendons. It was bandaged and it hurt. Cautiously he slid a hand up to his head. It too was bandaged, and it throbbed sickeningly.

"Doctor!" exclaimed a clear low voice. "He's—"

"Coming to, eh? Splendid!" said another voice. It was briskly professional, yet familiar. "Miss Reynolds, do you have any kind of stimulants in the house? Mr. Jason and I do not drink," the voice lied smoothly, "but there are occasions when a medicinal measure of whisky—"

"I'll get some at once, doctor."

A door closed quietly.

Foyle opened his eyes. He was lying on a bed in a lighted room, and Gano's ugly face was grinning down at him. He had a string of questions to ask and he began pouring them out.

"Where are we? How did we get here? Who's that woman? What happened after—"

"Shut up!" interrupted Gano superiorly. "I'm the doctor and I'll do the talking!" He darted to the closed door, put an ear to it, and returned to the bed. "Haven't much time. Won't take her long to fetch the whisky. I only asked for it to get her out of the room, when I saw you were coming to. Now get this! You are Mr. Jason. I am Doctor Sling. I am engaged in doing some very important research, and you are my co-worker and guide. We met with a misunderstanding in Van Gaughn. We were persecuted and attacked by ruffians! Stripped of our dignity, and robbed of our horses! We escaped—martyrs to the noble cause of science!"

"I could cry," Foyle grunted. "Say, last I saw of you there, you'd missed the jump and gone under."

Gano shook his head. "I caught hold of the back of the buckboard. Climbed on in time to keep you from falling off. How we smashed through that pack! You, the horses, the mule, and me—hanging on by one hand and shooting with the other! An effective combination. I must keep it in mind. Still, I wouldn't try riding that mule again to skip out of hell. The brute nearly wrecked my chaste beauty."

He stroked his nose, which was swollen. "They got their horses and came howling after us," he mentioned. "It was a bit difficult, driving the team and holding you on as well. I was tempted to let you go. You know—like that old story of the Russian who tossed his family out of the sleigh to the pursuing wolves. Very sensible of him. Lightened the load, delayed the wolves, and saved his life. As a boy, it was one of my favorite stories."

"How come you didn't?" asked Foyle.

Gano gestured airily. "Oh—I happened to recall Big Mac's order to help

you stay alive until you did the job. So I drove off the trail and hid in the brush. They tore past in the dark, all terribly fierce, and for all I know they're still scouring the south for us. I then drove wide around the town and headed north. By the way, did you chance to notice the brand painted on that buckboard?"

"No."

"I did, and it interested me. When I reached the main road, northbound, I slacked off the lines and left it to the horses to choose the route. Naturally, with their minds on their supper, they trotted homeward. The brand on the buckboard was—V Bar!"

Foyle heaved a breath. "What? You mean—?"

Gano nodded, his eyes glittering, the lips of his huge mouth curled in silent mirth. "Yes—this is the V Bar outfit! We are in Ebb Grimm's house, uninvited but not unwelcomed guests!"

He raised a finger, listening, head cocked. His batlike ears seemed to quiver. "Sssh! Here she comes! Be ready for another surprise. You'll get one, if you're half the man I think you are, Foyle—Mr. Jason, I mean!"

Chapter Five

Mistress of V Bar

THE first sight of the girl who entered the room jerked Foyle's scattered thoughts up short. He stared at her. At once a gnawing, like hunger, clutched at him inside and overrode the heartbeat throbbing of his pains.

Few women had ever had that instantaneous effect on him; none as strongly as this. In his kind of life there were no high pedestals for women, no rigidly observed laws of prim decorum. They took their social standing according to the flame of their attraction, and no degree was untouchable. The other kind, the kind he rarely met, caused him always to become more stiffly reticent than usual. *They* were untouchable, and for that reason he guarded himself against having any feeling about them. From that rule of conduct sprang a blunt and urgent question: Who and what was this girl?

She had a mass of brown hair with reddish undertones. Her skin had a kind of silvery, satin aura that, combined with her full warm lips, summed a voluptuous quality that the most popular dance-hall queen would have envied. Nothing short of an iron smock could have concealed the sleek curves of her body. Her eyes contained some of the color of the undertone of her hair. They were like molten copper, transparent around the deeper irises, but not empty. They were utterly feminine eyes.

There was something else, something more, invisible, not easy to define, yet immediately recognizable to masculine senses. It belonged in the realm of womanhood where, behind the vulnerable ramparts of passion and compassion, idolatry breathlessly waited with a boundless capacity to love the invader.

Gano, on his best behavior, relieved her of her tray and set it down. "Our patient is doing very well." He bowed, and flipped a hand toward Foyle. "Miss Reynolds—Mr. Jason."

Their eyes met and they spoke words that meant nothing. Foyle went on looking, feeling nothing of the pain, only the gnawing. Among the girls

whom he entered in his private tally as "nice" he had never met one like this. But then, he had never met or seen a girl such as this anywhere.

Under his straight gaze her lips parted slightly, revealing the line of her even white teeth. She pinked. The color flushed from beneath her hair and spread until it crept under the neckline of her dress. Then her eyelashes screened her eyes. He knew that his eyes were saying too much, too candidly, but he couldn't remove them from her.

It was Gano who broke that up. "I have been telling Mr. Jason of my tribulations after I saved him from those ruffians in town," he said, coughing modestly. His eyes were saying a lot, too, fastened on the girl, but he stood partly behind her and she couldn't see them. "That was a dastardly outrage, Miss Reynolds! Quite unprovoked. Had it not been for me, Mr. Jason would surely have been murdered! Fortunately I was able to secure a mule and dash to his rescue!"

"A mule?" She regarded him dubiously. "But, doctor, it was a buckboard you brought him here in."

Gano smiled brightly at her. "Mr. Jason doesn't know very much about riding a mule," he murmured confidentially, and let that subject drop. "It's late, Miss Reynolds. I'm sure we are keeping you up. Ah, what a blessed angel of mercy you are in our sore distress! But you must not wear yourself out for us. You must have your sleep, my dear. To paraphrase the immortal Bard of Avon—"

The Bard went unparaphrased. The door opened abruptly and a man stood there. He was a short, neat man, up in his forties. His eyes were small and sharp. Chronic impatience and irritable severity could be seen at a glance in his brown, knotty face. His movements were curt and direct. He looked to be the type of cowman who drove himself and everybody around him hard, resented pleasure as a waste of time, and suffered dyspepsia from eating too fast. He looked as humorless as a snapping turtle.

His intolerant eyes stabbed at Foyle, at Gano, and finally to the girl. "What the devil's this?" he rasped in a voice clipped tight from anger. "Did they come in the buckboard? It's down in the yard. They stole it off me!"

The girl lifted a restraining hand. "This is Ira Hamp, our range boss," she explained to Foyle and Gano. To the range boss she said, "Mr. Jason and Doctor Sling borrowed it. They were attacked in town and their horses taken, and they had to get away as best they could. Is everybody in Van Gaughn going crazy? Any stranger who comes in, they accuse of being a Banner gunman! It's outrageous! They could at least—"

"That don't concern me!" Ira Hamp broke in, while Gano was making clucking sounds of sympathy for himself and Foyle. "My business is to run this outfit. I'm runnin' the roundup on a mighty close schedule. I drove in town late for new rope. A ruckus was goin' on when I got there. It don't concern me. My concern is keepin' the crew at work, an' I'll do it long's I'm foreman!"

His use of that term—foreman—indicated that he was from somewhere up north. Southwestern cowmen didn't use it. The man who ran the outfit was the range boss, top screw, high-cock-a-doodle, or something casually disrespectful.

"I backed in by the livery," Ira

Hamp went on, his voice getting tighter. The taking of the buckboard was a personal affront and a bitter offense. It had cost him time. "I went in an' asked Harrison to water the horses. He wouldn't. He barred the doors. While I argued with the ol' fool, them two—" he speared his finger at Foyle and Gano—"stole the buckboard! I had to run around town an' borrow a broken-down ol' nag to get home! I didn't even get the new rope! They stole that buckboard, I say!"

"Well," Foyle put in mildly, "somebody stole our horses, so I reckon it's an even stand-off."

The range boss took a step toward the bed. "I got nothin' to do with your horses!"

"Your buckboard is there in the yard, isn't it?" queried Gano. "Our apologies and thanks should be sufficient. After all, you only work here, so you don't own it!"

Ira Hamp thrust out his chin. He failed to detect the glint in the pale, slanted eyes. "Shut your trap, Chink—I'm just sore enough to shut it for you!"

Foyle, half rising from the bed, said swiftly to Gano, "Hold it, man, hold it!" Only he knew the lethal significance of the Mongoloid man's baleful grimace, the stillness of the hands, and the soft hiss of an expelled breath.

The girl stepped up to the range boss. "I think we had better go downstairs and talk this over, Mr. Hamp," she told him. "You can apologize later to Doctor Sling."

"I got no time for talk," he grunted, preceding her out of the room. "Not about this, anyhow. An' I sure don't apologize to no Chink!"

"Easy, Gano!" Foyle whispered. "Easy!"

Ira Hamp evidently didn't have a high opinion of feminine intelligence. They heard him, going downstairs with the girl, say roughly, "I wish Grimm was here! He'd know what to do with the likes o' them two thieves! He sure wouldn't put 'em up in the best bedroom, an' act the fool, treatin' 'em like—"

"That's my privilege, Mr. Hamp!"

"All right, Miss Donna, all right! So 'tis—till Grimm gets back. Then you'll see! He won't like it, I tell you now! You ain't been here long enough to know—"

The voices faded away. Foyle lay back in the bed and gazed up at the ceiling.

"Her name is Donna," he said reflectively. He repeated it. "Donna. Nice name. Donna Reynolds." It sparked a thought. He frowned, puzzled. "Who is she? Where does she fit in here on Grimm's V Bar outfit? D'you know, Gano? You had a good chance to talk with her before I woke up, didn't you?"

Gano didn't reply for a spell. He sat down and built a cigarette, using Foyle's makings. A tiny tremble shook his fingers. He licked his lips before he ran the tip of his tongue along the edge of the brown paper. He lighted the cigarette and smoked jerkily, hunched over in the chair. His eyelids were lowered, heavy and sullen.

"Yes, I had a good chance," he assented, "before you woke up. To—talk with her. Then you opened your eyes. You looked at her. And she—that was all you had to do."

He flung the cigarette to the floor. Its burning end burst into a shower of sparks. He ground them out under his heel. He was unpredictable, by turns cynically gay and darkly brooding. The

dark mood was on him. His voice was low and grating.

"All I know is what we both heard. Her name is Donna Reynolds. She is beautiful, she lives here in Grimm's house, and she hasn't been here long. And you ask where she fits in! There's the answer!"

Foyle scowled at him. "What's bitin' you? I know Hamp riled you, but that's no cause for you to blackguard the girl behind her back! Cut it out!"

Gano continued talking as though he hadn't heard. "What the hell does it matter what she is? It doesn't to me." A spasm of harried agony ravaged his tawny, uncouth face. "It's what *I* am that matters!"

He glared down at the floor. "Life has cheated me since the day I was born! And it could have been so glorious. Mongolism, they say, is an accident that can occur in the finest and proudest families. How well I know that! Mine was a fine, proud family. They bred great soldiers, diplomats, rulers. Their name is known throughout Europe. What a hideous shock to them was my birth! What a disgrace! My family was famous for its tall, handsome men, its elegantly beautiful women. I was a shameful little monster among them! They never quite regarded me as human, although I had their brains—their aristocratic manners—pride! The very sight of me remained a constant horror to them! The throwback! Alien monkey!"

Before such a stark revelation of concentrated bitterness, Foyle could find nothing to say. Sweat twinkled in the ridges and seams of Gano's low forehead. He passed a hand over it, smearing it. He sat there, huddled, glaring down the spent years into the faraway past. His voice fell to a sneering monotone.

"Oh, they didn't disown me. They couldn't! They packed me off to expensive schools—far off! They gave me an allowance, generous amounts, hoping I'd quickly drink myself to death. And they rushed me out of the country, when I killed a colonel in a cabaret for making a certain remark about my appearance. How glad they were to be rid of me at last!"

He cackled horribly. "A touching farewell, that! I changed my name. When the money they gave me was gone, I lived on my wits. Gambling and cheating. Trickery and theft. Murder and robbery. You think you've gone bad, Foyle? Hah! You've barely scraped the surface of sin! What else was there for me? All men have been my prey, all my life since!"

Foyle wished he'd shut up. This naked exposure of tragedy and crime embarrassed him. He sensed in Gano a compulsive urge to confession that was self-revulsion rather than a soul-cleansing. Some burning emotion had caught up with Gano, and fired a reaction that he could not throttle down. But he, Bain Foyle, was not his confessor, and he drew back from hearing more.

"I've changed my name frequently," Gano said. He fisted his knee. "Never could I change myself! Men are repelled by me. Women recoil. In their eyes I see that unreasoning distrust, dislike, animosity, shrinking repugnance! Or, worse, the unforgivable insult of secret, scornful laughter! I am a man!"

He struck his knee again in futile rage. "A man! Yet, because of this cursed half-Mongol face and half-dwarfed body, I am forever an outcast, a pariah! That girl downstairs. Donna Reynolds. She was civil to me. Friendly, even. I could have given her my blood for that! I am a man, I say! Then you looked at her. She was glad not to look at me again! The comparison was—too excessive! Damn you, Foyle! Damn your tall body, long legs, straight eyes, your skin—!"

"Okay, *amigo!*" Foyle cut in. This was more comfortable ground. This abusive tangent offered a welcome return to normal talk. He said hurriedly, "Is she alone here, you reckon?"

Gano shrugged and straightened up. A grin, at first wry and ghostly, then full and false, lightened his face. He spoke with almost his old tone of mocking insolence.

"What a discerning question! The ranch crew is out on roundup. And that, if I judge the Hamp creature right, means every last man who is able to move, including the cook. Ebb Grimm is off somewhere. He's probably lining up fighting men to oppose Big Mac. Of course she is alone! That is, except for us. And that, as Hamp warned her, would not please Mr. Ebb Grimm! It certainly would not please me, in his place!"

The pointed inference brought Foyle's scowl back. "They say Grimm's been a widower a long time. He must be getting along in years."

"What of it?" Gano scoffed. "He's well-to-do. He's the biggest rancher in this part of the country. Men of his age and wealth often become the—er—protectors of lovely but penniless women! He can give her security, comfort. Did you see the bracelet on her wrist? Real diamonds! A valuable bauble, not the sort of trinket that a ranch girl wears. Believe me, if Grimm gets word that there's some youngish male company dawdling around his prize possession, we can expect him home in a hurry! I hope it works out that way, so we can wind up this job."

Foyle released a sigh. The hard mask settled over his face, etched with lines that had come too soon for his years. Life, he reflected saturninely, was a string of mirages, like a lonely desert trail, each shimmering illusion crumbling as it was reached. Even he, for all his experience, could still be gulled, wishful to believe, his faith captured, until his cup dipped dry sand.

And yet—*Whatever she is*, ran an unbidden thread of thought, *I'm a gone duck! This time I can't go on!*

He brushed the private confession aside, refusing to accept it. "What shape am I in, Gano?" he asked.

"The sheriff's bullet," Gano answered, "seems to have grazed the bone as well as a tendon in your lower thigh. That accounts for the numbness. The other one could easily have knocked the parietal bone askew in your cranium—but happily you're quite as thick-skulled as I suspected! It fluked, and parted your hair rather prettily on the side. Donna Reynolds thinks I'm a surgeon. She's a darling. I put on an impressive show for her benefit. There's no reason why you shouldn't get up when the stiffness leaves your leg. You'll be limpy and sore for a while, but on the whole you got off lucky."

"Soon's I can," Foyle stated, "I'm getting out o' here, Grimm or no Grimm! Tomorrow! Today! Past midnight, isn't it?"

Gano took a walk up and down the room, fingering his lips and shooting

glances at Foyle. "No, you won't!"

"Who says?"

"I do! You're my patient, remember! I forbid it!"

"Go to blazes! You just now said—"

Gano made a dismissing hand-pass. "I've held a professional consultation with myself and reversed my opinion. You stay there. Your guns are hanging up there on the wall, out of your reach. All I have to do is give you a tap on the skull with one of mine, and you'll have a sudden relapse."

"Why, damn your nerve—!"

"Listen, Foyle!" Gano halted at the foot of the bed. "For your own good as well as mine, listen! Whatever it is that's weighing on your mind, you had better forget it. We've got a job to do here, and we can't back out. Big Mac gave his orders. You know what it means to go against him! I can see you going in and telling him, 'We got inside Grimm's house, but we decided not to wait for him!' I can see Big Mac's face! 'Yes, we walked right out again. Because Grimm had a pretty girl, and I—' "

"Shut up about her, will you?" Foyle snapped.

Gano laughed soundlessly. "So solly —no can do! She's too important to us, apart from her charms. If you were thinking straight you'd see that. Now, look! Grimm will be back sometime. It'll be soon, too, if he hears about us being here! I suppose he keeps in touch, wherever he is, seeing he's the big chief. We will be here, waiting for him!"

"What about that town crowd? They're bound to find out where we are."

"True. Hamp will spill it out sooner or later, and they'll come for us. But if darling Donna stands up for us, they're not going to drag us out! She's mistress of this house. She's our ace! Our only card, in fact!"

"Hide behind a girl's skirts?"

"Lovely skirts, too!" Gano nodded, unabashed. "I imagine she has a lot of spirit. She would go all out for someone she—er—liked. We must win her trust, respect, loyalty. In a woman, those excellent qualities and virtues can usually be aroused, I have observed, by one dominant emotion—love. I don't possess the qualifications to handle that, so it's your job. Right?"

"Wrong!" snarled Foyle.

Thoughtfully, Gano helped himself to a stiff drink from the bottle on the tray. "It's a poor doctor who can't swallow his own prescription! Foyle, you can be the most thick-headed fool! That girl is already half gone on you. God knows you're gone on her! What could be more natural? She's lonely. Her protector is old and away from home. Along you come—a tall, passably good-looking man in a rough way, reasonably young and obviously virile. Hurt, and needing her gentle care! You open your eyes and see her. You're a lonely sort of cuss, yourself. She, beautiful. Gorgeous! She's passion and fire and affection and— Oh, hell!" He swung away, restlessly finger-combing his coarse yellow hair.

When he spoke next he pitched his voice low and flat. "All right, Foyle, walk out! Go back to Banner! Tell Big Mac that Fellowstone Gano is sticking to the job! I'll get it done, I swear, somehow. There's big money in it. Damn anything else!"

He looked suddenly aged, wearily satanic, a man saturated in all the blackest depths of crime. "Money is everything!" he muttered, leaving the room.

CHAPTER SIX

The Night Marauders

ABSENT most of the time, the following day Gano came into the bedroom and found Foyle staring at a blank wall. Donna Reynolds had brought Foyle his meals and later removed the dishes, and her visits had released a turgid flood of feelings in him.

He could recall her every word, every inflection of her voice, every motion. He could see her. The sunlight through the window brought out the undertones of her hair so that they glimmered, alive, like the deep fires recessed in polished quartz. It struck further fires in the transparent copper of her eyes, and placed a faintly blue shadow under the curve of her throat.

When she arranged the tray on the bed, her nearness had forced him to draw back, amazed and dismayed at what it did to him. It was useless to remind himself that she belonged to another man. His senses ignored it. This time the mirage persisted and he couldn't shrug it off and go on. Cynical reason promised that it would disintegrate and vanish like the rest in barren disillusion, while in his heart he wished fervently to stay hoodwinked.

"How's the patient?" inquired Gano, flicking ash from an expensive cigar that he had purloined from somewhere on the premises. "Decided to wait for Grimm after all, eh? Too bad! I anticipated earning twenty thousand dollars all for myself—plus whatever else I could get away with from here."

Foyle forsook his visions. He eyed Gano bleakly. "I'd about as soon leave her to that pack o' Russian wolves you spoke of!"

"Oho!" Gano clicked his tongue. "The protective-male instinct, eh? Methinks I caught a rapt expression on your countenance as I came in! I observe also that you've taken your guns down off the wall." He leered like a bronze satyr. "And the eyes of darling Donna softly glow with a pensive light that only a blind man could miss seeing. Congratulations, Mr. Jason—I do hope you'll both be very happy!"

Resisting a temptation to hurl something at him, Foyle changed the talk by asking, "Where did you pick up that name for me, by the way? Off a wanted bill, I bet!"

Gano waggled a hand reassuringly. "Your ignorance of classic mythology astounds me. Jason, son of Aeson, was that enterprising bucko who hied forth to win the Golden Fleece. A fitting name for you, say I. He won the damned thing, too, come to think of it, and carried off a lovely princess as a bonus. Those were the days! But let's get to business. My plans call for speed."

"Are you trying to take charge, Gano?" Foyle's tone was gently dangerous.

He was conscious of a subtle altering in the relationship between himself and Gano since last night. Where Gano's insolence had been lightly impersonal, it now had a core of steely malice. There had been something approaching a friendly give-and-take understanding between them, normal to their hazardous situation. Today it existed largely in form, little in content. Perhaps Gano regretted having gone that far toward friendship. He was solitary and friendless by choice, avoiding personal entanglements, letting

nothing interfere in his credo of self-interest.

At Foyle's blunt question Gano let his one-sided grin fade. His oblique eyes stilled, drained of the slightest trace of humor.

"Not at all," he replied. "I know my place." A muscle quivered on a prominent cheekbone. "I am—the obedient servant. Far be it from me to intend any offense to the master!"

Foyle said uncomfortably, "Forget it! What's on your mind?"

Gano's face was an impassive mask overlying a sneer. "Ira Hamp came to the house again today for something," he related tonelessly. "He talked with Donna—excuse me—with Miss Reynolds. I listened. Our guess about Grimm is correct. He's in Texas, in the Panhandle, gathering ex-Rangers, discharged soldiers, and the like. It's more than a posse he's recruiting, although it's to be known as the Pronghorn Posse to give it a touch of legal color. It's a whole company! Over a hundred fighting men, fully armed and equipped—that's the number I heard Hamp mention! A lot of money is being raised to pay for it. Grimm was once a cavalry officer, and he knows what he's doing."

Foyle whistled softly. "Man! Big Mac better move fast!"

"I thought," Gano drawled, "that was what we were here for!" He was being deliberately disagreeable. "With such an army behind him, Grimm could ride down into Banner and settle Big Mac once and for all. It would be the finish for us—especially you! Territory law is thin and spotty. Not even the governor would bother to look too closely into the hanging of Big Mac's top gunman and a few others, after Big Mac got kicked out. Big Mac has plenty of political enemies and rivals. They'd thank Grimm for breaking him. They'd protect Grimm and his men, after it was done, and get them appointed special deputies or something of the kind. In cutthroat politics, justice is on the side of the winner, as we all know. I say *we* had better move fast! We've got to stop it, to save our own skins besides Big Mac's!"

Foyle granted the accuracy of Gano's statement of the case. Territory politics, tangled up in elective offices, government appointments, and military controls, was a jungle of intrigue. Once a man slipped, the rest pounced on him.

It had been so ever since the Mexican Governor Armijo fled, chased by General Kearney's U. S. troops, leaving his mantle of authority behind to be squabbled over. About the size of all New England, there was plenty of room in the Territory for private wars and feuds, and its politics occasionally got clouded in powder smoke here and there. The old Spanish and Mexican land-grants problem had never been settled. There was dissatisfaction among erstwhile grand *dons* and *haciendados*, who supported for office any candidate promising restitution of their million-acre estates. The same candidates also promised the new homesteaders more land and free titles, at the same time vowing to the American cattlemen that the range would be kept open for them. Only a politician could reconcile those three burning problems.

"Two of us to stop an army!" Foyle reflected aloud. "This job gets tougher right along!"

Gano gave his sombrero an up-thrust and folded his arms. "Before Hamp

left, he went into the ranch office with Miss Reynolds. The ranch office is a small building set apart from the main house, on the east side, the opposite side to the bunkhouse. It's kept locked. There's a steel safe in there. I had a good look at it through the window. Very likely that is where the money is cached for the Pronghorn Posse—the war chest. The girl has a key to it. She opened the safe for Hamp to put away a used-up tally book and take out a new one."

"You 'pear to have done considerable spying," Foyle remarked.

"I have made some use of my time," retorted Gano coldly. "I have learned that Grimm is gathering his recruits at a camp on the Muleshoe, just over the Texas line. When he gets them organized and leads them in, practically every Pronghorn cowman will join them. They are determined to force a quick showdown on Big Mac, that's plain. But nothing will be done until Grimm gets the posse ready. That may take a few more days."

Foyle nodded. "Old army officers gen'rally want everything set just right before they jump, yeah. Maybe Grimm will make a trip home first, though, for the money to pay 'em with. If the money is still being raised, then he sure couldn't have taken it with him."

Gano put his finger tips together and made a steeple of them. "Remove the head. Blunt the spear. Yes." His fingers curled inward. "But can we depend on it that he'll do that—and alone? No! Another way to stop them is to remove the war chest. At least it would delay them until they could raise more money. By then Big Mac would have warning, and he'd make the first move. We would be the ones who'd lead a posse here into the Pronghorn! Yes, if they lost their war chest—"

"I don't go in for robbing a place where I—uh—where I'm a guest," Foyle said shortly.

"Is that so?" Gano shrugged. "Well, there's no guarantee that we'd find it in the safe, so that's another chance we can't depend on. I have still another way, the simplest and quickest. Grimm prizes the girl. He'd be a fool if he didn't! He does, or he wouldn't leave her here as mistress of the place while he's away, with a key to his safe. If *she* were removed—and held as hostage—"

"That's out! Not for a million!"

"Why? She'll be alone here in the house with us the rest of the day! I overheard Hamp telling her that he'd try to drop in late tonight or early tomorrow morning, depending on how the roundup work was going. There are good horses in one of the corrals, and spare saddles under the wagon shed. It wouldn't be much trouble to take her off when it gets dark! We can be well on the way back to Banner by morning! Big Mac would pay as much for her as for Grimm, I think." Gano peaked his heavy brows thoughtfully. "Perhaps more! What's to stop us?"

Foyle got his legs out of the bed and sat up. "Me!"

"But you're able to ride, if we take it easy. You might bleed some, but Big Mac's money will make it up!"

"That's not what I mean, Gano." Foyle's left hand came out from under the blankets, dragging his gun belts. "What I mean is, I'd kill any man who tried it! *Any* man! Is that plain enough for you?"

They stared unblinkingly at each other. In his sinister mood Gano seemed to be pondering on whether or not

to call the bet. Reaching a decision, he picked up his half-smoked cigar from the tray and relighted it. He took another drink, filling the glass to the brim and downing it in one gulp.

"You'll never live to see the day—" he began, and stopped as if the phrase was one that conveyed more than he meant to say. His smile came, more shallow and false than ever, not diminishing the chill of his pale eyes.

"All right, Mr. Jason. Then that's out—as far as you are concerned." He was either relieved at having brought about an open clash, or was cloaking his true feelings. "I shall be satisfied if we can get hold of Grimm or the money. Preferably both! The longer we have to wait here, however, the more risk we run. I never trust to luck, and I have a feeling that trouble is coming! If things go bad I'll not be surprised, but I'll not be caught if I can help it! You may get killed. After all, you're not in top shape to pull a shoot-out getaway if it comes to it. In that—er—sad event, I shall be left, of course, to my own resources. I'll use my own ways to get this job done!"

He moved to the door. "Is that plain enough for *you?*" he purred, and minced out, quietly whistling a cheerful little dirge.

Foyle narrowed his eyes. The words and manner carried clear warning that his "obedient servant" was prepared to take matters into his own hands if the chance came his way. He was no longer to be trusted, and he hadn't the shadow of a scruple left in his sin-steeped soul. He could stand and challenge an armed mob, or slip up and knife a man in the back, whichever the occasion called for, equally without a qualm.

Some words that Gano had uttered, leaving the sentence unfinished, stirred up a hazy recollection, a dim and dreamlike figment that Foyle strove to capture and examine. He connected it with the buckboard, his head wound, with the blinding white flash in his eyes. It had to do with Big Mac.

For an instant he almost caught it. It was so close he knew it as a thought that he'd had at that time. An icy bit of truth. About Big Mac. But he was trying too hard. It eluded him. All he could remember was the white flash, and Gano's voice.

He shook his head, shoving the guns back under the blanket. He knew all there was to know about Big Mac. The lost thought couldn't have been important. The important thing was that Gano obviously was itchy, out of patience, eager to do the job and get away before all the risks piled up and exploded. That thought—of Gano carrying off Donna, in his present satanic mood, and handing her over to Big Mac in his guarded mansion of infamy—conjured up a shuddery vision that Foyle thrust away. He knew Big Mac. And he knew Gano, now.

He would have to get hold of Ebb Grimm soon. Or the money in the Pronghorn war chest. Or kill Gano.

Chapter Seven

War Chest

IT WAS late night. A full moon poured steady light outside and the window caught it and bleached out the room's darkness to a gloom in which all objects were visible. The door swung inward, noiseless, casting a blurred oblong of shad-

ow on the side wall. The shadow bulged. Gano slipped in and looked at the bed. It was empty.

Foyle, dressed and wearing his gun belts, stepped out from behind the opened door. "Don't you ever sleep?" he inquired. He dipped a glance at Gano's hands, half expecting to see a knife. When his trust ran out it ran out all the way.

Gano saw the glance. A slight tightening, barely perceptible, thinned his lips. A flare started in his eyes, and died. To the query he responded, "Yes, but I'm a light sleeper."

"So am I," Foyle said. He nodded in the general direction of the front of the house. "I heard a couple o' riders pull in. You seen 'em?"

"Yes. Two men." It was Gano's turn to inspect Foyle's hands, and he did it deliberately. "I've seen them before. So have you. In the Union Bar. One is the red-faced fool they called Atchley. The other is that lanky one who spoke up. Scanlon, Miss Reynolds called him. They've gone into the ranch office with her and shut the door and pulled a drape over the window. Must be something serious. Thought I'd better tell you. I'll go back now and try to hear what they're—"

"I'll take it this time," Foyle said. "Leg's a lot better. No reason you should do it all." It wasn't his intention to speak the words as curt commands, but because of his distrust his voice was crisp, hard.

Gano inclined his head, hiding whatever was in his eyes.

"I shall wait here. With abated breath!"

The room opened onto a hallway. There were stairs at one end. No lights showed anywhere, except from the slit under the door of a downstairs room,

evidently the front room. It was an unusually large house. Foyle descended the stairs into the main hallway, limped through it, and opened the front door. There was no raised porch, but a Mexican-style *portico*, flagstoned, at ground level. Beyond the flagstones, the customary hitchrack. Two saddled horses.

On the east side of the house, Gano had said, was the ranch office. Foyle turned that way, came to the end of the *portico*, and there it was. A small building, shaded by cottonwoods, subdued lamplight yellowing the window. Probably the original ranch house, before prosperity erected the big house now overlording the yard.

He trod carefully under the cottonwoods to the closed door and stood motionless, listening to the voices in the office. The act of eavesdropping provoked a twinge of shame. He reminded himself that if he didn't do it, Gano would. The talk was muffled. He crept closer until he could distinguish the words. It was easy to pick out Atchley's heavy, rasping tone.

"Takes a pile o' money!" Atchley was saying grumblingly. "Mind you, everybody's chipping in. No holdouts. They wouldn't do it for anybody else but Grimm, though. That goes for me, too, I'll admit. We're gambling an awful lot on him! We sure can't afford to lose!"

A more modulated voice, that of Scanlon, queried, "Can any of us afford not to gamble, John? We've got to back Grimm. If we don't, this'll be another corner added to Big Mac's

bailiwick. You know what that would mean. New laws, high taxes, graft, and pay-offs! Gangs of gunmen flashing badges, serving warrants for murders they did themselves on Big Mac's orders! Crooked sheriffs, bought judges, and rigged juries! I had a cousin ranching down below Banner. When he objected to 'em selling him out for delinquent taxes, one o' Big Mac's pals shot him dead and bought the place for a dollar, nobody else daring to bid. Person'ly, I'll gamble all I've got to keep Big Mac out o' the Pronghorn!"

"Now, Frank, I'm not griping," asserted Atchley. "I know what we're up against. Haven't I chipped in more'n my share, there? Like to know how Grimm's doing, is all. You heard from him lately, Donna?"

There was an affirmative murmur from Donna Reynolds. Foyle bent over sidewise nearer to the door, forgetting that his injured leg wouldn't yet take much strain, and caught the girl's closing words: ". . . coming for it anytime now."

"Glad to know it," Atchley said. "Lot o' cash, that, to be keeping here. Makes close to thirty thousand dollars, all told. I guess that's a good safe, though."

"Take ten men to budge it," commented Scanlon dryly. "Grimm bought it from a bank that went bust up in Raton. Some boogers went to work on it with sledgehammers up there one night. Couldn't dent it. That's a safe an' a half! No, I wouldn't worry none about the money, not even if— Huh?"

Foyle's injured leg, held braced too long under his bent position, had got a cramp in it. In straightening up quickly to remedy it by kicking out, Foyle was forced to increase his weight on it. His knee buckled. He lurched off-balance and his elbow brushed the door.

"Huh?" Scanlon muttered again. "Was that you, John?"

"It sure wasn't!" A chair scraped and hard heels hit the floor. "Somebody outside!"

Any chance of darting off was hopeless. Foyle stooped over, holding his aching knee in his hands and working the cramp out of it. The door jerked open and there he was, the lamplight shining on him.

"Evenin'," he said without glancing up. "Got coffee on?"

Full of the intention to charge forth in pursuit of a prowler, Atchley hauled up short, blinking down at the stooping figure before him. All Foyle saw of the cowman was his thick legs, and he hoped he wasn't going to have to see more.

"What the blazes are you doing?"

"Getting a sore kink out o' my leg."

Atchley had a single-track mind, narrow-gauge. "Oh," he said, not entirely unsympathetic. Rough horses could wear down the gristle in any man's joints. But further consideration found the answer inadequate to his question. "What're you doing *here*, I mean?"

"Looking for the cookshack. This it?"

"Oh," said Atchley, satisfied. "No, it's back o' the house. Doubt if there's any coffee on. Hamp put the cook on the roundup wagon."

"Okay." Foyle made to move off, still rubbing his knee.

Scanlon said sharply, "Wait a minute!" His legs scissored up alongside Atchley's. "Wait--a--minute! Who are you, that you don't know your way around here? Mister, let's see your face!"

Foyle paused, letting his hands dan-

gle. Slowly, he lifted his eyes to the two cowmen's waists, their chests. He looked into the muzzle of a .44 six-gun, leveled in Scanlon's fist.

Scanlon breathed incredulously, "Well, by—!" Shock threw harsh volume into his voice. "Don't move! Not a blink! Know him, John? Durn right you do!"

Atchley gulped, grabbed hipward, and then Foyle was looking into the muzzles of two guns. The second one was held by Atchley, and Atchley's florid skin had gone a paler hue. The gun clicked to full cock, finger tightening on the trigger. Foyle guessed the hammer was about to fall. There wasn't a thing he could do to stop it.

"Don't shoot!" It was Donna Reynolds who cried out. "He's Ben Jason—a friend!" Foyle had given her his first name as Ben, the nearest to Bain he could think of. "He's hurt!"

"Friend?" Scanlon kept an unwavering stare on Foyle. "Him! Donna, are you out o' your head? He and a Chinese bug-doctor like to've wrecked the town a couple nights back!"

"Banner men!" blurted Atchley. He looked beyond Foyle, searching fearfully for a glaring-eyed yellow face in the dark. "Banner gunmen, or I'm crazy!"

"You're both crazy—as crazy as all the rest!" the girl accused them hotly. "He and Doctor Sling are from the north! From Denver! They came here for help, after you all attacked them in town like a lot of madmen! They brought back the buckboard that they borrowed," she added, in proof of their honesty. "I think even Hamp realizes the mistake, only he's too angry to admit it."

Atchley burst out, "Lord Almighty, girl, look at him! His face! His eyes! What was he up to, prowling at the door?"

Foyle didn't say anything. Under the challenge of the drawn guns, it was difficult for him to disguise the dark hardness of his face, the tough recklessness in his eyes. The best he could do was to keep his mouth shut.

"He has already told you," the girl answered Atchley. "He wanted some coffee. What's wrong about that? It's the first time he has been downstairs. How was he to know this isn't the cookshack? He saw the light in the window, and came here. What could be more natural? There's no earthly reason to disbelieve him!"

"B-But—!" Atchley spluttered, and Scanlon broke out with, "Now, look, Donna—"

It was as far as they got before she interrupted them both. "Prowling! Is that what you call it, when a man—a wounded man—comes up and knocks on the door? You heard him knock! Would he have knocked if he was prowling? It's ridiculous!"

Scanlon muttered, "Hell!" and twisted his ear. "It wasn't a knock, exactly. More like—"

"Oh—talk, talk, talk!" Donna Reynolds stepped between him and Atchley. "You talk yourselves into believing any crazy thing!" She pushed their guns down. "Men!" she sighed resignedly—and softly, looking at Foyle.

Seeing that he might move now and not get shot for it, Foyle lifted his hat to her. Ignoring the two glowering men, he said, "Whatever all this is about, I'm sure sorry I banged the wrong door." He guessed he could leave the two for her to handle. She did all right. "I better get back to bed. G'night—" he hesitated—"Donna."

Her color deepened. She smiled, and

her eyes were glad.

"Good night—Ben!"

And that was how it was. Her eyes said so. Her eyes said that Scanlon and Atchley didn't have a chance of breaking through that. Their suspicions were weak reeds against her impregnable conviction and confident young faith. She would end up persuading them that they owed apologies to Mr. Ben Jason and Dr. Sling Bool Hi, of Denver, researchers in entomology, anthropology, ornithology. Past masters of triggernometry.

GANO was waiting in the upstairs room. "Learn anything?" he asked, deceptively diffident. "I heard voices. Did they catch you at work? Sounded like it to me."

Foyle slumped onto the bed. He wasn't sorry that the moonlight on the window had dimmed with the high ascent of the moon. He knew that his face, showing the reaction from Donna's look, would have betrayed him to Gano in a better light. The intense and feverish excitement had to be shielded behind a screen of cool calculation.

"The money," he said; "the Pronghorn Pool—the war chest—is in the safe, all right. I learned that! Grimm will be coming anytime now to get it. I don't know if he'll come alone."

Gano scratched a match, lit a cigar. "How much?"

"Close to thirty thousand dollars."

"A-aah!" Gano blew a smoke-ball and a ring. "In the safe! And she has a key!"

"We don't touch her!"

"Very well. So you said before. It is agreed." Gano crossed his short legs. His eyes glimmered amusedly in the semi-darkness. "That safe! So heavy and forbidding. Foyle, I'll bet I can crack it in six minutes! Want to bet?"

"Ten dollars. No—twenty."

Gano chuckled. He was in high spirits. "Done! As soon as the visitors leave and darling Donna retires to bed. That's an old Whitehead box. I've cracked a hundred. Like to show you some night."

"I'll learn tonight what I can, watchin' you."

"H'm. You're coming with me? H'm!"

"Damn right I am!"

But Scanlon and Atchley stayed the night. Nor did they show any intention of leaving the next morning, but sat out on the portico, smoking and fidgeting, uncertain of themselves. Ira Hamp rode in soon after breakfast, and they walked with him down to the corrals for a private talk. Judging from the range boss's stubborn gesticulations, he was reviving all their distrust of Foyle and Gano. They began nodding vigorously, glancing toward the house, only too ready to align their superior male sagacity against a mere girl's opinion.

"They won't leave as long as we're here," Foyle told Gano. "More likely they'll send out the call for help to stand watch on us till Grimm comes for the money. There's nothing we can do. They're too cagey. We might as well pull out now while we can."

Gano nodded agreement. "I'm sure they'd be happy to see us depart! They're busy men, and it would leave them free to return to their work with easier minds. Tonight we could slip back for—er—something we left behind, and be well out of the country

with it ahead of the hullabaloo in the morning, eh?"

"Leave it to you to think o' that!" said Foyle dourly.

Gano flashed a cynical grin. "I followed your thought!"

Frank dismay clouded Donna's eyes when Foyle made his announcement to her. "You're leaving? Oh, no! Your wounds!"

"I'm well enough to travel, going easy. It's best." He tore his eyes from hers, his mouth hard-set, white around the lips. He stuck a thumb at Gano. "Can't do any good here, the way things are. Folks think—well, they've made it plain what they think of us, and nothing will change their minds. Makes it uncomfortable for you, too, us being here."

Scanlon, Atchley, and Hamp moved within hearing, looking pleased and relieved. Foyle raised his voice.

"If you could spare a couple o' horses, Hamp—"

Making no bones about his eagerness to be rid of the unwelcome guests, Hamp said, "Sure thing! We'll take yours in trade when I find who's holdin' 'em. Where you headin' for?"

"Denver."

"Well, well, that's a right long way!"

"Well, well, we hope it's far enough to suit you, as it does us!" put in Gano genially. He bowed to Donna. "Dear lady, it is impossible to express my gratitude, my deep appreciation, my most sincere and heart-felt—"

She didn't hear. She was gazing up into Foyle's face. "You'll come back—won't you—Ben?"

"Yes," he said. "Yes—I'll be back."

"Promise?"

He almost retched in shame. "I promise."

Chapter Eight

Robbers' Return

THEY rode northeast over the range, as if short-cutting toward the river trail to Santa Rosa and on north. At the last minute Atchley and Scanlon had allowed awkwardly that maybe it was all a mistake, their being taken for Banner men, but nobody could afford to take extra chances these days. They didn't offer to shake hands, and Ira Hamp eyed grudgingly the two good horses Foyle and Gano picked.

Foyle rode looking straight forward, his face stonily controlled, his thoughts in battle. He had the wish to be riding away forever from the V Bar ranch. Opposing it was the wish to go back, and the knowledge that he would. There was nothing on top of the world that could alter that decision.

He would go back—to rob the one girl he had ever really loved. It was the least evil to which he was committed. He tried to believe that it would add just another regret to the growing pile, but he knew it wasn't so. It would rush him down the last stretch into the private hell of a harrowed conscience that refused to die.

Gano, regarding him sidelong, said, "If Grimm is anything like Scanlon and Atchley, he hasn't a chance. Big Mac will easily outwit him and get the jump on this Pronghorn crowd, and then—God help them! I think he's bound to win in the end, no matter what happens." He was silent for a moment, then added in a changed tone, "When the smash comes, I'll do what I can to take care of Donna."

It had the sound of a grave vow, but Foyle countered crisply, "Maybe I'll be around to 'tend to that!"

Gano turned his face away, smiling faintly. "Maybe," he murmured, without conviction.

They drew in beyond the first high line of hills, scanned the surrounding country, and off-saddled. Nobody was following. Nobody was spying on them. It was another indication that the Pronghorn cowmen, for all their ready suspicions and violence, lacked wary persistence. That was the usual weakness found in honest men. The virtue of vigilance, constant and unwearying, held its most honored place in the armory of rascals. Simple men soon tired of elaborate precautions, and shifted their reliance to the risky faith that right was might.

Gano climbed the nearest hill and flattened out behind a stunted piñon to hold watch. At that distance the buildings of the V Bar ranch were square specks, but he had telescope eyesight, unaffected by the sun's glare. The hot day dragged by, and he lay patiently, never asking Foyle to relieve him. They had brought along no food. The water in their canteens had to be shared with the horses.

In midafternoon Gano called down to Foyle, "Scanlon and Atchley are leaving now. Hamp left hours ago. Let's hope there'll be no more callers today!" He rolled over and lighted a cigar. To Foyle, below, he looked like a boy sneaking a forbidden smoke.

A cool wind sprang up with sundown. The early moon rose, remote, gradually supplanting the sun. A tiny light shone from the ranch. Foyle went up the hill, and he and Gano watched the light. At last it winked out, leaving only the dark horizon and long streaks of moonlight on east-faced folds of ground.

They descended the hill, not uttering a word, and laid the saddles on their horses. They rode around the hill and lined out toward the spot where the light had been.

The buildings of the V Bar loomed up. Foyle and Gano circled around to the corrals, tied the horses, and paced soundlessly up to the yard. They knew their bearings and went directly to the little ranch office. The shadows of the cottonwoods hid them. The door was locked. Gano passed it up and stepped to the window. A slender blade flashed briefly.

"All right, Foyle, I'm going in."

"Go ahead; I'm right behind you."

They slid through the opened window into the office. Here it was dark. Foyle lost sight of Gano, but he heard a metallic jingle and traced it to the safe. It was a large safe, its top as high as his chin, the door massively hinged. He couldn't see what Gano was doing, except that he was on his knees, studiously fingering the lock-plate and making tests with what was evidently a handy little pocket kit of tools and skeleton keys.

It took less than five minutes. Gano, master of devious dark arts, whispered, "Foyle, you owe me twenty dollars! That was our bet, wasn't it?" He drew open the heavy door of the safe and ransacked inside, spilling out papers. "Ah! Here we are!" He stepped back with a cash box, wrenching off its lid. "Banknotes! How I love them! So easy to carry!"

Foyle said, "Here's your twenty."

It brought a low chuckle. "Small change! Keep it! I've got real money here!" Possession of the money had created a new man of Gano. The feel

of the packets of crisp banknotes exalted him. His chill secretiveness had given way to a feverish joy that sparkled his eyes.

Foyle said, "Not so fast!" It was best to have the showdown now, if there had to be one. He got a hand on the cash box. "I'm in charge of this!"

Their faces were only inches apart. "You? You'll never live to see—" Gano began the worn phrase, and then Foyle's eyes flickered swift recognition of a rush of memory.

Sounds outside jerked their heads up, nerves taut. The sounds grew louder, resolving into footsteps and the growl of men's muttering. There had been no noises of horses, and there was none now. Only men on foot, treading by the little office. While he listened, Foyle stared in recollection into a blinding white flash and examined the thought that came with it. The thought was a sinister one, but he guessed it was true. He guessed he knew why Big Mac had sent Gano to join him.

Gano swung his stocky body, yanking free the cash box and whispering thinly, "Time to go!" His right arm moved, quick and sure. Foyle hit him before his hand reached the holstered gun. It was an uppercut to the chin and stood him on his toes. The next bowed him over backward. Foyle caught him and let him down easy without thumping the floor too loudly.

The cash box fell among the spilled papers. Foyle gathered up the packets of banknotes, stuffing them inside his shirt. Time to go, as Gano had said. Gano, however, was slated to be out cold for a while. He would know not to rely so much on a fast gun next time, if the Pronghorn crowd didn't catch him first and string him up. A good thing if they did, Foyle told himself. Still, he looked down at Gano, oddly reluctant to leave him lying there helpless.

A crash splintered the furtive hush in the yard. The footsteps stamped on into the house. Loud now, the men's talk mingled in a medley of profanity. The voice of Donna Reynolds called out an alarmed query. Some laughter boomed. A man answered in an excited, staccato tone:

"Honey, we're a-callin' for Ebb Grimm! If he ain't here, maybe you'll do to talk to till he comes! Eh, Red?"

"We-ell, I'd say so from here!"

The boots clattered on stairs. The girl's scream slashed through the night, then was drowned by the racket and laughter of the men.

Foyle dived out through the window of the office. He raced limpingly across the yard to the portico. The front door of the house, smashed in with a log, hung askew on its bottom hinge. The stairs, directly before him, held seven men. Donna stood at the top of the stairs, dressed in a white night robe, holding a lighted lamp in her right hand.

A man had hold of Donna's left wrist. His hat was off. His head was a flaming red shock of hair joined to a shaggy beard. He was grinningly aping to kiss her hand, to the hilarity of the others. The laughter of the seven men sounded drunken. They were ragged, dirty, heavily armed. Three of them carried rifles. They all looked and behaved as if they had recently emerged from a long hide-out in an outlaw camp, and hadn't yet shed their brush manners.

Foresight played no part in Foyle's reaction. Fury flooded out the icily impersonal calmness that was the foun-

dation of his gun training.

"Red!" he said. His voice grated through the laughter. "Red Murrell! Get back to your horse-thief camp on Pintada Canyon an' take your scummy buzzards with you!"

The seven men whirled around. Long hiding in the clay caves and rabbit-brush thickets of Pintada Canyon had sharpened them to an animal wildness. They glared truculently at Foyle's leveled and cocked guns. The guns were smooth and polished from use. The men were not scared, but watchful.

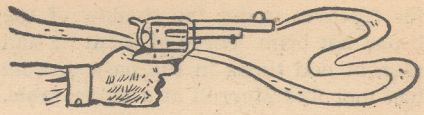
Because of his bandaged head Foyle wore his black sombrero tipped forward. His face was in dark shadow. The light from Donna's lamp at the top of the stairs made only the line of his jaw visible. But he had a clear view of Red Murrell, the man who, according to Big Mac, for months had tried and failed to earn the Banner bounty offered for Ebb Grimm's capture.

Red Murrell kept hold of Donna's wrist. His bloodshot, sunken eyes rested appraisingly on Foyle's guns. He had been a notorious hotshot until drink fogged the front of his brain. Neither whisky nor wounds had hurt his bull nerve, though, and he could still coolly size up an unexpected situation. His big fault was that he couldn't see very far ahead any more, and it had dulled his trust in his own judgment. He had lasted too long.

He asked Foyle thoughtfully, "Now, who in hell would you be?"

"You heard what I said!" The flat drone of menace in Foyle's voice caused the men with rifles to still their restlessness.

Red Murrell lifted Donna's hand and wagged it playfully. "I'd say from here, now, you're—"



Foyle fired. He shot Red Murrell in the forearm, knocking it loose from Donna, and an instant later slapped an up-lifted rifle with a bullet that wrecked the breech and that man's fingers.

Donna trembled startledly at the shots. The flame of the lamp in her hand guttered and smoked. The fear remained in her eyes, although she was now looking at Foyle. Foyle's eyes glimmered deadly cold in the dark malevolence of his face. He looked tougher than Red Murrell.

"You heard me!" he said.

Murrell pushed back his sleeve and studied his blood-wet forearm. He heaved his thick shoulders forward, then slowly relaxed. Eyeing Foyle, he said, "You're a leetle quick on the shoot! I oughta know who you are, but blast me if I can place you."

The unsteady flickering of the lamp got his attention. Donna raised the lamp higher, like a weapon, in an instinctive gesture of defense.

Red Murrell, flinching, exclaimed, "Don't you chuck that at me, gal!" His hairy head and beard left him too readily vulnerable to fire, and he betrayed more uneasiness over that than of Foyle's guns.

"All right, bad hombre!" He moved down a step, watching the lamp warily, but speaking to Foyle. "Yeah, we heard you. Pull your hackles down, we're goin'! Boys, take a good look at him, will you? I sure do want to know who he is!"

Foyle put his back to the wall and let them file past. Each man stared venomously at him, trying to discern

his features under the shadow of the broad hat brim. Three of them he had seen at odd times in the past, and he had met Red Murrell at a poker table. The rest were unknown to him.

Red Murrell, last to leave, sent Foyle a nod. "Here on, I'll be lookin' for you, a limpin' larrikin with a rag round his noggin!" he promised, and lumbered out after his men, casually shaking a trickle of blood from his hand.

Foyle followed him part way to the shattered door, motioning up at Donna to shield the lamp so that it wouldn't shine down on him. He heard the men troop off. They walked unhurriedly, knowing that the ranch hands were away on roundup. Red Murrell rumbled a few words and they hastened a trifle. The sounds of their footsteps faded out as they tramped on to wherever they had left their horses.

He became aware of Donna descending the stairs. At the bottom she sent him a questioning look, and he nodded and said, "They're gone."

She glided swiftly past him, the hem of her night robe skimming the floor. He watched her go out through the front door and turn left toward the little office building. The Pronghorn war chest was her first concern. He followed, guilt and reluctance dragging at him, wanting to hurry to his waiting horse and ride away, but unable to do it.

With a key she unlocked the door of the office. Holding the lamp up, she passed inside. Her cry of dismay cut through Foyle like the whimper of a hurt child. He entered after her. Under the light of the lamp he saw all that she saw—the gaping safe, the spilled papers, the looted cash box. The brutal disorder left by plunderers in the night.

Gano lay on the floor, propping himself up on one elbow, dabbing at his bruised and cut chin and gazing vacantly at the traces of blood that it left on his hand. The light hastened the rise of his consciousness. Into his slanted eyes began creeping a glint of animosity. He stopped shaking his head, to run a stare up Foyle from feet to face. Foyle kept a gun out and met Gano's eyes stonily.

"Our money! Gone!" Donna spun around to Foyle. The rush of air flared the lamp. Her words came in a stammer of despair. "Gone! The safe—look—robbed!"

He said nothing. His deepset eyes, trained to an opaque blankness, met her paled and stricken face. Here was his test. He had to go through with this and not take a single weak or hesitant step. Conscience would not survive this deed, and success meant freedom at last from its futile nagging. Failure meant downfall, the inevitable coming of the catastrophe that overtook men of his kind when they indulged in the fatal luxury of indecision.

Strange and warring expressions crossed Donna's face. There was incredulous wonder, then shrinking doubt, a heartbreaking suspicion.

"The window was—was forced open." The girl spoke haltingly, as if in shame. "It must have been done very quietly, or I would have heard. And—and this safe was opened quietly, too!"

She turned the lamp up brighter, fumbling with it. "Those men—the Murrell gang. *They* didn't come quietly, did they? No. They're horse thieves. And rustlers. But they're not—not expert lock pickers. They had to break down the door with a log!"

She gazed down at Gano on the floor. Almost in pleading, she asked him, "Why are you in here? You broke in, didn't you? Do you have the money?"

Gano, his eyes fixed unwaveringly on her since her first word, moved his head slightly in negation that carried more conviction than a thousand vehement denials. He straightened a forefinger at Foyle, and didn't speak.

Like someone in the unnatural composure of sleepwalking, Donna faced Foyle. "Were you in here tonight? Was it from here that you came into the house?" Her shoulders drooped. She set the lamp on the desk, tiredly, as if lacking the strength to hold it any longer.

Hushedly, she said, "Yes. It's in your face—in your eyes. I can see it. *You* have the money! *You!*"

CHAPTER NINE

Trigger Terms

SOMBER apathy dissolved suddenly under a storm of emotion. Frenzied wrath flamed in the girl's eyes. Her forlornly drooping body came erect and taut, the rich mass of hair tossed back, the faint blue veins throbbing in her white throat. She stood like an angry young goddess condemning the idol whose crumbling clay had destroyed her faith and sacrificed her pride on a false altar.

"Thief!" Her voice did not go loud and shrill. It was hardly above a whisper, yet penetrating, as audible as the crack of a whiplash. "They warned me. I wouldn't listen. They were right! Thief! Hypocrite! You would come back, you said—and you did! In the dark! To rob the house that gave you shelter and help when you desperately needed it! The lowest pickpocket would have more honor!"

Sitting up, Gano wagged his head in sad disapproval at Foyle, and sighed, "Evil companions in his youth corrupted him, no doubt!" He glanced into the cash box, saw it was empty, and his disapproval became more acute.

Foyle's face was gray and drawn, distorted by muscles bunched over clenched teeth. Gone was the stony stare. Donna made to speak again. He had to stop her. His endurance had reached its limit. He glowered down at her and commanded harshly, "Shut up!"

She met his eyes squarely. "Go, thief, with the money! I can't prevent you! Go, you lying, cheating—"

"Shut up!" he thundered, and now his eyes were crazed.

She thought he would hit her, for he drew back his right arm, and she stood unflinching to receive it. But he ripped at his shirt. He thrust wads of banknotes at her, tumbling them out, letting them fall anywhere, as if they burned him.

Gano let out a moan of anguish at the sight of a fortune treated so disrespectfully. He scuttled forward, hands outstretched to help gather the precious harvest.

Foyle, savagely glad of an object to vent some of his feelings on, stuck a gun at him and snarled, "Hands off! You ever touch that money again, I'll blast you down! Back up!"

One look at Foyle's face, and Gano backed up, worry in his eyes. "You're crazy!" he muttered.

Foyle drove him into a corner. Over his shoulder he told Donna, "Pick up your money an' get back to the house!"

To Gano he said, "Turn round an' face the wall! You hear? This gun's ready to go off!"

"I believe you," Gano admitted, and obeyed.

Foyle plucked Gano's guns out and pitched them through the window. He said, "When you find 'em, keep going an' don't come back! It's time we parted company!"

"Time separates the best of friends," Gano concurred. "And so does money, come to think of it."

Leaving him standing there like a culprit schoolboy in the corner, Foyle paced out. Beyond the shading cottonwoods a white-robed figure waited, hair glossy in the moonlight. The storm in him had subsided some, but he snapped roughly:

"Get into the house, I said! Hide that money before—"

"Wait, Ben!" she broke in. Her eyes were shining wet. "P-Please don't tell me to shut up, b-because I won't! Oh, Ben, I'm so horribly ashamed! I should have known!"

He walked toward her. "Known what?"

Her attempt to smile was a tremulous failure. "It's so clear to me now. It was he, of course—Doctor Sling—who robbed the safe. You caught him at it and knocked him down. Took the money away from him. But you wouldn't denounce him, because he had been your friend, even when I—You saved us all tonight—everybody in the Pronghorn." She hid her face. "And I called you a thief!"

A crack and a gun-flash stabbed from the direction of the corrals. Foyle jumped at Donna and pulled her down with him. His first thought was of Gano. But there hadn't been time enough for Gano to retrieve his guns and slip off.

"Get into the house," Foyle said, "while I tend to that joker!"

He drew his guns and called, "You missed, Murrell! I'll be right with you!" He rocked up and made for the corrals at a weaving, limping sprint, spacing shots at the spot where the gun-flash winked.

His guess was right. Red Murrell bellowed an oath of disgust as he mounted and took off. Shooting by moonlight was tricky business. When it came to tangling with a charging firecracker, a sensible man knew enough to quit.

Foyle turned back. Looking into the office, he saw that Gano was gone, and he went on into the main house. Lamps were lighted in the downstairs front room. There he found Donna. She had laid the money on a table.

An awkward silence lasted between them until Foyle said, "I guess we could put that back in the safe now. My bugarrooin' partner has pulled out, an' so has Murrell. I better stay the rest o' the night, though."

"I—I think you had better."

They carried the money back, and he helped her tidy up the office. When all was in place again she locked the safe. Foyle closed the window and drew over it the Navajo blanket that served as a drape. A scrap of paper fell from a fold of the blanket. He picked it up. It was a scribbled note and he read:

For reasons affecting our mutual health I find it advisable to resign my position as your obedient servant—G.

He grinned faintly, crumpling the note. There were few things to the credit of that ugly little sinner, but one of them was a sardonic sense of humor.

"I'll sit out the night here," he told Donna.

"I'll get some coffee," she smiled, and he recalled his excuse to Atchley and Scanlon when they had discovered him outside the door. He guessed nothing would ever shake her belief that he liked a midnight pot of coffee. Her every look and gesture betrayed her wish to please him and make up for what she thought was a hideous mistake. He would leave as soon as it was safe for her, he promised himself.

The tray she brought from the kitchen bore coffee and sandwiches for two. And she had snatched time to get dressed, abandoning all idea of retiring for the remainder of the night. "I'm much too wrought up and excited to sleep," she confessed, and he nodded. So was he.

"You see, I haven't been here very long," she went on, setting out the tray's contents on the desk. "Less than a year. From the time my mother died, I lived with relatives in a quiet town where nothing ever happened. Then they lost their money, and I gave them what my mother had left me—jewels, mostly—and, well, then things began happening."

She talked easily and naturally, her clear eyes candid. Foyle thought of the time in his own life when things began happening, and he wished with an impotent intensity that those things could have been different for them both.

Donna wore a full-skirted dress of flowered dimity, small at the waist, and she had put on a light woolen jacket against the night air. From a loose pocket of the jacket she took out her key to the safe.

"Please keep this for me, will you?" she asked. "Men have better pockets."

With his eyes on her face, Foyle slowly held out a hand to receive it. This, he knew, was not purposely a graceful means of expressing her trust in him. It was simply a normal action, quite guileless and unconsidered. And the more sincere because of it.

And because he wasn't paying the key any attention, his eyes being on her face, it slipped through his fingers when she passed it to him. They both stooped to pick it up, and her hair and his nose met.

Her hair was soft and his nose was hard, so they came to no harm, but mental composure collapsed. Donna raised her head, laughing over the small accident. Foyle looked into her eyes, so close to his that he could see the pupils expanding under his gaze. She ceased laughing, but her lips stayed parted.

His ruling thought was, *Whatever she is—whatever she has been—I can't go on without her.* Her took her in his arms and kissed her.

The coffee cooled in the cups.

When he remembered to pick up the key Foyle saw that his hands were not steady. He said huskily. "There must be some way to work things out! There's got to be! If only it was possible to—to change everything—make life different!"

Donna, shyly radiant, answered warmly, "But it *is* possible, Ben! My mother did it. She was a successful actress, and a very beautiful woman, but after her second marriage she changed herself over into a capable ranch wife and made my stepfather very happy. He—my stepfather—hated the stage. He always feared that my mother would want to go back to it someday, but she was happy with him and never gave it a thought."

Reflecting on it, Foyle asked, "Were you on the stage, Donna, before—uh—you came here?"

"For a little while, yes. It didn't last long." She smiled, affectionate amusement in her eyes. "When the Captain learned that I was singing in a theater—well! There was really nothing at all wrong about it, but"—she flushed a little—"nobody could ever convince the Captain there wouldn't be! He came up and packed me off home with him. I'm glad now he did. I love this country."

Foyle knitted his brows. "But who," he asked, puzzled, "is the Captain? Ebb Grimm?"

She nodded. "My stepfather, yes. I call him Captain because that's what he was, once, and I think he likes—Ben, is something wrong? You look—strange."

"No," Foyle said. His voice sounded dead and hollow in his own ears. His face felt stiff. "No, Donna, nothing's wrong. An' there isn't going to be," he added gently, and she couldn't know that he meant to make sure of it by leaving tomorrow. The scales were too out of balance, so much guilt on his side and so little on hers.

The steady trotting of two horses beat a muted tattoo. They listened tensely. The horses came on up the trail into the yard. A whistle shrilled a single curt note.

Donna flew to the door. She gave back the whistle like a boy. "Hi, Captain! Welcome home!"

Ebb Grimm was tall, thin, and razor-edge straight. As soon as he stamped into the office he leveled a penetrating pair of eyes at Foyle and rasped, "Gr-hum!" What that signified could have been anything, but it closely resembled an old campaigner's grunt at the sight of hostile Indians.

He had a hatchet face, barbed with a beak nose jutting above dangling cavalry mustaches as long and pointed as daggers. Old army was his stamp. He was around seventy, and looked as if he would never die, except possibly by violence. But for the powdering of dust, his severely neat clothes might have been fitted on him by an orderly fifteen minutes ago. He wore bleached buckskin gloves with ten-inch gauntlets, and when he tugged them off, his hands showed as white and well-kept as those of a town girl of courting age.

Gravely affectionate, he bent and kissed his stepdaughter on her forehead, meanwhile keeping his piercing eyes on Foyle. "What's been going on, my dear?" he inquired crisply. "I met Hamp coming in. He's putting up my horse. Says he thinks he heard some shots. Who's this—hah—gentleman?"

"Ben Jason," answered Donna. "The Murrell men came tonight. The safe was robbed. They broke into the house. I was alone. Ben got here just in time. He saved the money and drove them off. There are some more things to tell you, but they can wait. I suppose Hamp has spoken to you about Ben, hasn't he?"

Ebb Grimm's snort shook his fierce mustaches. "Hamp's a fool! He never should have left you here alone, under any conditions. All that matters to him is getting the work done in record time, expecting I'll pay him extra wages. Atchley and some of the others aren't much better, either. Cow business and profits come first with them, and they can't get it through their heads that they won't have much business left to worry about if M'Cavan has his way. Gr-hum! It's like counting the cost of powder when the camp is

surrounded and under attack!"

He dropped his irascible manner, shaking hands with Foyle. "Happy indeed to know you, Mr. Jason. Extremely grateful." He was a gentlemanly old war dog who asked no probing questions. "No higher recommendation is possible than the praise of my stepdaughter," he assured Foyle, with somewhat floridly old-fashioned courtliness. "Your inestimable service to her places me equally in your debt. Besides being deeply fond of Donna, I am responsible for her safety and welfare. The money, too, is of—hah—some importance. I trust that you will remain with us, Mr. Jason. We have a need of good lively fighting men."

Foyle said briefly, "Thanks, but I must leave in the morning."

Grimm thumbed his mustaches. He shot a keen glance at Donna, and frowned musingly. He drew out two long black cheroots, gave Foyle one, and struck a match for them both.

"I'm bound to induce you to change your mind, Mr. Jason," he vowed. "You're a Southwestern man, born and bred, I take it. I'm not. But I like this country, sir. Fine country. This here is one of the best parts of it. Why leave? No reason at all."

"I must leave—" Foyle began.

"No reason at all!" repeated Grimm firmly. "Fine country. Only politically rotten. Part of it, anyway. The part ruled by that scoundrelly Big Mac M'Cavan! You've surely heard of him." He sighted his cheroot at Foyle. "M'Cavan is more than just a rotten apple in the barrel, take my word for it! He has big plans. He has powerful backing. If you have any feeling for this country, sir, you owe it to your conscience to do your share toward stopping that blackguard! I certainly shall do mine!"

He inhaled the strong smoke, expelled it in a forceful gust, and continued. "At first inspection M'Cavan's plans appear to be preposterous—the dream of a madman. Federal authorities would laugh it off, yes. Until too late. Those fools!"

There seemed to exist a prevalence of fools, in Grimm's opinion. He said, "I shan't go into details now, but I swear that M'Cavan's schemes involve outright treason! Revolution! War! I know what war is. It's not to be laughed off. We've had our Civil War, and mighty uncivil it was. The fact that we don't want another, sir, is no guarantee that we couldn't have one! M'Cavan's plan is *not* preposterous! He expects to have the Mexican border states on his side. It could lead to war with Mexico."

"Could he win?" Foyle asked.

Grimm shrugged. "I've been a soldier. I've seen some strange victories and defeats. At the least, armed revolution means bloodshed. This one would be sheer horror! Think of it! Mexican bandits and renegade Yaquis, American outlaws, badmen, shabby adventurers—all swarming through the country, killing, looting, burning! That may be M'Cavan's purpose—a gigantic raid to take over the country long enough to plunder it to the bone. He and his backers can always escape down into Mexico and disappear with their loot. Or perhaps that's the second choice, in case the main plan fails. They wouldn't lose, either way, you see. Some few of us hope to stop them in time. Will you join us? A man like you surely can't stand aside and—"

Outside, Ira Hamp uttered a surprised shout, and Grimm broke off to point his beak nose at the open door.

The shout was followed by a chilling laugh. A gun spat one solid report, and somebody grumbled an oath.

Unsteady footsteps scraped the gravel. Hamp entered at a staggering run. He hung a toe on the doorstep and fell headlong into the office.

"The Chink!" he gasped, laboriously rolling over onto his back. "Laughed—an' shot me! Laughed!" It was like him to condemn the laugh along with the shot.

Grimm bent over him. The whole front of the range boss's shirt was stained dark and wet. He had been shot in the chest. He tried to sit up, pushing Grimm away.

"Damn—your fight—Grimm! It don't—concern me any!" Then he choked and fell back, and his head hit the floor. He would never earn his extra pay for attending strictly to business.

Hamp hadn't thought to mention the presence of Red Murrell and his men, and it was a moment more before they opened fire with a volley that brought echoes rattling back from the far foothills. Ebb Grimm dragged a long Dragoon .44 out from under his coat, took a fresh bite on his cheroot, and cast an expertly disparaging glance around the office. As a place to fort up in it wasn't much. He kicked the door shut and bushed an eyebrow at Foyle.

"Gr-hum! Bad situation, Mr. Jason!"

Foyle met his old eyes and said, "Yeah." He meant, as Grimm did, that it couldn't be worse. By luck or design, the marauders had crept back and struck at just the right time for them. Foyle cursed himself for being caught off guard. He had been listening to Grimm's talk of danger, while the nearer peril closed in.

A gun blatted five times through the door, punching the lock into a twisted

mass and sending splinters and bits of metal flying across the office. A shallow laugh rippled, and Gano said in mock reproval:

"Do be careful, Red! Might hit Mr. Grimm, you know, and Big Mac wants him alive! And we certainly don't want to hurt the young lady, do we?"

"We gotta git 'em!" rumbled Red Murrell. "An' quick! Don't you try stallin' me tonight, Gano! I know you from the ol' days. Always some cussed trick up your sleeve!"

"But my tricks work, you'll admit," Gano chided him. "Stop shooting, *compadre*, and listen—all of you. I want the occupants of this little edifice to hear me, too. We will now proceed to gather dry brush. That is, some of you will. Pile it up here around the walls. I, dear friends, shall then strike a match. Yes, yes! Proceed, jolly minions! Our entrenched hosts shall very soon be untrenched! They shall exit forth—laden with money, I urge, for I'm not sure about the fire-resistant qualities of that so-called safe!

"Am I heard and understood by all interested parties?" he ended politely.

There was no misunderstanding, outside or inside the office. His words were not too clear, some of them, but his meaning was lucid and lethal.

Foyle, guns in his hands, cocked an eye bleakly at the door, then at Grimm. No kind of defense was possible here. The little building would take fire, burn rapidly, and they would have to jump out and take whatever trigger terms were waiting for them.

He looked last at Donna, and then

he took his eyes off her and said in a dead, flat tone, "Grimm, drop your gun!"

Ebb Grimm reared his hawklike old head. "What?" He saw Foyle's guns trained on him. He saw the face above them, dark and lean, somberly saturnine. "What, Mr. Jason?"

Foyle slapped out with a gun barrel. He knocked the big old Dragoon .44 from Grimm's hand to the floor. He called, "Gano, come in here! And you, Murrell! Don't fool with me, or I'll be out there to show you some shootin'! Who the hell d'you think's in charge here, anyhow? Me, damn you—*Bain Foyle of Banner!*"

Chapter Ten

Foyle's Folly

GANO entered first, saying, "It's all right, Red. Yes, he's Foyle. I thought it best not to mention that to you. Might have rattled you a bit. Nice fellow, really, as long as you don't cross him. I got along well with him for a while."

He strolled into the office, self-possessed, cool, giving Foyle his brightest false smile. "Devilish neat work," he complimented blandly. "You tossed back the money, and promptly won the whole jackpot! What a gambler! Now we have the money *and* Mr. Grimm! I take off my hat to you!" He took off his hat.

Foyle said coldly, "We? You resigned, Gano—remember?"

He hadn't looked at Donna since divulging his dread identity, nor at Grimm. He didn't want to have to look at them. Not ever again.

He heard Donna whisper stunnedly, "Foyle? Oh, God—no, no!" Then she was sobbing in Grimm's arms, and Grimm was making incoherent sounds deep in his throat, the raging, broken sounds of an old soldier betrayed and defeated.

Gano grinned slyly at Foyle. "I resigned as your obedient servant. I did not resign from the Grimm game! You and I now work on equal terms, share and share alike. I think my efforts have not been negligible in bringing about this triumphant conclusion. I say, therefore, *we* have the money and Mr. Grimm!"

Red Murrell, glowering, demanded, "How 'bout me? I'm in it, too, an' I want my cut! Where's that money you spoke of, Gano? I'll take that, an' you can have Grimm."

"The blazes you will!" Foyle barked. "That's mine! Furthermore, I contracted to catch an' deliver Grimm—an' no two-bit badman turns me off! Your shootin' don't impress me, Murrell! *Sabe?*"

He couldn't make it all stick, he knew. The best he could do was to aim high, then strike a deal. In this argument over the spoils he stood alone against eight men. To sway Gano back over onto his side was good trading policy, and he said:

"Gano an' I got this job done. We didn't get much help from you, an' we didn't need any. Fact is, you nearly queered it."

"Right!" agreed Gano, but added, "Still, we'll take care of you, Red, don't worry."

Red Murrell moved his injured arm, looking speculatively at Foyle's guns. "I don't fall much for that talk," he objected. His eyes were attracted by the shimmer of Donna's diamond

bracelet in the lamplight. "That's mine, anyhow! I'm puttin' my claim on it right now!" He grabbed at it. "Turn it loose, gal!"

"I can't!" Donna cried, shrinking from him. She was chalky-white from fear and the bitter pain of broken illusions. "My mother had it fitted on there long ago. It won't come off now."

That frustration was the last straw for Red Murrell. It was obvious to him that the girl told the truth. The solid-gold bracelet fitted her wrist like a band. He cursed, relinquishing it, and swung a glare at Foyle.

"All right!" he roared. "You're Foyle —yeah, I know you now! Mister, you could be the ring-tailed king o' hell, but you don't rook ol' Red! I got six hombres there outside. They ain't schoolmarms! Nor me! All right!"

"Nobody's trying to rook you," said Gano.

"Nobody's goin' to!" Murrell swore. "We take this Grimm an' the money down to Banner—all of us! We take the gal, too, an' her di'mond bangle. Leave her here, she'd raise the alarm too soon. Let Big Mac figger our shares. I'll 'bide by what he says. That's fair an' it's my last word, an' be damned to you! I ain't never yet been skeered to fight, anytime, anyplace, an' I don't know how to bluff! Not ol' Red!"

Gano murmured soothingly, "Fair enough, Red. We need you and the boys to help us get out fast before daylight, anyway. We may run into trouble, and you know the country. There's no fight. Your deal is okay. Eh, Foyle?"

"It'll do," Foyle said shortly. It had to be that way. The deal wasn't as good as he wished, but Gano had cut the bargaining ground out from under him. This was no place for a blazing gunsmoke argument, one against eight, and Donna in the midst of it. Murrell's mood was recklessly stubborn and ugly. His six brush-prowlers would fight, no question of that. And Gano, playing his own game, would pitch in with the winning side.

Foyle went to the safe. "You still watchin' my back for Big Mac, Gano?" he asked, unlocking it with the key Donna had given him.

"That's another task I haven't yet resigned," said Gano.

Foyle took out the cash box. He tucked it under his left arm, and said to Donna and Grimm, without looking at their faces, "Bear in mind you're in my charge. Mine. Nobody else's. Do as I tell you. You can trust me not to—"

"I would sooner trust a—a ravening wolf!" breathed Donna.

Her stepfather gripped her arm. "Foyle, I'm not afraid of Big Mac M'Cavan or of anything he can do to me. But Donna is a young girl, a young lady. Banner is a bad place for her!"

"I know," Foyle said tonelessly, motioning them out of the office ahead of himself and Gano. "Do as I tell you now."

Ebb Grimm stiffened his shoulders, tamped his cheroot out carefully, and offered an arm to Donna. "Come, my dear," he said gently.

They stepped out under the cottonwoods. Saddled horses were brought up to the yard. Last to mount, Foyle looked the party over. He was in charge, he had stated, and he meant to keep them reminded of it. Gun prestige was all that upheld his command. He knew their kind. In their chief traits they resembled a wild pack of savage dogs, snarlingly mutinous, ready to pounce on the self-elected leader at the first sign of weakness.

"They love you not!" murmured

Gano beside him. "They don't forget how you drove them out of the house, nor forgive. Red's arm is getting inflamed where you shot him. He doesn't wash often!"

Foyle slid a glance at him. "How about you?"

Gano smiled innocently. "I have my orders from Big Mac. They are not affected by any petty resentment."

Foyle tied the cash box and hung it on his saddle horn. "Okay, if we're ready to go!" he announced, ranging a stare over the unfriendly faces in the moonlight. "String out. Let's not crowd together. Grimm an' the girl ride up front with me, out o' the dust—an' out o' the cuss-talk some o' you spill so free! Gano, I reckon you could—"

"Red knows a short route to the river trail," Gano casually interrupted. "He can guide us. I'll ride ahead with him and keep in touch with you, so you won't go astray in the dark. Come on, Red!"

They got moving in that order: Gano and Murrell leading the way, Foyle following with Donna and Grimm, and the gang bringing up the rear. That deal wasn't good, either, from Foyle's own viewpoint, but the arrangement was a natural one and hard to argue against. Gano had a gift of raising perfectly plausible suggestions.

Foyle looked back once at the house and outbuildings of the V Bar ranch, and noticed Donna doing likewise. Her lips were moving. She was praying, he guessed. Or maybe she was saying a farewell, like himself.

Morning sunlight found them traveling south, closely following the river. After some consultation it had been agreed that the open trail offered too much risk of their being sighted, and their horses were not fresh any more. They rode under cover of the high bank left by the river in one of the shiftings of its course, and for added protection the hills shelved upward beyond the bank. They were safe, making steadily for Banner, not a doubt left of getting there without any trouble.

The orderly pattern of travel was relaxed. Only a semblance of it remained. Gano and Murrell, leading, and from habit glancing back occasionally, had let their horses slacken down to a walk. Murrell's half-dozen men rode in a bunch, smoking and talking, yawning, slouched in their saddles. They were less than fifty yards behind Foyle and the two captives.

Gano began peering backward more often at Foyle. He acted restless. At last he reined his horse around, said something to Murrell, and came riding back. He nodded to Foyle in passing, and joined the men in the rear. After a short while he came up behind Foyle. He rode alongside for a moment, silent, then cleared his throat.

"Two more days should see us in Banner, eh? Maybe three."

"Yeah."

Gano frowned. "Well—plenty of time," he muttered, and heeled his horse and rejoined Murrell up forward. He seemed irritated.

Foyle watched him go, and let his eyes drift elsewhere. The false river bed stretched southward, its pale sand a long flash in the sunlight, the sky clean and blue above it. On his right the eroded bank and the hills passed

gradually by, changing shapes, yet retaining their monotonous sameness. The hot sun climbed toward noon, eating away all shadows.

He laid a thorough regard on the arroyo that Gano and Murrell were riding past. It was, he judged, an *arroyo madre*, as the Mexicans would call it. A mother arroyo, fed by little ones. It made a big, deep gash in the bank, where in heavy rain time it spewed torrents, although now it was as dry as the sandy bed. Probably, almost certainly, it ran far back up into the hills.

He looked behind. The six men were discussing a joke, guffawing, enlarging on it with leering comments, making it do lengthy service in driving out their brainless boredom. Foyle looked forward again. He spoke to Donna and Grimm, quietly.

"Listen!" he said. "I've got something to say to you."

Donna scarcely moved her head. "Say it, Bain Foyle! We can't stop you, any more than we can stop you from—"

"Shut up!" Foyle said. "Grimm, you were caught tight there, last night. You didn't have a chance. I did what I had to do."

Ebb Grimm snorted derisively. "Why trouble yourself to make excuses? You are Bain Foyle! That name is familiar to all of us. You came up from Banner to get me, for a reward. Nothing you say can alter that! I'm not a fool!"

"Maybe," Foyle said, "I'm the fool. Take this cash box. See that arroyo we're coming to? There's where you and Donna turn off! Ride up that arroyo and keep going. Ready, now!"

"What? What do you mean?"

"Do as I tell you!"

Grimm and Donna looked at him. They saw the same lean face, dark and saturnine. The same hard mouth. If there was any difference, it was only that the underlying shade of sadness in the eyes was more pronounced.

Grimm exclaimed unbelievingly, "Are you—telling us to escape? It's impossible! Murrell—Gano—the others—!"

"I reckon I can hold 'em off long enough for you and Donna to get a fair start," said Foyle, still quietly, almost tranquilly. "I'm Bain Foyle, remember! Here's the arroyo. Here's your cash box. Get going—and don't stop for anything!"

Donna cried, "Ben! You can't—!"

"Dammit, do as I tell you! The hell I can't!"

He hauled his mount around, crowding them into the mouth of the arroyo, booting their horses. He watched them go plunging up the winding gravel bed of the arroyo, and he smiled and felt a joyous relief. He saw them look back. Donna's hair was flying, tumbled over her neck and shoulders. Her lips parted and she called to him, but it couldn't be heard above the rattle of slithering, climbing hoofs. He waved at her, and laughed for the first time in years. By heaven, there went a girl for a man to have.

A babble of shouting burst out. The six men dropped their paltry joke and spurred horses forward. Murrell and Gano whirled, digging at their holsters, swearing in tinny tones.

Bain Foyle, gun master of Banner, slid off his horse and slapped it farewell. He spread his wide shoulders. He took a deep breath, drew his guns, and looked up at the sky. Blue and serene, the sky, clear as a baby's conscience.

"What a day!" he said aloud, and he laughed again.

It wasn't so bad, to die this way. Better than a dirty alley.

Chapter Eleven

Back to Banner

FOYLE fired twice and spilled two of the half-dozen. The remaining four whirled in close against the bank, piling out of their saddles, cautiously changing tactics. Two shots and two down.

Charging up from the right with Gano, Red Murrell shouted, "Get him, quick! We gotta catch them two!"

The blue sheen of Murrell's gun barrel shortened to a pinpoint, as Foyle swung his smoking guns. Murrell had the use of only one arm. His left arm was swollen and his eyes were fevered. He triggered hurriedly, hooked his reins, and wrenched his horse up rearing. His massive head hunched down, and the horse took Foyle's bullet. The horse floundered, crashing into Gano riding alongside. On the left, the four men slid around a shoulder of the old riverbank. The first of them got off a shot and sent Foyle's hat spinning.

Foyle backed up into the dry arroyo and stood fast, waiting. Nothing stirred at the mouth of it, and a baffling silence closed down. The sounds of the two horses, carrying Donna and Grimm away, grew fainter and died out. He speculated about the doings of Gano and Murrell and the four men, until he heard scrambling noises and grasped the ominous meaning.

They were climbing the riverbank to get above and shoot down at him. That was their best play, the winning card that would soon finish him. He was resigned to death, but he had to hold it off somehow until Donna and Grimm had a long start. With difficulty he clambered up the left side of the deep arroyo, clawing at the sandy strata, and got to where he could peer over the edge.

Two of the men had reached the high ground. They were running across it, angling toward the arroyo and motioning to somebody beyond it. One of them spied the white bandage on Foyle's head. He yipped a warning. They both dived to the ground, and Foyle's shot went wasted. A gun rapped somewhere behind Foyle, on the other side of the arroyo. Sand exploded near his face. His instinctive jerk cost him his grip and he tumbled to the bottom.

"I got him!" bellowed Murrell. "Close in on him, boys! Come on, Gano!"

"Go easy, Red!" Gano sang out. "He's hard to kill!"

"The hell he is!" A bearded face bobbed into sight above the arroyo. Foyle sliced a gun up and fired. Murrell pulled back.

"Right in the whiskers!" commented Gano. "Red, didn't I tell you he's hard to kill? He's a shooting wampus!"

Murrell could be heard cursing him. At the end of a string of lurid oaths he rasped, "Quit grinnin', you yaller-skinned monkey, an' do some shootin' y'self!"

Silence fell again. Foyle listened for the coming of the four men on the left. They were creeping to the arroyo, stalking him, and once they reached it he would be without cover, like a bear trapped in a pit. There was nothing for him to do but wait, using up the shrinking margin of his time, watching for them to show themselves.

Something moved stealthily along the left edge, where the four were. A hat rose an inch. Foyle slung a shot. The hat spun away. Four gun muzzles poked immediately into view at different points. He was tricked, trapped and located.

A gun cracked muffledly. Red Murrell uttered a harsh cry and there was another report. The four gun muzzles lining the left bank went motionless, as if their owners had received a shock. Then they snapped up, leveled out.

Gano appeared on the right bank in full sight, smiling his shallow smile over a pair of blaring, kicking guns.

Foyle, about to send a bullet at Gano, changed his mind at the last instant. Gano wasn't shooting at him down in the arroyo. He was firing straight across it. The four on the left bank were blazing back at him. It was a stand-up shoot-out at ten yards' range.

Gano came on. His short and stocky body jerked, the yellow silk shirt dotted, but it didn't stop him. He concentrated calmly on one after another of the four. The furious gun battle lasted only a brief moment. It ceased suddenly, all guns silenced, and while the echoes still grumbled in the hills Gano stepped blindly off the edge and fell headlong into the arroyo.

Foyle caught Gano and broke his fall. He laid him on the sandy floor. Gano couldn't focus his eyes, but he was able to pronounce distinctly, "Bain Foyle, I've never known a bigger fool than you!"

"You're another!" said Foyle gruffly.

Gano quirked his lips wryly. "True. But this is the first completely foolish thing I've ever done. And it's the last. Damn you, I suspected you'd be up to some crazy trick. I should have shot you in the back this morning. It was high time. My orders from Big Mac were—explicit! Instead, I've killed old Red and those four. And they've killed me."

"What got into you, *amigo?* I figured you were on their side."

"That's the foolish part of it. I was. Until Red blew up and called me—a yellow monkey." The slanted eyes closed wearily. "I've killed other men for less. It came to me right then, Foyle, that you—that you—no matter how mad you got, you never once spoke as if you knew I was—well, different. Or even looked at me in that way. Even when you shoved a gun in my face. That doesn't mean a thing to you, does it?"

"No."

"It does to me—although I swear I never would have thought it meant so much. I was supposed to kill you after you got the Grimm job done. Big Mac doesn't want you back. Good price—ten thousand. Just another killing. I had a dozen chances. I held back. I tried hating you—tried to prod you into saying something that would make hating you easy. Hatred has always been easy for me—but not this time. Why? Damned foolish!"

Gano moved his right hand, and Foyle clasped it, looking down into the flat, broad face of the Mongoloid gunman.

"And because of it, Foyle—because of that damned foolishness—I finally decided," Gano whispered, chuckling faintly, "that—I remain—your—obedient servant—"

After a while Foyle stood up. The crunch of his heels in the sand made the only sound in the quietness. He looked down again at Gano and said,

"I'm pushing on down to Banner. To see Big Mac. I've got to. Got to go through with the damned foolishness and make it stand good, *amigo*."

He was talking to himself. Gano was dead. Foyle left the silent arroyo, taking Gano's guns with him.

The horses, left hastily ground-hitched, untied, had spooked at the outburst of gunfire. They were drifting north in a bunch. When he limped after them they halted to watch him, but a wall-eyed buckskin swiveled and ran, and they all tore off. To try catching them was hopeless, with his bad leg. They would drift back to the Pronghorn country and be picked up there.

He limped southward. Back to Banner, his mind commanded him. Back to where he had started from. To kill Big Mac. To smash the ruthless power that he had helped to build.

Bain Foyle, last of the old gun-fighting bunch of Banner, the man whose return was forbidden by Big Mac, held his mind's command before him like a holy obsession. It drew him on, alone and afoot, through the days of hunger, the pain and exhaustion. He rested briefly where and when he fell, and dragged himself up and plodded on. He had no other thoughts to occupy him, to keep old ghosts out. He didn't need them.

BIG Mac M'Cavan sat at his untidy desk, smiling affably, his manner conveying the impression that Foyle's arrival was expected and welcomed. He chose not to show any notice at first that Foyle was a worn-out man whose haggard face looked dead below the dirty head bandage, who rested shakily on one leg.

"Ah, there, Foyle."

"Ah, Mac."

"Sit down."

Foyle sat down. *This time*—he thought. *This time*—

This time his holsters were empty. Two guards at the main door of the brick mansion had lifted his guns before letting him in. He guessed dully that his stumbling approach had been seen and reported before he entered the town. The guards were ready. So was Big Mac.

The same strong-jowled face, noble forehead, leonine head crowned by its magnificent gray mane. The same ponderous dignity and throbbing voice, buttered with the professional charm of genial superiority.

Big Mac glanced over his desk at Foyle's ruined boots and inquired, "Been walking?"

"Five days," said Foyle. He rested back in the chair. A wave of weakness and nausea rose in him. He pressed his cracked lips and fought it down. It was stuffy in this room. He sweated. The sweat was clammy under his armpits. The nerves of his bad leg crawled and tightened. The leg was stiffening again because he was seated, but he hadn't the energy left to rise.

"From the Pronghorn?" Big Mac asked. "How did you make out up there, by the way?" He spoke indifferently, but the shine was hot in his eyes.

"*Bueno*," Foyle replied. "Some trouble, but we handled it, Gano and me. Red Murrell took a hand. We got Grimm. And the whole Pronghorn war chest. And his stepdaughter. Did you know of her?"

"*Bueno* is right!" breathed Big Mac. "The stepdaughter? I knew her mother, back East a long time ago. Might have married her, in fact, but Grimm—

well, that's an old grudge. Grimm and the girl and the money, eh? *Bueno* to hell! Man, you did make out! But where are they? And—er—where's Gano?"

Foyle eased his leg. He wasn't sweating now. He said, "Gano went under, shooting it out with Red and his bunch—right after I gave Grimm the money back and turned him and the girl loose. Yeah, it was *bueno* to hell, Mac, how we made out up there!"

Thick silence ran for a full minute. Big Mac forgot to smoke. His mouth was round, his cigar held suspended. His eyes flared, then cooled to sharp awareness, fixed on Foyle's face.

A drumming rumble grew audible, like thunder. In the hushed room Big Mac's chair creaked. Putting down his cigar, Big Mac reached forward to the line of desk drawers.

"Have a smoke, Foyle."

"That's the wrong drawer, Mac!" said Foyle, starting up.

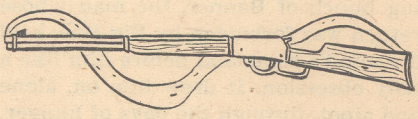
"It's the right one for this brand of smoke!" Big Mac plucked a gun from the drawer and fired through an open pigeonhole.

The short-range discharge and the bite of burned powder sent Foyle back into his chair. In the hollow of his starved stomach Gano's guns had escaped the attention of the guards. He ripped his shirt open in both hands, rooting them out. Their front sights gouged his bare stomach and he shot as soon as they cleared. Too fast. Both bullets whipped papers stacked in pigeonholes. One, deflected, caused Big Mac to jump and let his gun hammer slap at half-cock. Foyle got his spent muscles under control and worked his trigger fingers twice. The four reports crashed a reverberating chatter in the closed room.

The drumming undertone swelled loud, gathering further noises, becoming a confused uproar. All the town seemed swiftly drawn into it. Something was happening in Banner, outside of this stuffy room. Men were shouting. A crackle of exploding cartridges brought a high note of authority to the drumming.

Big Mac's chair groaned. His gun barrel scraped the desk, and vicious rage at last shrank his eyes and smeared the bogus nobility of his face. He mouthed the weak curses of a weak man, a small bean in a bloated pod, and as his eyes glazed he squeezed the trigger again in a final jet of temper.

Foyle thumped to the floor and rolled painfully over to train his guns on the door. The two guards and all the rest—why didn't they come rushing in? It was getting noisier outside. Everybody shouting. Shooting. Stampeding. . . .



HE WAS telling someone about his father, he thought.

"The old man had it right. He knew. This kind o' life doesn't count for anything. If you live to man-size, the time's bound to come when you know you've had enough—maybe too much. Then you get careless. It doesn't matter any more, and you don't try so hard. Then you're through. The old man knew, all right."

He thought he said that. It was mumbled behind closed lips, and sounded like moaning.

It was no mumble, the clear voice that said urgently to him, "Ben! Open your eyes, Ben! You're not going to

die, you hear? You mustn't! You can't do that to me!"

He got his eyes opened, shocked, knowing that voice. "You?" he asked. She was holding his head off the floor, crying into his thin, dirty, unshaven face. The room was full of men. "Donna," he said, "this is a bad town—for you to be in!"

He tried to get up, having a vague idea that it was up to him to see her safely home.

John Atchley hovered over him with a flask. Frank Scanlon was there, too, and several others whom Foyle had seen before in Van Gaughn, but most of the men were strangers to him.

"Could he have a drink, Ebb?" Atchley asked.

"A short one might pull him together a bit," Ebb Grimm said. He took the flask and bent down to Foyle. "Only a short one, mind! We've got to get you out of here. Some of the boys need care, too. I rode to the Muleshoe camp, fast as I could, and got the posse started. No time to lose, after what happened. Donna swung through the Pronghorn and met us with the bunch. When we got to that arroyo it told us all anybody could read. It even convinced Atchley!"

"It sold me," Atchley admitted freely. "Sure had been a whale of a gun fight there!"

Foyle drank from the flask, and coughed, his parched throat gagging on the whisky. "Gano sided me. He was a good hombre. Wish you'd bury him decent on the way back. I wasn't able to."

Grimm nodded. "It'll be done. We expected to bury you there. And there was where Donna was supposed to turn back home. We found your tracks instead of your body. Your boot tracks, leading south, a couple of days old. And right there Donna proceeded to act mightily disobedient! Refused to turn back! Yes, and rode us hard to keep up with her! She's a dangerous girl with a mind of her own, like her mother—I'm warning you, Ben!"

Foyle said, "My name's Bain."

"My old ears," stated Grimm, "are too dull to detect any difference. But what's everybody standing flat-footed around here for? We've taken this town in right smart style, but I wouldn't swear how long we might hold it without some trouble—and durned if we want to keep the ratty place! Big Mac is dead, anyhow. We'd better go home and be quiet till it blows over. Boots and saddles, men! And don't forget to commandeer the best vehicles for our injured!"

They were all grinning. Foyle, helped to his feet, looked into Donna's eyes. He felt lifted by a lightheartedness, a new cleanness. But the score had to be plainly shown, once and for all, nothing hidden, nothing ever again secret and disguised. He said:

"Banner is where I came from."

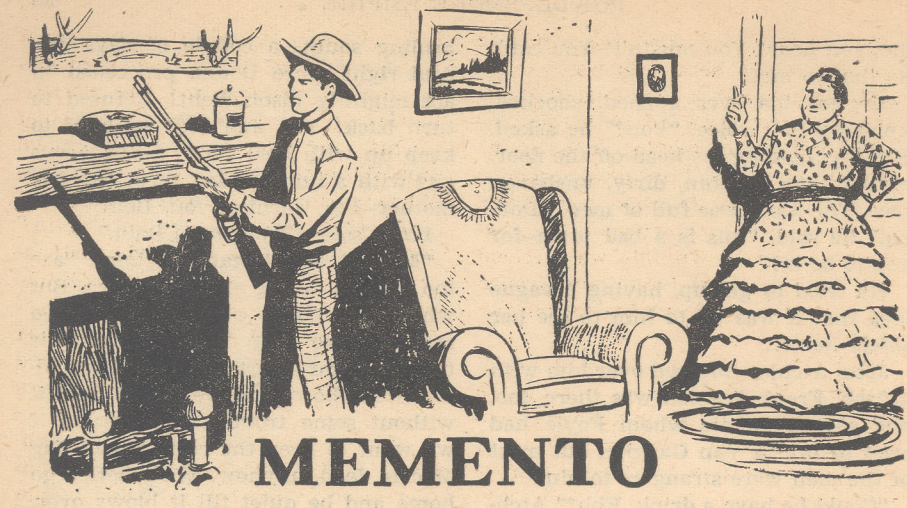
Grimm drew himself up and lighted a cheroot. "Exactly! Banner is where you're coming from! If you'll recall, Hamp is no longer with us. I would like a Southwestern man as range boss, one who knows the country. One who regards as his business anything and everything that concerns me and the V Bar ranch. It's not easy to find the right man. I—h'm—may give you a trial. Think it over, Ben, eh?"

Donna said, holding Foyle's eyes, "He will, Captain!"

Foyle said, holding Donna's eyes, "I will, Captain!"

Ebb Grimm said pleasedly, "Grhum!"

THE END



MEMENTO

A Story by Thomas Thompson

White men keep Indian relics as souvenirs of things past. Jim Willie, learning that there is no place for an Indian in a white man's world, concludes that turnabout is fair play.

THEY named him Jim Willie, after the two cowpunchers who had picked him up as a half-naked, five-year-old, brown savage, nearly frozen, clinging to the full calico skirt of his bullet-killed mother. The cowpunchers wrapped him in a saddle blanket and turned him over to Brad Eccles, the Quaker, joking to cover their feelings, saying, "Here's a 'Pache that ain't killed nobody yet, Brad." And Brad Eccles and his wife took him and raised him, because they were that kind of people.

These things Jim Willie remembered as he leaned against the pole corral and looked down at Molly Eccles, a pretty girl of fifteen, a girl he had considered his sister for twelve years. But suddenly they were not children any longer, Jim Willie knew, and this girl loved him and perhaps he loved her. He could see it in the depths of her blue eyes and in her parted lips and in the color that tinted her fair skin. He knew he could take her in his arms and kiss her as the white men do—

Cort Bailey's voice was rasping and loud and confident and it was like the man. "Where's that damn Injun? Hey, you, Jim Willie! Take my horse and feed and water him."

Jim Willie let his arms drop from the top rail of the corral, his tall, young frame easy and graceful with its movements. He didn't speak to the girl; he didn't say the words that would tell her he was beginning to think about the color of his skin and the color of her skin. He walked soundlessly toward the barn and he took Cort Bailey's horse.

He stabled the bay gelding and cared for it patiently because it was a horse and not because it was Cort Bailey's, and when he came out of the barn he stood a long time looking at the frame house with the cottonwood-shaded yard, the house that had been home so long. There was trouble in that house, he knew. Trouble was a cloud that followed Cort Bailey and draped its shadow over everything the big cattleman touched.

Jim Willie took off the white Stetson Brad Eccles had given him and he stood there turning it in his hand, feeling the texture of it. He had never used the snakeskin band he had made for the hat. The snakeskin band was an Indian decoration; the hat was a white-man hat.

There was little they had told him about the range trouble Cort Bailey had brought, but he knew about it, sensing it, seeing it shape, piecing it together from the dry weather and the sparse grass. He could have asked Molly and she would have told him all, but it would have meant talking to her, under the grape arbor in the warm evening, perhaps, with the moon on the mesa—

He looked into the distance where the sun was building a last fierce fire on the tumbled land of his ancestors and he set his white hat on his straight black hair and walked across the yard to the back door and entered noiselessly. When Maria, the cook, turned and found him standing there she was surprised. It was a game he played with her.

Maria, round and fat and shapeless with her skirt of many flounces, spoke to him in Apache and he felt a quick desire to answer her in English. She had taught him the tribe language and he had taken to it naturally and at first he enjoyed the tales she told him of the old customs and the glorious battles. She had known the great chief Cochise and she said she had known Jim Willie's parents, but sometimes Maria spoke with a crooked tongue.

He said, "Cort Bailey is here again," and he saw Maria chop viciously at the cabbage head with her great kitchen knife.

He picked up a jam tart and pushed it into his straight-lipped mouth and through the crumbs and the sweetness he said, "*Ha tip-e-ca?*"

"What is the matter?" she repeated. Maria was part Mexican and often there was fire in her eyes and in the quick way she moved her hands. "If you were not stupid you would know the matter!" She could speak to him this way and still have affection in her voice. "Every day Cort Bailey moves more cattle on the range when there isn't even enough grass and water for the cattle of *Nantan* Eccles. And what does *Nantan* Eccles do but read his God book and talk soft?"

"It is the way of his church," Jim Willie said. "He has told me about it." He was remembering the countless evenings of winter with the fire on the stone hearth and the sonorous voice of Brad Eccles reading the Word, not interpreting it, because the Word was as it was written. "*Nantan* Eccles does not believe in war and blood and one man fighting another. It is his church."

"Bah!" Maria's knife flashed up and down, dicing the cabbage. "What would *Nantan* Eccles do if Skin-ya and the Coyotero Apaches decided to fight? Would he read his Book then?"

"You have been to the Apache camp again, Maria."

She met his accusation squarely. "And why not? They are my people. They are your people, too," she said, pointing the knife at him, "and someday when you are tired of trying to play the white man you will know that. Do you think because Molly looks at you with moons in her eyes—"

"Maria!" His voice was a whip, his black eyes hard and lifeless, his face thin and chiseled with tension.

Maria shrugged and retreated behind her wall of protective silence and her knife worked busily on the cabbage head. For a moment Jim Willie stood and watched her and he wanted to talk with her because she was of his kind, but there were things he could not explain to Maria. In the house of Brad Eccles all men were equal. *Nantan* Eccles had said so often and Jim Willie believed it, but when he tried to explain it to Maria he ran short of all words and to her repeated "why, why?" there was only one answer. "*Dah-koo-gah*," he would say. Because—

He walked around the big wood stove where the bread dough in the warming oven raised mountainous and sweet under the white flour sacks and he entered the living-room and saw Brad Eccles and Molly and Cort Bailey there.

He had a swift way of appraising the emotions of men and he saw that Brad Eccles was angry, and that was unusual. The big man sat at the table, his hands knotted with his anger, his great, white beard trembling with it, and it was there in his blue eyes. But when he spoke his voice was soft and patient and quiet with dignity.

"There's springs over back of Mesa Amarillo, Mr. Bailey," Brad Eccles said. "Certainly in a country as big as this there is no need for the two of us to quarrel over water."

Cort Bailey was standing, a well built man with a red beard that was a bristling frame for the set of his bulldog jaw.

"I've tried to be patient, Eccles," he said, taking his hat from the table. "There's 'Paches camped back of Mesa Amarillo and you know it. If our weak-livered Indian Bureau had any guts the 'Paches wouldn't be there, I'll admit, but they're there. If you think I'm gonna risk my cows and my boys in that country with those damn 'Paches when there's plenty water close at hand—"

"The Coyotero Apaches will not bother a cattleman, Mr. Bailey," Jim Willie said. It was seldom he allowed himself to speak out this way without being asked, but *Nantan* Eccles was in trouble.

Cort Bailey stopped his hat halfway to his head. For a moment he stared at Jim Willie, an anger building in his gray eyes.

"Listen, boy," he said, "when I want any advice from an Injun I'll ask for it." He slammed his hat on his head and his lips were dark with blood behind his red beard. "Go get my horse."

The hurt in Jim Willie was like a snake feeling spring warmth. It moved, slowly at first, and then it crawled, ever faster.

"Get your own horse," he said. He shouldn't have said that, he knew, but Molly was there, pretending to sew, and she was watching him.

"Why, you impudent—" Bailey's words had the rasping eagerness of a man who seeks and relishes trouble.

"Get Mr. Bailey's horse, Jim," Brad Eccles said. His voice was paternal. It gave a command while it excused an error.

"Yes, sir," Jim Willie said, and he walked across the room, passing close to Cort Bailey, walking slowly, his eyes meeting Bailey's eyes, telling Bailey he was obeying Brad Eccles and not Bailey. He didn't look at Molly but he knew that her fingers were stitching faster and he could hear her breathing, shallow and quick.

"You better get rid of that damn Injun before he murders you in your sleep some night," Cort Bailey said at his back.

The soft voice of Brad Eccles answered but Jim didn't hear the words.

Bailey said, "An Injun is an Injun. They never change. I wouldn't have him around."

Jim knew that those words would anger Molly, but she would keep silent, making her answer down inside as he had to make his answer. She didn't dare speak out, for a few words might reveal her true feelings. And her feelings were something she couldn't admit. Not even to Brad Eccles.

He patted the muscular shoulder of the bay gelding and smoothed the forelock over the head band when he bridled it and he tightened the cinch before leading the animal outside. The desert darkness had come down over the ranch and the smell of the dry weather was thick in the coolness of evening. To the west the flat top of Mesa Amarillo was like a bench supporting two bright stars.

He saw Cort Bailey linger a moment in the light of the doorway, and then he came striding across the yard, his boots hitting solidly on the hard ground. He grunted when Jim handed him the reins and then with one foot in the stirrup, his hand on the pommel, he turned and looked down at the Indian.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" he said.

"Do not move more cows on Coyote Spring," Jim said. "There are too many there now."

He saw the big man's foot slip out of the stirrup, slowly, and the hand that was on the pommel tightened and relaxed and when it came down it was a fist. Jim knew what was coming; it was in the slouch of Bailey's shoulders, in the settling of his weight. He was broad and thick, a powerful man, and Jim had much of the stringiness of youth about him. Jim stepped in swiftly, his thought being that he could pin Bailey's arms to his sides.

The fist exploded in his face and the world was red and white and the earth slapped against his back and drove the air from his lungs. The stars wheeled and turned and rocketed into space and then Molly was there, holding his head, crying, wiping at the blood on his lips.

"Jim! Jim!"

He sat up slowly, laboring to focus his eyes, and Molly had her arm around his shoulders, supporting him. Her hair was close to his face and he could smell the scent of it and her softness was close to him. But stronger than this was the taste of blood in his mouth and the ancient burn of anger. The smell of the sage and the summer night was in his nostrils and the red dust of the old land was on his clothes. He stood up and bent from the waist to pick up his white Stetson and he stood there a moment, looking at it, not putting it on.

"Jim, listen to me—"

He pushed her aside and walked off into the shadows and he heard her crying.

The bars of the corral gate were smooth to the touch, still warm from the stored heat of the day. He gripped them and stood there, staring into the night, unmoving, his anger building in sullen silence, overwhelming him. He didn't know Molly had followed him until she spoke his name.

"Jim, please speak to me—"

"I'll kill him!"

The words were savage and primitive and they came without his knowing he had spoken them. It was as if they had lain for centuries in an old well deep within him, waiting to be said. He saw Molly step back and she was a stranger and then she was near him, her hand on his arm, her voice pleading.

"No, Jim. You mustn't say such things."

"I'll kill him, Molly," he said. "He wants to drive your father out of the country. He wants to take everything for himself—" His voice broke. "He hit me." He had never felt so helplessly young. "He hit me because I am an Indian."

"No, Jim." She was standing close to him now, her hand gripping his arm. "It doesn't make any difference. Dad and I have told you that. You're one of us. I—we—" She took her hand from his arm and she couldn't meet his eyes. "We love you, Jim."

He looked at her and he felt the blood that had run from his mouth making a dry stream on the side of his chin. For the first time in his life he trusted himself to put his hand on her soft, blond hair. And in that moment he realized that any love she had for him was only sympathy. She was sorry for him because he was an Apache trying to be a white man, and being what she was she would stand by him even if it meant hurting herself. She had a great heart, just like her father, and he loved her for it. But sympathy, he knew, could be a sharper knife than hatred.

"If that is so," he said, "will you go to the dance with me Saturday night?"

It was a cruel question and he knew it was cruel, but he knew too that it would make her face the truth. He knew the color had flooded her cheeks and she stood looking at him a moment and then she turned and ran toward the house, holding her skirts up from the dust.

No, Molly, he thought, *you won't go to the dance with me because you can't. And there are a hundred other places you can't go with me because I am an Indian and you are a white girl.*

He felt ages older than his seventeen years and as he watched her run toward the house it was as if some ancient voice had come from the mesas and the desert and spoken to him.

He lifted his hand and his knuckles touched the dried blood on his chin.

I am an Apache, he said silently. *I am not ashamed of it.*

He felt a driving urge to saddle his pony and ride in the night, not to go anywhere, just to ride and feel the wind and the smell of darkness. But that would mean explaining to Brad Eccles why he did it. Molly, he knew, would not tell her father of the encounter with Cort Bailey, for Jim had had no right to give orders to Bailey.

He let the temper run out until it was only a smoldering coal deep inside, waiting to be blown into life again. He turned then to go to the small bunkhouse he shared with Pete Severn, the only other hand on the Brad Eccles place. He saw the back

door of the ranch house open and he sensed, rather than saw, the shapeless form of Maria sliding into the darkness. Maria had a sack over her shoulder. He knew what it meant.

At any other time he might have intercepted Maria and scolded her for stealing food to give to her relatives; he probably would have made her take it back, for he felt a strong sense of protection toward anything that belonged to Brad Eccles. But tonight his thoughts were wild and untamed and they needed the night and stealthy activity to sooth them. He turned, hunching himself down, keeping well in the shadows, and he started trailing Maria, running swiftly a few steps, stopping to listen, moving on.

The trail led through the cedar brake to a stream bed, dry since March, and then to the broken land where the sandstone spires, dark now, blazed purple and red in the glare of daylight. The pungent odor of sun-scorched rock and old sage was part of the night and as Jim followed he marveled at the speed with which Maria could travel. He couldn't tell her age, but he knew she was one of the first to go to the San Carlos Agency, which was where Brad Eccles found her and got permission to hire her after his wife's death. Maria had never forgotten the old days. The old days were in her speech and in her thoughts and even in the muscles of her legs.

His own breath was coming faster and he kept his lips tight, exhaling through his flared nostrils. Maria, he knew now, was heading toward the rock formation called The Post Pile. He circled out from the trail and came in ahead of her and he was going to drop to his knees and wait.

He had just paused behind a gnarled juniper when an arm came out of the darkness and circled his neck and a knife point penetrated the shirt on his back and touched his skin. The odor of greasy buckskin and smoke was thick and pungent.

He spoke calmly in Apache, hiding his fear. The arm relaxed and he was jerked around so that he was facing the four Indians who stood there. The foul smell of *tiswin*, the native whisky, was strong.

They were young men, a few years older than himself, and he knew they were from the renegade band of Coyoteros which was off the reservation. He had talked to Maria about it, hours at a time, and she said they only wanted to be free for the summer—that when winter came they would return to the reservation. But horses had been stolen and now and then some isolated ranch reported being held up for food.

The man with the knife stood forward, a tall man, naked to the waist, his hip-high moccasins rolled to his ankles in the manner of summer wear. He wore a dirty and ragged pair of agency-issue trousers and there was a battered straw hat on his head.

"You speak Apache like a brother," he said, "and you walk clumsy in the dark like a white man."

"It is the fool from the ranch of Eccles," another said. "He is not Apache; he is not white. He is both bird and mouse, like the bat."

The third man was reeling slightly when he stepped up and it was his breath that carried the strong, putrid sourness of *tiswin*. He reached out suddenly and snatched at the white Stetson Jim wore.

"I like this hat."

Jim lunged in, driving his fist

against the man's middle. The air spilled from the Indian's lungs and he staggered back, holding his stomach, and he started to retch violently. The other three Indians were stonily silent, and then one of them began to laugh. It was a signal and they all pounded their sick companion on the back.

"Which kicked you?" one said. "The bird or the mouse?"

"Fools!" The voice slid out of the darkness. "With the noise you make they can hear you at San Carlos. You are not worthy of the old chiefs." Maria was standing there, the bloated flour sack at her feet. She looked at Jim and tossed her head disdainfully. "You thought you would surprise me?" she snorted. "I have watched you since you left the corral."

"His fist is like the kick of *dazen*, the mule," the leader said. He was already elbow-deep in the sack.

"And why not?" Maria said. "Have I not told you the blood of Cochise is in his body?"

One came and felt Jim's muscles, and Jim stood there stolidly, saying nothing. The man clapped Jim on the shoulders.

"Eat with us," he said.

One man took a loaf of fresh bread from the sack. He gripped it with both hands, digging his strong teeth into the middle of the loaf, tearing at it. Another had a well-meated bone from yesterday's roast and he gnawed it, smacking his lips. The third dug jam from a jar with his fingers and the sticky sweet was smeared on his lips. The one with the *tiswin* sickness rocked to and fro, moaning softly, and the others ignored him.

Jim found some pieces of jerky in the sack and he ate them slowly, remembering the manners Mrs. Eccles had taught him. And in a while Maria started telling of the old days, talking softly at first, remembering the past, telling these young men of their fathers and their grandfathers, inviting them to speak.

It became a lulling ritual and one by one the Indians picked up the cadence, standing to tell their stories, acting them out in a sort of dance without movement that was older than the desert. There was a pause, and Jim knew it was his turn. He stood, feeling afraid at first, and then all the old stories Maria had told him flooded his mind and tumbled there but he could not tell them. He remembered then a story Molly had read him from a book.

The sibilant tones of the old language became the wind in the cedars and the towering bulk of Mesa Amarillo was there as witness to his tale. He told of the white man who had come in the great ship and of the Indian maid who had laid her own neck under the ax to save the head of the white man.

The opulent red moon came and rested on the mesa and the stars in the east retreated while those in the west sent down long spider silks of silver to entangle the day. The night smells were thick—the tar weed, the sage, the cedar, the heat from the depth of stone, the coolness of starlight.

A great peace settled on Jim Willie, the Apache who had been raised a white man. It was something like Brad Eccles had explained happens to a man when he meets his God and talks to him in a giant cathedral. The domed night was a cathedral and the mesas were alters and for hundreds of years the ancestors had owned this land un-

til it was part of them and their very skin was the color of a shaded mesa at sunset.

He finished his tale and stood there, his arms spread out from his sides, his hands clenched, his face tilted to the mother stars. And the Indians who were his brothers came before him and called him *chickasaw*.

He walked reluctantly with Maria, back toward the ranch, knowing that here tonight he had experienced true companionship with men of his blood. But for his clothes, his prized white Stetson, he might have been one of them, and he felt a small wash of loneliness.

He walked with Maria to the kitchen door and before she could enter he said, "Is it true I walked in the night like a bull—that you knew I followed!"

She looked at him and smiled and then she touched his arm and her fingers were warm against his flesh. "I might better have been followed by a shadow," she said. "I did not hear you once. I only guessed that you must have come from the corral."

She went inside, opening the door so that it did not squeak, and Jim Willie went to the bunkhouse. He entered and undressed without disturbing Pete Severn and for a while he lay on his bunk, his hands clasped behind his head. He went to sleep then, feeling a calmness and wholeness he had never known. And the little ember of hatred for Cort Bailey glowed steadily and warmed the belly of the sleeping Apache.

Brad Eccles was a man who awoke early and the purple promise of sun was still pale on Mesa Amarillo when the clanging of the triangle awoke the two men in the bunkhouse. For a moment Jim Willie lay there, unable to place the confinement of the wall at his side, and then he heard Pete Severn stirring and he was awake. The familiar objects in the tiny bunkhouse rushed in at him and took their places and crowded the dream from his mind.

"What you doin', Jim?" Pete Severn said. "Dreamin' about a pretty little Injun gal?"

Pete Severn was a thin little man with no hips and legs that were bowed and undeveloped from his many years in a saddle. He had pictures of dancing girls tacked over his bunk. He rubbed his hand across his stubble of gray whiskers and his bright blue eyes peered intently in the thin light. He whistled.

"What happened to your lip? Bee sting yuh?"

Jim didn't answer. He got out of his bunk quickly and dressed and went outside. There was a bucket of water on a bench by the door, a tin basin, a small glass. He washed his smooth face quickly and after he had dried on the roller towel he glanced at himself in the mirror. His lip was horribly swollen. He turned and saw Pete watching him.

"Say," Pete said, "you look like you been in a fight." The old cowboy's eyes lighted. "Say, you ain't been fightin' over some pretty little squaw, now have yuh? You ain't got some little gal staked out in the brush—?"

Pete's talk of girls always bothered Jim, but this was as good an explanation as any. He said, "Don't tell on me, Pete."

"Shucks no, boy," Pete said, laying his hand on Jim's shoulder. "What the deuce? I was young once myself." He winked broadly. "And I ain't so old yet."

Jim liked the comradeship in Pete's

voice. The older man threw out the water Jim had used and he rinsed the basin quickly before pouring his own wash water. In a moment he was making burbling sounds into his cupped hands and Jim walked on to the house.

He sat in silence while Brad Eccles returned thanks, and then he ate with his head down, not wanting to meet Molly's eyes, not wanting Brad to see his swollen lip. He didn't look up even when Brad Eccles spoke, but he felt a twist of excitement.

"I've talked to Cort Bailey," Brad said, "and we haven't reached an agreement. I'm going to fence Coyote Spring. Jim, you hitch up Samson and Chalk to the flat-bed. We'll take the cedar posts we planned on using for the new corral."

Both Pete and Jim took the day's orders in silence, just as they did every morning, but both of them knew this was to be a showdown with Cort Bailey. Pete wasn't a fighting man; he never had been. But he wasn't a man to back down from trouble. Jim thought of Cort Bailey and his hands trembled on his fork. Perhaps now Brad Eccles would take down the deer rifle that hadn't been used in years and perhaps Pete would strap on the six-shooter he kept hidden under his mattress.

"We don't want trouble," Brad Eccles said. "We only want to protect what is ours."

Pete and Jim loaded the posts and hoisted up two rolls of wire. Brad himself had been saddling his horse, moving slowly as if thinking everything out. Pete drove the wagon over near the blacksmith shop and picked up a small keg of staples while Jim got a couple of hammers and the wire stretcher and some pliers. He started to climb the wheel of the wagon and then he glanced back and saw his pinto watching him over the top rail of the corral.

"I think I'll ride," he said to Pete. "You go on and I'll catch up with you."

Brad rode out by the left wheel of the wagon and Pete grinned and said, "It would kill that kid if he had to ride on a wagon. Reckon that's the 'Pache comin' out."

"He's a fine horseman," Brad Eccles said.

Jim's eyes searched each man swiftly. Brad Eccles was not carrying a rifle. There was no six-shooter belted around Pete's thin middle. He watched the wagon roll and bump down to the pasture gate and then he picked up a catch rope and dropped a loop deftly over the neck of the pinto.

He saddled quickly, his strong fingers tying the cinch knot, and he had started to mount when he thought of Molly. In his anger last night he had said a cruel thing and he had hurt her. The thought of it was suddenly heavy and he knew he had to speak to her.

He looped the reins over the middle rail of the corral gate and walked swiftly toward the house. He entered the back door, knowing that Molly was usually in the kitchen at this hour, talking to Maria. But he found Maria alone.

The cook didn't meet his eyes when he looked at her and she plunged into her work of dishwashing with a betraying suddenness. He felt a quick concern, not knowing why he did. It was the feeling he sometimes had when the thunderclouds piled in the west and the day grew increasingly dark with its promise of storm.

"Where's Molly?"

"She went to the town," Maria said quickly, and he knew she was relieved because he hadn't asked something else. "She left while you were loading the posts."

"Why?"

"Why?" Maria's voice was tinged with the nervousness of one who has a secret. "How do I know why? Go now. If you do not hurry you will be late."

He walked to her quickly and gripped her arm, turning her toward him. "What do you hide from me, Maria?"

"You hurt me!" she said, trying to free herself from his grip. She was frightened. He could feel her tremble. It wouldn't be because of Molly, he knew.

"What do you know?" His fingers dug into her arm and she cried out sharply. "Is it of Skin-ya and the Coyoteros? Have they listened to Nock-aye-de-Klinny the medicine man? Do they speak of the ghost dance and of war?"

"Let me go—" There was terror in her voice.

"Tell me, Maria." He gripped her arm until the pain of it made her bend her knees.

"No, no," she said. "It is not that. The Coyoteros do not want war."

"What, then?"

"Some of the men need horses. The men you met with last night. They are your brothers. They are of your blood—"

"Where will they get horses?" He drew back his hand as if he would slap her across the face.

"From Cort Bailey, the cattleman." Her voice was a whimper. "It is not wrong. Cort Bailey tries to hurt *Nantan* Eccles and *Nantan* Eccles does nothing. It is right that your brothers should take the horses of Cort Bailey."

"When?"

"Today at Coyote Spring while *Nantan* Eccles and Cort Bailey talk. Your brothers wait there now and they will take the horses. They will not harm *Nantan* Eccles. They have promised me this."

He shoved her roughly and she fell against the cupboard and stood there rubbing her arm, her dark eyes accusing Jim Willie.

"You are an Indian," she said hotly, free of his grip. "It is the Indian way."

He pushed through the door and entered the living-room. The rifle hung on deer horns over the mantel.

He thought of the men he had been with last night and of how he had been close to them. For a second it seemed right. Cort Bailey had caused trouble. It was just that someone should cause trouble for Cort Bailey. But the memory of the odor of *tiswin* was strong in him and he knew of the old tales where young bucks, crazy with the sour native whisky, had killed and tortured.

He reached for the rifle and by accident he knocked down one of the exquisite Indian baskets that lined the mantel. He reached down to pick it up and he held it in his hand a moment before replacing it on the mantel. He had never known why the white men went to so much trouble to keep some souvenir of Indian lore.

Maria's voice lashed out at him: "You would not kill brothers of your own blood."

He lifted down the rifle and checked it to see that it was loaded.

BRAD ECCLES and Pete Severn had just arrived at the spring when Jim caught up with them. He hung back, not wanting Eccles to see the

rifle he had brought, and his eyes quickly scanned the rock and brush for some sign of Indians.

The spring was a water hole, shallow, a hundred feet or more across and about the same length. It lay brown and tepid at the bottom of a natural saucer a few acres in extent. There were half a dozen old, stunted willows at the upper end where the seep came out of the ground. The pond was edged with a band of caked, white mud six or eight feet wide, cracking in the sun. The entire saucer was rimmed with rock, and sage grew on the gentle slope. Above the seep, where they had scooped out a shallow well for fresh water, was the camp of Cort Bailey.

There were only three men in the cattle camp—Bailey and two others—but they were heavily armed. They stood up when they saw Pete driving the wagon down toward the water hole and Cort Bailey stood there, easily distinguishable by his red beard, and his thumbs were hooked in his gun belt.

"Pay him no heed," Brad Eccles said. "Pull up at the lower end of the spring, Pete, and we'll get to unloading. If they want to talk, I'll do the talking."

Jim was trying to spot Bailey's remuda and he remembered the little natural stone corral over behind the rise. There was browse there and graze enough. This was where Bailey would have his horses. The rest of Bailey's men were out with the cattle and the horses would be unguarded. He felt a reluctant admiration for the way the Apaches had planned this.

He saw Eccles put down the post he was packing and the big man stood there, his feet spread, his hands on his hips. Cort Bailey and his two men were walking around the pond, coming toward the post wagon. They stopped about ten feet away and Cort Bailey spat across the center of his lips.

"What do you think you're up to, Eccles?"

"I'm going to fence the spring, Bailey," Brad Eccles said, and his voice was strong and sure but it was soft.

Cort Bailey's hand slid along his gun belt and now it rested on the butt of his six-shooter. His two men watched him, waiting for some signal. They had stepped up and now the three of them stood there, side by side.

"You put a post in that ground and you're askin' for trouble, Eccles," Cort Bailey said. "I aim to water my cows."

"You'll water them," Brad Eccles said, and Jim felt a small wave of terror. Was *Nantan* Eccles going to back down again? "With the spring fenced," Brad Eccles said, "we can water them a small bunch at a time. After your herd is watered they'll be in shape to move and you can take them on back of the Mesa where there's range and water for the taking."

Cort Bailey mistook the softness of Brad's voice for weakness. He smiled, and it was a half smile that just lifted one side of his mouth. "There's water and range here for the takin', Eccles. Get that load of posts to hell out of here. Now."

Jim Willie never got to hear Brad's answer. At that moment there was a shrill trumpeting of a panicked horse from beyond the rim of the hill. There were garbled shouts, the crashing of light timber, the pounding of hoofs.

"Something's after the horses!" It was one of Bailey's men and now Bailey and his two hands were running up the slope, and Bailey had his gun in his hand.

Brad Eccles and Pete Severn broke into a run and a hot excitement raced

through the veins of Jim Willie. He threw himself on the back of his pinto and his hand snaked the rifle from the boot. He rode up the slope at a run, gripping the rifle in his right hand.

Brad Eccles had overtaken Cort Bailey on the run up the slope and now they stood there, side by side, and below them in the stone corral with its makeshift lumber gate there was a smother of dust. Horses plunged and reared and the sun was bright on the naked skin of the four Apaches. Cort Bailey gave a roar of rage and the gun in his hand spat flame. The voice of Brad Eccles was louder than the gunshot.

"Stop it! You don't know how many they are. Do you want an Indian war on your hands? I'll talk to them—"

"This is the only kind of talk an Injun understands!" The gun came up again and Brad's great fist lashed out. It caught Cort Bailey in the center of the face, spilling him off his feet. The gun was knocked out of his hand. His two men stood there, undecided, their guns half drawn. And Brad Eccles was running down toward the corral, calling to the Indians.

Jim Willie's hand was hot on the breech of the rifle. He wanted to call out to *Nantan* Eccles—tell him to let the Indians have the horses. It was what Cort Bailey deserved. It was just.

He saw Bailey roll over and get to his knees and he stayed that way, shaking his head like a red bear, and then he crawled forward and got the gun. He threw himself to his feet and the gun was in his hand and Jim Willie saw the hammer come back. Brad Eccles was directly in front of him, running toward the Indians.

"Bailey! Hold your fire!" Pete Severn screamed. "You might hit Eccles!"

There was blood on Cort Bailey's face and his mouth was twisted, his teeth exposed. He was half crouching, raising the gun. And some old voice told Jim Willie what was going to happen.

Cort Bailey wasn't going to shoot an Indian. He wasn't trying to protect his horses. He would fire and the bullet would strike Brad Eccles in the back of the head and then in the white-man court Cort Bailey would call it an accident. He would call it an accident and men would believe him. They would blame the Indians while Cort Bailey ran his cattle on the land of Brad Eccles.

Jim Willie's knee dug into his pony's shoulder. And as the pony turned, the rifle in Jim's hand exploded.

He saw Cort Bailey jerk forward, almost as if he had jumped. He saw the gun in Bailey's hand spin free. He saw Bailey fall. There was blood spreading on Cort Bailey's back. There was a second of fierce silence and in that silence Jim Willie felt his own blood pounding and he knew he had done the right thing. And then *Nantan* Eccles had turned, his face white and horror-stricken, and he was staring at Jim Willie, staring at the smoking rifle in Jim's hand.

A terrible panic seized Jim Willie. He was an Apache and he had killed a white man. That was all a white-man court would see. He knew of the law and he knew of the terrible dread of a rope on the limb of a cottonwood—

He saw the Indians running for their own horses and then he dug his heels into his pony's flanks and he was riding at a dead run, still gripping the rifle. The wind caught the brim of his white Stetson and turned it up.

His pony was staggering with ex-

haustion when he reached the top of Mesa Amarillo. He was safe for a time here, he knew. Time enough to think. He dismounted and his legs were trembling and he walked over to the rim of the mesa. From here he could look down on Coyote Spring and in the distance was the Eccles ranch house. And all around was the vast expanse of the land.

The figures down at Coyote Spring were like ants crawling on painted canvas. He could not tell one from the other, but he picked them out in his mind. Cort Bailey's men, startled, afraid, lost without a leader. Pete Severn, chewing vigorously on nothing, swallowing noisily. And *Nantan* Eccles, a man of God and peace, looking at death.

There would be talk now. Lots of talk, all over the desert country. "It's in their blood," someone would say. "A 'Pache is a 'Pache, and there's nothin' you can do about it." Perhaps Pete Severn would remember the swollen lip and piece things out in his mind. "That damn 'Pache killed Bailey because Bailey hit him." There was a deep sadness in Jim Willie.

The sun passed noon and still he squatted there, looking off into the shimmering distance, trying to find thoughts that would make sense. He couldn't go back, he knew, for even if they didn't hang him for the murder of Cort Bailey they would call him a "bad Injun" and put him on a reservation.

He felt he would like to cry, but he didn't know how, and he thought of Molly. That was the greatest pain, and the greatest satisfaction. Molly would know now that she couldn't love an Apache. Far off on the edge of the land, almost like a mirage, he could make out the sprawling little town. Molly was there.

And it was right that she should be there, he realized. There were young men there—men of her own blood. And someday she would forget Jim Willie and she would find a young man she loved and he would love her. And the cattle of *Nantan* Eccles would grow fat in the season of rain, unmolested by Cort Bailey and his herds. A buzzard sailed over the rim of the mesa, caught the updraft of warm air and wheeled there. Jim Willie stood up and the sun was hot on his face, for he had removed his white Stetson and laid it on a rock.

He picked up the hat now and stood there, turning it in his hands. He had been so proud of that hat. No other Apache had a hat exactly like it. It was a hat that had marked him as belonging to the white men.

A quick anger touched him and he knew that Maria was right and she always had been. He was an Apache and the Coyoteros were his brothers and a hat does not change a man. He walked to the edge of the mesa, gripping the hat savagely in his hands. He would destroy it and that would be the end of it.

He drew back his arm, intending to sail the hat far out into the distance, and then he saw the small darkness of the cottonwoods that stood around the yard of *Nantan* Eccles. Beyond the cottonwoods was the grape arbor where Molly sat of an evening, telling him of the white-man ways. And at the end of the arbor was the wide door to the front room, the fireplace where *Nantan* Eccles read from the God book.

He remembered the fireplace and the mantel and he wondered if he had done right, taking the rifle today. He

knew that he had, and there was peace in him. And then he remembered the Indian baskets that always stood there on the mantel and he thought of the Navajo blanket on the bench by the window.

And suddenly he knew why the white men kept souvenirs of Indian lore. The white men kept Indian objects and prized them because these things were a link with another day. He looked at the white Stetson he prized so greatly and he smiled and put it carefully on his straight, black hair. Someday, in some hidden canyon, that hat would hang, perhaps, in his brush *jacal.*

The horse was dead-tired and he took off the saddle and left it there. Leading the animal, he walked across the flat top of the mesa and it was mid-afternoon when he came to the other side.

Far below him he saw the desert, and nearer, close to the foot of the mesa, he saw the cedar thickets. There was an almost imperceptible ribbon of blue smoke rising straight up and he knew it was from the fire of an Apache. He looked once into the sun and started the long descent down the side of Mesa Amarillo.

Songs for a Land of Horseback Men

By S. OMAR BARKER

I WOULD sing them sweet and low—
Songs for my New Mexico,
Where the cottonwood's green shade
Meets the desert unafraid;
Where blue deepens every sky,
And sun-lazy cattle lie,
Chewing gently as they drowse,
Well content that they are cows
In a land of mesas wide,
Where the sun-browned cowboys ride.

I would sing them clear and loud—
Songs of mountains snowy-browed,
Where the lonely cougar's track
Threads through forests greenly black;
Where the brawling Pecos heads
In a dozen rocky beds;
Where the spruce tree coolly roofs
Trails for hardy horses' hoofs.

I would sing out free and lusty
Of a land whose songs are dusty
From four hundred years of trail men—
Horse-and-saddle, never-fail-men!
Spanish knights in armor bold,
Thirsting for a legend's gold;
Mountain men and frontier troopers,
Silent men and saddle-whoopers;
Long-haired scouts and *ciboleros,*
Texas trail men, wild *vaqueros;*
Sweating cowhands of the ranches—
Saddle breeds in all their branches!

I could sing New Mexico
In a hundred songs I know,
Yet in each somewhere would sound
Hoofs that drum upon the ground,
Rhythm now, as rhythm then,
For this land of horseback men!

A Novelette by Les Savage, Jr.

TRAITOR TOWN

It takes an ambush bullet to convince Tony Ferrar this is one storm he can't ride out as a neutral.

CHAPTER ONE

Child of Two Races

UNCLE HONDO found Tony Ferrar playing solitaire at one of the short card tables in the rear of La Fonda. The old man came across the crowded barroom at a hobbling walk, apprehension deepening the furry seams of his face.

"George Manatte is in number five, asking for you," he told Ferrar. "Don't go in, Tony. Cimarron Garrett is with him."

Ferrar grinned, getting up. "Would you have me hide from that blowhard?"

The old man shook his white head. "Short men and fools they are recognized from afar."

Chuckling, Ferrar moved through the crowd of peons and trappers that filled the inn this summer evening of 1846. He was a tall man, with curly black hair and startling blue eyes that came from the Irish trapper who had fathered him, and a darkness to his long face, a sharp height to his cheekbones that were the heritage of his Mexican mother. The exotic mixture seemed to extend to his whole personality. While his solid-muscled upper body was clothed in padded waistcoat and tailored fustian, he wore elkhide leggings that were black and greasy from years on the trail.

Reaching the door of number five, he knocked, and was told to enter. George Manatte and his daughter Julia sat at the small deal table, while Cimarron Garrett stood against the wall, arms folded across his massive chest. Ferrar took a chair, tilted it back against the wall, and relaxed immediately into his indolent sprawl. He smiled at Julia, but she did not answer it. Her wide blue eyes were solemn as a child's in her softly rounded face, gazing at him with disturbing fixity. Her cloak was pushed back, revealing deep breasts swelling at a prim calico dress, and her hair spilled like a cascade of honey onto her shoulders.

"You take your daughter into strange places, George," Ferrar said.

"I want her to know what's going on," Manatte said. He put his elbows on the table, a tall man, well in his fifties, with a face scored by the weather and eyes faded by the sun. One of the biggest fur traders in this town of Santa Fe, he still wore a simple broadcloth suit and beaver hat.

"As you probably know, Ferrar, the War with Mexico is going against the Mexicans," he said. "General Kearny has taken Las Vegas. He's going to march on this town in a couple of days. We have one chance to stop the bloodshed, to convince Governor Armijo how useless it is to stand against the American army."

Ferrar's heavy brows raised. "Captain Cordenza is coming from Chihua-

hua with four companies of cavalry. Add that to Governor Armijo's dragoons and they can cut Kearny to pieces in Apache Canyon."

Manatte shook his head. "Captain Cordenza and his four Chihuahua companies were captured by an American force last week."

Ferrar came forward, chair legs slapping the floor. "How do you know?"

"Cordenza accepted the surrender terms by note. Kearny now has the note. I heard that from my last contact with him. But no more of my men can get through. Governor Armijo was close to Cordenza, he'll know Cordenza's signature and handwriting. Armijo won't be able to stand against Kearny without Cordenza's cavalry. If Armijo knew Cordenza had been captured, he'd capitulate immediately. General Kearny could walk into Santa Fe without a shot. We want you to go to Las Vegas, Tony, get Cordenza's note of surrender from Kearny, and bring it to Armijo."

Ferrar settled back, frowning deeply. Cimarron Garrett stirred against the wall, speaking disgustedly.

"I told you Ferrar was more greaser than Yankee, George. He wanted Cordenza to get through and help Armijo."

Ferrar's eyes flashed with anger, swinging up to Cimarron. The man was one of Manatte's muleskinners, six feet tall and almost as wide, with a mane of yellow hair and a yellow beard that curled against his keg-chest like foamy hoar frost. His greasy rawhide jacket was fringed with the black hair of a dozen Indian scalps, and his leggins were held up by a belt of gold pesos.

Manatte leaned farther toward Ferrar. "You know how the Americans in this town have been clamped down on. Any white man who tried to leave town would be shot. Even if he did get out, he'd never make it through that strip between here and Las Vegas. Only a Mexican could get through, but we don't know any Mexicans we can trust. You're the only one, Tony. The Mexicans trust you. You could get through."

Ferrar shook his head. "I'd betray every friend I have if I helped Kearny take this town."

"You don't number the Americans among your friends, then," Manatte said thinly.

"That proves he's a greaser," Cimarron said.

Ferrar stood up, nostrils pinched with anger. "Don't use that word again, Cimarron."

The man grinned evilly. "Why not? Any grea—"

"Never mind, Cimarron." Manatte got up angrily, almost upsetting his chair. "I can see there's no use talking any more. But you've made an unwise choice, Ferrar. It will be hard for those who fought Kearny, when he takes the town."

He turned and stamped to the outer door, swinging it open and stepping out into the alley. With an enigmatic grin, Cimarron followed him. It left only Julia in the room. She had risen, and she came slowly around the table, to face Ferrar.

"Why did you refuse, Tony? You're more Yankee than Mexican. You've got to help your own people."

He waved his hand toward the noise of the main room. "These are my people as much as the Yankees. I was born here. My life is here. I speak Spanish as easily as English."

"But you'd *help* them by bringing

Kearny in! You know what the government has been here."

He shook his dark head. "I admit there's a lot of graft under Armijo's rule—"

"Not Armijo's rule," Julia said. "He's nothing more than a figurehead. Morina Garcia is the power behind the throne, and you know it. She doesn't represent Mexican rule any more than a cat represents a dog. Graft is the smallest part of it, Tony. The kind of life you've led has blinded you to it. Drinking, gambling, living high, off on your trap lines half the time, you have no real picture of what's going on. The people are suffering under that woman's domination. She's gotten Armijo to bleed them dry—"

"Stop it!"

He checked himself, surprised that it had come out so hotly. They stood there, staring at each other a moment, white-faced. Then Julia took a deep breath.

"I've thought for a long time that Morina Garcia had come between us, Tony. Now I know it's true."

He tried to catch her arm, protesting. "Julia—"

She stepped back, her voice shaking a little. "Never mind, Tony. If it's over, it's over. You can't force something like that."

She looked at him for a last instant, with an intense hurt shadowing her eyes, then turned and went out. He stared after her, with a sense of deep loss. Then, shaking his head helplessly, he turned back into the outer room.

The bar was filling with *peons* and Taos Indians and young *vaqueros*. Tomas was throwing three-card monte for Uncle Hondo and Ferrar made his way through the crowd toward their table.

"What did they want, Antonito?" the old man asked.

"Just some fur deal," Ferrar said.

Tomas went on shuffling the cards. He was Morina Garcia's Navajo servant, an enigmatic statue of a man with a face that might have been carved from some dark wood, so little did it change expression. A bright red band held his long black hair, and his pants and shirt were of doeskin, white as milk and always immaculately clean.

Ferrar poured himself some *pulque*, trying to relax, trying to take the pleasure he should in being here with his friends. Life should be like the taste of good wine in the mouth. He should savor the reek of the place as he always had—the piquant scent of chile peppers drying out front and the stable stench drifting in from the rear and the smell of grape wine and rotgut whisky and sweat and leather and sawdust. He should drink in the soft sound of Spanish and the slap of cards. It was the life he loved.

But somehow he was disturbed. "Uncle Hondo," he said. "You are a *peon*. Are your people happy?"

"They sing all day, they drink all night. I would live no place else in the world."

"How about Armijo?"

The old man looked around him. "Is that wise?"

"You are among friends."

Uncle Hondo leaned forward, wagging his shaggy head from side to side. "The governor he is at times hard. But we are certainly better off than we were under Spanish rule."

"And you don't want the Americans?"

"If the *gringo* is all like that Cimarron Garrett, I would do to them that." Uncle Hondo spat on the floor. Then

he turned his wise old eyes up to Ferrar, the wind-wrinkles deepening at their corners. "Something she is troubling you, Antonito. I have been your man since a baby you were, and I know that look."

Ferrar shook his head. "Nothing."

Uncle Hondo put a gnarled hand on his arm. "It is sometimes hard to be a child of two races."

Ferrar glanced sharply at him, surprised at his insight, then chuckled softly. "I can't hide anything from you, old one."

Uncle Hondo grinned at him, then glanced over his head, the expression changing in his face. Ferrar turned to see Captain Seguro Ugardes coming through the door. He pushed through the knots of *peons* and *vaqueros*, answering their greetings with a jaunty grin. He made an elegant figure in the round blue jacket of the Mexican dragoons, with its red cuffs and collar. His blue velvet breeches were unbuttoned at the knees to show white stockings above the deerskin boots, and the Golden Cross of Honor glittered brazenly over his heart. He came clear to Ferrar's table, clapping him on the shoulder.

"It is good to see someone who can relax, *amigo*. I have had a trying day."

"Governor Armijo been keeping you busy?" Ferrar asked.

Captain Ugardes took a chair and dropped wearily into it. "The palace is in an uproar. All kinds of rumors. Some say Kearny has ten thousand men. Some say only a handful. Armijo is in one of his rages. Nothing is right. I wish Cordenza and those four Chihuahua companies would get here. It would make us all feel safer."

"Cordenza's coming, then?"

"*Pues*, of course—" Ugardes broke off, studying Ferrar. "You make a point of that. Do you have any information?"

Ferrar frowned, realizing for the first time what a position Manatte had put him in. Ugardes's reaction convinced him that Governor Armijo did not yet know Cordenza had been captured. Thus, Manatte had put Ferrar under an obligation of secrecy by telling him the news. But why had Manatte been so sure he would keep their secret? Captain Ugardes was Ferrar's oldest friend in Santa Fe, they had grown up together. Didn't his loyalty to that kind of friend place a deeper obligation upon him than the mere fact his father was white? Wouldn't Manatte know that?

He looked up, on the point of telling Ugardes. Yet something checked him. Perhaps Ugardes saw the struggle going on within him. He leaned forward and put a hand on Ferrar's arm.

"I have always known it would be hard for you, if something like this ever came up, Antonito. I will not press you. Just remember this. No matter what happens, no matter which side you choose, we will always be *compadres*."

They stared into each other's eyes a moment. Then the embarrassment of a man who has touched deep emotion flushed Ugardes's face, and he leaned back with a laugh.

"Enough of this. I came here to forget the war. Like the old days, no? Wine and monte and maybe a pretty *doncelita* to amuse us."

They had their drink and wandered to the monte table and for a short while the laughter and pleasure which only this country could afford filled the two men. Then Ferrar noticed a change in the sound about him. First

it was the rough laughter dying out. Then the clink of glasses seemed to diminish.

Ferrar turned to see Cimarron Garrett shouldering his way through the knots of men. With him was Pitch, his swamper. The man was shorter than Garrett, but just as broad. The muscles of his chest and shoulders bulged like sides of beef beneath a hickory jacket. A barrel of hot pitch had been dumped over his face while he was doping a hot box on the trail, many years before. It had burned most of his hair off and left one eye blinded, and the left side of his face was badly scarred.

Behind Garrett and Pitch were three of the buckskinned trappers who worked for Manatte. They were tall, rawboned men from Tennessee and Kentucky, their elkhides black with bear grease and stinking of beaver medicine.

"That fool," Ugardes said under his breath. "Doesn't he know better than to come in here? With the feeling against the Yankees he's liable to be torn apart."

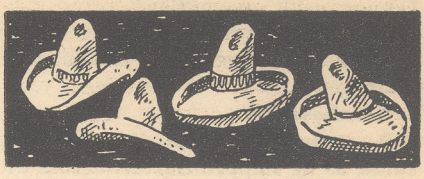
"He's drunk," Ferrar said.

Garrett pushed his way heedlessly through the crowd, ignoring the curses and hateful looks that followed him. He halted before Ferrar's table, hooking thumbs in his waistband and swaggering drunkenly.

"I thought I'd better check on you. Manatte was a fool to trust you. Ran right to your greaser friends with the news."

Ferrar felt his fingers close around the edge of the table. "I haven't said anything you wouldn't, Garrett, and you'd better not stay in here. You're taking too big a chance."

"But you aren't, are you?" Garrett asked, swaying toward Ferrar. "Put



you in a bunch of *chilis* and nobody could tell the difference."

Ugardes's voice was a drawn blade. "*Señores*, you are insulting my friend."

"I expect," Garrett said. "Too yellow to dodge for himself. Has to hide behind the Mexican army."

"Are you blind, as well as a pig?" snapped Ugardes. His face was dead white. "If Ferrar hit you and a fight started in here, you'd be torn to pieces. The feeling is so bad against you the slightest thing will set it off. Ferrar is giving you this chance. Take it and get out."

"Git out, hell," Garrett said. He grabbed Ferrar's shoulder, twisting him around in his chair. "Did you think I wouldn't follow you in here just because this place was filled with Mexicans?"

Ferrar was trembling, unable to contain himself much longer. "I notice you didn't come while you were alone," he said thinly.

Already there was an ominous muttering from the crowd, and Ugardes grabbed Garrett's arm. "They'll kill you if anything starts, *señor*. Will you get out?"

Garrett jerked his arm free. "There ain't enough greasers in all Santa Fe to cause us trouble. You're the one who'd better get out, Ugardes. In a couple of days there won't be any *chili* army left."

"You make a bad mistake," said Ugardes in a voice so low it was barely audible. "I am not so noble as Ferrar.

Do not insult my service."

"Service?" snorted Garrett. "A bunch of donkeys in rags with a sheepherder for a general—"

"*Pordiosero*—"

It escaped Ugardes in a hissing curse, as he slapped Garrett across the face. For one instant, the immense muleskinner stared at Ugardes, disbelief in his gaping mouth. Then he made a snarling sound and lunged for the captain. Savage vindication in his face, Ugardes jumped backward, unsheathing his saber. But it caught on the underside of the table, and Garrett reached him before he could bring it into play. Garrett's blow made a sharp, meaty crack in the room. It bent Ugardes back across the *chusa* table like a bow.

Ferrar lunged up out of his chair at Garrett, but Pitch caught his arm, spinning him halfway around. Ferrar saw Garrett snatch the saber from Ugardes's limp hand and swing it high. With only that moment left, Ferrar sank his fist into Pitch's belly with all his weight behind it. Pitch doubled over with a gasp. Ferrar tore free and threw himself bodily at Garrett as the saber swung down.

He smashed heavily into the man, knocking him aside. The sword bit into the edge of the *chusa* table an inch from Ugardes's hip. Ferrar carried Garrett on down the table and the man had to let go of the saber to catch hold of the edge and stop himself.

Before Ferrar could recover, he felt the man's arm snake around his neck. The great bicep bulged. There was the pop of tendons. A shooting pain in Ferrar's head. Holding Ferrar in the crook of his elbow, Garrett brought his other fist into Ferrar's belly.

The wind left Ferrar in a gasp. He hung there in a moment of limp helplessness, sensing the shift of Garrett's weight as the man brought that fist back for another blow. With the last of his will, Ferrar doubled up and jackknifed a knee to block the fist.

He heard Garrett grunt in pain as his fist cracked against Ferrar's knee. That arm around Ferrar's neck tightened spasmodically. The congestion in Ferrar's head was so great now he thought it would burst. Sound and sense spun. He felt Garrett shifting for another blow.

With a gasp, Ferrar brought his right arm around behind Garrett, into the kidneys. Garrett's grunt was full of pain. Ferrar hit him there again, a vicious hooking blow. This time he felt it slack Garrett's death lock on his head. He tore free. Garrett tried to follow up and grapple again, but Ferrar hit him in the belly. It stopped the giant for a moment, pain twisting his face.

Ferrar knew he would be finished if Garrett could get in close and grapple again. As the big man recovered and took a step toward Ferrar, arms outthrust, Ferrar weaved off to one side, brushing aside the right arm, smashing at his belly again. Garrett grunted sickly and doubled forward. It left his face exposed. Ferrar put all his weight behind the blow. Garrett's head jerked up and his whole body spun. The table caught him waist-high and bent him over. It left the back of his neck open. Ferrar made a hammer of his fist and hit the man there.

Garrett stiffened, then went limp, rolling off the table and onto the floor. Ferrar caught at the table to keep from going down, surprised at how drained he was. Garrett lay unmoving at his feet. The room was filled with

wild shouting and cursing, the sound of cracking furniture and vicious blows.

Ferrar turned to see the *chusa* dealer and the bartender struggling with Pitch against the bar. Ugardes was on his knees astraddle one of the trappers on the floor, slamming his head into the hard adobe.

The other two trappers were struggling in the midst of half a dozen Mexicans, and more *peons* were streaming in the door, drawn by the fight. The bartender broke a bottle over Pitch's head, and the man went to his knees. Ferrar staggered over to Ugardes, pawing at him.

"Stop it, Seguro, we've got to get them out of here before a mob gathers, get off him—"

Ugardes spun over onto one knee, eyes blank with rage. Then his eyes cleared, and he saw who it was. Shaking his head, he got to his feet. His black hair was torn from its queue and hanging down over his eyes.

"Get that one out," he shouted to the bartender. "Get him out before he's killed."

The *chusa* dealer and the barman got the stunned Pitch between them and half dragged him to the rear door. The trapper on the floor rolled over with a groan. The other two broke and ran suddenly before the growing crowd jamming in the front door. Ferrar staggered back to Garrett, rolling him beneath the *chusa* table and standing in front of him.

"That way," he shouted, pointing toward the rear door. The first wave of *peons* streamed past him after the trappers, and there was a momentary break. He caught Garrett by the collar and dragged him over to one of the side doors, rolling him into a small room. There was an outer door here leading onto a back alley. Garrett was coming around as Ferrar dumped him against a wall.

"You'd better get out fast," Ferrar told him. "If they catch you, they'll cut you to pieces."

Garrett got to his feet, sagging heavily against the wall. His eyes were bloodshot and vindictive.

"This isn't the end, Ferrar," he said thickly. "You'd better not stay in this town when Kearny comes."

Ferrar slammed the door on him and went back into the bar. More *peons* were coming in from the front now and milling around Ugardes, who stood at the bar with a big drink. He hailed Ferrar with a grin.

"Are they all safe?" Ferrar asked in a low voice.

"A bunch of *vaqueros* are still chasing the trappers," Ugardes laughed. "But those mountain men have long legs. What a fight, Antonio! We haven't had so much fun since the bull got loose in the palace. I owe you a drink. Garrett would have cut me in two with that sword." He poured Ferrar a drink and then jumped up onto the bar with his own, raising the glass high.

"A toast, *compadres*, a toast to Antonio, the *gringo*-killer. He saved my life. He defended the honor of Santa Fe. Truly he is a *hidalgo* and one of us."

A knot of the men who knew Ferrar gathered around, slapping him on the back and making obscene jokes at the expense of the *gringos*. Their hands were callused and the reek of them was strong and it was the kind of a thing that struck deep at the roots of a man. Ferrar took a drink, smiling around at their sweating, grinning faces. It was as if the old life had re-

turned, with all the strange tensions and conflicts swept away.

CHAPTER TWO

Primitive

SAN FRANCISCO Street was full of black shadows and thick silences when Ferrar and Ugardes and Uncle Hondo left La Fonda near midnight. They crossed the plaza with a hot little wind rustling tawny dust against them, passed the deserted market place, lonely and ghostly now in the moonlight. Ahead of them lay the Palace of the Governors, the center of Mexican rule for all New Mexico. It was a long building of adobe with towers at either end. The arcade running the length of its front was supported by a row of peeled *puntales.*

"What do you keep looking around for?" Ferrar asked Uncle Hondo.

"Is somebody following us?" muttered the old Mexican.

"You are an old *burro,*" chuckled Captain Ugardes.

"Even a hair casts a shadow," moaned Uncle Hondo. "We had better be careful going home, Antonito. That Cimarron Garrett does not give up so soon—"

He broke off with a sharp intake of breath as a figure suddenly stepped from the black shadows beneath the palace arcade. Ferrar wheeled sharply. But he saw that it was Tomas. His immaculately white doeskins turned him to a pale wraith in the darkness. He stopped before them, staring with enigmatic eyes at Ferrar.

"Señorita Garcia," he murmured.

Ugardes looked with envy at Ferrar. "She wishes to see you, Ferrar. I wish I were so honored."

Ferrar grinned, gripping his hand. "See you tomorrow, Seguro. Uncle Hondo, it'll be safe for you to go home. It isn't you Garrett wants."

Ferrar left them before the palace and followed the Navajo down past Burro Alley, where a single burro still stood, loaded down with faggots, his master rolled up in a blanket against the wall, fast asleep. The massive oak door of Morina Garcia's gambling *sala* was half a block beyond the alley. It opened into a hall which led to the large gambling-rooms at the rear. Ferrar could hear the click of the roulette wheels and the metallic voices of *chusa* dealers. Before reaching the gambling-rooms, however, Tomas turned through a door halfway down the hall that opened into the woman's private chambers.

Morina Garcia's parlor was probably the most sumptuous room in Santa Fe. The floor was of red Spanish tile; a polychrome frieze ran around the wall. Hangings of velvet and silk draped corners of pier glass mirrors that reflected the pendants of the cut-glass chandelier in a hundred glittering shards. Diagonally across one corner was a Turkish divan upholstered in jade silk. Upon this sat Morina Garcia.

Light from the candles in their silver sconces caught up a soft blue-black glow in her hair. Bare shoulders gleamed like alabaster against the contrast of a taffeta dress red as blood. A single cabochon emerald rode the deep upper swell of her breast.

Until this woman had come to Santa Fe, two years before, Ferrar had thought Julia Manatte was the woman he wanted, had been on the point of asking her to marry him. Then Morina

Garcia had come north from Mexico City, filling the whole province with the legends of her fabulous rise from a ragged *peon* to to one of the most famous gamblers of the period.

Within a few short days after the establishment of her gambling-salon in Santa Fe, every man in town was vying for her affections. A general had fought a duel with a judge, and had gotten but a rose from her hair for his trouble. Captain Ugardes had sworn he would die for her, and all she asked of him was an introduction to Tony Ferrar.

"Antonito."

Just the single, husky word from her. But it sent an excitement through him he had never felt with Julia. Her magnetism seemed to permeate the room.

"*Chica*," he murmured.

Her eyes became veiled. "You are the only man in Santa Fe who has the right to use that name. Perhaps I should take away the privilege. You have not been to see me for so long."

"Business," he said.

"Like smuggling your furs into the hills pelt by pelt so you can make up a fur train that will run through Armijo's blockade to St. Louis?" she asked.

His eyes widened in surprise. "Do you know everything in this town?"

"Everything." Her ripe lips spread in an indulgent smile, and she rose from the divan. "If I help you get those furs through, will you help me in something?"

He could not help chuckling. "It's a long time since we made a deal."

"Your greatest threat is Armijo's fur patrol, no?"

"If they catch me, I don't have enough men to fight them."

She moved toward him, voice growing husky. "What route were you planning to take?"

"Glorieta Pass, Apache Canyon."

"Don't do it. That is where the patrol will be tonight."

He caught her by the arms, and the satiny feel of them went through him like fire. "*Chica*, you're wonderful. What do you want from St. Louis?"

"Not from St. Louis," she said, looking down at her fine strong hands. "I have helped you, Antonito; now you will help me. Have you heard of the Cordenza note?"

The humor left him in a rush, his hands slid off her arms. Face tight with wariness, he played it close to the vest.

"No. What is it?"

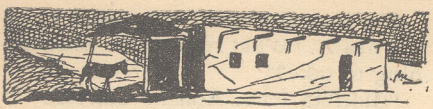
"As you know, Captain Cordenza was bringing four companies of cavalry from Chihuahua to help Governor Armijo here. The Americans now claim Cordenza has been captured, and they have his note of surrender as proof. But it is not his note. It is a forgery."

"How can you be sure?"

"My agents inform me that Cordenza was not captured. He is but a day's march from Santa Fe. Have I ever been mistaken before, Antonito?"

"If anybody has the truth, you have."

"I am glad you have so much faith in me," she said. "Governor Armijo is not so easy to convince. You know him under pressure. He is ready to run at the drop of a pin. If that forged note reaches him, he will be convinced Cordenza is captured. He will think he can't stand against Kearny with the dragoons he has here. We are afraid he will capitulate and give Santa Fe to the Americans."



"I thought Armijo knew Cordenza's handwriting."

"The Americans must have taken that into consideration," she said. "Maybe they actually got some of Cordenza's handwriting and copied it. I don't know the details of their plot. All I know is it will lose the war for us if the note reaches Armijo. All the talking we can do in the world won't convince him once he gets it into his head that Cordenza has been captured." She looked up. "I know Manatte sent word to Kearny that he was trying to get you to take the note through to Armijo for them."

"Your spies have been working overtime," he said wryly.

Her chin lifted. "I also know that you refused Manatte. I am proud of you, Antonito. Now you will get the note for us. We will see that it does not fall into Armijo's hands."

Ferrar moved restlessly to a heavily shuttered window. "There must be somebody else who could do as much."

"Nobody!" She rose with a sensuous hiss of taffeta across a full hip. "You are the one Kearny is expecting. He will not trust another without proper credentials from Manatte, which we can't get. You can't ride the surface any longer, Antonito. It's fine to gamble and drink and sing and be everybody's friend in normal times. But there's a war going on. You are on one side or the other. Think of your people."

"My people?"

She came toward him. "You are more Mexican than Yankee. Perhaps your father was Yankee, but it is where you live that counts, who are your friends. Men like Uncle Hondo and Ugardes would die for you. Will you let them down now? If Kearny takes over we will be nothing but dogs in the dust. You know the Yankee attitude toward us. Greasers—" Her lips writhed on the word. "You know what will happen the minute Santa Fe is in American hands."

He frowned with the picture of Cimarron Garrett before him. Somehow it symbolized what had been brought to his attention so often these last years, the contempt so many Americans seemed to hold for the Mexicans here. And yet something else was trying to resolve itself in his mind.

"It's funny," he said. "I was given the same kind of talk earlier this evening. Only the Mexican rule was represented as despotic then."

"Despotic?" She laughed softly. "Your mother must have told you what went on under the Spanish regime here, before the Mexicans revolted. Haven't we advanced a thousand years from that? You've been listening to the wrong people, Antonito. You know where your heart is. Say you'll do it. Say you'll start tonight, and meet me at the old Pecos pueblo tomorrow night after dark, with that note."

He shook his head, realizing how right both Morina and Manatte had been. He had ridden the surface too long. And now, when he wanted to look beneath and see the hidden issues at stake, he couldn't. His indecision must have shown in his face. The woman came closer. Her voice dropped to a husky whisper.

"If you will not do it for your people, Antonito, will you do it for me?"

He felt the blood thickening in his throat. "You—*Chica?*"

"You told me once you'd do anything for me."

"But this—"

"Yes—this."

The kiss started as something rich and ripe; suddenly it was savage. Her lips flared beneath his, the curves of her body flattened to him, he was swept by the passion of it. Finally she pulled her head back, staring heavy-lidded into his eyes.

"If you start tonight, you can reach Kearny at Las Vegas by dawn."

He shook his head, trying to pull away. "I don't know. I can't think with you this close."

"Do you have to think?"

"Yes."

She tried to kiss him again. He pulled free. The pupils of her eyes distended.

"*Tu barrachon*," she hissed. "I was right. You are nothing but a drunken fool meant to spend his nights in some cantina, swilling and gambling. *Chica!* You shall never use that name again. How could I have ever thought you worthy of my confidence?"

All the primitive, savage force of her Indian blood darkened her face and blazed in her eyes. He could not help the sardonic smile that crossed his face.

"You should have done this in the first place," he said. "I always thought you much more fascinating in your barbaric state."

"*Bribon!*" she panted.

With a husky curse, she wheeled for a tankard of brandy which sat on one of the marquetry tables. He had already reached the door and swung it open by the time she wheeled and threw the tankard. The silver pitcher made a clanging crash against the door, as he pulled it shut behind him.

CHAPTER THREE

The Toll of the Bell

TONY'S father had been an Irish trapper for Hudson's Bay who had drifted down to Taos and Santa Fe in the early part of the century, establishing a fur business there. Prospering, he had married the daughter of one of the most aristocratic houses in the province. With her had come the dower of a sprawling hacienda on the hills overlooking Santa Fe. The walls were adobe, thick and high, built in the days when Indian attacks necessitated that the home be a fortress. On the death of his parents, Tony had taken over the fur business, using much of the house on the hill as a storage place for the pelts his trappers brought in every spring.

He knocked three times on the immense door of the *zaguan*, and it was opened for him by Uncle Hondo. He rode through this wagon entrance into the patio.

"Troops have been up in the hills half a dozen times today, watching the house," Uncle Hondo said. "They know you make a run for it soon now, Antonito?"

"Do you think they suspect anything?"

"No. The last load of pelts went out in a *carretta*, covered by a load of onions. We unloaded it at the old wood cutters' house. If troops were watching, they will think we were merely giving him his winter's supply of onions, as we always do."

Ferrar nodded in satisfaction. They had been sneaking furs out like that for days now, under loads of vegeta-

bles, beneath the cover of faggots on a wood cutter's burro, even under the shirts and *tilmas* of laborers and peasants whose comings and goings around the Ferrar house were so usual they would not arouse suspicion. Each load had been picked up in a safe spot along the road or in the hills and transferred to the train of mules Ferrar's men held back in the mountains.

"And now we are ready, old one," Ferrar said. "Get your horse and we will ride."

North of Santa Fe the cedars filled the hills with their stunted ghosts, and the yucca stood like lonely candles in the pale moonlight. They picked up the Pecuris Trail and followed it for an hour and then turned off for the meeting-place in the mountains. Deep in timber, at a deserted and crumbling hacienda, they found the mules. Twenty-five of them, their straw-matted *aparejos* bulging with the swart beaver pelts that had piled up in Tony Ferrar's warehouse since Governor Armijo had closed the Santa Fe Trail to any trade with the United States.

Little Joe was standing by the lead mule, a short, squat, bowlegged man in white cotton shirt and buckskin leggins. He looked like a gypsy, with the brass ring in his ear and the spotted bandanna drawn over his greasy black hair. But he claimed pure Castilian descent, and would cheerfully knife anybody who doubted it.

"Were you followed?" he asked.

"We circled back three times to make sure we weren't," Ferrar said. "I think we can start safely. Morina gave me a tip that the fur patrol would be in Apache Canyon tonight. The only thing we'll have to worry about is the customs troops at Taos."

"I don't know," Uncle Hondo said darkly. "In Santa Cruz it is said that the toll of the bell is not for the dead, but to remind us we too may die tomorrow."

"And the time I will really start worrying is when you quit grumbling, you old *bribon*," leered Little Joe. "*Vamanos*, you lazy *burros*. Let's go!"

He swung onto his ratty little pony and the four other drivers stepped into saddle, prodding the mules with their pointed poles. There was a great groaning and grumbling and twitching of ears, and the train was under way.

They found the Pecuris Trail again, and turned north. It led through dry washes where *chamiza* turned the sand to gold and primrose lay like patches of blood so red it was almost black in the feeble moonlight. They passed Cuyamangue while it was still dark, a huddle of adobe huts surrounded by fields of alfalfa sighing like a lonely woman in the wind. And beyond that was Pojoaque, with the Indians sleeping in their mud hovels and a dog howling at the cavalcade passing above the town through the hills.

And all the time they were rising toward the mountains around Taos. The hour before dawn was the blackest, with the stars blinking out. Then light began to come, milky at first, finally flushed by a rising sun. They were south of the Pecuris pueblo now, climbing a shelving trail that looked across a vast expanse of timbered ridges and sheltered valleys. It was a country Ferrar loved, but somehow the familiar exhilaration, the sense of freedom did not come. His mind was

still on the Cordenza letter.

He had tried to tell himself that he had done right, that he would be gone a month, and it would all be resolved before his return. But that did not satisfy him. Yet, even if he returned now, what could he do? Was Morina right, was his allegiance to the people of Santa Fe? Or was his white heritage too strong? It seemed that he could not turn either way without betraying someone with whom he had ties. It would do no good to go back, with the decision unresolved.

"What are you always looking behind for, old one?" Little Joe asked.

"Didn't something move up there on the hill?" Uncle Hondo said.

"Yes, and we were followed all the way from Santa Fe. By our shadows. You live in dreams, you old *bribon*."

With the full light of the sun came the cry of a great blue fool hen perched beside the trail in one of the spruces. Ferrar's buckskin shied at the sound and he fought it with numbed hands. The shadows swallowed the canyons and gorges beneath him with hungry mouths.

They reached the top of the cut and began descending. The trail shelved down through a deep canyon, with the silvery flash of a river far below. Ferrar's attention was still turned down when the sound came.

It was like a great clap of thunder. The buckskin reared, bugling shrilly. The mules brayed behind Ferrar and began to bolt, banking up behind the buckskin in wild ranks. One of them was shoved off the edge and crashed down the cliffside like a broken rag doll.

"Let the mules go, Antonito," shouted Little Joe. "They'll all go off the side."

Another shot crashed, its echoes rolling across the gorge. Ferrar put the spurs to his buckskin. The frenzied beast squealed and plunged forward down the rocky trail, with the burros streaming out behind.

All Ferrar could do was let his frantic horse have its head on the narrow shelf. He risked one glance up but could see nothing on the timbered slope above. The trail was getting steeper, dropping swiftly toward the level of the canyon floor. His horse stumbled and almost went down. He knew it was only a matter of time before it spilled, or was shot from beneath him. He heard another mule slide off the treacherous shoulder behind him and plummet down the steep escarpment with a lost bray.

He saw a point ahead where the cliff became a talus slope and knew it was his only chance. If he were thrown beyond it, where the wall became sheer again, he would be broken to bits before reaching bottom.

Another volley of shots put his buckskin into a new frenzy. He tried to pull it down before the slope. It fought the bit, stumbled. He realized it was going down and kicked free, diving right over the horse's head. Its impetus threw him far enough to strike a shoulder of the slope. He sprawled flat, stunned, and slipped and flopped through the shale. It seemed as if he slid a thousand feet before he rolled off onto a sandy beach.

He lay there a moment, dazed, bleeding. His shirt had been ripped completely off his back, his body was a mass of bloody bruises and wounds from the rocks, his leggins hung in shreds. As from far off, he heard the shots begin again. Sand kicked up a foot from him.

Groaning, he rolled over and crawled into the water. It cleansed his wounds and revived him. He threw himself deep into the current and let it carry him down till he reached a rocky shallow where he could cross into the timber on the other bank.

Crouched here, sobbing with exhaustion, he could see the mules just streaming out into the floor of the canyon from the end of the trail. Some plunged into the river, and their pack saddles immediately overturned them and they were swept downstream until the packs were torn off by the rocks and they could start swimming for the opposite side. Others charged on down the other side of the canyon, braying wildly. Little Joe plunged off the trail and into the river. A shot chipped rock off in the face of his horse and the man had a wild time forcing him into the current.

Ferrar came to his feet and ran toward the point Little Joe would reach. The horse lunged onto the bank, dripping wet. Little Joe saw Ferrar in the timber and reined the squealing animal toward him. He dropped off, holding the reins, and they both hunkered down behind a screen of brush, looking out at the carnage. Then they realized how silent it had become.

"The shots, they have stopped," Little Joe said.

"Sure they have," Ferrar said bleakly. "They've done their job. Half the pelts have been ripped to pieces on the rocks and the other half will be swept all the way down to Santa Fe in this river."

"Is right," Little Joe said mournfully. "A dozen of them mules must have gone over the side. St. Looey will get no fur this year."

Ferrar shook his head. "What are we thinking of? The hell with the furs. What about the men?"

"I saw Ramirez go over the side with the mules. The others were ahead of me. They were chasing what few mules got into timber, the last I saw."

The clatter of hoofs on the rocky trail brought both their heads up. Uncle Hondo had been at the rear of the column. His frightened horse had settled down to a spooky, skittish trot. The old man was bent over the big saddle horn, hanging on grimly, his wizened body jerked from side to side.

Ferrar's face went white. Both he and Little Joe left the trees at a run, plunging into the creek, fighting its turbulent spring current across to the other side. Ferrar came out a hundred yards farther down than where he had gone in, crouched on the white sand, sobbing for air. The old man's horse clattered from the trail onto the beach.

Gasping, Ferrar rose to his feet and stumbled to catch it before the animal went by. He blocked it up against the canyon wall, got its bit. Little Joe was there to help him lift Uncle Hondo off. They lowered the old man to the ground. His eyes fluttered open, he tried to grin.

"They are right about the bell, in Santa Cruz, no?"

Ferrar clutched his shoulders. "Uncle Hondo, who did it, who was it?"

"I get a look at one of them—" The old man broke off, to cough feebly. Blood bubbled from his mouth. He settled back, fighting for breath. Finally the words left him, on a dying whisper. "A man with long yellow hair, and a beard, all yellow—all yellow—"

Ferrar stared down at him, with bleak eyes. His voice, when he finally spoke, was barely audible. "Cimarron Garrett."

Chapter Four

"I Belong to Both."

THEY got back to Rancho Ferrar near dusk, with Uncle Hondo's body wrapped in his poncho and hung across his horse. Little Joe went to the cathedral in town and came back with the priest and after a simple service they buried Uncle Hondo by torchlight in the cemetery where Sean Ferrar and his wife lay, and a dozen of the retainers and faithful *peons* who had died in their service.

Before the services were over, Ferrar saw a wagon coming up the road from town, and when he led the procession back to the house, it was waiting before the front door. Julia Manatte had just gotten down from the front seat, with one of George Manatte's teamsters still up in the wagon, holding the reins.

"I heard Little Joe was in town for the priest," she said. "What happened, Tony? The caretaker at the church said something about Uncle Hondo."

Bitterness and deep fatigue turned his face gaunt, forming shadowy hollows beneath the cheekbones, lending his eyes a sunken, feverish look. He stared down at her without answering, unable to believe she did not know. Her face was thrown into deep shadow by the hood of a cloak that covered her to the knees, but he could see her eyes, guileless and deeply worried.

"I guess your father doesn't tell you the dirtier side of his business," he said. His voice was ugly. "That was Uncle Hondo we buried up on the hill. My fur train was attacked. They couldn't be satisfied with merely making sure the furs were ruined or lost. They had to kill a harmless old man."

"Who had to? Tony, please, who had to—"

"Cimarron Garrett."

Her lips parted, the blood left her face till it had a parchment hue. There was a restless murmur from the people around them. A torch spat softly. Then she began shaking her head.

"Tony, you can't believe that, you can't! Dad had nothing to do with it. If Cimarron did it, Dad didn't know about it."

"What did your father want to do? Make me think Morina attacked me, make me turn on her? Then maybe send you up to convince me when I came back, is that it? So I'd take the letter through for you? Only Cimarron made the mistake of getting seen. Maybe that's why he killed Uncle Hondo. He knew Uncle Hondo had seen him—"

"No, no, Tony—" She was almost crying. "Dad wouldn't do anything like that, he wouldn't." She came up against him, seeming to forget the rest of the people, her thrown-back head tossing off the hood to let the torchlight shine like wet gold in her hair.

"Did I ever lie to you, Tony? Even after that Garcia woman came between us, did I lie to you? Maybe you're right, maybe it was Cimarron Garrett. But he doesn't represent all the Americans here, any more than Morina Garcia represents the Mexicans—"

"Cimarron works for your father, doesn't he?"

"Yes, but—"

"Just how bad does your father want the Americans in Santa Fe?" he asked her.

She pulled away, staring blankly up at him.

"That's what I thought, you're afraid

to answer it," he said. "And just how far would he go to bring them in?" He paused, and her lips parted slowly, as if she would speak, but she did not.

He said bitterly, "Your father wanted me to get the Cordenza letter of surrender. You tell him I've gone to get it."

She pulled away from him, forcing the words out. "Who—who will you bring it to?"

"Who do you think?"

She grabbed his arm as he tried to wheel away. "You can't do it, you can't betray your own people."

"I guess I didn't really know who my people were, up till now," he said. "You decided for me, by killing one of them."

He tore loose and went inside with long, savage paces. She tried to follow, but the servants blocked her off, coming after him. He told one of them to saddle up his best horse. The powder in his Dragoon cap-and-ball was wet from his swim in the river, and he reloaded the cylinder, primers and all, before buckling the five-shot back on. Then he hooked the powder horn onto the other side of his belt and put the buckskin bullet pouch in a coat pocket and went out into the patio, where the horse was saddled.

Little Joe wanted to go with him, but he knew he could travel with more secrecy alone. Julia's wagon was gone when he rode through the gate in the *zaguan*, and turned down toward the Santa Fe Trail.

Through his bleak fury, his grief at Uncle Hondo's death, one thought drove him. George Manatte had always been highly representative, to Ferrar, of the Americans in Santa Fe. And now what had happened became just as representative of how it would be if the Americans took over. If they were capable of killing one innocent man to gain their ends, they were capable of killing a thousand.

In this bitter mood he reached Glorieta Pass, with the cedars standing like stunted ghosts on the slopes. He passed through Apache Canyon and went by the cutoff to Pecos, the deserted pueblo at which Morina had promised to meet him if he got the letter for her. He knew she would hear of what had happened, would know he was going after the note, and would be waiting at the pueblo for him on his return.

He pushed his horse to the small farm of a *peon* he knew and had something to eat and got another horse. He reached the canyon in the mesa south of Las Vegas about noon of the next day, where a Yankee patrol picked him up and took him to Las Vegas, a hundred squalid adobes huddled along the west bank of the Gallinas. Kearny and half a dozen officers were gathered in one of the larger buildings in a feeble attempt to escape the heat.

Ferrar had dealt with Kearny several times before in his business along the Trail, and Manatte had already sent word that he was trying to get Ferrar to carry the note, so Kearny accepted him without much question. Cordenza's letter of surrender was a short missive, written in poor Spanish, stipulating two terms beside those offered by the Americans. All the American officers seemed sure that Armijo would either capitulate or surrender once he saw the note and realized his main hope of support was cut off.

They fed Ferrar and replaced his beaten-down animal with an army horse and a patrol escorted him out as far as the mesa. In the late afternoon he passed Starvation Peak, with its

Penitente cross stamped forebodingly against the sky, and San Jose, where the dogs set up a howl at the drumming of his horse's hoofs. He was stupefied with fatigue, now, and rocking heavily in the saddle. He lost count of the times he fell asleep and jerked up barely in time to keep from pitching from the horse.

It was already evening when he sighted the turnoff to Pecos ahead. It was here the first shot smashed out. The bullet struck the road directly in front of him, and the excited horse veered and pirouetted and reared high, pitching him off its rump.

He hit heavily on the bank of an arroyo and rolled to its bottom and lay there, stunned. Dimly he could hear the tattoo of the horse's hoofs, racing away into the night. He rolled over, shaking his head, and pulled out his Dragoon.

He could not be sure, but he thought the shot had come from the other side of the road. The arroyo he was in pinched off right against the cutoff into Pecos. He lay there a moment, thinking back. He had told Julia where he was going, and he knew who this was.

For a moment he had the savage impulse to stop and fight and get Cimarron Garrett for Uncle Hondo. But the Cordenza letter was more important. He had to get it to Morina first.

He crawled to the end of the arroyo and then snaked up into the cover of scrub timber. It was what they had been waiting for. From across the road came the boom of a shot. Lead crackled through piñons a few feet from him. He fired four times at the gun flash and then turned and ran as hard as he could into timber.

His volley had made them seek cover, for the return shot did not come till he was deep in the trees. He reloaded his gun as he ran, measuring powder roughly into each chamber, spilling a little each time, seating the gray lead balls with the ramrod. With the cylinder reloaded, he fumbled for caps in his pocket, thumbing them home on the nipples at the rear of each chamber. He was in broken country by the time he finished, looking down into Pecos.

An early moon had risen, its light making a hazy mystery of the ancient Indian town. Pestilence and war had wiped out its people long ago, and it stood ancient and deserted. He sought vainly in its courtyards for sight of Morina's coach.

He knew he would be foolish to remain in the open, if he had to wait for her, and dropped down a crumbling shale bank to the buildings, stepping into the first door that had not fallen in. The darkness was musty with the odor of ancient things. Broken pottery crumbled beneath his feet.

Then the waiting began. The ghosts of this lost city whispered through its countless chambers. He remembered stories of a sacred fire that never died and of human sacrifices that still went on in hidden *kivas*. Then he realized it was not his imagination causing the whispers in the crumbling buildings. While he had been watching the approach, his ambushers could have moved around and come in from behind.

He heard the distinct crunch of pottery underfoot, from far within the city. He turned to stare achingly into the blackness. No telling how many passages led into this chamber.

Then a new rattling broke into his tension. The coach came up on the crest and clattered down the age-old

trail. There were half a dozen outriders in blue jackets and red helmets, their lance tips silvery flickers of light. Captain Seguro Ugardes led them, a proud figure in his high-cantled saddle.

The coach pulled up with a flourish, its matched team stamping, and Tomas jumped from beside the driver to open the door. The troop of lancers formed ranks of their prancing horses, and faced the coach at attention as Morina Garcia stepped out.

"Seguro," Ferrar called. "*Chica.* Get out of the open. Manatte's got his men here."

His voice echoed into the crumbling chambers and died. Out in the courtyard, Morina turned toward the sound of his voice. She had on a hooded cloak which dropped her face into black shadow; diamonds glittered on her fingers. Finally she laughed huskily.

"Antonito, how would Manatte know we were here?"

"Move her out of here, Ugardes," Ferrar called desperately. "They hit me on the road, I tell you!"

He saw the sharp toss of her head, the motion of anger he knew so well. There was a pause, then she laughed again. "It is all right, Antonito. We are safe. There has been a mistake. You can come out."

"A mistake?"

"I assure you, you are safe. Come out."

Slowly he moved into the open, gun held tight, peering at the doorways of the buildings that circled the great courtyard. But no shots came. Finally he reached Morina, gazing at her wonderingly. At that instant, there was a faint movement from the first-story roof of a building which formed the balcony of the second story.

"*Señor,*" Morina called sharply, as if to halt something.

But the man had already come into view, sliding over the edge of the balcony, to hang and drop to the earth below. It was Cimarron Garrett, carrying a long Yerger rifle, with the moon making a golden mane of his yellow hair. Then there was a faint crunch of pottery behind Ferrar, and he wheeled to see Pitch emerge from the doorway next to the one he had stood in.

"You are both fools!" Morina said disgustedly.

"How the hell did we know he was coming here?" Cimarron said. "He was seen talking to Julia Manatte last. You told us he'd already refused to get the letter for you."

The whole thing struck Ferrar with a sick shock, as he wheeled back to Morina. "I thought Cimarron and Pitch were Manatte's boys."

"Everybody else in Santa Fe thinks they are too," she said. "It suits me to have it so."

"Then *you* killed Uncle Hondo." It left Ferrar in a thin whisper.

The toss of her head slid the hood off, and moonlight made a blue-black flash in her dark hair. She stepped forward, reaching for his hand.

"Antonito, they didn't mean to. It was an accident. I had to do that, don't you see? I couldn't let you leave with your furs. You were the only one who could get the letter through. But Uncle Hondo was an accident. Cimarron told me. He was shooting at the mules—"

"The hell he was!" Ferrar pulled away from her, face white. "You knew I thought Cimarron was Manatte's man. You knew I'd get that letter for you if I was convinced Manatte killed Uncle Hondo."

"Antonito—"

"No!" He pulled away again, staring

at her. His breathing made a thin sound in the moment of silence. "I brought the letter to you because I realized the people who had killed Uncle Hondo would be capable of doing the same thing again to attain their ends. Capable of doing it on any scale, one man or a thousand. But I brought it to the wrong one, didn't I? How many more people do you think you'll kill?"

He wheeled to Ugardes. "Seguro, you aren't going to let her get away with it! Can't you see how she operates now?"

There was a hurt confusion in Ugardes's face as he looked at Morina. She turned swiftly to him, putting more intensity into her voice than Ferrar had ever heard before.

"Seguro, you can see what I had to do. It was only to save our people. Uncle Hondo was an accident, I swear it. But if it had to be, isn't it better to have one suffer that many may be saved?"

Ugardes turned to Ferrar, shaking his head. "She's right, Tony. It was tragic that it had to be Uncle Hondo. But now we must finish it."

Morina faced Ferrar, holding out her hand. "Let us have it, now. Don't try to destroy it in this last moment. You wouldn't have a chance."

Ferrar realized how right she was. Cimarron held that Yerger on him now and Pitch had a big Cherington pistol pointed at his back. Sick with his own helplessness, he took the letter from his pocket, handed it to her. She opened it, read it, smiled triumphantly.

"Hadn't we better destroy it at once?" Ugardes said.

"I want to know whether it is a forgery," she said. "There is a man in Santa Fe who knows Cordenza's handwriting. We will have to leave Ferrar here. You can understand how dangerous it would be to let him go. When it is over, he will go free. Does that suit you, *Segurito?*"

Ferrar saw the captain's young eyes widen. "*Segurito?*"

"Yes," she murmured. "Why not? And there will still be but one man in Santa Fe who calls me *Chica*. That will be you, *Segurito*."

Ferrar saw a wild flame of adoration light Ugardes's eyes. He wondered if his own eyes had looked that way when Morina told him the same thing, so long ago. The woman had turned to Cimarron, her brows raised in a faint inquisition.

"We'll hold him here till we hear from you," the yellow-haired man said. "We'll do that."

She wheeled and stepped into the coach. The Navajo climbed back onto the seat beside the driver. Ugardes stepped into his saddle, turned to look down at Ferrar. That shine had left his eyes. They were beginning to look puzzled again.

"I'm sorry, *amigo*. I hope we meet again when it is over."

He raised his arm, dropped it, the troop wheeled and broke into a gallop after the coach, as it clattered up the rise. Then Cimarron told Pitch to get Ferrar's gun. The man stepped in behind Ferrar, pulled the cap-and-ball from Ferrar's hand.

"Now we'll wait a while, so they won't hear the shots," Cimarron said. "Captain Ugardes didn't look too convinced."

Ferrar's sick defeat deepened as he realized what they meant. He knew it was only a few seconds now. But he couldn't just let them shoot him. Not just bow his head and submit. He felt

the sweat start out on his forehead, felt all the muscles of his body contract. A surprised look crossed Cimarron's face. He jerked his rifle up, till it covered Ferrar's chest.

The shot made a great smashing sound. But it did not come from Cimarron's gun. His mouth dropped open, he staggered backward with shock making a grotesque mask of his face, and a red hole staining his chest.

At the same time, Pitch swung away from Ferrar, firing his Cherington at the rise of land. He realized his mistake an instant after his shot, and tried to wheel back and jerk Ferrar's Dragoon up in his other hand. But Ferrar had already spun around and was lunging into him. He knocked the gun back down as it went off, crashing into Pitch so hard the man fell.

Ferrar went down with him, catching the Dragoon and twisting it from his hand as they fell. He struck the ground on his knees, astraddle Pitch, and raised up, with the heavy cap-and-ball in his hand, and smashed it into the man's face. Pitch made a broken sound and went utterly slack.

Panting, Ferrar got up. Cimarron lay on his back, dead eyes staring emptily at the sky. There was nothing in sight on the rise of land. Ferrar ran heavily up the trail, gun ready. Finally he came into sight of Captain Ugardes, lying on the ground just beyond the crest.

"That Pitch, he's a better shot than I thought," Ugardes chuckled. Then he choked, and blood bubbled from his mouth.

Ferrar dropped to his knees beside the man, trying to ease him. "Why did you come back, Seguro?"

"I got to thinking," the man muttered feebly. "It came to me how quickly Morina had changed from you to me. I had wanted it so long that I couldn't think straight when it happened. But riding back, it came through. She wouldn't have switched so easily if she really cared for you. And if she didn't care, she had only been using you. And if she could use you, she could use me. I had to make sure, Tony, I had to come back."

"Seguro—"

The man's eyes were getting glassy, his voice fading. "You were right, Tony. What happened to Uncle Hondo had been going on a long time, in many different ways. We didn't see it. We only saw the *peons* at the cantinas, drinking, gambling—we thought that represented their life as much as ours. But they were suffering under the rule. And it was her rule. Not Armijo's. She was pulling all the strings. Just like the Cordenza letter. She knew it was real all along. But she wanted Armijo to fight Kearny, so what she had here wouldn't be overthrown by the Americans. She doesn't represent our people—any more than Cimarron and Pitch represent the Yankees. Stop her, Tony. Get the letter—to Armijo— Too much needless bloodshed—already—"

He sagged back. Ferrar called his name. The young captain's eyes were closed. He did not answer.

Ferrar got up, a pale look to his face, a lost feeling inside him. Then he turned and stumbled through the greasewood to where Ugardes had left his horse. He mounted the nervous beast, turning it down the trail. But Ugardes had left his troop where the cut-off ran into the Santa Fe Trail, and they must have heard the gunshots, for the earth began to tremble with their galloping.

Ferrar pulled his horse off into the

piñons and watched them sweep by in the darkness, lances down. He thought bitterly that it was a fitting tribute to Ugardes.

Then he turned the horse and rode.

It was a wild ride, over barrancas, into arroyos, seeking short cuts across the loops and switchbacks of the trail. He had cut off the last wide turn in by the road by crossing the ridge between it and was forcing the lathered horse down through scrub oak when the coach rolled around the point, coming hard. It passed him before he reached the road, and he burst out a few feet behind it, blocked off from the view of Tomas and the driver.

He spurred the stumbling horse into its last run. It gained the rear of the coach, began to veer and weave, unable to keep the pace. Knowing it was his last chance, he rose to a crouch in the saddle and leaped for the coach. His left foot came down on the boot, his right foot caught in the rear window. His hands caught the luggage rail on top.

Tomas must have felt the coach tilt. He turned sharply on the front seat, then rose and climbed back across the top, pulling his knife. Ferrar fought desperately to get on top and meet the man. He had to use both hands, and had no time to draw his gun. He managed to sprawl out on top, belly down, when Tomas reached him. The Navajo lunged up and drove down with the knife.

All Ferrar could do was flop over. The knife drove hilt-deep into the wood of the top. Before Tomas could pull back, Ferrar caught the man around the neck, pulling him down and doubling up at the same time to smash a knee in his downcoming face.

It stunned Tomas, knocking him over Ferrar's body. Wildly he tried to catch the rail, but his impetus carried him over it, and he rolled off the racing coach with a scream.

Ferrar pulled the knife from the top and crawled up behind the driver, who was still fighting to stop the horses. He put the point of the blade against the man's back, disarmed him, waited until the coach was halted, and then ordered him to jump down and walk away from the coach.

As the man reached the ground, Morina shoved open the door and started to step out, calling angrily to the driver. "Juan, what's going on, why did Tomas fall off—?"

She stopped, mouth open in surprise, as Ferrar dropped off to confront her. Then she ripped the Cordenza note from the bosom of her dress. He reached her before she could tear it, putting the point of the knife against her throat.

"Don't destroy it, *Chica*—" He made the word thin and ugly.

Her eyes widened. "You wouldn't."

He pressed the knife harder against her neck. "I'm thinking of Uncle Hondo, *Chica*."

Her eyes narrowed, her cheeks grew pale. Slowly, the defeat came into her face, making it indefinably gaunt and old. He took the letter from her slack fingers. Then he turned and climbed back into the seat, picking up the reins.

He took one last look at Morina. It was like stirring the ashes of a burned-out fire. The passion he had felt for her, the intense attraction, seemed to have belonged to another life, another man. It had been real enough, in its way. But again he had only been looking at the surface. Now he knew what lay underneath. He lifted the reins and started the horses down the road.

MANATTE, Julia, and a dozen Yankee trappers met Ferrar a mile down the road, halting his coach.

"What happened?" Manatte asked him. "We heard the Garcia woman had left town and figured it was to get the letter. Julia wouldn't stay behind. She still couldn't believe you'd take it to Morina."

Ferrar handed down the letter. "She was almost wrong. I'll tell you sometime. Just get this note to Armijo. It will straighten out a lot of things."

Julia was dressed in a man's coat and blue jeans, a flat-topped hat tilted over one eye. Smiling, she climbed off her horse onto the coach seat.

"Take my horse back with you," she told her father. Then she turned to Ferrar, face radiant. "You must have finally found out who your people really are."

"I belong to both," he said. "Your people are my people, and so are the Mexicans. And soon they can all be one people, if men like Cimarron or women like Morina don't get the power in their hands and twist it all into lies for their own sake."

She put a hand on his arm. "I have the feeling you've come back to me, Tony."

He smiled down at her. "Yes," he said. "I've come back to you." THE END

THE COURTESY OF HENRY MILLER

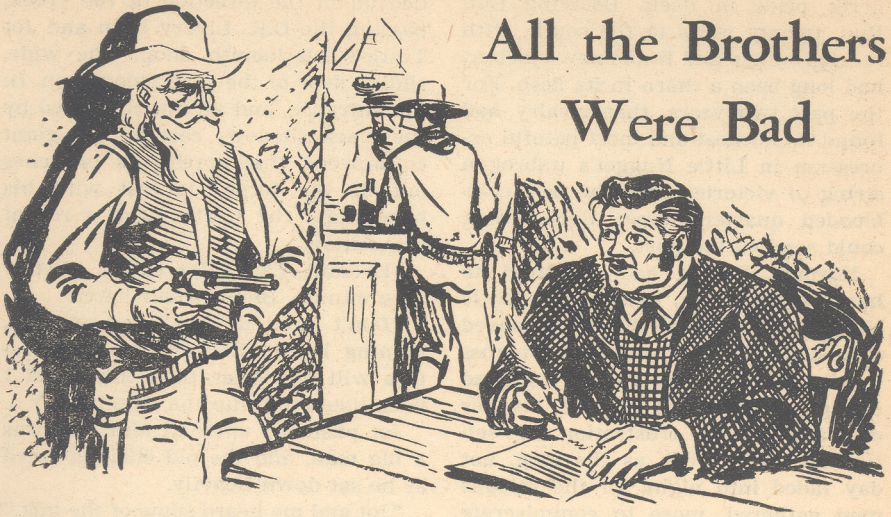
HENRY MILLER, the German emigrant boy who built the greatest livestock empire California ever saw, not only operated his own ranches, he bought feeders and stockers extensively from other outfits. He did the classing himself, and he paid spot cash from his saddlebags. This fact was well known to Californians, both inside and outside the law.

So, in the days when Tiburcio Vasquez rode across California, Henry Miller rode one day alone, as was his custom, across Pacheco Pass to buy cattle in the San Joaquin valley. At the crest of the grade, he was relieved of his money by a masked gentleman, also prone to work alone when the stakes were high. Miller gave up his money without a struggle but pointed out that he had quite a journey still to make and would need funds for food. The bandit courteously returned him a twenty-dollar gold piece and the two parted as amicably as could be expected.

The days slid into weeks, and one day Henry Miller was sitting in a Gilroy saloon, a known haunt of Vasquez and his men, when a booted and spurred rider entered and began talking to the proprietor. Miller recognized the voice from that by-gone day in Pacheco Pass. He rose, reached in his pocket, walked behind the man, and gently touched him on the arm. The rider whirled, ready for flight or fight, and Henry Miller handed him a twenty-dollar gold piece saying, "I returns the money you were so kind to loan me." He was out the door and into his buggy before the rider knew quite what had happened to him. It is said that Miller never suffered thereafter from Vasquez's depredations.

—OLD HUTCH

Planning to wreak vengeance on an old foe, Cap McQueen little realizes that in doing so he may upset the applecart for his own comrades in connivery.



All the Brothers Were Bad

By HARRY SINCLAIR DRAGO

THE big race was over. Once again Little Nugget, the Bull Run horse, had won, and the wild, hilarious crowd that had arrived by special train that morning was now taking Rock Creek apart.

Though the purse was small, thousands of dollars had changed hands on the result of the race. From the track, just an oval cut out of the sagebrush on the big flat at the edge of town, its improvements limited to an unpainted judges' stand at the finish line, the Bull Run contingent, three hundred strong and comprised mostly of hardrock miners and smelter workers, had made a concerted rush for Rock Creek's eleven saloons. There, whooping and hollering, they poured salt into raw wounds with their reckless spending and jeering remarks regarding Mormon Brown, the defeated Rock Creek horse.

They had very little time in which to do their crowing and celebrating: down at the depot, the Nevada Northern special had steam up and was already calling them back. But primed with whisky and their winnings, they made the most of their few minutes. Fists flew and windows crashed in a shower of broken glass, with the more exuberant showing their contempt for Rock Creek by emptying their guns in the air.

Finally, they were gone, and peace of a sort returned, with the losers licking their wounds and growling in their beards.

Rock Creek was old, as desert towns go, but aside from its permanence and the continuing prosperity it drew from the cattle and sheep ranches in Rock Creek Basin there was nothing to distinguish it from a hundred other Ne-

vada communities. And yet, it had a fierce pride in itself. Booming Bull Run, twenty miles to the south, with its rich mines and brand-new smelter, had long been a thorn in its flesh. For the past two years, that rivalry had found its keenest and most painful expression in Little Nugget's unbroken string of victories over the best cold-blooded quarter horses Rock Creek could send to the post.

Mormon Brown had appeared to have the race won today, until Little Nugget, two lengths behind, had moved up in a driving finish and flashed across the line the winner. To lose was bad enough, but to lose in that manner only added to the frustration that settled on Rock Creek as the long, hot day faded into night. In the saloons men gathered, more to commiserate with Doc Bannister, Mormon Brown's owner, as well as with one another, than to discuss ways and means—if any—of avenging this latest slap at their civic pride and their pocketbooks.

Cap McQueen, Rock Creek's leading saloonkeeper and the day's heaviest loser, having listened to as much of the talk as he could stand, put on his hat and strode forth for a breath of air and the companionship of his own thoughts, bitter as the latter were tonight. The money he had lost on the race and the damage his establishment had suffered at the hands of the Bull Run crowd were matters that, ordinarily, he would have taken in stride, but in this instance a personal angle was involved and it filled his cup of misery to overflowing. Between him and Yank Kiley, his Bull Run rival and owner of Little Nugget, there was a long-standing enmity that had nothing to do with horse racing.

Cap reached the end of the sidewalk. Stepping out into the road, he continued on in the direction of the creek, passing the O.K. Livery barn and Jot Tuttle's blacksmith shop. The wide, sliding door of the shop stood open. In the entrance, and all but concealed by the black shadows cast by the giant cottonwood that spread its branches outside the forge, Jot sat with his handyman, the Cactus Kid, a recent acquisition.

"Evenin', Cap!" Jot called. "Better sit a minute. Empty chair here."

"Don't mind if I do," Cap growled, turning back. "Reckon the conversation will be better than the drivel I been listenin' to up the street."

Jot pushed a chair at him. Cap was a big man, and the old chair groaned as he sat down heavily.

"Jot and me heard some of the talk," the Cactus Kid volunteered contemptuously. "Make you sick to listen to it. This town wants to grow up."

He was a thin, tiny man, still young, but with a face that was old and hard, his eyes cunning and overly bright with the sickness that was killing him.

Cap lit an expensive cigar and studied it thoughtfully. He felt perfectly at home in the present company. All three were birds of passage whose trails had crossed many times before Rock Creek knew them. This past acquaintance was a matter which, for reasons of their own, they kept to themselves.

Each of this trio had been many things in his day, and few of their ventures had been within the law. To turn a quick and easy dollar, that had always been their intent. Some of their schemes had blown up in their faces, necessitating sudden departure for points unknown. But being men of experience, with an uncanny ability to

smell disaster before it broke, they had always managed to get away and bob up somewhere else a few weeks later. Panamint, Bodie, Aurora, fading Virginia City—the towns lay along their back trails like the scattered beads of a broken rosary.

Jot Tuttle was the eldest by ten years, an innocent-looking old juniper, with the flowing white beard of a Biblical patriarch. Though Jot was a medicine man, he had sold religion from the back of a wagon more than once, and with quite as much success as he dispensed his favorite Indian Root Compound, a concoction of his own brewing that was guaranteed to cure everything from snake bite to measles. Ten months back he had drifted into Rock Creek to find Cap solidly established as one of the town's leading citizens. This fortuitous circumstance inclined him in its favor, and after looking Rock Creek over and finding it to his liking, he purchased the blacksmith shop and settled down to what he hoped would be obscurity until the law lost interest in him. He was then fresh from Arizona, where he had sold a "salted" mine to a gullible Easterner, only to have the fraud discovered before he was well on his way with the ill-gotten proceeds.

Here under the cottonwood, of an early evening, Cap McQueen often sat down with Jot and the Kid, "cutting up old touches," as the homely phrase has it, and spending a pleasant half an hour. Their slant on life was the same and they spoke the same language.

To see Jot turning to honest toil, at his time of life, didn't fool Cap. He knew the old man had his reasons, and he was not hard pressed to surmise what they were. But he asked no questions; he had taken himself out of circulation more than once, and for similar reasons. While things were cooling off, a man could look around and be ready when something turned up. He knew that was what Jot was doing—waiting for something to turn up.

As for the Cactus Kid, his honest name was Willie Dugan. He was just a burned-out rolling stone who had blundered into Rock Creek, found Jot, and stayed on because he was able to live on the old man's bounty. There had been a time, in the long ago, when his name meant something. That went back to the days when he had worn the silks on the best half-mile tracks in the mountain states and on the Coast. A good rider, he had money to throw away, and he threw it. Needing more, he took the easiest way he could find to get it, pulling horses and getting pocketed on favorites and finishing back with the field. It had not taken his larceny long to catch up with him. When the usual warnings had no effect, he was ruled off.

He had been quickly forgotten and for ten years had been going steadily downhill, riding the sagebrush tracks occasionally, winning when he was up on a good horse, or losing if that promised more money. A devious little man, always ready to do the bidding of such as old Jot and Cap McQueen. He had his own opinion as to how the race had been run that afternoon, but he sat back, a homemade cigarette pasted on his lip, and let them have their say.

"Bannister should have listened to me and let the Kid ride his horse," Jot declared weightily, as he refilled his pipe. "He wouldn't have it; said young Powell was a local boy and had brought Mormon Brown along in good style, and he was goin' to stick with him.

That was his mistake."

Cap nodded grimly. "No use cryin' over spilt milk," he said bitterly. "But losin' money on a hoss race is one thing, and bein' dumped by a cheap tinhorn like Yank Kiley is somethin' else! Struttin' around with his diamonds and his silk hat like he was somebody! Who in hell would ever have heard of him if they hadn't built the smelter in Bull Run?"

"I ain't acquainted with the party," Jot observed, stroking his beard meditatively. "Today's only the second time I ever laid eyes on him. But I got his number right off. That big, fat four-flusher is a hick."

In Jot's book there was nothing lower.

"Yeh, a hick!" Cap growled. Hick was about as low-down as he could go, too. "A hick, and I let him make a sucker of me!" he continued, anger boiling up in him. "You know what he did to me, Jot. I had a nice little combination saloon and gamblin'-business in Bull Run. I wasn't makin' a million, but I was doin' all right; and then Kiley comes along, lookin' dumb, and makes me a good offer. Like a sap, I take it, and sign papers that I won't engage in business in Bull Run for five years. Two weeks later the big news breaks: the Wertheim Syndicate has bought the Hornet and Desert Queen mines and are goin' to put up new mills and a smelter!" Cap could only shake his head at the pity of it.

This was a new story with the Cactus Kid. He sat up, interested. "Who tipped him off, Cap?"

"Huh!" was McQueen's wrathful snort. "Cost me a thousand bucks to find out who tipped him off! A couple gents had been up on the mountain for a week, looking the properties over. He followed them all the way back to Reno before he found out who they was. When he saw them gittin' together with Defoe and the other owners, he knew what was up, and he high-tailed it back to Bull Run and roped me in! Look at Bull Run today! Yank Kiley's rakin' in a fortune! And he ain't satisfied; he's got to rub my nose in the dirt with his damned hoss!"

"He had you faded all the way around today," the Kid declared with quiet emphasis. "He had a better horse and a better rider. The boy who was up on Mormon Brown made his move too soon; he didn't have nothin' left when he got to the wire." In the darkness his beady eyes bored into Cap. "What do you know about this fella who was up on Little Nugget? Where'd he come from?"

"Why, they tell me he's a timekeeper at the smelter. His name is Jensen." Cap straightened up suddenly, curious about what was behind the Kid's question. "What you gittin' at?"

The Cactus Kid laughed thinly. "You're foolin' yourself, Cap. He's no timekeeper, and his name ain't Jensen; he's a jock—a pro. His real moniker is Whitey Spane. Snake Eyes, the boys used to call him. I only knew him by sight and I hadn't seen him in five years till this mornin'; but I spotted him in a second."

Cap hurled his cigar to the ground with a violent oath and fastened his fingers in the little man's shoulder. "Kid, you sure of what you're sayin'?" he demanded fiercely.

"Course I am! I had reason to remember him; he got ruled off, same as me. Yank Kiley musta brought him up from California. Kiley was goin' to make sure he won."

"The dirty, double-crossin' crook!"

The irony of Cap's heartfelt condemnation, with whom such trickery had been standard practice for years, was lost on him, as it was on Jot and the Cactus Kid. "I oughta go after him with a gun!"

"There's better ways," Jot said thoughtfully. "Yank Kiley and that Bull Run crowd can be taken."

"You mean run in an outside hoss on 'em?" Cap rejected the idea with a scornful shaking of his head and, answering himself, said, "It wouldn't work. Kiley's got spies in Rock Creek. They'd smell a rat. If we got Little Nugget into a race, it'd be only for the purse; Bull Run wouldn't back the hoss."

"That crowd can be taken—and for the works," Jot insisted. His eyes were as full of guile as an Armenian rug peddler's. "You couldn't do it, Cap, but I could—me and the Kid. It'll take a little time. I know where I can find the horse I want. I'll git him into Rock Crick without any fanfare. After a time, I'll let folks persuade me into havin' the Kid work him out a little. I'll leave it to you to start buildin' up talk of racin' him ag'inst Kiley's Little Nugget."

Cap refused to be interested. "I tell you it wouldn't work, Jot! Kiley's crowd would git suspicious."

"Sure they will! That's exactly what I want 'em to do. But they won't be suspicious at first; that'll come when we git close to race day." The old man chuckled forbiddingly. "That's when they'll put their foot in the bucket. I know how to make a horse look bad. What I don't know, the Kid does. The word will be carried down below that we ain't got a chance. Bull Run will come up here with every dollar it can beg, borrow, or steal. Yes, sir! We can take 'em to the cleaners, Cap! You drop by ag'in tomorrow evenin' and I tell you what I got in mind. I got some money; you put up half and I'll put up the rest."

Cap was there the following evening, and again the next night. A week later Jot hitched a team of horses to a light wagon and drove north, leaving word that he was off to visit a sister in Humboldt County and might not be back for three or four weeks. Behind him, he left the Cactus Kid and a smith to run the forge.

JOT HAD PUT a hundred miles and more between himself and Rock Creek by the time he reached the towns along the main line of the Espee. He turned west, wandered through Elko County, and, unnoticed, headed for the Calico Mountains, along the Nevada-Oregon line. This was country which he knew as well as any man—the Owyhee country, eastern Oregon, Idaho, all the way across the Snake River Plains to Boise.

His destination was the little town of White Pine or, to pin-point it, the horse ranch of Stony Mullane, an old acquaintance, four miles above White Pine. He took his time getting there, and, with his usual caginess, hung around White Pine for three days until he met Stony seemingly by chance. He was there to buy a horse, but after he had permitted Stony to persuade him to move out to the ranch, the better part of a week passed before he got around to mentioning it.

No one bred better "short" horses than Stony Mullane. He had raced them in half a dozen states. One, a blue roan by the name of Corky, had had things his own way on the dirt tracks of the Northwest for several years; a real champion, who hung up

a mark of twenty-two seconds flat for the quarter. He not only had speed, but since being retired, when bred to good mares, had sired speed.

Jot saw the horse he wanted, a young three-year-old, a blue roan like his father, that had never been run in Nevada. The price was high, but he didn't demur at that; what he wanted was secrecy, and he had old services rendered to Stony to get him that.

The blue roan had never been put to a rig, singly or as a team. That was the way, however, in which Jot was determined to arrive in Rock Creek with him. To facilitate matters, he traded the pair he had driven north to Stony for a bronc that had been broken to harness, and with which the blue roan was familiar. After a day or two of trying to get the animals to go together, Jot was ready to set out.

He began craftily by driving through White Pine after dark, thereby avoiding the questions and curiosity of the town. He had grub enough in the wagon to take care of his needs for a day or two. When he made camp for the first time, he was through the Calicos and well down Owl Creek. After that, by easy stages, he moved down through Elko County and across the Espee. His new team got only grass to eat and no care from him. In two weeks, they looked so rough that no one paid them any attention.

In Rock Creek, Jot's continued absence went unremarked by all save Cap McQueen and the Cactus Kid. And then one day, when they were beginning to get anxious, he drove in, unhurried and as casually as though he had been no farther away than the basin.

He had a barn in back of the blacksmith shop. The Kid and he unhitched the team and put the horses in the stalls.

With curiosity consuming him, Cap exercised admirable restraint and kept away for two days before he wandered in to see what Jot had brought home. He was not impressed with what he saw.

"Don't look like he could run a lick!" he grumbled.

"No?" Jot cackled. "Don't let the eye deceive you, Cap. He ain't had a mouthful of grain in two weeks. Didn't put a brush or currycomb on him—and I don't intend to for some time; I want him to look rough and no account. Stony worked him for me and I saw him do twenty-three-five. He's got a mark of twenty-two-five, and he'll do better than that. Corky's get is like their old man; they never hit their peak until they're late three-year-olds. Little Nugget never shaded twenty-five in his life. When he goes up ag'in' this fella, it won't be no contest."

"What's his name?" Cap inquired, still critical.

"We'll call him Peso. He'll bring in a lot of 'em, Cap!"

The old man's confidence and enthusiasm began to have its effect on McQueen. "What do you think, Kid?" he asked, as they came out of the stall. "You been sizin' him up for a couple days."

"I'm itchin' to get a saddle on him, I'm tellin' you!" the Kid declared vehemently. "He's a lot of horse—good mouth, good legs. But what the hell! Why shouldn't he be good? He's got the blood in him. His old man was unbeatable at a quarter, and no slouch at three and a half furlongs. Grain him for a few weeks and polish him up and you won't know him."

"We won't polish him up," Jot said

flatly. "He's a sleeper, and we're goin' to keep him a sleeper. We want those long odds."

Before Cap left, he was completely won over. "What do you want me to do, Jot?"

"I want you to keep away from me. For the present, I mean: I don't want folks to git the idea that we're puttin' our heads together about somethin'. You'll see me drivin' Peso and the other one around town. There don't want to be any talk about racin' him outa us—nary a word; when I figger folks have got used to seein' him on the wagon, I'll have the Kid take him out on the road some evenin' and run him a bit. No real speed, y'understand; jest enough to git me talkin' about him bein' purty good. We'll keep doin' that two or three times a week."

Jot laughed heartily. "You know what folks will say—Jot Tuttle, the old fool, figgerin' he's got a race horse! You can join in on the laugh at my expense, Cap. Lay it on as thick as you please. And then one evenin', you come out on the road and we'll show you enough to make you change your tune. You begin spreadin' the word then that I really got somethin'."

Cap nodded. "I know how to work that. I'll pass the information like it was somethin' confidential and gotta be kept a secret. But what about Kiley's spies? They'll be watchin' you by then."

"Sure! Sure! We'll show 'em jest enough to convince 'em that Little Nugget can run away with the blue roan. Be sure you don't overplay it when you start your race talk, Cap. Build it up gradual."

The big man brushed this bit of advice aside with a curt wave of his hand. "You don't have to tell me how to handle that end of it! I'll git half a dozen men I can trust—men with money—and we'll work up a proposition to put up the purse if you can show us somethin'. You'll have to take the hoss out to the track and give us an idea of what he can do. You can't show us too much or too little, Jot. The trial will be clocked. You can be sure of that."

The old man ran his hand down his beard in a thoughtful gesture. "That'll be all right. Kid, you do the quarter in about twenty-five or six—no better. You can time yourself purty well."

"Huh!" the Cactus Kid snorted scornfully. "If I can't, who can? When we get that far along, I'll have to be on the track every day for workouts. That's the only way you can ready a horse for a race. The railbirds won't learn anythin' from watchin' me; I been clocked by a thousand of 'em in my time."

Rock Creek grew used to seeing Jot driving about town with Peso and the other horse he had acquired from Stony Mullane. The ancient wagon they drew added nothing to their appearance. To eyes that should have known better, they were just a pair of broncs that had been broken to harness and scarcely up to the good ranch teams that could be seen on the street any day.

Without any conniving on Jot's part, things began to go his way as July turned the corner into August. Two months had passed since Rock Creek had been humbled by Bull Run, time enough for the town's fighting spirit to show signs of resurgence. Bill Stewart, the Rock Creek Basin cowman, touched it off. He announced that he did not intend to call matters quits. He said it was the duty of the community

to come up with a horse that could beat Little Nugget. He didn't doubt that there was one around. He had a little piebald mare of his own that could run.

"Mebbe she ain't good enough," Stewart said one night in Cap McQueen's Eldorado Saloon. "We want the best. Let's see what we can find. If somebody can show us a hoss that can do the quarter in around twenty-five, we'll challenge Bull Run for a September race."

Doc Bannister fell in line with the suggestion and began to talk up Mormon Brown. He didn't get far with that; Mormon Brown had been fairly beaten, and nobody was interested in backing him a second time. But other hopeful men had horses that they regarded highly, and it soon got to the point where an evening seldom passed that didn't see someone putting a bronc over the level stretch of road north of town.

Jot knew it was time for him to make his move. Without divulging his intention beforehand, he and the Kid took Peso on the road a week later. There were witnesses and, as he expected, they had a good laugh at his expense, especially when the Kid refused to let the blue roan show a thing. Peso's hair was long and uncurried and he looked as rough as they could make him.

There were other evenings, and Jot and the Cactus Kid went out again and again. By now, helped by Cap's adroit tongue, the whole town was laughing. Jot pretended to let it get under his hide and snapped at his tormentors. Though, in turf parlance, Peso was kept under wraps, Jot let the Kid open him up enough to convince the most skeptical that if Rock Creek was to find a horse that stood a chance against Little Nugget, he was the one.

Secretly, Jot send word to Cap that it was time to stop laughing and get down to business. The latter had been waiting for his cue. Still scoffing, he got Stewart and a handful of his cronies to go out and watch Peso one evening.

When the workout was over, Stewart turned on Cap indignantly. "You claim to know somethin' about hosses! What's wrong with you? The blue roan's got plenty!"

"Reckon I gotta eat crow," Cap acknowledged, crestfallen in his simulated chagrin. "He's nothin' to look at, Bill."

"Looks!" Stewart growled. "Did looks ever win a race? I like the way the hoss moves; he picks up his legs like a sprinter! Who's the little runt ridin' him?"

"Calls himself the Cactus Kid. He blew into town a while back. He seems to know what he's doin'."

"He's okay," Stewart agreed.

It wasn't difficult to get Jot to agree to an early-morning trial on the track. Cap was careful to see that none of Yank Kiley's friends was among those present. Peso ran the quarter in a shade over twenty-five.

That clinched it. Again it was honest Bill Stewart who unwittingly furthered the conspirators' plans. He called the Cactus Kid over and gathered the others about him.

"All we got to do now is keep our mouths shut," he told them. "We got all the hoss we need to take that Bull Run crowd over the bumps. We can git five dollars for two if we play our cards right." He looked to Jot. "You know we got some stool pigeons in Rock Creek, don't you?"

"I've heard it said," the old man answered.

"Wal, we have," said Stewart. "Gil Evans, the barber, is one of 'em, and so are the gents he trails around with. You can't keep 'em from havin' a look at your hoss, Jot. They'll time him. Don't try to stop 'em. Let 'em hang around as much as they please. What you and the little fella here have got to do is sell 'em a bill of goods."

Jot's grin was shrewd and sharp. "Reckon that can be arranged, Bill."

"Then go to it! And you better start to clean up Peso. Git him clipped and put a little shine on him. You ain't goin' to fool the likes of Gil Evans by lettin' the hoss go as he is."

Cap was ready with an objection. "I don't go along with that; the rougher he looks, the better."

"No," Stewart insisted. "And I'll tell you why; if we think enough of Peso to put up the stake money, ain't it reasonable to believe we'd have pride enough to dress him up? We're dealin' with some smart gents, Cap; we don't want to scare 'em off by givin' 'em the idea we're coverin' up somethin'."

It was good advice, and Cap and Jot took it. As in the past, the challenge was made through the Rock Creek *Gazette* and accepted two days later through the columns of the Bull Run *Advertiser*. The stake money was promptly posted and the race set for Saturday, September 11th.

It gave Jot and the Kid a full three weeks in which to get Peso ready. The blue roan was a different-looking horse when he had been clipped and curried, his mane and tail trimmed. But they didn't go too far with that; they were not interested primarily in his appearance. They had Peso on the track every morning now, tuning him up. Being a good "short" horse, he broke fast instinctively.

The Kid pretended not to be satisfied and sent him away time after time. Actually there was little he could teach the horse, but it gave the onlookers—and they were always present and in ever-increasing numbers—something to talk about. He further confounded the spectators by always pulling up short of the wire, whenever he broke from the quarter pole. When he really wanted Peso to open up, he'd take him around on the back stretch and drive him hard for a furlong or a furlong and a half. The horse showed flashes of great speed. But that wasn't telling the Bull Run spies what they wanted to know.

Personally, the Kid got a great bang out of it. He knew he had a real horse under him again. After the workouts, he dried Peso out carefully and rubbed him down before leading him back to the barn. It was usually after ten by that time. With racing fever beginning to sweep Rock Creek, Jot Tuttle's blacksmith shop was becoming a popular place and the Kid always found someone on hand to sound him out about Peso. It enabled him to spend a pleasant hour or two, but no one got any information out of him.

Cap began putting in an appearance at the forge every afternoon. By now, he felt it was not only safe but actually required that he show an important interest in Peso. He was careful, however, not to seem to get too friendly with Jot. It did not prevent them from exchanging confidences. The old man got him aside, a week before the race. He was anxious to know how the betting was going.

"There ain't no bettin'; not yet," Cap said. "Bull Run sent up a big

chunk of money, but the best they'll offer is three for two, and we ain't takin' it."

He pulled out a copy of the Bull Run *Advertiser*. Under a heading of *Burnt Child Dreads Fire* the *Advertiser* took Rock Creek's sporting element to task in caustic fashion for its reluctance to back its horse.

Or are these gentlemen to the north acknowledging defeat already? it asked. *Three times straight, Little Nugget has beaten the best they had. We confidently expect the Nugget to make it four straight next week. But why do they issue a challenge if they think so poorly of their nag? We understand the animal's name is Peso. He appears to be the only peso in Rock Creek.*

"That's right good," Jot observed. "But I been noticin' that the man who has the last laugh usually has the best one. What about the starter and judges, they been picked?"

"Yeh, same bunch as last time. Joe Ferguson will send 'em away. We'll git a fair shake from him." Cap called the Kid over. "This Jensen—or whatever his name is—is goin' to be up on their hoss again. I want you to keep away from him, and don't let nothin' slip about knowin' who he is, understand?"

The Cactus Kid bristled. "You think I'm sap enough to double-cross myself? Jot says the two of you will have a nice piece of money riding on Peso for me. That's right, ain't it?"

"It sure is! It'll put you back on your feet, Kid."

CAP HAD NO SPIES in Bull Run, but he had a friend or two, and one of them got word to him on the morning before the race that sent him hurrying down to Jot's place. The latter had just returned from the track and was preparing to shoe a horse.

"What's got you so excited?" he inquired, looking Cap over.

"Plenty! I just been tipped off that Yank Kiley's sending his jock and a couple gents up here tonight. They're goin' to try to git Peso outa the barn and take him out on the road and find out for themselves just what he can do."

"Wal, I declare!" Jot exclaimed, grinding the surprise out of his voice. He put down the tongs he was holding and took off his leather apron. "So that's what they're aimin' to do, eh?"

"They won't git away with it!" Cap rapped. "We'll spoil that game; you and the Kid will bed down in the barn with the hoss tonight."

"I dunno whether that's the right thing to do or not," Jot declared dubiously. He took off his battered hat and searched through his thinning hair with thoughtful fingers. "Mebbe we better sit down and think this over."

Cap saw no need to think anything over, but when the old man led the way back to the barn, he followed. There they sat for half an hour, with McQueen suggesting one thing and Jot taking a quite different angle.

"Why take a chance on stubbin' our toe at this late last?" Cap demanded heatedly. "Your scheme might work, and it might not."

"It'll work." Under their hooded brows Jot's old eyes were pools of cunning. "It'll be late at night when they git the horse out, and they'll be anxious to put him back in his stall as quick as they can. They won't notice that his shoes ain't mates. I'll put a heavy shoe on his right foreleg and one on the left hindleg. That'll do the trick; it'll throw Peso off his stride. He'll run, but it'll slow him up. You mark my

words, Cap, them Bull Run galoots will head for home convinced that he don't belong on the same track with Little Nugget."

"And they'll be right if Peso shows up lame tomorrow—"

"Good grief! Do you think I'd be suggestin' it if there was any chance of that happenin'?" Jot's voice was shrill with annoyance. His patience was long, but he had reached the end of it.

"You want long odds," he continued. "Wal, by grab, I'm showin' you how to git 'em! And you're goin' to listen to me, Cap. You talk about squarin' your account with Yank Kiley. Let me handle this my way and we'll nail him in his own trap."

This was such a powerful argument with Cap that he could not hold out against it. Late that afternoon Jot changed the shoes on Peso. When he and Kid departed for their boarding-house, they left the barn door unlocked. They turned in early, but half an hour later they were stealing through the sagebrush. When they found a spot from which they could observe anything that happened on the road, they sat down to wait.

It got to be well after midnight. The late moon was riding high by now. On the road, nothing moved.

"False alarm!" the Kid growled disgustedly. "Cap got his signals crossed!"

"Early yet," Jot said casually. "We'll wait an hour or two."

They didn't have much longer to wait. Two horsemen appeared. One of them stopped and the other, getting down, began moving along the road in long, measured strides, obviously stepping off a quarter mile. When they were ready, a whistled signal to Jensen brought him out of the brush, leading Peso. He got up quickly and after several false starts sent the blue roan flashing down the road. After a few minutes, he turned and came back for a second trial. That was all. Moving off in the direction of town, they passed from view.

"What do you know!" Jot exclaimed, glowing with Machiavellian delight. "Never suspected a thing! Didn't look at Peso's legs oncet!"

"He didn't show 'em much," the Kid agreed.

"Not a thing, Kid! We'll git five to one for our money by noon tomorrow. We'll give those gents time to clear out, then we'll cool the horse off and rub him down. You can go home and git some sleep; I'll spend the rest of the night in the barn."

IN THE MORNING, before Rock Creek was astir, Jot put a new set of shoes on Peso and was exceedingly careful in setting them. After that, he banked his fire; he wasn't taking in any work today. Sitting there, waiting for the Kid to spell him while he went off to breakfast, he went over every move he had made since first speaking to Cap. He couldn't find a mistake; everything had worked out as he had planned. And today wouldn't be the end of it; there'd be other races. He and Cap would make a fortune on Peso.

Cap came early to inquire how things had gone during the night. He grinned his pleasure on hearing what the old man had to say. "Then we're all set, Jot."

"We're all set," the latter agreed. "You git back uptown and take care of your end of the business; I'll take care of this end."

As in the past, the Bull Run contingent came up on a special train, to

which was attached a boxcar carrying Little Nugget and a retinue of handlers and well wishers. The horse was taken out to the track at once and placed in a hastily made rope corral. Leaving the Nugget well guarded, the crowd fell into line behind the Bull Run Silver Cornet Band. Led by Yank Kiley, resplendent in his diamonds and silk hat, they swaggered into Rock Creek to take the town over as they had done on frequent occasions in the past.

It was noon. In a few minutes the saloons were bulging with their presence. Long lines began to form in front of the several restaurants and eating-places, inadequate to handle such a crowd.

In what he called "strict confidence" Kiley had acquainted his friends with how Peso had been taken out of the barn and given a midnight trial. Of all the Bull Run hundreds, there wasn't a man but had heard it before the special pulled into Rock Creek. As Jot had predicted, the odds began to lengthen at once. By one o'clock five to two was being offered on Little Nugget; then five to one, even six to one. What did it matter? Bull Run was betting on a sure thing.

Other events preceded the match race, but few men were interested in them, and it was after three before the crowd gathered in full force at the track. Rock Creek had turned out almost to a man. Bill Stewart and a score of Rock Creek Basin cowmen were on hand with their crews, all armed.

Cheers broke from the crowd when Little Nugget and Peso were paraded at last. The officials for the race, intent on making the most of their brief moment, conferred endlessly before the two horses were led back to the starting-post. Small boys began darting across the track and had to be restrained.

At last Joe Ferguson, the starter, had the two horses lined up. After several false starts, he dropped his flag and sent them away.

It was all over in a few seconds, and not much of a race. Peso broke fast and was never headed. That he won by just a length was only because Jot had ordered the Kid to make it close. He was looking ahead to other days such as this; there wasn't a mining camp in Nevada that didn't have its "fast" horse and the money to back him up.

Stewart's buckaroos had no need for their guns; the incredible had happened and the Bull Run crowd was too stunned to have any appetite for trouble. They knew the Nugget had been defeated by a better horse. They couldn't complain on that score. When they got their wits back, they had no need to look further than Yank Kiley to find the man who had led them into this debacle—Kiley, with his tales of midnight trials and a sure thing! Whether he was a fool or a liar, or both, wasn't important; they were broke, and they could thank him for it.

It took all the aplomb and swagger out of Yank. He knew what they were thinking. A cold chill ran down his spine as he saw the storm clouds gathering about him. He had no explanation for what had happened. What good to protest his innocence? He knew these men who had followed him so blindly were ready to tear him limb from limb and were only waiting to find a leader.

Yank eyed the Rock Creek Basin buckaroos enviously, wishing he had them on his side. Lacking any such support as that, he gathered about him

a handful of men on whom he could count and started for the train. In droves, the Bull Run crowd followed. It wasn't necessary for the engineer of the special to toot his whistle today to call them in; long before Little Nugget was loaded, they were aboard, anxious to be on their way home.

It was Rock Creek's turn to jeer. Several hundred strong, they gathered at the depot to jibe and gloat over the departing visitors. No one enjoyed it more than Cap McQueen. Just before the train pulled out, he got Jim Andrews, the publisher of the Bull Run *Advertiser*, aside and filled his ear with some startling facts.

"Give Kiley my regards!" Cap called after him, as the newspaperman ran to hop aboard the moving day coaches. "Tell him I'll be thinkin' of him!"

Rock Creek celebrated all night. Even Jot, who seldom touched a drink, got pleasantly jingled. It had been a great day for him. He had won almost five thousand dollars on the race.

"And it's jest the beginnin'," he told Cap. "We'll campaign up and down Nevada with Peso and take things easy for the rest of our lives. It shows what a man can do if he jest saws wood and keeps his mouth shut. It's the blabbermouths like Yank Kiley that end up behind the eight ball."

"Yeh," Cap agreed uneasily, thinking of what he had told Andrews. "Yeh, we'll do all right, Jot."

JOT WAS IN THE SHOP, working again, two days later. The excitement had abated and he was formulating a letter in his mind that he was going to have Cap dispatch to Eureka and other towns that might be induced to match their best against Peso. As he was so pleasantly employed, the Cactus Kid hurried in with the previous afternoon's edition of the *Advertiser*. He shoved it under Jot's nose.

"Read that!" he burst out, in white-lipped wrath. "There's a skunk around here and his name is Cap McQueen!"

Jot got his steel-rimmed spectacles and took the paper outside. Seated under the cottonwood, he read the startling headlines and story through from end to end. It was an accurate, detailed account of how Peso had been removed from the barn in the dead of night, of the weighted shoes, of how Yank Kiley had been tricked by Jot Tuttle and Cap McQueen, leading to the long odds on the race. When the news got around Bull Run, a mob had descended on his saloon, wrecked it, and run him out of town.

Old Jot folded the paper carefully and put it down on the bench. He thought things over long and carefully before he spoke, and when he did, Cap stood accused and convicted; no one else could have supplied the *Advertiser* with the facts.

"He sold me out, Kid," he said, his voice cold and terrible. "He saw his chance to square his account in full with Kiley, and he took it—and walked out on me and you."

"I'll say he did! The cat's out of the bag now! There won't be no more easy pickin's for Peso around here!"

"No, there won't," Jot muttered softly. "We'll have to be movin' on—and Peso goes with us."

The Kid studied him with his overly-bright eyes for a moment. "McQueen owns half the horse—"

"I'll settle that with him. You git our belongin's, Kid. Put 'em in the wagon, and buy a little grub. You have Peso and the other one hitched by the time I git back."

It was the middle of the afternoon when Jot walked into the Eldorado. Things were quiet. Cap stood in front of the bar, talking to a bartender. He saw the old man coming and was in no doubt as to what brought him.

"I want a word with you," Jot told him. "We better go back to your office." There was a forbidding absence of excitement about him, save for the wintry chill in his faded eyes.

"Sure, Jot," McQueen agreed with mock joviality, pretending that nothing was amiss. He followed the old man into the little room at the rear and closed the door.

"Now there's no need for you to git excited," he began as he sat down. "After all, you cleaned up on the race. I saw a chance to smash Kiley, and I—"

"Let's not waste breath, Cap," the old man suggested, his eyes boring into McQueen. "Both of us know what the score is. You sold me out. That's all there is to it. I might forgive you for that, knowin' what Kiley had done to you; but I can't forgive you for bein' a fool. We got jest one piece of business to transact, and we better git over with it. Pick up your pen and begin writin'. I'm tradin' you the blacksmith shop for your interest in the horse."

"Not on your life!" Cap whipped out. "You think I'm crazy? You ain't got two hundred dollars' worth of tools in the place. The hoss is worth—"

With a minimum of motion Jot extracted a huge hogleg of a gun from the waistband of his pants and shoved its business end over the edge of the table. "Let's have no nonsense about this, Cap. You start writin' like I told you. I want a bill of sale with your name on it."

McQueen did some fast thinking. He had known Jot Tuttle a long time. Incidents in that long record convinced him that the old man was not bluffing.

"All right," he gave in; "have it your way!"

Jot examined the signed paper. Finding it satisfactory, he placed it in his wallet and shoved the big .45 back into his britches. "Reckon me and the Kid and Peso can be on our way."

It was his last word with Cap. When he reached the blacksmith shop, he found the Kid waiting, Peso and the other bronc hitched, and their belongings, so limited that they barely filled an egg crate, stowed away in the wagon, with grub enough to last them several days.

The shop meant nothing to him. Climbing up on the wagon, he took the reins and they rolled out of Rock Creek. The Kid tried to engage him in conversation, but Jot had nothing to say.

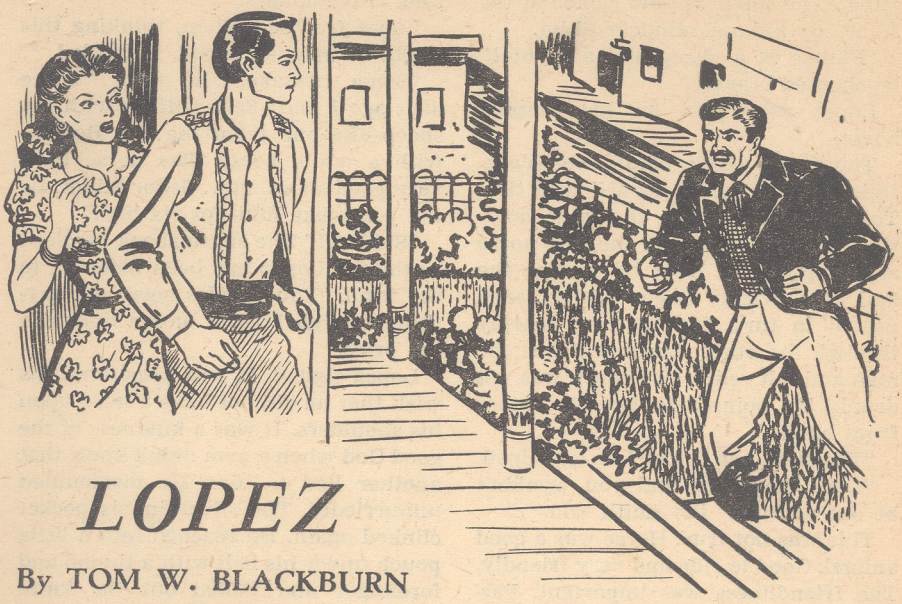
Two miles north of town, the road ascended a long hill. The Cactus Kid looked back. He could see Rock Creek shimmering in the heat haze that lay in layers over the sagebrush. "If you want to have a last look at her, Jot, you better turn around."

Jot shook his head. "No need for that. I'm done with Rock Creek and everythin' in it. Cap McQueen's jest about through too. He don't know it, but he will in a week or ten days. He cooked his goose when he let that stuff git into the *Advertiser*."

Puzzled, the Kid said, "How do you mean?"

"Why, every paper in Nevada will pick up that story and reprint it. It'll be all over the state in a week. It'll tell some interested parties, who've lost track of Cap, where he's to be found. They'll be comin' for him."

The bad one from the mesas comes to right a great wrong . . .



LOPEZ

By TOM W. BLACKBURN

HE WAS a bad one.

The strong smell of sheep was about him. His horse was limping laboriously. He came in over The Hill and turned at the foot of the descent into the lower of the two parallel streets which embraced every building of consequence in Frio. This street was Bajo, the lower road. There was a smith's shop up on Alto, too, and better work was done there. But each man to his place.

A number of children were playing in the dust of the street. They were very small and therefore happy. Among them was one with red hair. One of Macready's kids. Macready leaned all day against the bar in Jose's Place, drinking *pulque* for its cheapness, or sleeping in the sun outside the door, or again at the nonsense of children's games with the kids. Macready's wife had too many kids. She said so often and she behaved so. Some of them were usually running in the dust of Bajo with darker companions and Macready seemed to make no distinction.

The Macready kid scrambled to his feet and looked up at Lopez.

"Thief!" he shrilled in Spanish. "Son of a dog! Father of a sheep and a coyote!"

A small *paisano*, half the size of the Macready kid, also scrambled to his feet. He wore a tattered shirt with a shortened tail and nothing else. Little ones this small had not yet learned their habits and there was only one well the length of Bajo. Water must be carried and was precious and there was no unnecessary laundering of

children's clothes along this lower street. The small *paisano* looked at the Macready kid and mimicked him.

"Father of a sheep and a coyote!" he shouted bravely.

Lopez rode past on his limping horse.

There was shade before the blacksmith's shop. Lopez turned into this. The smith came into the wide doorway. He looked at the limping horse and emptied his head by placing the ball of a grimed finger against each nostril in turn and blowing sharply through the other. Lopez watched the man and felt relief. The smith was not drunk. He pointed to Horse's tender front hoof.

"The shoe, she is lost," he explained.

"Lose the horse and you wouldn't be out nothing," the smith said.

This was not true. Horse was a good animal. Good to ride and very friendly. The friendliness was important. Perhaps the smith could not see it. Perhaps only a lonely man could understand the friendliness of an animal.

"The other shoes," Lopez said patiently, "not so good, too. Very thin. Much wear. I buy new ones. *Cuantos*—how much?"

The smith blew through his nose again.

"Look," he said, "I work for a living, *sabe?* Shoe blanks cost me money and I got to get money for them. I ain't takin' nothing in trade!"

Lopez nodded with complete understanding. It was important to have money. He thrust a hand into his pocket. Seven silver dollars were there. He permitted them to clink together. It was a beautiful sound, for this was his money.

"*Cuantos?*" he repeated.

The smith squinted out into the sun.

"Dollar and a quarter a shoe," he said. "Five dollars."

Lopez frowned. Then, thinking this might be misunderstood, he smiled.

"Some mistake," he said. "Three days ago I meet *Señor* Miller with my sheep—the one from the Big Bench—with a white horse. The horse have very good shoes, new. *Señor* Miller, he say you make him—for six bits."

"Six bits!" The smith shook his head as though Lopez had been listening to the wind. "You *pelados* never get anything straight! Buck and a quarter's the price."

Lopez sighed. It was sometimes his wish that he did not have a head upon his shoulders. It was a kindness of the good God when a man didn't know that another lied to him. He dismounted unhurriedly. The silver in his pocket clinked again. He reached into a little pouch under his belt with a thumb and forefinger and pulled out the knife resting there. His thumb touched a button and the good blade snapped open. It was a smooth and easy movement, certain to be acquired when such a knife was the only steel a man owned—his ax, his table tools, his weapon—his friend.

The sun was bright on the blade. The smith blinked at it.

"Six bits," Lopez said gently. "The same as *Señor* Miller."

"Somebody's going to catch one of you bench-runners without your toad-sticker one of these days," the smith promised. "Hope I'm there when they do!"

Lopez shrugged. "You will be good to Horse?"

The smith looked at the knife and nodded sullenly. Lopez put the knife away and pulled a bundle from the cantle of his saddle. He started up the

street with this. Friend Horse would be shod. Now there were other matters.

THERE were chickens in Delgado's dooryard, a new hasp and lock on the door. Lopez put his face to the one small street window but could not see through its dirt. He stumbled through a litter of rusty tin cans in the weeds of the side yard and found the back door also tightly closed, barred from within. It was curious. Delgado was a careful man with no enemies, even on the upper street. He was not one to lock his doors.

Mama Rosario came from the next shanty, all hugeness and jiggling fat. She broadcast a bucket of slops onto the sandy soil and chickens came running. She put the bucket down and shaded her eyes to look at Lopez. There was no escape. He crossed to her and asked of Delgado.

"Dead," Mama Rosario said. "Of phlegm in the throat. It makes two weeks Saturday he choked to death. A very bad passing, but the will of God."

"The old woman?" Lopez asked.

"To La Vaca. They came and took her. *Señor* Nolan wrote the letter."

Lopez knew of La Vaca. A government house was there, for the crazy ones. It required only a man of importance to write the letter which sent them. *Señor* Nolan was brother to Macready's wife. He ran The Store while Macready was drinking *pulque* and sleeping in the sun and playing with the kids along Bajo. *Señor* Nolan was the most important man in Frio. Writing the letter which sent Delgado's old woman to La Vaca would not make him better loved along the lower street. But it would make no difference. Bajo had long hated *Señor* Nolan.

"Much sadness with Delgado and the woman," Lopez said with feeling. "Much sadness with me. I wanted a bath—hot water. Delgado had a big tub."

Mama Rosario put her hands on the broad shelves of her hips.

"Hot water!" she snorted. "Hot water you'll get, for truth! What's the matter your sheep? Why you are not to mind your own business? The good God does not require that you live on Bajo with us. You have the mesas. Go back to them! Go! Leave us alone! Get out of Frio! Go!"

The soul of Mama Rosario was very small. It was begging in her eyes. But she was shrewd. She knew why Lopez had come riding down The Hill. He felt much sadness for her, also. To be old and fat was enough. But to be afraid—

"For a favor, *Mamasita*," he said gently, "go make your scolding to someone else. I have much to do."

He turned and started across the back of Delgado's yard toward the nearest of the foot trails which shuttled up the weed-covered bluff to Alto and that part of Frio-town which had importance. He had wanted to be bathed and freshly clothed, without the smell of sheep and the dust of the benches on him, when he made this climb. But then a man did only as he could.

He closed his ears. Mama Rosario was shrilling the curses of a long lifetime at his back. A hundred crackling phrases to be learned anew by the little ones of the street and shouted at passing strangers—not for their unknown meaning but for the wonderful sound they made in the still air of a day otherwise no different than the one before or the one to follow.

THE trail led on the upper level to the back door of La Quinta, for *Señor* Nolan was happy to permit Macready's big saloon to do business with those of Bajo if they came by the back door. The back door was painted but the front, facing Alto, was purple glass and reflection of the sun gave rich color to the plainest clothes in passing. The color of the glass was very beautiful. Lopez knew presently he would pass to admire the color, but all things in proper course.

He turned through the weeds toward the rear of a smaller building which contained the barber's shop. As he did so, the painted back door of La Quinta opened and Macready came out, blinking in the sun. He was a big man, with the bright red hair of his many kids and the bright red face of much drinking and eyes no man could read. It was a strange thing to see Macready here. He had built La Quinta and The Store and the Bank of Frio. He had built the biggest house and many of the smaller ones.

His wife was much seen along Alto, complaining of Macready and his kids to those she met and showing how drab were the clothes on her thin body—clothes always the newest and brightest and best in Frio. She was seen often in La Quinta, coming and going from the office there, and at the Bank and The Store, looking to the health of business and dissatisfied with it.

Señor Nolan, who was her brother, was also always somewhere along Alto, attending to the things which Macready had built. But not the big man with the red hair. He and his kids were as much of Bajo as Mama Rosario and Felicia Pico, and what Macready drank did not come from La Quinta but from Jose's Place, at the far end of the lower street. It was for this reason it seemed strange to see him leaving his own place of business. Lopez stopped in the weeds beside the path and stared.

Macready came out along the path, headed for Bajo and muttering to himself. He saw Lopez and stopped. He groped a little and smiled.

"Lopez!" he said in a pleasant Spanish. "It makes the lifetime of an old donkey since I've seen you!"

"*Si*," Lopez agreed.

"How are the sheep?"

"*Bien*."

Macready rocked on his heels and indicated La Quinta.

"Them!" he said thickly. "How much more they think they can get? Lopez, ever sign a Power of Attorney?"

These were important words and Lopez was not sure of them. He shook his head to be on the safe side.

"I have!" Macready said grimly. "Hundreds of 'em! But this is the last! Nothing else to sign away. Everything sold down the river. But I got friends. Me and the kids got friends. That's something *they'll* never have, eh, Lopez?"

"*Si*," Lopez agreed again, and certain puzzled respect forced him to add, "*señor*."

Macready warmed to the addition. He straightened as though gathering his huge body and his hazed thought together at once. The unreadable eyes were for a moment kind and heavy with sadness.

"Don't climb up here to start anything, son. They got us licked—both of us." He started to move on, then swung back. "Don't build somethin' that makes money. It'll eat you up. And don't marry a meek woman. She'll fool you with a lot of kids, then use 'em to

take the heart right out of you!"

Macready was gone, reeling down the path, before Lopez realized the man with the red hair could have been useful in reasoning with the barber who was his tenant.

LOPEZ knocked three times on the closed rear door—the last louder than he liked—before the barber answered. He was fat and had pig's eyes. He was angry. He spoke to the good God in a harsh, guttural language which was neither *yanqui* nor Spanish. Lopez held one of his silver dollars up between his thumb and forefinger so that it was bright in the sun. And he smiled, making himself as agreeable and his voice as entreatingly hopeful as lay within his nature.

"A bath, *por favor*—with the hot water," he said.

The fat barber looked at him as though from much height, a curious accomplishment, since the barber was a small man. His cheeks puffed out with unfriendliness but his eyes remained on the dollar. He put the razor in his hand into a pocket of his hair-dusted shirt and he took the dollar. He glanced uneasily down the passage behind him to a curtain which cut it off from his shop in front. Stepping back, he motioned Lopez inside.

A rusty kitchen stove glowed with heat at one side of a small back room. The barber dipped a tin pail of steaming water from the reservoir of the stove. He handed this to Lopez and pushed him toward another curtain closing an alcove.

"Ten minutes," he whispered warningly. "Clean up after yourself. No singing."

Lopez nodded without full understanding of the caution. Who would think of singing when the business at hand was the washing of his body? Singing was for moonlight or the stars—the happy heart or a woman. A bath was for cleanliness and a good smell.

He stepped through the curtain into the alcove. There were water pipes on Alto and one led to a spigot over a tin tub of much greater size than that which had belonged to Delgado. As he surveyed the alcove, Lopez heard the fat barber go back into his shop. The walls were thin. The barber had a customer in his chair. Presently came *Señor* Nolan's voice, muffled as though by a steaming towel.

"What was the racket out back, Hans?"

"The boy I hire to scrub the bathtub each day," the fat barber answered with ease and untruth. "Me, I run a clean shop, Mister Nolan."

Señor Nolan's chuckle was also muffled.

"Sure. You got to, Hans. It's in your lease with Mac."

"*Ja*," the barber said. "So it is." His razor whisked against a strop.

With all small sounds explained by the barber's untruth, Lopez turned on the spigot. Water ran from it. Clean water. He remembered a thirst earlier in the day, crossing the benches. He bent and drank. This was affluence. He swiftly stripped, turned off the water, and stepped into the tub. There was chill in the temperature but luxury in the feel of the water. When his body was immersed, he reached the tin bucket up from the floor and slowly poured in its steaming contents. It was magnificent.

He wondered if death did not come to an old man in such fashion as this, a slow flooding of warmth to the whole of his body, banishing chill and wash-

ing away the dust and imperfections and small aches of the years. It would be good to live to the age of an old man if to die was like this.

But it was foolish to deal with such thoughts. He was young, and death far away. He reached into a can of soft soap on a shelf above the tub and commenced to scrub red dust from his body.

The scraping of the barber's razor against a stubbled cheek came from the shop in front. Presently the sound of the barber's voice, as agreeable as Lopez had tried to make his own at the back door.

"You get fat, Mister Nolan. The home cooking, eh?"

"My sister sure as the devil don't get any credit for it. She can't even cook beans!"

"*Ja*," the barber said. "Once Mac told me. But I don't mean Missus Macready. I mean the new—housekeeper at your own place."

"You heard about her, hunh?"

"I hear everything. I think you make good deal, Mister Nolan. This girl, she's pretty—and pretty good in the kitchen, eh?"

The barber's tone made kitchen duties embrace many things. *Señor* Nolan grunted.

"For a *cholo*."

"I had me one, once," the fat barber said with pride. "Kept her till she got fat. Fought me like a wildcat, too, all the time—like yours."

Señor Nolan said a big *yanqui* curse with which Lopez was not wholly familiar. The barber's chair squeaked as though its occupant had shifted abruptly.

"Doesn't anyone have any private business in this miserable string of ruts?" *Señor* Nolan growled angrily.

The fat barber sounded a little frightened and he had plainly long been among Spanish peoples. He took hasty refuge in the obvious.

"It is a small town—" Lopez could almost see the unhappy shrug of his fat shoulders.

"It's going to be smaller by one second-rate barber if you don't learn to mind your own business!" *Señor* Nolan said.

There was only the sound of the razor after this. Lopez felt sorry for the little fat man. *Señor* Nolan had a way of speaking which took the hair from a man's head like a pair of shears. And in Frio it was possible for *Señor* Nolan to bring about whatever he desired. Mindful of time, Lopez climbed from the tub, dried himself with his old clothing, and took fresh garments from the bundle he had been carrying.

THERE was no movement along Alto when Lopez reached the street from the rear of the barber's shop. He glanced across to the best of Macready's small houses, on the next lot to the big place Macready had built for his wife and kids. There was green grass and a garden of flowers in the double front yard of the two places. It was well watered and orderly and would have been beautiful except that it was here Macready's kids lived and none of them was in sight nor was there the litter small ones made at play nor any worn signs of their comings and goings across the lawn and through the flowers. The dust of Bajo was better than this.

The front door of the small house was open as though some need within had set the house gasping for fresh air. Lopez glanced obliquely into the barber's shop as he reached the walk.

The fat man was nearly done with *Señor* Nolan's shave.

He wondered how soon it would occur to *Señor* Nolan that what was known to the barber was known also even far out onto the mesas. Perhaps it was a small matter. *Señor* Nolan had called Felicia Pico a *cholo*. Lopez, himself, was a bad one from the benches. They were as nothing in Frio. This was *Señor* Nolan's town.

Moving down the near side of Alto, Lopez passed before La Quinta and the light cast from the purple-glass front turned colors in his faded shirt and vest and sash to things of richness and beauty, so that for forty feet along the walk he was as handsomely dressed as a man could wish to be. When he was past La Quinta he clung to the purple feeling of richness. He needed it. Seven dollars was not a great deal of money, and four were already spent.

He turned into The Store. This was an establishment of much size. It had once been two buildings. The Store had once only sold foods and hardware. Dry goods had been sold by a *Señor* Levy, next door. A good arrangement, for those without money did not owe one man for everything they needed. But when *Señor* Nolan came, this changed. *Señor* Levy came on bad days and left Frio in a rented wagon with his wife and a trunk and nothing else. It was said this was the day Macready first came down the bluff to Jose's Place for *pulque*. It was said this was the day Macready's kids first discovered the friendly dust of Bajo.

The walls between the two business places had been removed. Now there was so much space a man at one end of The Store could not readily hear what was said at the other. And it had flooring—perhaps more smooth concrete than all the remainder of Frio combined. It was swept every day and was very clean.

Racks of cottons, already made up for wearing, flanked the main aisle all the way to the long grocery counter at its head. Lopez looked at only one of the cottons. A dress for a young woman of shoulder height, a certain figure, and eyes so brown as to be black. The dress was a little more dusty on its hanger than it had been when he had last seen it, three months before, but what mattered a little dust, which could be shaken free and forgotten, when the colors were strong? He took the dress from the rack and folded it carefully across his arm.

One of Macready's larger kids was idling near the candy case on the grocery counter, waiting patiently for the grocery clerk to turn his head. He was ignoring the rock candy in the wide-stoppered jars on top of the case. He plainly was interested only in the chocolates beneath the glass counter top. Lopez would have paused to watch, knowing Macready's kids were amusingly clever with their small thievery, but the boy turned to look at him. He looked at the dress Lopez carried over his arm and he went down a side aisle to where one of his small sisters stood motionless, staring soberly and intently upward at a stand supporting a remarkable woman's hat. It was a small thing of felt, surmounted by an enormous, curving feather of brilliant green which looked much like a fall shaft of *ocotillo* blossom with the color all gone wrong.

The boy with the red hair spoke to the little girl and hurriedly left The Store. The little girl reluctantly transferred her solemn upward gaze from the wonderful feathered hat to Lopez.

When he located the head clerk and approached him, the little girl was at his heels.

"*Cuantos?*" Lopez asked the head clerk, and he put the dress carefully on the counter. The head clerk looked at the tag.

"Four ninety-five," he said. "But no charge. No credit. Not for you!"

"*Pues, si,*" Lopez agreed. "It makes many months I am told about the credit." He shrugged. "No charge. Lopez is a bad one. But the last time I asked, *Señor*, you tell me this dress a long time on the rack. To me a price of two dollars."

The clerk looked at Lopez and then at the dress.

"You got two dollars?"

Lopez put the silver on the counter. The clerk raked it into a drawer, rolled the dress into a bundle, and shoved it into a paper sack. Lopez accepted this and when the clerk turned away he shook the dress out, folded it with great care, and restored it to the sack. The little girl watched with solemn interest.

Lopez looked about The Store for a moment. Bright gasoline lanterns hanging overhead. Gleaming little stoves, built for greasewood fuel and with ovens in which a good woman could create miracles, even out on the mesas. A case where stood rifles and shotguns of great beauty, with stacks of yellow ammunition boxes beside them. And a bed, knocked down and standing against the wall. A bed with a painting of the desert on the footboard. And a mattress and springs. Most of all he looked at the bed. This was the good thing about The Store. It cost no silver to look.

The little girl with the red hair followed him outside, but when he started across the skimpy gravel of Alto's paving toward the best of Macready's small houses, she turned and ran swiftly toward the back lots and the bluff which fell away to Bajo.

THE front door of *Señor* Nolan's house was open still. Lopez entered. There was sound from the kitchen. He crossed to this. A hot fire glowed behind the mica window of the firebox door in the stove against the far wall. A copper washboiler sat on the lids. Steam was thick in the air. Clothes were heaped against the back door. Men's shirts, things a thin woman of importance might wear to make her appear more than she was. And much quantity of the plain, small clothes Macready's kids wore.

A tub sat on a bench in the middle of the room. Felicia Pico was bent over this, arms red to the elbows with the scald of strong soap and hot water, working the collarband of a shirt over the corrugations of a washboard slanting down into the suds. Her hair was stringy with dampness.

The smell of the room was heat and steam, soap and suds, and the wide variety of stains clothing could acquire. It was not pleasant, but it was not as bad as sheep. Nevertheless, Lopez permitted himself anger for the first time since he had heard of this, far out on the mesas.

Perhaps it was the will of the good God, as some had said, that a man should take a woman. *Señor* Nolan had lived long alone in Frio and Felicia had great beauty. But, as *yanquis* often boasted, this was a free country. And for the shelter of his house, for food always upon the table and clothes upon her back, *Señor* Nolan could not make the girl of a Lopez his sister's slave.

"Feliz–" Lopez said softly.

She straightened above the washboard and brushed a strand of hair from her eyes. He saw a bruise below the crown of her cheek. There were four spots of darkened flesh, spaced as the fingers of a man's hand, on her shoulder beyond the open throat of her blouse. As the fat barber had said, *Señor* Nolan's *cholo* had fought him. And she had been hurt.

"Paco!" she breathed. "Paquito!" She was bright for a moment. Then her shoulders fell. "It is too late, Paquito."

This was not true. Lopez knew in his heart it was not. The little house on the mesas was not yet finished. Nothing was in it for comfort. He did not have the hundred sheep of his own he once believed he required. He owned now only a dollar in money. But it was not too late. He had waited long for Felicia because of his love for her. She had waited long for him. But it had not been too long. He said so and pointed to the clothing she wore.

"His?"

She nodded. Lopez held out his package. She took it and stepped barefooted into the woodbox alcove where the stove and washboiler gave her privacy. She came out in a moment, wearing only the dress he had bought at The Store. She was more beautiful for this. It belonged to her body as she belonged to him. He wanted those who had said she would be marked to see her, now. The bruises would fade and vanish and she was cleanly clad. What changes *Señor* Nolan had worked lay with his discarded clothes behind the stove.

Lopez turned and moved back through the house. Felicia followed, admiring her dress and saying small, soft sounds to herself which had no meaning except in his ears.

There were many people on Alto when they emerged from the house. Macready's wife was half the distance across the lawn from her own door. The barber was in front of his shop. Macready's kids, seven or eight of them, were scattered along outside the fence. *Señor* Nolan, with two clerks from The Store and the bar man from La Quinta, was just inside the gate, heading for the house. In the street, near his kids, striding big and angry and carrying a rifle under his arm, was Macready. Behind him were Mama Rosario and Jose, from the *pulqueria*, and perhaps a dozen more who climbed the bluff from Bajo only on a Saint's day when the padre was in Frio.

Lopez heard little beyond the small, soft words Felicia murmured behind him–words now become a swift prayer to the Lady of Sorrows. His eyes were on *Señor* Nolan and the pick handles carried by the men with him. But he did not really see even them. Bigger than these was the law, the law written by the good God before the first man and the first woman and written for them. He did not halt until his way was blocked by *Señor* Nolan and the men with the pick handles.

"*Por favor, señores,*" he said softly. "I wish to pass."

From the street Macready's heavy voice boomed with no trace of thickness.

"Paul, you leave that kid be!"

"Mind your own business!" *Señor* Nolan snapped over his shoulder. And to Lopez, "I told you to stay out of Frio! There's one medicine you *cholos* understand!"

He started forward with the three men. There were other words along Alto.

"Coyote!" Mama Rosario screamed.

Macready's kids picked it up. "Coyote! Father of a coyote!"

Small rocks began to fly, thrown by small hands. One struck Lopez, but by accident. *Señor* Nolan and his men were the targets. Macready's wife did a strange thing. Lopez thought she would run toward her brother, doing for him as she had always done. Instead, she swung abruptly toward the street, crying out to Macready.

"Mac, Mac, do something!"

Señor Nolan was close. He struck with his clenched fist. Lopez hit the ground with blood in his mouth and seething within him the sudden fury of his race at a face blow by the hand of another.

He rolled clear of a kick and came to his feet, the knife from his waistband open in his hand. One of the men yelped.

"Look out! He's got a shiv!"

The man swung his club but Felicia caught his arm and swung him off balance. Lopez crouched and drove in low. *Señor* Nolan tried to twist away and the knife therefore did not work as cleanly as it might, opening a great wound in his side instead of the small puncture of an upward reach through his ribs to his heart. He fell twisting and screaming on the green grass of his lawn, blood and fear of death pouring out from him in a double stream.

Lopez would have quieted the screams but a pick handle caught him and drove him violently aside. He rolled to his knees and saw Macready hammer the clerks and the man from La Quinta back with his clubbed rifle. Felicia helped him to his feet. The others crowded in about *Señor* Nolan. The wounded man straightened on the grass and his moaning choked off. Macready's wife turned to her husband and pressed her face against his chest.

"Mac!" she sobbed. "Mac!"

Macready touched her hair with a clumsy hand.

"Get the kids into the house, Ruth," he said gently. "Feed 'em lunch—a big lunch. It'll get their minds off of it. I'll be with you soon's I can."

Macready's wife started back toward her house, calling to the kids. They started toward her, subdued and strangely obedient, looking from the thin woman to the suddenly soft-voiced giant who was their father. One of them seemed to be missing. Macready's wife kept repeating one name as they moved away. Macready spoke to one of the clerks.

"Put that stick down! And you boys give me a hand." He nodded at Mama Rosario. "Better come along, too, *Mamasita*. May need you."

Macready and the clerks bent. They lifted the body of Macready's wife's brother. They were not too careful. *Señor* Nolan was plainly very dead. Mama Rosario followed after them into the dead man's house, but not before she had flung Lopez a meaningful, imperative glance. Felicia touched his arm. They backed across the lawn and stepped over the fence. As they angled out into the street those from Bajo found much to watch in another direction. The fat barber went back into his shop, where he could see nothing.

As they reached the far walk a little girl with red hair—perhaps the one who had been missing—emerged from The Store. She was walking very stiffly and with much importance. She was wearing a woman's hat with a tall green feather like a fall *ocotillo* blossom with the color all gone wrong. She passed Lopez and Felicia without

seeing them and crossed toward her house. Felicia laughed a little as Lopez led her swiftly back along the side of The Store toward the paths down the bluff to Bajo.

The smith was not at the forge on the lower street but Horse was well shod and waiting. Lopez put three dollars on the anvil and handed the last big coin to Felicia before he swung her up behind Horse's saddle.

"For the padre when he comes to the mission on the mesa," he said. "He will wish to marry us."

Felicia nodded. Lopez swung up and they rode up Bajo toward The Hill and the mesa trails. Horse no longer limped and Lopez fell to thinking as a man of responsibility will.

Macready had called his wife by her Christian name and she had turned to him as a wife to her husband. There had been gentleness of a kind between them. Maybe good would come of this. It was possible *Señor* Nolan had made a slave of more than Felicia in Frio. Macready would again be master of The Store and La Quinta and the Bank of Frio. He would again be master of his home. There was no other to keep him from it. Perhaps in time Lopez would again have credit on which to live through a lean season. Macready had once been generous with friends. If so, a worry was settled.

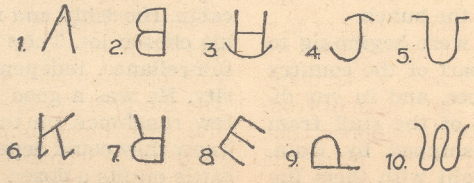
There remained but one other. Lopez had not before had a woman. Would he be a husband fit for the girl behind him? It was a thing he greatly desired, one for which he would strive. But would this be enough? He was Lopez of the mesas. He had killed a man without regret.

He was a bad one.

READ YOUR BRANDS

A Western Quiz by Eric Manders

CONFUSING as cattle brands often seem, with their endless variations, a good cowpoke can read them like poetry—and give you the owner's name to boot. The cowboy takes pride in his ability to read these brands; it offers proof of his range savvy. Perhaps the most interesting of the simple brands consist of a single letter *in the act of doing something*, or subtly distorted in other ways. Take a look at the brands below and see if you can "read" them by giving each letter its proper adjective. Answers on page 127.



Walking ___ Running ___ Reverse ___ Rocking ___ Tumbling ___
Lazy ___ Crazy ___ Swinging ___ Flying ___ Open ___

COWS and COWMEN

Reminiscences of cattle kingdom days, by one who lived through them.

William MacLeod Raine

I SAW my first longhorns in 1881, a herd of them owned by my father who had recently arrived in the untamed West from a combed and curried England. These mossyhorns were a ragged breed, all legs and ribs and projecting hipbones. The man who dubbed them "horned jack rabbits" had found an apt word of description for them. They were wild as the long-eared rabbits and could tear through the brush as fast. The top price for one in good times was twenty dollars, unless it had been run over by an engine on the unfenced track of the newly built railroad, in which case the owner doubled the asking price, realizing for the first time that the "critter" was the pick of the bunch.

The cattle drives were beginning to slow down in our part of the country because of the fences, and in our direction a good deal of the stuff from Texas was being shipped by train. Some of these brought with them the ticks fatal to stock not used to them. This disease, which we then called "Texas fever," did not hit our district for several years, during which time my father's outfit had been steadily growing. But when it reached us the havoc was devastating. The carcasses of our stock lay thick on the prairies and in the woods. In a few weeks my father had almost ceased to be a cattleman.

The hazards facing a cattleman both personally and in his business were great. In West Texas the raiding Kiowas and Comanches killed hundreds of settlers until the Rangers and the army subdued them. Danger stalked the pioneer in the shinnery and in the piney woods. It lay down with him at night beside his campfire and in his cabin. Hardship and rough living were his chosen lot. They developed in him self-reliance, independence, and integrity. He was a good neighbor, for the few ranchmen on the frontier had to know they could depend on the nearest cattle outfits a dozen miles or so away. Many a time was a family awakened in the dead of night by a horseman out-

side shouting, "Saddle up and git out, the Injuns are raidin'." Speaking of the old-timers, Charles Goodnight once told me that there were mighty few culls in the herd those days. Most of them were simple but tough, God-fearing men.

One came to know how dependable his neighbor was. I have seen my father lend five hundred dollars without security and without taking a note for the money. He knew the borrower was good for it. His word was enough. One settler bought two farms on partial payments and was not asked to give a mortgage for the balance. When a newcomer wanted to put up a barn those living near rode over and helped him with cheerful good will. One rancher would sell to another a thousand head of cattle with no record of it made except on the back of an envelope.

After the Civil War Texas was bursting with unbranded cattle, due to the fact that all the men had been in the Confederate army and stock was not "worked." There was a scramble to brand these mavericks. The man with the longest rope got most of them. Between the Lone Star State and a northern market for the longhorn stretched hundreds of miles of wilderness over which hostile Indians and buffalo roamed, a country of blizzards and droughts, of bankfull rivers the herds would be forced to swim.

Charles Goodnight is authority for the statement that Oliver Loving was the first man to drive a herd north. In 1858 he took a herd across the Indian Territory through Kansas and Missouri to Illinois. Eight years later he and Goodnight formed a partnership for trail-driving which lasted until the tragic death of Loving. Fifty years after this I heard Goodnight talk of his friend, a wistful note in his voice.

The first market for beef stock the partners found was at Fort Sumner, New Mexico, where the government had established a reservation for Indians. Later they took herds across the Raton Pass along the foothills of the Rockies and sold the stuff to John W. Iliff in Colorado, whose stock ranged in the Platte valleys for a hundred miles.

This route became known as the Loving-Goodnight trail. The worst stretch of it was between the Concho and the Pecos rivers, a tramp of eighty miles across a burning-hot desert without water, the torture increased by the dust and heat of the herd. Cattle travel from eight to twelve miles a day. On this trail they had to be kept moving day and night with little rest in order to bring them to the river alive. Scores of the longhorns died. The men and horses too reached the Horsehead Crossing completely exhausted. When the cattle smelled water they crowded forward and into the river so fast that many of the weaker ones were drowned. The nerves of the riders, throats parched, eyes inflamed and red, lips cracked, were so frayed that quarrels at the Crossing were frequent. A quarrel usually meant a gun fight. Goodnight told me that he knew of a dozen cowboys buried there. Some succumbed to the stings of rattlesnakes, thousands of which infested that country, but most of them passed away in the smoke of barking guns.

On one of his early Pecos trips Goodnight drove a mixed herd, but it was an experience he never repeated. The herd dragged out too far, since steers travel faster than cows. This was especially true when a number of the

cows were heavy with calf. One of the distressing features was that the newly dropped calves had to be shot. They could not keep up with the herd and there was no way to carry them. Hundreds of these were killed on the bed grounds. Nobody wanted to do the job, though it was the only merciful thing to do.

I think that the most harrowing experience on the trail and the most dreaded was the stampede. The herd was more likely to bolt during the first week of the drive, since some of its leaders were anxious to head for home. During that period the stock was usually driven far so that when they bedded down they would be too tired to run. But at any point of the trail a night stampede was possible. The least sound might be the signal for some mossyhorn to start a run. The crack of a whip, the rattle of a sidewinder, an unexpected voice in the night, the whirr of a rising covey of quails might start the sleeping cattle.

Many of the worst stampedes were caused by the terrific electric storms that occurred in the High Plains country. To the trailers these seemed to come more frequently at night. They were awesome displays, intensified by the fact that the riders were racing through the darkness beside the herd attempting to turn the leaders and swing the cattle into a compact mass where they would start milling. The lightning played on the horns of the flying cattle and on the ears of the horses. Balls of fire ran along the ground. The heels of the cowboys' boots, the horns of the saddles, were torn away by bolts of the lightning. Frequently when you read tales of the old drivers you will run across a line mentioning that one of the party was struck dead or that his body was found after the stampede trodden down by a hundred hoofs when his horse stepped into a gopher hole.

In 1876 Goodnight gave up his ranch near Pueblo, Colorado, and drove sixteen hundred head back down the trail into Texas. He found an ideal place for his spread at Palo Duro canyon in the Panhandle, not far from where Clarendon is situated today. Some of his herders had to hold the stock back while he with others drove ten thousand buffalo out of the canyon. There was no other ranchman within a hundred miles of him. He built a sod house, corrals, and fences. His supplies had to be freighted from Trinidad, Colorado. A year later T. S. Bugbee wagoned in to the Panhandle and became his nearest neighbor. It must have been a comfort for Mrs. Goodnight to know that there was another white woman less than eighty miles distant.

Charles Goodnight was the greatest cattleman who ever lived in the Panhandle. He was a heavy-set man, slightly bowlegged, with a marked resemblance to General Grant. A vital force for law and order in the community, sometimes harsh and plain-spoken, fearless, and of rockbound integrity, he was looked up to by every ranchman in the West. He made friends with the Indians when he could, fought them when he must. Though he treated them justly, he was not a sentimentalist. Once I asked him what was done with the body of a marauding Kiowa caught by one of the ranch cowboys stealing horses and shot. He said casually, "Hank roped his foot and dragged him to a gulch." Of thieves and troublemakers he was mentally intolerant, yet often showed great pa-

tience with them.

The last time I saw Charles Goodnight he was past ninety, still full of energy, looking forward to the new West emerging from the old. He died at the age of ninety-three.

To understand the cattleman of the great trail-herding days one must realize that he was a product of his environment. A hard-bitten son of the early frontier, his training and heritage as well as the circumstances of his life forced him to stand on his own feet, an individual with a code of ethics quite different from that of a protected city dweller. The drama of his surroundings gave him color. He was only one generation removed from the period of the Alamo when Bowie, Crockett, Deaf Smith, Fannin, and Houston carved out of a Mexican province the Lone Star State. Texans never forget that story. It is worth remembering that the men who won freedom at San Jacinto were so rebellious of restraint, of discipline, that they almost wrecked their cause. Their sons the cattlemen were also markedly individual.

All kinds of men, good and bad, went up the trail with the herds. A considerable number of them were Negroes and Mexicans. In later years all of those living were proud of being in that group. Wandering through the lobbies of the Menger and Gunter hotels in San Antonio thirty years after the drives had ceased, I saw in the tanned and wrinkled faces of the old-timers gathered there for the annual reunion of the Trail Drovers' Association their pride in the memory of those days. The trail years had been full of gusto and adventure. They still wore their big hats tilted, with a touch of you-be-damned jauntiness. When they got together they were a tightly knit brotherhood.

The most successful of the trail drivers were big businessmen. Colonel Ike T. Pryor, whom I used to meet in the lobby of a San Antonio hotel, took up the Chisholm Trail in one year fifteen herds totaling 45,000 head of stock. He told me that in the bad years of the mid-'eighties his firm went in the red more than half a million dollars. John R. Blocker, according to his brother Ab, sent north in 1886 more than 57,000 cattle and 1500 horses. In the early days "Shanghai" Pierce bought from the Texas ranches many herds and pointed them for Abilene and Dodge and Ellsworth.

"Shanghai" Pierce was one of the largest operators. It was his custom to take with him while buying beef stock a Negro leading a pack horse loaded with gold and silver currency. He would pour the money out on a blanket and let it lie there while he bargained with the stockmen. Murdo Mackenzie of the great Matador ranches mentioned to me that both in the Southwest and in Brazil, to which country the company extended its holdings, he often traveled alone for days carrying large sums of money in his saddlebags for cattle purchases. Though he carried a holstered revolver it was more for rattlesnakes than for fear of robbers.

On one occasion Charles Goodnight, returning to Texas from a drive, poured the proceeds into the bed of the chuck wagon. As he moved through the country the rattling of the coin announced his coming like a brass band. J. Evetts Haley, in his book on Goodnight, mentions that on one occasion when the trail driver was facing great peril from thirst he reflected that

men were foolish to risk so much for money when at a pinch they would give a million dollars if they had it for a canteen of water.

In the days of the drives the names of a score of big cattlemen were better known over the great stretch of cow country than that of the president of the United States—such men as Seth Mabry, Ike Pryor, John R. Blocker, John Slaughter, "Shanghai" Pierce, Charles Goodnight, and George W. Saunders. When it became cumbersome to carry cash for goods bought and wages paid they wrote checks that were as readily accepted as government greenbacks. These passed from hand to hand as a medium of exchange until the paper on which they were written was nearly worn out. Banks were all right for city people but a homesteader or a cowboy could not go a hundred miles to get hard money.

As early as 1870 the government had awakened to the extent of the livestock industry in Texas and the development of the trail trade. The Department of Agriculture report for that year points out that along the Gulf coast could be found cattle lords with herds surpassing in number "even the flocks and herds of the great men of Uz." One of these was Captain Richard King, who had settled at Kingsville, Texas, before the Mexican War. He was owner of the Santa Gertrudis ranch, which embraced 85,000 acres. In his brand, the Running W, ranged 65,000 cattle, 10,000 horses, and 8,000 goats. He had three hundred Mexican herdsmen and each year branded 12,000 calves and sold 10,000 fat bullocks.

Before King died the estate had grown to more than a million acres. The employees stayed generation after generation. They were a part of an almost feudal life. Today the ranch is one of the great show places in America. There are half a dozen small towns in it and also one of the largest private game preserves in the world. It is a long day's ride on horseback from the front gate to the splendid buildings that make up the family residence.

An even greater ranch in size, though it has not held together to the degree that the King ranch has, was the X I T in the Panhandle. The syndicate that owned these millions of acres received them as a grant from the state in consideration of building the Texas capitol, at that time the largest one in the country. A good many years ago I rode a horse part way across one of the ranch pastures from morning until late afternoon without sighting the boundary fence. South of the New Mexico line the X I T ran for 200 miles.

The range was so extensive that it covered ten counties which had been laid out but were not yet organized or populated. Ab Blocker had the distinction of naming this tremendous estate. He suggested that an abbreviation of Ten in Texas would be appropriate, so it became the X I T.

In the early years the grass was so thick and abundant the stockmen could not conceive of a time when there would be a shortage of feed for stock. Unfortunately as the number of cattle increased and new owners crowded in there was much overgrazing and the range deteriorated badly. Even in my time the grass in places was once knee-deep to a horse where now it is scant and thin.

As a small boy I watched a hundred covered wagons pushing westward during the early 'eighties. "Movers," we called these poverty-stricken migrants. The wagon was often a ram-

shackle affair drawn by horses ready for the boneyard. A long-legged colt might be running beside the outfit and a cow be tied to the end gate. Fastened to the side there were usually a tub and articles of furniture. In nine times out of ten the driver was lank and bearded, the woman beside him bedraggled and poke-bonneted. Who could have guessed that this man and woman—multiplied by a million others—would in a dozen years wipe out the supremacy of the range kings by homesteading the water holes and plowing up the range?

But the day of the open range, though it lasted less than two decades, was the most glamorous in the history of this country. Never in the world before was there anything like it and conditions have so changed that there never can be again. The drivers back of the millions of mossyhorns moving up the trails did not know they were treading a road of empire and that those longhorns lumbering through the wilderness were forerunners of a civilization out of which would be fashioned a dozen states in all of which the laws, customs, habits of life, speech, and vocabulary would be determined by the cattle influx. Nor could they know that the romance of their adventures would hold so great an appeal two generations later that hundreds of thousands of people would be eager to read stories of it in *Zane Grey's Western Magazine.*

No other occupation ever impressed itself so vividly on this country's imagination.

The big spreads naturally clashed with the small fry who had settled on the creeks and ran small herds. There were faults on both sides. The riders of the large outfits were sometimes arbitrary and violent. Among the small holders was a sprinkling of nesters who preyed on the stock of the great ranches. In Wyoming the rustlers and the hoemen had the sympathy of the residents of the small towns with the result that cattle thieves brought into court could not be convicted. Stockmen took a harsh view of this miscarriage of justice. Some of them hired killers to shoot down known rustlers. Others hanged them when caught. Even the most law abiding of them found their patience worn thin. They understood the action of the less scrupulous stockmen even while they stood aloof from such violence themselves. One of the most respected of them, John Clay, put the problem in a question. What would you do if a thief broke into your house, helped himself to your property, was arrested, tried, and freed to jeer at you and continue his depredations? If you were a man you would take the law into your own hands, he concluded.

Some of these stock detectives ("protection men" they were called in Texas) were hard characters known to be killers. Others were good citizens who gathered evidence against rustlers and turned it in to the civil authorities. Two of the most notorious, Bill Standifer and "Pink" Higgins, I never met. They were employed by the same ranch. Both were men fearless and strong with many redeeming qualities. They quarreled, fought a duel on horseback, and Standifer was killed. Prior to this time "Pink" had been the leader of his faction in the famous Horrell-Higgins feud in which the Horrell family was wiped out. Texas feuds were deadly ones.

I have known a good many stock detectives and inspectors. One of them

was Sam Dunn. He had run a saloon in Tascosa during the early days but later had been a cattle inspector for many years. Our acquaintance was close enough for me to dedicate a book to him. Dunn had lived his life on the turbulent frontier but I feel quite sure he never shot a man from ambush. Finn Clanton was another type of protection man. He was a brother of Billy Clanton, who was killed by the Earp crowd in the O K corral fight. Will Barnes, who collaborated with me in the writing of the book, *Cattle*, told me that an Arizona cattlemen's association employed Finn to "get rid of rustlers." Clanton looked to me like one who would take this mission literally.

Tom Horn operated in Brown's Hole and later in Wyoming. Before this time he had an excellent reputation as a cowboy and scout. He stood well over six feet, deep-chested and lean-loined, straight as an arrow. To the day of his death he had many friends, though he was convicted of murdering a fifteen-year-old boy. Both at his trial and execution he carried himself with no evidence of fear and without the least touch of bravado. It is difficult to understand how one page of this man's life could carry so fine a record and another a career so ruthlessly evil. A well-known Wyoming cattleman, John Coble, wrote this tribute to Horn after his death:

The story is done. Close the pages that tell of fighting our country's foes, of secret service, of Cuban campaigning, of zeal, of faithfulness, or fearlessness. Unwritten always must remain the record of Tom Horn's bravery, loyalty, generosity, and the countless kindly acts which marked his pathway through life. I am proud to say that he was my friend, always faithful and just. When can I hope to see such another! And no man ever walked more bravely to his death. I am convinced, and I reassert it to be true, that Tom Horn was guiltless of the crime for which he died.

Part of the time I was present at Horn's trial. My opinion is that he was convicted on insufficient evidence on account of the hot feeling against him, but I believe he was guilty of shooting Willie Nickell and several other rustlers.

Because of the sturdy character of cattlemen it was inevitable that in the wilder sections of the West many of them were called from their ranches to serve as peace officers. As foreman of the Hashknife outfit in Arizona Burt Mossman spent half of his time cleaning out nests of rustlers operating in that region. Pat Garrett and John W. Poe, who were instrumental in terminating the career of the young ruffian Billy the Kid, were both recruited from the ranks of cowboys to stop the Pecos River rustling and were later cattlemen. From their own lips I heard the story of the killing of Bonney.

I may be responsible for the small book written by Poe in which is told the story of the outlaw's death. He was a banker at Roswell, New Mexico, when I knew him, and was also the owner of a ranch that was a model for that time. He had been one of the first in the Southwest to discard the custom of running longhorns and letting them rough through the winter without feed. He fenced, bred up his stock, irrigated, raised alfalfa, and fed hay to the cattle in bad weather. About two years after my visits with him I was talking with Charles Goodnight and Poe's name was mentioned. I said that I had urged Poe to get the story down

on paper. Goodnight went into the house and brought back with him a manuscript the banker had sent him. This was dated within a week of the time I had left Roswell.

As a matter of fact when Garrett and Poe with Kip McKinney rode to Fort Sumner looking for Billy the Kid neither of them expected to find him. The natural assumption was that he had crossed into Mexico and would stay there. Poe was living at White Oaks at this time. An old man who had been sleeping in the loft of a livery stable came to Poe with the tale that he had heard two Mexicans on the ground floor say that the outlaw was staying at Fort Sumner. Garrett could not believe this was true, but it was up to them to run down any clue they found. The sheriff, a long lean man several inches over six feet in height, told me that when the boy killer came into the dark room where he was talking with Pete Maxwell it was one of the biggest surprises of his life. He had one instant to decide whether to kill or be killed.

With the possible exception of Texas no state has been so completely dominated by the cattle industry as Wyoming. The influx of the herds came not only from Texas but from the big ranges of Oregon and other coast states. At least three of Wyoming's cattlemen, John B. Kendrick and the two Careys, father and son, were both governor of the state and later United States Senator. Another cattleman who represented the state in Washington for several terms was Senator Warren, the father-in-law of General Pershing.

All of these men were fine types of Westerners, honest, upright, and intelligent. Incidentally each one of them had been president of the Stock Growers Association of Wyoming, an organization that wielded a great influence in the state. When I was a reporter on Denver newspapers I met most of these men and was impressed by the force of their individuality.

It became apparent to observing cattlemen even in the '80s that the early haphazard way of ranching would have to be abandoned if the business was to survive. One winter in the mid-'eighties the winter kill of stock amounted to nearly fifty percent. Overstocking the range with longhorns was ruining the grazing-grounds. The poor quality of the stock meant lower prices. Thomas Sturgis, a ranchman prominent in the Association, was an insistent advocate of fencing, winter feeding, and breeding up the cattle. At the meetings of the cattlemen he hammered at the need of a change in the method of stock raising. Stubborn old-timers who would not heed dropped out of the picture. The longhorn disappeared, giving place to the white-face Hereford. Fields of alfalfa dotted the range. The change came none too soon, since tough days were ahead for the livestock industry.

In 1930 Russell Thorp became "herd boss" of the Association with offices at Cheyenne. He was the son of an old-timer who organized and ran the famous Deadwood-Cheyenne stage and freight line to and from the camps of the Black Hills gold boom. The story of that line, running through a wild territory infested by Indians and outlaws, is one of the most exciting in the history of the West. Young Russell owned the Damfino brand, but he was needed for a bigger job, to help guide the cattlemen of Wyoming through periods of depression, devastating drouths, high feed prices, meat

shortages, and legislative restrictions.

In Wyoming there are 20,000 registered brands. Thorp's duties cover a wide field. As head brand inspector he has to decide the ownership of stray cattle. The total recovery of lost and stolen stock from the early brand-blotting days to the present rustling by trucks has amounted to $40,000,000. He drives 30,000 miles a year on personal tours of inspection and he finds time to edit *Cow Country*, the bulletin of the Association which has reached its seventieth volume. Very likely he is in Denver as I write this, since the biggest cattle show in the West is being held here this week and hundreds of high-heeled boots are clumping the streets. During the National Western Stock Show ranchers come for a thousand miles to take over the city.

Out of the Old West a new one has emerged. A cowboy no longer crashes through the mesquite after a four-year-old high-tailing it to escape. He rides to the summit of a hill and drifts the lazy whitefaces down to the roundup grounds. He does not put his bronco into a bankfull river with a thousand tossing longhorns breasting the current. The long drives are over. Very likely he chugs over the bumpy ground in an old Ford instead of riding the line as of old.

One of the typical products of the ranch as it is today is Daniel I. J. Thornton, who was inaugurated as governor of Colorado after a hurried campaign in which he covered more than two hundred towns in his own plane. He is a Texan by birth and was born in a loam soddy hut from which his parents wagoned west, a ten-day trip the youngsters enjoyed immensely. Governor Thornton is still in his thirties. He became an active member of the 4-H club (an organization which features farm products raised by boys and girls) before he was ten and a few years later president of the club congress in Texas. He studied at Texas Tech and at the University of California in Los Angeles, where he met his future wife and married her as soon as he could.

He had several jobs but was restless until he got back to the land. With borrowed money he bought the White Mountain Hereford ranch near Springersville, New Mexico. In Wyoming he purchased fourteen of the finest Herefords for $16,295 and began winning prizes at stock shows almost at once. He pulled down seven firsts at the first show where he exhibited. One of his bulls, Triumph Domino 45th, sired more than a million dollars' worth of heifers. Three years ago he sold two bulls for $50,000 each, the top price ever reached. By this time he had moved to Gunnison, Colorado.

On that occasion I saw in the rotunda of the Brown Palace hotel the T. T. Triumphant, one of the finest animals ever bred. The bull and its master, Dan Thornton, held a two-day reception in the hotel attended by half the people in the city. Dan is a big handsome man who cannot be separated from his pipe. He stepped into his new job under favorable auspices, since he did not have to give pledges to any politicians. The original nominee was Ralph Carr, one of the best governors Colorado ever had. He died shortly before the election and Thornton was chosen to take his place. The cattleman made a whirlwind campaign. He had no political past to explain away and what he said was clear, blunt, and sincere.

We did not err in expecting him to

make an A-1 governor.

Here is a story that's been told on Dan. When he was a very small boy at school the teacher asked him what a cow's hide could be used for, a natural question at that time and place since especially in the early days a hide filled a hundred needs. Little Dan was not very sure of the answer but he took a shot at it. He said that a cow's hide was to hold in the cow. We still give Dan A for effort.

There is left now very little open range, but when I was a boy a roundup was something to see. Every cattleman in the district attended in person or sent a rep (representative) to ride for him, each man bringing half a dozen mounts to throw into the remuda. Prior to the gathering the affair was well advertised, notices being posted at crossroad stores and other prominent points. The roundup call given below was in 1882:

Will commence May 15th at Power's ranch on the North Platte River, and work west covering Sheep Creek and Rawhide to their heads; thence to head of Running Water; thence to head of Lance Creek and as low on Lance Creek as the pens four miles above Carr's ranch; thence to head of Twenty Mile; thence to head of Walker Creek; thence to Ft. Fetterman; thence east down the river working the tributaries on the way and finish at Ft. Laramie.

By Beeson, foreman. Foremen of respective ranges to act as assistants on their range.

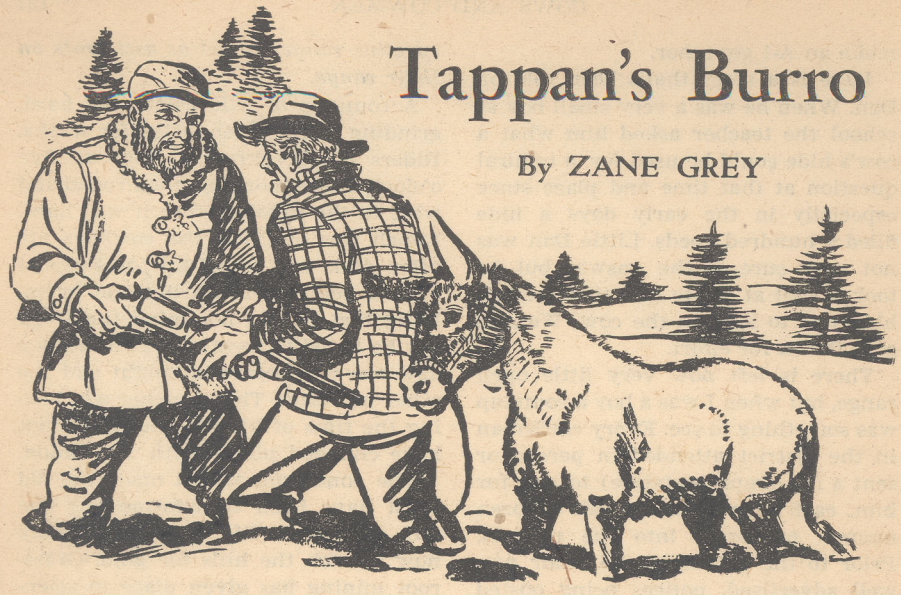
A roundup of wild cattle was hard, grinding work which lasted for weeks. Riders ate breakfast at four or five o'clock in the morning, then roped and were in the saddle before it was light. Lunch was omitted. The cowboys ate after dark and rolled up for sleep at once. I remember hearing one grumbling that he did not mind the work but he hated to have only two meals a day, one just before midnight and the other just after. That puncher was having the time of his life. He would not have changed places with Jay Gould.

The conditions which made the old West have been transformed by the flux of modern life. Few prospectors now scratch the hills for gold. Grassroot mining has given place to scientific methods. The open range has been wiped out except in a few spots where the grass is not worth fencing. Time and circumstance have modified the traditions of early days. Yet those traditions are woven into the warp and woof of the high plains country. Because that young old West existed Colorado and Wyoming and Arizona are what they are today.

Few of those now living who rode a saddle on the open range look back on that era without nostalgic memories of that vanished life, of loping in to the roundup grounds in the sun and the wind, of nights before a campfire with darkness gathering close.

Answers to "Read Your Brands" Quiz on page 117

1. Open A.
2. Reverse B.
3. Rocking H.
4. Swinging J.
5. Flying U.
6. Walking K.
7. Crazy R.
8. Tumbling E.
9. Lazy P.
10. Running W.



Tappan's Burro

By ZANE GREY

His fellow men may betray him, but his humble beast of burden knows only how to serve and obey her master.

CHAPTER ONE

Death Valley Ordeal

TAPPAN gazed down upon the newly born little burro with something of pity and consternation. It was not a vigorous offspring of the redoubtable Jennie, champion of all the numberless burros he had driven in his desert-prospecting years. He could not leave it there to die. Surely it was not strong enough to follow its mother. And to kill it was beyond him.

"Poor little devil!" soliloquized Tappan. "I'll have to hole up in this camp a few days. You can never tell what a burro will do. It might fool us an' grow strong all of a sudden."

Whereupon Tappan left Jennie and her tiny, gray lop-eared baby to themselves, and leisurely set about making permanent camp. The water at this oasis was not much to his liking, but it was drinkable, and he felt he must put up with it. For the rest, the oasis was desirable enough as a camping-site.

Desert wanderers like Tappan favored the lonely water holes. This one was up under the bold brow of the Chocolate Mountains, where rocky wall met the desert sand, and a green patch of *palo verdes* and mesquites proved the presence of water. It had a magnificent view down a many-leagued slope of desert growths, across the dark belt of green and the shining strip of red that marked the Rio Colorado, and on to the upflung Arizona land, range lifting to range until the saw-toothed peaks notched the blue sky.

Locked in the iron fastnesses of these desert mountains was gold. Tappan, if he had any calling, was a prospector. But the lure of gold did not bind him to this wandering life any more than the freedom of it. He had never made a rich strike. About the best he could ever do was to dig enough gold to grubstake himself for another prospecting trip into some remote corner of the American Desert. Tappan knew the arid Southwest from San Diego to the Pecos River and from Picacho on the Colorado to the Tonto Basin. Few prospectors had the strength and endurance of Tappan. He was a giant in build, and at thirty-five had never yet reached the limit of his physical force.

With hammer and pick and magnifying glass Tappan scaled the bare ridges. He was not an expert in testing minerals. He knew he might easily pass by a rich vein of ore. But he did his best, sure at least that no prospector could get more than he out of the pursuit of gold. Tappan was more of a naturalist than a prospector, and more of a dreamer than either. Many were the idle moments that he sat staring down the vast reaches of the valleys, or watching some creature of the wasteland, or marveling at the vivid hues of desert flowers.

Tappan waited two weeks at this oasis for Jennie's baby burro to grow strong enough to walk. And the very day that Tappan decided to break camp he found signs of gold at the head of a wash above the oasis. Quite by chance, as he was looking for his burros, he struck his pick into a place no different from a thousand others there, and hit into a pocket of gold. He cleaned out the pocket before sunset, the richer for several thousand dollars.

"You brought me luck," said Tappan, to the little gray burro staggering around its mother. "Your name is Jenet. You're Tappan's burro, an' I reckon he'll stick to you."

JENET belied the promise of her birth. Like a weed in fertile ground she grew. Winter and summer Tappan patrolled the sand beats from one trading-post to another, and his burros traveled with him. Jenet had an especially good training. Her mother had happened to be a remarkably good burro before Tappan had bought her. And Tappan had patience; he found leisure to do things, and he had something of pride in Jenet. Whenever he happened to drop into Ehrenberg or Yuma, or any freighting-station, some prospector always tried to buy Jenet. She grew as large as a medium-sized mule, and a three-hundred-pound pack was no load to discommode her.

Tappan, in common with most lonely wanderers of the desert, talked to his burro. As the years passed this habit grew, until Tappan would talk to Jenet just to hear the sound of his voice. Perhaps that was all which kept him human.

"Jenet, you're worthy of a happier life," Tappan would say, as he unpacked her after a long day's march over the barren land. "You're a ship of the desert. Here we are, with grub an' water, a hundred miles from any camp. An' what but you could have fetched me here? No horse! No mule! No man! Nothin' but a camel, an' so I call you ship of the desert. But for you an' your kind, Jenet, there'd be no prospectors, and few gold mines. Reckon the desert would be still an unknown waste. You're a great beast of burden, Jenet, an' there's no one to sing your praise."

And of a golden sunrise, when Jenet was packed and ready to face the cool, sweet fragrance of the desert, Tappan was wont to say:

"Go along with you, Jenet. The mornin's fine. Look at the mountains yonder callin' us. It's only a step down there. All purple an' violet! It's the life for us, my burro, an' Tappan's as rich as if all these sands were pearls."

But sometimes, at sunset, when the way had been long and hot and rough, Tappan would bend his shaggy head over Jenet, and talk in different mood.

"Another day gone, Jenet, another journey ended—an' Tappan is only older, wearier, sicker. There's no reward for your faithfulness. I'm only a desert rat, livin' from hole to hole. No home! No face to see— Some sunset, Jenet, we'll reach the end of the trail. An' Tappan's bones will bleach in the sands. An' no one will know or care!"

When Jenet was two years old she would have taken the blue ribbon in competition with all the burros of the Southwest. She was unusually large and strong, perfectly proportioned, sound in every particular, and practically tireless. But these were not the only characteristics that made prospectors envious of Tappan. Jenet had the common virtues of all good burros magnified to an unbelievable degree. Moreover, she had sense and instinct that to Tappan bordered on the supernatural.

During these years Tappan's trail crisscrossed the mineral region of the Southwest. But, as always, the rich strike held aloof. It was like the pot of gold buried at the foot of the rainbow. Jenet knew the trails and the water holes better than Tappan. She could follow a trail obliterated by drifting sand or cut out by running water. She could scent at long distance a new spring on the desert or a strange water hole. She never wandered far from camp so that Tappan had to walk far in search of her.

Wild burros, the bane of most prospectors, held no charm for Jenet. And she had never yet shown any especial liking for a tame burro. This was the strangest feature of Jenet's complex character. Burros were noted for their habit of pairing off, and forming friendships for one or more comrades. These relations were permanent. But Jenet still remained fancy-free.

Tappan scarcely realized how he relied upon this big, gray, serene beast of burden. Of course, when chance threw him among men of his calling he would brag about her. But he had never really appreciated Jenet. In his way Tappan was a brooding, plodding fellow, not conscious of sentiment. When he bragged about Jenet it was her good qualities upon which he dilated. But what he really liked best about her were the little things of every day.

During the earlier years of her training Jenet had been a thief. She would pretend to be asleep for hours just to get a chance to steal something out of camp. Tappan had broken this habit in its incipiency. But he never quite trusted her. Jenet was a burro.

Jenet ate anything offered her. She could fare for herself or go without. Whatever Tappan had left from his own meals was certain to be rich dessert for Jenet. Every mealtime she would stand near the campfire, with one great long ear drooping, and the other standing erect. Her expression was one of meekness, of unending patience. She would lick a tin can until it shone resplendent.

On long, hard, barren trails Jenet's deportment did not vary from that where the water holes and grassy patches were many. She did not need to have grass or grain. Brittle-bush and sage were good fare for her. She could eat greasewood, a desert plant that protected itself with a sap as sticky as varnish and far more dangerous to animals. She could eat cacti. Tappan had seen her break off leaves of the prickly-pear cactus, and stamp upon them with her forefeet, mashing off the thorns, so that she could consume the succulent pulp. She liked mesquite beans, and leaves of willow, and all the trailing vines of the desert. And she could subsist in an arid wasteland where a man would have died in short order.

No ascent or descent was too hard or dangerous for Jenet, provided it was possible of accomplishment. She would refuse a trail that was impassable. She seemed to have an uncanny instinct both for what she could do and what was beyond a burro. Tappan had never known her to fail on something to which she stuck persistently. Swift streams of water, always bugbears to burros, did not stop Jenet. She hated quicksand, but could be trusted to navigate it, if that were possible. When she stepped gingerly, with little inch steps, out upon thin crust of ice or salty crust of desert sink hole, Tappan would know that it was safe, or she would turn back. Thunder and lightning, intense heat or bitter cold, the sirocco sand storm of the desert, the white dust of the alkali wastes—these were all the same to Jenet.

One August, the hottest and driest of his desert experience, Tappan found himself working a most promising claim in the lower reaches of the Panamint Mountains on the northern slope above Death Valley. It was a hard country at the most favorable season; in August it was terrible. The Panamints were infested by various small gangs of desperadoes—outlaw claim jumpers where opportunity afforded—and out-and-out robbers, even murderers where they could not get the gold any other way.

Tappan had been warned not to go into this region alone. But he never heeded any warnings. And the idea that he would ever strike a claim or dig enough gold to make himself an attractive target for outlaws seemed preposterous and not worth considering. Tappan had become a wanderer now from the unbreakable habit of it.

Much to his amaze, he struck a rich ledge of free gold in a canyon of the Panamints; and he worked from daylight until dark. He forgot about the claim jumpers, until one day he saw Jenet's long ears go up in the manner habitual with her when she saw strange men. Tappan watched the rest of that day, but did not catch a glimpse of any living thing. It was a desolate place, shut in, red-walled, hazy with heat, and brooding with an eternal silence.

Not long after that Tappan discovered boot tracks of several men adjacent to his camp and in an out-of-the-way spot, which persuaded him that he was being watched. Claim jumpers, who were not going to jump his claim in this torrid heat, but meant to let him dig the gold and then kill him.

Tappan was not the kind of man to be afraid. He grew wrathful and stubborn. He had six small canvas bags of gold and did not mean to lose them. Still, he was worried.

"Now, what's best to do?" he pondered. "I mustn't give it away that I'm wise. Reckon I'd better act natural. But I can't stay here longer. My claim's about worked out. An' these jumpers are smart enough to know it. I've got to make a break at night. What to do?"

Tappan did not want to cache the gold, for in that case, of course, he would have to return for it. Still, he reluctantly admitted to himself that this was the best way to save it. Probably these robbers were watching him day and night. It would be most unwise to attempt escaping by traveling up over the Panamints.

"Reckon my only chance is goin' down into Death Valley," soliloquized Tappan grimly.

The alternative thus presented was not to his liking. Crossing Death Valley at this season was always perilous, and never attempted in the heat of day. And at this particular time of intense torridity, when the day heat was unendurable and the midnight furnace gales were blowing, it was an enterprise from which even Tappan shrank. Added to this were the facts that he was too far west of the narrow part of the valley, and even if he did get across he would find himself in the most forbidding and desolate region of the Funeral Mountains.

Thus thinking and planning, Tappan went about his mining and camp tasks, trying his best to act natural. But he did not succeed. It was impossible, while expecting a shot at any moment, to act as if there was nothing on his mind.

His camp lay at the bottom of a rocky slope. A tiny spring of water made verdure of grass and mesquite, welcome green in all that stark iron nakedness. His camp site was out in the open, on the bench near the spring. The gold claim that Tappan was working was not visible from any vantage point either below or above. It lay back at the head of a break in the rocky wall. It had two virtues—one that the sun never got to it, and the other that it was well hidden. Once there, Tappan knew he could not be seen. This, however, did not diminish his growing uneasiness. The solemn stillness was a menace. The heat of the day appeared to be augmenting to a degree beyond his experience.

Every few moments Tappan would slip back through a narrow defile in the rocks and peep from his covert down at the camp. On the last of these occasions he saw Jenet out in the open. She stood motionless. Her long ears were erect. In an instant Tappan became strung with thrilling excitement. His keen eyes searched every approach to his camp. And at last in the gully below to the right he discovered two men crawling along from rock to rock. Jenet had seen them enter that gully and was now watching for them to appear. Tappan's excitement gave place to a grimmer emotion. These stealthy visitors were going to hide in ambush, and kill him as he returned to camp.

"Jenet, reckon what I owe you is a whole lot," muttered Tappan. "They'd have got me sure! But now—"

Tappan left his tools, and crawled out of his covert into the jumble of huge rocks toward the left of the slope. He had a six-shooter. His rifle he had left in camp. Tappan had seen only two men, but he knew there were more than that, if not actually near at hand at the moment, then surely not far away. And his chance was to worm his way like an Indian down to camp.

With the rifle in his possession he would make short work of the present difficulty.

"Lucky Jenet's right in camp!" said Tappan, to himself. "It beats hell how she does things!"

Tappan was already deciding to pack and hurry away. On the moment Death Valley did not daunt him. This matter of crawling and gliding along was work unsuited to his great stature. He was too big to hide behind a little shrub or a rock. And he was not used to stepping lightly. His hobnailed boots could not be placed noiselessly upon the stones. Moreover, he could not progress without displacing little bits of weathered rock. He was sure that keen ears not too far distant could have heard him. But he kept on, making good progress around that slope to the far side of the canyon. Fortunately, he headed the gully up which his ambushers were stealing. On the other hand, this far side of the canyon afforded but little cover.

The sun had gone down back of the huge red mass of the mountain. It had left the rocks so hot Tappan could not touch them with his bare hands.

He was about to stride out from his last covert and make a run for it down the rest of the slope, when, surveying the whole amphitheater below him, he espied the two men coming up out of the gully, headed toward his camp. They looked in his direction. Surely they had heard or seen him. But Tappan perceived at a glance that he was the closer to the camp. Without another moment of hesitation, he plunged from his hiding-place, down the weathered slope. His giant strides set the loose rocks sliding and rattling.

The men saw him. The foremost yelled to the one behind him. Then they both broke into a run. Tappan reached the level of the bench, and saw he could beat either of them into the camp. Unless he were disabled! He felt the wind of a heavy bullet before he heard it strike the rocks beyond. Then followed the boom of a Colt. One of his enemies had halted to shoot. This spurred Tappan to tremendous exertion.

He flew over the rough ground, scarcely hearing the rapid shots. He could no longer see the man who was firing. But the first one was in plain sight, running hard, not yet seeing he was out of the race.

When he became aware of that he halted, and dropping on one knee, leveled his gun at the running Tappan. The distance was scarcely sixty yards. His first shot did not allow for Tappan's speed. His second kicked up the gravel in Tappan's face. Then followed three more shots in rapid succession. The man divined that Tappan had a rifle in camp. Then he steadied himself, waiting for the moment when Tappan had to slow down and halt.

As Tappan reached his camp and dove for his rifle, the robber took time for his last aim, evidently hoping to get a stationary target. But Tappan did not get up from behind his camp duffel. It had been a habit of his to pile his boxes of supplies and roll of bedding together, and cover them with a canvas. He poked his rifle over the top of this and shot the robber. Then, leaping up, he ran forward to get sight of the second one. This man began to run along the edge of the gully. Tappan fired rapidly at him. The third shot knocked the fellow down. But he got up, and yelling, as if for succor, he ran off. Tappan got another shot before he disappeared.

"Ahuh!" grunted Tappan grimly. His keen gaze came back to survey the fallen robber, and then went out over the bench, across the wide mouth of the canyon. Tappan thought he had better utilize time to pack instead of pursuing the fleeing man.

Reloading the rifle quickly, he hurried out to find Jenet. She was coming in to camp.

"Shore you're a treasure, old girl!" ejaculated Tappan.

Never in his life had he packed Jenet, or any other burro, so quickly. His last act was to drink all he could hold, fill his two canteens, and make Jenet drink. Then, rifle in hand, he drove the burro out of camp, round the corner of the red wall, to the wide gateway that opened down into Death Valley.

Tappan looked back more than he looked ahead. And he had traveled down a mile or more before he began to breathe more easily. He had escaped the claim jumpers. Even if they did show up in pursuit now, they could never catch him. Tappan believed he could travel faster and farther than any men of that ilk. But they did not appear. Perhaps the crippled one had not been able to reach his comrades in time. More likely, however, the gang had no taste for a chase in that torrid heat.

Tappan slowed his stride. He was almost as wet with sweat as if he had fallen into the spring. The great beads rolled down his face. And there seemed to be little streams of fire trickling down his breast. But despite this, and his labored panting for breath, not until he halted in the shade of a rocky wall did he realize the heat.

It was terrific. Instantly then he knew he was safe from pursuit. But he knew also that he faced a greater peril than that of robbers. He could fight evil men, but he could not fight this heat. So he rested there, regaining his breath. Already thirst was acute. Jenet stood near by, watching him. Tappan, with his habit of humanizing the burro, imagined that Jenet looked serious.

A moment's thought was enough for Tappan to appreciate the gravity of his situation. He was about to go down into the upper end of Death Valley—a part of that country unfamiliar to him. He must cross it, and also the Funeral Mountains, at a season when a prospector who knew the trails and water holes would have to be forced to undertake it. Tappan had no choice.

His rifle was too hot to hold, so he stuck it in Jenet's pack; and, burdened only by a canteen of water, he set out, driving the burro ahead. Once he looked back up the wide-mouthed canyon. It appeared to smoke with red heat veils. The silence was oppressive.

Presently he turned the last corner that obstructed sight of Death Valley. Tappan had never been appalled by any aspect of the desert, but it was certain that here he halted. Back in his mountain-walled camp the sun had passed behind the high domes, but here it still held most of the valley in its blazing grip.

Death Valley looked a ghastly, glaring level of white, over which a strange dull leaden haze drooped like a blanket. Ghosts of mountain peaks appeared to show dim and vague. There was no movement of anything. No wind! The valley was dead. Desolation reigned supreme. Tappan could not see far toward either end of the valley. A few miles of white glare merged at last into leaden pall. A strong odor, not unlike

sulphur, seemed to add weight to the air.

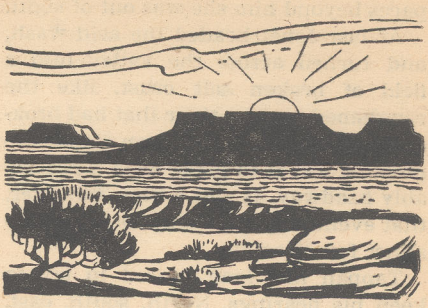
Tappan strode on, mindful that Jenet had decided opinions of her own. She did not want to go straight ahead or to right or left, but back. That was the one direction impossible for Tappan. And he had to resort to a rare measure —that of beating her. But at last Jenet accepted the inevitable and headed down into the stark and naked plain.

Soon Tappan reached the margin of the zone of shade cast by the mountain and was now exposed to the sun. The difference seemed tremendous. He had been hot, oppressed, weighted. It was now as if he was burned through his clothes, and walked on red-hot sands.

When Tappan ceased to sweat and his skin became dry, he drank half a canteen of water, and slowed his stride. Inured to desert hardship as he was, he could not long stand this. Jenet did not exhibit any lessening of vigor. In truth what she showed now was an increasing nervousness. It was almost as if she scented an enemy. Tappan never before had such faith in her. Jenet was equal to this task.

With that blazing sun on his back, Tappan felt he was being pursued by a furnace. He was compelled to drink the remaining half of his first canteen of water. Sunset would save him. Two more hours of such insupportable heat would lay him prostrate.

The ghastly glare of the valley took on a reddish tinge. The heat was blinding Tappan. The time came when he walked beside Jenet with a hand on her pack, for his eyes could no longer endure the furnace glare. Even with them closed he knew when the sun sank behind the Panamints. That fire no longer followed him. And the red left his eyelids.



With the sinking of the sun the world of Death Valley changed. It smoked with heat veils. But the intolerable constant burn was gone. The change was so immense that it seemed to have brought coolness.

In the twilight—strange, ghostly, somber, silent as death—Tappan followed Jenet off the sand, down upon the silt and borax level, to the crusty salt. Before dark Jenet halted at a sluggish belt of fluid—acid, it appeared to Tappan. It was not deep. And the bottom felt stable. But Jenet refused to cross. Tappan trusted her judgment more than his own. Jenet headed to the left and followed the course of the strange stream.

Night intervened. A night without stars or sky or sound, hot, breathless, charged with some intangible current! Tappan dreaded the midnight furnace winds of Death Valley. He had never encountered them. He had heard prospectors say that any man caught in Death Valley when these gales blew would never get out to tell the tale. And Jenet seemed to have something on her mind. She was no longer a leisurely, complacent burro. Tappan imagined Jenet seemed stern. Most assuredly she knew now which way she wanted to travel. It was not easy for Tappan to keep up with her, and ten

paces beyond him she was out of sight.

At last Jenet headed the acid wash, and turned across the valley into a field of broken salt crust, like the roughened ice of a river that had broken and jammed, then frozen again. Impossible was it to make even a reasonably headway. It was a zone, however, that eventually gave way to Jenet's instinct for direction.

Tappan had long ceased to try to keep his bearings. North, south, east, and west were all the same to him. The night was a blank—the darkness a wall—the silence a terrible menace flung at any living creature. Death Valley had endured them millions of years before living creatures had existed. It was no place for a man.

Tappan was now three hundred and more feet below sea level, in the aftermath of a day that had registered one hundred and forty-five degrees of heat. He knew, when he began to lose thought and balance—when only the primitive instincts directed his bodily machine. And he struggled with all his will power to keep hold of his sense of sight and feeling. He hoped to cross the lower level before the midnight gales began to blow.

Tappan's hope was vain. According to record, once in a long season of intense heat, there came a night when the furnace winds broke their schedule, and began early. The misfortune of Tappan was that he had struck this night.

Suddenly it seemed that the air, sodden with heat, began to move. It had weight. It moved soundlessly and ponderously. But it gathered momentum. Tappan realized what was happening. The blanket of heat generated by the day was yielding to outside pressure. Something had created a movement of the hotter air that must find its way upward, to give place for the cooler air that must find its way down.

Tappan heard the first, low, distant moan of wind and it struck terror to his heart. It did not have an earthly sound. Was that a knell for him? Nothing was surer than the fact that the desert must sooner or later claim him as a victim. Grim and strong, he rebelled against the conviction. That moan was a forerunner of others, growing louder and longer until the weird sound became continuous.

Then the movement of wind was accelerated and began to carry a fine dust. Dark as the night was, it did not hide the pale sheets of dust that moved along the level plain. Tappan's feet felt the slow rise in the floor of the valley. His nose recognized the zone of borax and alkali and niter and sulphur. He had reached the pit of the valley at the time of the furnace winds.

The moan augmented to a roar, coming like a mighty storm through a forest. It was hellish—like the woeful tide of Acheron. It enveloped Tappan. And the gale bore down in tremendous volume, like a furnace blast. Tappan seemed to feel his body penetrated by a million needles of fire. He seemed to dry up. The blackness of night had a spectral, whitish cast; the gloom was a whirling medium; the valley floor was lost in a sheeted, fiercely seeping stream of silt.

Deadly fumes swept by, not lingering long enough to suffocate Tappan. He would gasp and choke—then the poison gas was gone on the gale. But hardest to endure was the heavy body of moving heat. Tappan grew blind, so that he had to hold to Jenet, and stumble along. Every gasping breath was a tortured effort. He could not

bear a scarf over his face. His lungs heaved like great leather bellows. His heart pumped like an engine short of fuel. This was the supreme test for his never proven endurance. And he was all but vanquished.

Tappan's senses of sight and smell and hearing failed him. There was left only the sense of touch—a feeling of rope and burro and ground—and an awful insulating pressure upon all his body. His feet marked a change from salty plain to sandy ascent and then to rocky slope. The pressure of wind gradually lessened; the difference in air made life possible; the feeling of being dragged endlessly by Jenet had ceased. Tappan went his limit and fell into oblivion.

When he came to, he was suffering bodily tortures. Sight was dim. But he saw walls of rocks, green growths of mesquite, tamarack, and grass. Jenet was lying down, with her pack flopped to one side. Tappan's dead ears recovered to a strange murmuring, babbling sound. Then he realized his deliverance. Jenet had led him across Death Valley, up into the mountain range, straight to a spring of running water.

Tappan crawled to the edge of the water and drank guardedly, a little at a time. He had to quell terrific craving to drink his fill. Then he crawled to Jenet, and loosening the ropes of her pack, freed her from its burden. Jenet got up, apparently none the worse for her ordeal. She gazed mildly at Tappan, as if to say, "Well, I got you out of that hole."

Tappan returned her gaze. Were they only man and beast, alone in the desert? She seemed magnified to Tappan, no longer a plodding, stupid burro.

"Jenet, you—saved—my life," Tappan tried to enunciate. "I'll never—forget."

Tappan was struck then to a realization of Jenet's service. He was unutterably grateful. Yet the time came when he did forget.

Chapter Two

Tonto Interlude

TAPPAN had a weakness common to all prospectors: Any tale of a lost gold mine would excite his interest; and well-known legends of lost mines always obsessed him.

Pegleg Smith's lost gold mine had lured Tappan to no less than half a dozen trips into the terrible shifting-sand country of southern California. There was no water near the region said to hide this mine of fabulous wealth. Many prospectors had left their bones to bleach white in the sun, finally to be buried by the ever blowing sands. Upon the occasion of Tappan's last escape from this desolate and forbidding desert, he had promised Jenet never to undertake it again. It seemed Tappan promised the faithful burro a good many things. It had been a habit.

When Tappan had a particularly hard experience or perilous adventure, he always took a dislike to the immediate country where it had befallen him. Jenet had dragged him across Death Valley, through incredible heat and the midnight furnace winds of that strange place; and he had promised her he would never forget how she had saved his life. Nor would he ever go back to Death Valley!

He made his way over the Funeral Mountains, worked down through Ne-

vada, and crossed the Rio Colorado above Needles, and entered Arizona. He traveled leisurely, but he kept going, and headed southeast toward Globe. There he cashed one of his six bags of gold, and indulged in the luxury of a complete new outfit. Even Jenet appreciated this fact, for the old outfit would scarcely hold together.

Tappan had the other five bags of gold in his pack; and after hours of hesitation he decided he would not cash them and entrust the money to a bank. He would take care of them. For him the value of this gold amounted to a small fortune.

Many plans suggested themselves to Tappan. But in the end he grew weary of them. What did he want with a ranch, or cattle, or an outfitting store, or any of the businesses he now had the means to buy? Towns soon palled on Tappan. People did not long please him. Selfish interest and greed seemed paramount everywhere. Besides, if he acquired a place to take up his time, what would become of Jenet? That question decided him. He packed the burro and once more took to the trails.

A dim, lofty, purple range called alluringly to Tappan. The Superstition Mountains! Somewhere in that purple mass hid the famous treasure called the Lost Dutchman gold mine. Tappan had heard the story often. A Dutch prospector struck gold in the Superstitions. He kept the location secret. When he ran short of money, he would disappear for a few weeks, and then return with bags of gold. Wherever his strike, it assuredly was a rich one. No one ever could trail him or get a word out of him. Time passed. A few years made him old. During this time he conceived a liking for a young man, and eventually confided to him that some day he would tell him the secret of his gold mine.

He had drawn a map of the landmarks adjacent to his mine. But he was careful not to put on paper directions how to get there. It chanced that he suddenly fell ill and saw his end was near. Then he summoned the young man who had been so fortunate as to win his regard. Now this individual was a ne'er-do-well, and upon this occasion he was half drunk. The dying Dutchman produced his map, and gave it with verbal directions to the young man. Then he died. When the recipient of this fortune recovered from the effects of liquor, he could not remember all the Dutchman had told him. He tortured himself to remember names and places. But the mine was up in the Superstition Mountains. He never remembered. He never found the lost mine, though he spent his life and died trying. Thus the story passed into the legend of the Lost Dutchman.

Tappan now had his try at finding it. But for him the shifting sands of the southern California desert or even the barren and desolate Death Valley were preferable to this Superstition Range. It was a harder country than the Pinacate of Sonora. Tappan hated cactus, and the Superstitions were full of it. Everywhere stood up the huge *sahuaro*, the giant cacti of the Arizona plateaus, tall like branchless trees, fluted and columnar, beautiful and fascinating to gaze upon, but obnoxious to prospector and burro.

One day from a north slope Tappan saw afar a wonderful country of black timber, above which zigzagged for many miles a yellow, winding rampart of rock. This he took to be the rim of the Mogollon Mesa, one of Arizona's freaks of nature.

Something called Tappan. He was forever victim to yearnings for the unattainable. He was tired of heat, glare, dust, bare rock, and thorny cactus. The Lost Dutchman gold mine was a myth. Besides, he did not need any more gold.

Next morning Tappan packed Jenet and worked down off the north slopes of the Superstition Range. That night about sunset he made camp on the bank of a clear brook, with grass and wood in abundance—such a camp site as a prospector dreamed of but seldom found.

Before dark Jenet's long ears told of the advent of strangers. A man and a woman rode down the trail into Tappan's camp. They had poor horses and led a pack animal that appeared too old and weak to bear up under even the meager pack he carried.

"Howdy," said the man.

Tappan rose from his task to his lofty height and returned the greeting. The man was middle-aged, swarthy, and rugged, a mountaineer, with something about him that Tappan instinctively distrusted. The woman was under thirty, comely in a full-blown way, with rich brown skin and glossy dark hair. She had wide-open black eyes that bent a curious possession-taking gaze upon Tappan.

"Care if we camp with you?" she inquired, and she smiled. That smile changed Tappan's habit and conviction of a lifetime.

"No indeed. Reckon I'd like a little company," he said.

Very probably Jenet did not understand Tappan's words, but she dropped one ear and walked out of camp to the green bank.

"Thanks, stranger," replied the woman. "That grub shore smells good." She hesitated a moment, evidently waiting to catch her companion's eye, then she continued. "My name's Madge Beam. He's my brother, Jake. Who might you happen to be?"

"I'm Tappan, lone prospector, as you see," replied Tappan.

"Tappan! What's your front handle?" she queried, curiously.

"Fact is, I don't remember," replied Tappan, as he brushed a huge hand through his shaggy hair.

"Ahuh? Any name's good enough."

When she dismounted, Tappan saw that she had a tall, lithe figure, garbed in rider's overalls and boots. She unsaddled her horse with the dexterity of long practice. The saddlebags she carried over to the spot the man Jake had selected to throw the pack.

Tappan heard them talking in low tones. It struck him as strange that he did not have his usual reaction to an invasion of his privacy and solitude. Tappan had thrilled under those black eyes. And now a queer sensation of the unusual rose in him. Bending over his campfire tasks, he pondered this and that, but mostly the sense of the nearness of a woman.

Like most desert men, Tappan knew little of the other sex. A few that he might have been drawn to went out of his wandering life as quickly as they had entered it. This Madge Beam took possession of his thoughts. An evidence of Tappan's preoccupation was the fact that he burned his first batch of biscuits. And Tappan felt proud of his culinary ability. He was on his knees, mixing more flour and water, when the woman spoke from right behind him.

"Tough luck you burned the first pan," she said. "But it's a good turn for your burro. That shore is a burro. Big-

gest I ever saw."

She picked up the burned biscuits and tossed them over to Jenet. Then she came back to Tappan's side, rather embarrassingly close.

"Tappan, I know how I'll eat, so I ought to ask you to let me help," she said, with a laugh.

"No, I don't need any," replied Tappan. "You sit down on my roll of beddin' there. Must be tired, aren't you?"

"Not so very," she returned. "That is, I'm not tired of ridin'." She spoke the second part of this reply in lower tone.

Tappan looked up from his task. The woman had washed her face, brushed her hair, and had put on a skirt—a singularly attractive change. Tappan thought her younger. She was the handsomest woman he had ever seen. The look of her made him clumsy. What eyes she had! They looked through him. Tappan returned to his task, wondering if he was right in his surmise that she wanted to be friendly.

"Jake an' I drove a bunch of cattle to Maricopa," she volunteered. "We sold 'em, an' Jake gambled away most of the money. I couldn't get what I wanted."

"Too bad! So you're ranchers. Once thought I'd like that. Fact is, down here at Globe a few weeks ago I came near buyin' some rancher out an' tryin' the game."

"You did?" Her query had a low, quick eagerness that somehow thrilled Tappan. But he did not look up.

"I'm a wanderer. I'd never do on a ranch."

"But if you had a woman?" Her laugh was subtle and gay.

"A woman! For me? Oh, Lord, no!" ejaculated Tappan in confusion.

"Why not? Are you a woman-hater?"

"I can't say that," replied Tappan soberly. "It's just—I guess—no woman would have me."

"Faint heart never won fair lady."

Tappan had no reply for that. He surely was making a mess of the second pan of biscuit dough. Manifestly the woman saw this, for with a laugh she plumped down on her knees in front of Tappan, and rolled her sleeves up over shapely brown arms.

"Poor man! Shore you need a woman. Let me show you," she said, and put her hands right down upon Tappan's.

The touch gave him a strange thrill. He had to pull his hands away, and as he wiped them with his scarf he looked at her. He seemed compelled to look. She was close to him now, smiling in good nature, a little scornful of man's encroachment upon the housewifely duties of a woman. A subtle something emanated from her—a more than kindness or gaiety. Tappan grasped that it was just the woman of her. And it was going to his head.

"Very well, let's see you show me," he replied, as he rose to his feet.

Just then the brother Jake strolled over, and he had a rather amused and derisive eye for his sister.

"Wal, Tappan, she's not overfond of work, but I reckon she can cook," he said.

Tappan felt greatly relieved at the approach of this brother. And he fell into conversation with him, telling something of his prospecting since leaving Globe, and listening to the man's cattle talk.

By and by the woman called, "Come an' get it!" Then they sat down to eat, and, as usual with hungry wayfarers, they did not talk much until appetite was satisfied. Afterward, before the

campfire, they began to talk again, Jake being the most discursive. Tappan conceived the idea that the rancher was rather curious about him, and perhaps wanted to sell his ranch. The woman seemed more thoughtful, with her wide black eyes on the fire.

"Tappan, what way you travelin'?" finally inquired Beam.

"Can't say. I just worked down out of the Superstitions. Haven't any place in mind. Where does this road go?"

"To the Tonto Basin. Ever heard of it?"

"Yes, the name isn't new. What's in this Basin?"

The man grunted. "Tonto once was home for the Apache. It's now got a few sheep an' cattlemen, lots of rustlers. An' say, if you like to hunt bear an' deer, come along with us."

"Thanks. I don't know as I can," returned Tappan irresolutely. He was not used to such possibilities as this suggested.

Then the woman spoke up. "It's a pretty country. Wild an' different. We live up under the rim rock. There's mineral in the canyons." Was it that about mineral which decided Tappan or the look in her eyes?

TAPPAN'S world of thought and feeling underwent as great a change as this Tonto Basin differed from the stark desert so long his home. The trail to the log cabin of the Beams climbed many a ridge and slope and foothill, all covered with manzanita, mescal, cedar, and juniper, at last to reach the canyons of the Rim, where lofty pines and spruces lorded it over the under forest of maples and oaks. Though the yellow Rim towered high over the site of the cabin, the altitude was still great, close to seven thousand feet above sea level.

Tappan had fallen in love with this wild wooded and canyoned country. So had Jenet. It was rather funny the way she hung around Tappan, mornings and evenings. She ate luxuriant grass and oak leaves until her sides bulged.

There did not appear to be any flat places in this landscape. Every bench was either uphill or downhill. The Beams had no garden or farm or ranch that Tappan could discover. They raised a few acres of sorghum and corn. Their log cabin was of the most primitive kind, and outfitted poorly. Madge Beam explained that this cabin was their winter abode, and that up on the Rim they had a good house and ranch.

Tappan did not inquire closely into anything. If he had interrogated himself, he would have found out that the reason he did not inquire was because he feared something might remove him from the vicinity of Madge Beam. He had thought it strange the Beams avoided wayfarers they had met on the trail, and had gone round a little hamlet Tappan had espied from a hill. Madge Beam, with woman's intuition, had read his mind, and had said:

"Jake doesn't get along so well with some of the villagers. An' I've no hankerin' for gunplay."

That explanation was sufficient for Tappan. He had lived long enough in his wandering years to appreciate that people could have reasons for being solitary.

This trip up into the Rim Rock country bade fair to become Tappan's one and only adventure of the heart. It was not alone the murmuring, clear brook of cold mountain water that enchanted him, nor the stately pines, nor

the beautiful silver spruces, nor the wonder of the deep, yellow-walled canyons, so choked with verdure and haunted by wild creatures. He dared not face his soul, and ask why this dark-eyed woman sought him more and more. Tappan lived in the moment.

He was aware that the few mountaineer neighbors who rode that way rather avoided contact with him. Tappan was not so dense that he did not perceive that the Beams preferred to keep him from outsiders. This perhaps was owing to their desire to sell Tappan the ranch and cattle. Jake offered to let it go at what he called a low figure.

Tappan thought it just as well to go out into the forest and hide his bags of gold. He did not trust Jake Beam, and liked less the looks of the men who visited this wilderness ranch. Madge Beam might be related to a rustler, and the associate of rustlers, but that did not necessarily make her a bad woman. Tappan sensed that her attitude was changing, and she seemed to require his respect. At first, all she wanted was his admiration. Tappan's long unused deference for women returned to him, and when he saw that it was having some strange softening effect upon Madge Beam, he redoubled his attentions.

They rode and climbed and hunted together. Tappan had pitched his camp not far from the cabin, on a shaded bank of the singing brook. Madge did not leave him much to himself. She was always coming up to his camp, on one pretext or another. Often she would bring two horses, and make Tappan ride with her. Some of these occasions, Tappan saw, occurred while visitors came to the cabin. In three weeks Madge Beam changed from the bold and careless woman who had ridden down into his camp that sunset, to a serious and appealing woman, growing more careful of her person and adornment, and manifestly bearing a burden on her mind.

October came. In the morning white frost glistened on the split-wood shingles of the cabin. The sun soon melted it, and grew warm. The afternoons were still and smoky, melancholy with the enchantment of Indian summer. Tappan hunted wild turkey and deer with Madge, and revived his boyish love of such pursuits. Madge appeared to be a woman of the woods, and had no mean skill with the rifle.

One day they were high on the Rim, with the great timbered basin at their feet. They had come up to hunt deer, but got no farther than the wonderful promontory where before they had lingered.

"Somethin' will happen to me today," Madge Beam said enigmatically.

Tappan never had been much of a talker. But he could listen. The woman unburdened herself this day. She wanted freedom, happiness, a home away from this lonely country, and all the heritage of woman. She confessed it broodingly, passionately. And Tappan recognized truth when he heard it. He was ready to do all in his power for this woman and believed she knew it. But words and acts of sentiment came hard to him.

"Are you goin' to buy Jake's ranch?" she asked.

"I don't know. Is there any hurry?" returned Tappan.

"I reckon not. But I think I'll settle that," she said decisively.

"How so?"

"Well, Jake hasn't got any ranch,"

she answered. And added hastily, "No clear title, I mean. He's only homesteaded one hundred an' sixty acres, an' hasn't proved up on it yet. But don't you say I told you."

"Was Jake aimin' to be crooked?" he asked.

"I reckon—an' I was willin' at first. But not now."

Tappan did not speak at once. He saw the woman was in one of her brooding moods. Besides, he wanted to weigh her words. How significant they were! Today more than ever she had let down. Humility and simplicity seemed to abide with her. And her brooding boded a storm.

Tappan's heart swelled in his broad breast. Was life going to dawn rosy and bright for the lonely prospector? He had money to make a home for this woman. What lay in the balance of the hour? Tappan waited, slowly realizing the charged atmosphere.

Madge's somber eyes gazed out over the great void. But, full of thought and passion as they were, they did not see the beauty of that scene. But Tappan saw it. And in some strange sense the color and wildness and sublimity seemed the expression of a new state of his heart.

Under him sheered down the ragged and cracked cliffs of the Rim, yellow and gold and gray, full of caves and crevices, ledges for eagles and niches for lions, a thousand feet down to the upward edge of the long green slopes and canyons, and so on down and down into the abyss of forested ravine and ridge, rolling league on league away to the encompassing barrier of purple mountain ranges.

The thickets in the canyons called Tappan's eye back to linger there. How different from the scenes that used to be perpetually in his sight! What riot of color! The tips of the green pines, the crests of the silver spruces, waved about masses of vivid gold of aspen trees, and wonderful cerise and flaming red of maples, and crags of yellow rock, covered with the bronze of frostbitten sumach.

Here was autumn and with it the colors of Tappan's favorite season. From below breathed up the low roar of plunging brook; an eagle screeched his wild call; an elk bugled his piercing blast. From the Rim wisps of pine needles blew away on the breeze and fell into the void. A wild country, colorful, beautiful, bountiful. Tappan imagined he could quell his wandering spirit here, with this dark-eyed woman by his side.

Never before had Nature so called him. Here was not the cruelty of flinty hardness of the desert. The air was keen and sweet, cold in the shade, warm in the sun. A fragrance of balsam and spruce, spiced with pine, made his breathing a thing of difficulty and delight. How for so many years had he endured vast open spaces without such eye-soothing trees as these? Tappan's back rested against a huge pine that tipped the Rim, and had stood there, stronger than the storms, for many a hundred years. The rock of the promontory was covered with soft brown mats of pine needles. A juniper tree, with its bright green foliage and lilac-colored berries, grew near the pine, and helped to form a secluded little nook, fragrant and somehow haunting.

The woman's dark head was close to Tappan, as she sat with her elbows on her knees, gazing down into the basin. Tappan saw the strained tensity of her posture, the heaving of her full

bosom. He wondered, while his own emotions, so long darkened, roused to the suspense of that hour.

Suddenly she flung herself into Tappan's arms. The act amazed him. It seemed to have both the passion of a woman and the shame of a girl. Before she hid her face on Tappan's breast he saw how the rich brown had paled, and then flamed.

"Tappan! Take me away—take me away from here—from that life down there," she cried in smothered voice.

"Madge, you mean take you away—and marry you?" he replied.

"Oh, yes—yes—marry me, if you love me. I don't see how you can—but you do, don't you? Say you do."

"I reckon that's what ails me, Madge," he replied simply.

"*Say* so, then," she burst out.

"All right, I do," said Tappan, with heavy breath. "Madge, words don't come easy for me. But I think you're wonderful, an' I want you. I haven't dared hope for that, till now. I'm only a wanderer. But it'd be heaven to have you—my wife—an' make a home for you."

"Oh—oh!" she returned wildly, and lifted herself to cling round his neck, and to kiss him. "You give me joy. Oh, Tappan, I love you. I never loved any man before. I know now. An' I'm not wonderful—or even good. But I love you."

The fire of her lips and the clasp of her arms worked havoc in Tappan. No woman had ever loved him, let alone embraced him. To awake suddenly to such rapture as this made him strong and rough in his response. Then all at once she seemed to collapse in his arms and to begin to weep. He feared he had offended or hurt her, and was clumsy in his contrition. Presently she replied:

"Pretty soon—I'll make you—beat me. It's your love—your honesty—that's shamed me. Tappan, I was party to a trick to—sell you a worthless ranch. I agreed to—try to make you love me—to fool you—cheat you. But I've fallen in love with you. An' my God, I care more for your love—your respect—than for my life. I can't go on with it. I've double-crossed Jake, an' all of them. Now, am I worth lovin'? Am I worth havin'?"

"More than ever, dear," he said.

"You will take me away?"

"Anywhere—anytime, the sooner the better."

She kissed him passionately, and then, disengaging herself from his arms, she knelt and gazed earnestly at him. "I've not told all. I will someday. But I swear now on my soul—I'll be what you think me."

"Madge, you needn't say all that. If you love me—it's enough. More than I ever dreamed of."

"You're a man. Oh, why didn't I meet you when I was eighteen instead of now—twenty-eight, an' all that between. But enough. A new life begins here for me. We must plan."

"You make the plans an' I'll act on them."

For a moment she was tense and silent, head bowed, hands shut tight. Then she spoke.

"Tonight we'll slip away. You make a light pack, that'll go on your saddle. I'll do the same. We'll hide the horses out near where the trail crosses the brook. An' we'll run off—ride out of the country."

Tappan in turn tried to think, but the whirl of his mind made any reason difficult. This dark-eyed, full-bosomed woman loved him, had surrendered herself, asked only his protection. The

thing seemed marvelous. Yet she knelt there, those dark eyes on him, infinitely more appealing than ever, haunting with some mystery of sadness and fear he could not divine.

Suddenly Tappan remembered Jenet.

"I must take Jenet," he said.

That startled her. "Jenet— Who's she?"

"My burro."

"Your burro? You can't travel fast with that pack beast. We'll be trailed, an' we'll have to go fast. You can't take the burro."

Then Tappan was startled. "What! Can't take Jenet?— Why, I—I couldn't get along without her."

"Nonsense. What's a burro? We must ride fast—do you hear?"

"Madge, I'm afraid I—I must take Jenet with me," he said soberly.

"It's impossible. I can't go if you take her. I tell you I've got to get away. If you want *me* you'll have to leave your precious Jenet behind."

Tappan bowed his head to the inevitable. After all, Jenet was only a beast of burden. She would run wild on the ridges and soon forget him and have no need of him. Something strained in Tappan's breast. He did not see clearly here. This woman was worth more than all else to him.

"I'm stupid, dear," he said. "You see, I never before ran off with a beautiful woman. Of course my burro must be left behind."

ELOPEMENT, if such it could be called, was easy for them. Tappan did not understand why Madge wanted to be so secret about it. Was she not free? But then, he reflected, he did not know the circumstances she feared. Besides, he did not care. Possession of the woman was enough.

Tappan made his small pack, the weight of which was considerable owing to his bags of gold. This he tied on his saddle. It bothered him to leave most of his new outfit scattered around his camp. What would Jenet think of that? He looked for her, but for once she did not come in at mealtime. Tappan thought this was singular. He could not remember when Jenet had been far from his camp at sunset. Somehow Tappan was glad.

After he had his supper, he left his utensils and supplies as they happened to be, and strode away under the trees to the trysting-place where he was to meet Madge. To his surprise she came before dark, and, unused as he was to the complexity and emotional nature of a woman, he saw that she was strangely agitated. Her face was pale. Almost a fury burned in her black eyes. When she came up to Tappan, and embraced him, almost fiercely, he felt that he was about to learn more of the nature of womankind. She thrilled him to his depths.

"Lead out the horses an' don't make any noise," she whispered.

Tappan complied, and soon he was mounted, riding behind her on the trail. It surprised him that she headed down country, and traveled fast. Moreover, she kept to a trail that continually grew rougher. They came to a road, which she crossed, and kept on through darkness and brush so thick that Tappan could not see the least

sign of a trail. And at length anyone could have seen that Madge had lost her bearings. She appeared to know the direction she wanted, but traveling upon it was impossible, owing to the increasingly cut-up and brushy ground. They had to turn back, and seemed to be hours finding the road.

Once Tappan fancied he heard the thud of hoofs other than those made by their own horses. Here Madge acted strangely, and where she had been obsessed by desire to hurry she now seemed to have grown weary. She turned her horse south on the road. Tappan was thus enabled to ride beside her. But they talked very little. He was satisfied with the fact of being with her on the way out of the country. Some time in the night they reached an old log shack by the roadside. Here Tappan suggested they halt, and get some sleep before dawn. The morrow would mean a long hard day for them.

"Yes, tomorrow will be hard," replied Madge, as she faced Tappan in the gloom.

He could see her big dark eyes on him. Her tone was not one of a hopeful woman. Tappan pondered over this. But he could not understand, because he had no idea how a woman ought to act under such circumstances. Madge Beam was a creature of moods. Only the day before, on the ride down from the Rim, she had told him with a laugh that she was likely to love him madly one moment and scratch his eyes out the next. How could he know what to make of her? Still, an uneasy feeling began to stir in Tappan.

They dismounted and unsaddled the horses. Tappan took his pack and put it aside. Something frightened the horses. They bolted down the road.

"Head them off," cried the woman hoarsely.

Even on the instant her voice sounded strained to Tappan, as if she were choked. But, realizing the absolute necessity of catching the horses, he set off down the road on a run. And he soon succeeded in heading off the animal he had ridden. The other one, however, was contrary and cunning. When Tappan would endeavor to get ahead, it would trot briskly on. Yet it did not go so fast but what Tappan felt sure he would soon catch it.

Thus, walking and running, he put some distance between him and the cabin before he realized that he could not head off the wary beast.

Much perturbed in mind, Tappan hurried back.

Upon reaching the cabin Tappan called to Madge. No answer! He could not see her in the gloom nor the horse he had driven back. Only silence brooded there. Tappan called again. Still no answer! Perhaps Madge had succumbed to weariness and was asleep. A search of the cabin and vicinity failed to yield any sign of her. But it disclosed the fact that Tappan's pack was gone.

Suddenly he sat down, quite overcome. He had been duped. What a fierce pang tore his heart! But it was for loss of the woman—not the gold. He was stunned, and then sick with bitter misery. Only then did Tappan realize the meaning of love and what it had done to him.

The night wore on, and he sat there in the dark and cold and stillness until the gray dawn told him of the coming of day. The light showed his saddle where he had left it. Near by lay one of Madge's gloves. Tappan's keen eye sighted a bit of paper sticking out of

the glove. He picked it up. It was a leaf out of a little book he had seen her carry, and upon it was written in lead pencil:

I am Jake's wife, not his sister. I double-crossed him and ran off with you and would have gone to hell for you. But Jake and his gang suspected me. They were close on our trail. I couldn't shake them. So here I chased off the horses and sent you after them. It was the only way I could save your life.

Tappan tracked the thieves to Globe. There he learned they had gone to Phoenix—three men and one woman. Tappan had money on his person. He bought horse and saddle, and, setting out for Phoenix, he let his passion to kill grow with the miles and hours. At Phoenix he learned Beam had cashed the gold—twelve thousand dollars. So much of a fortune! Tappan's fury grew. The gang separated here. Beam and his wife took a stage for Tucson. Tappan had no trouble in trailing their movements.

Gambling-dives and inns and freighting-posts and stage drivers told the story of the Beams and their ill-gotten gold. They went on to California, down into Tappan's country, to Yuma and El Cajon and San Diego. Here Tappan lost track of the woman. He could not find that she had left San Diego, nor any trace of her there. But Jake Beam had killed a Mexican in a brawl and had fled across the line.

Tappan gave up for the time being the chase of Beam, and bent his efforts to find the woman. He had no resentment toward Madgé. He only loved her. All that winter he searched San Diego. He made of himself a peddler as a ruse to visit houses. But he never found a trace of her. In the spring he wandered back to Yuma, raking over the old clues, and so on back to Tucson and Phoenix.

This year of dream and love and passion and despair and hate made Tappan old. His great strength and endurance were not yet impaired, but something of his spirit had died out of him.

One day he remembered Jenet. "My burro!" he soliloquized. "I had forgotten her— Jenet!"

Then it seemed a thousand impulses merged in one drove him to face the long road toward the Rim Rock country. To remember Jenet was to grow doubtful. Of course she would be gone. Stolen or dead or wandered off! But then who could tell what Jenet might do? Tappan was both called and driven. He was a poor wanderer again. His outfit was a pack he carried on his shoulder. But while he could walk he would keep on until he found that last camp where he had deserted Jenet.

October was coloring the canyon slopes when he reached the shadow of the great wall of yellow rock. The cabin where the Beams had lived—or had claimed they lived—was a fallen ruin, crushed by snow. Tappan saw other signs of a severe winter and heavy snowfall. No horse or cattle tracks showed in the trails.

To his amaze his camp was much as he had left it. The stone fireplace, the iron pots, appeared to be in the same places. The boxes that had held his supplies were lying here and there. And his canvas tarpaulin, little the worse for wear of the elements, lay on the ground under the pine where he had slept.

If any man had visited this camp in

a year he had left no sign of it.

Suddenly Tappan espied a hoof track in the dust. A small track—almost oval in shape—fresh! Tappan thrilled through all his being.

"Jenet's track, so help me God!" he murmured.

He found more of them, made that morning. And, keen now as never before on her trail, he set out to find her. The tracks led up the canyon.

Tappan came out into a little grassy clearing, and there stood Jenet, as he had seen her thousands of times. She had both long ears up high. She seemed to stare out of that meek, gray face. And then one of the long ears flopped over and drooped. Such perhaps was the expression of her recognition.

Tappan strode up to her.

"Jenet—old girl!—you hung round camp—waitin' for me, didn't you?" he said huskily, and his big hands fondled her long ears.

Yes, she had waited. She, too, had grown old. She was gray. The winter of that year had been hard. What had she lived on when the snow lay so deep? There were lion scratches on her back, and scars on her legs. She had fought for her life.

"Jenet, a man can never always tell about a burro," said Tappan. "I trained you to hang round camp an' wait till I came back. 'Tappan's burro,' the desert rats used to say! An' they'd laugh when I bragged how you'd stick to me where most men would quit. But brag as I did, I never knew you, Jenet. An' I left you—an' forgot. Jenet, it takes a human bein'—a man—a woman—to be faithless. An' it takes a dog or a horse or a burro to be great. Beasts? I wonder, now— Well, old pard, we're goin' down the trail together, an' from this day on Tappan begins to pay his debt."

CHAPTER THREE

Paid in Full

TAPPAN never again had the old wanderlust for the stark and naked desert. Something had transformed him. The green and fragrant forests, and the brown-aisled, pine-matted woodlands, the craggy promontories and the great colored canyons, the cold granite water springs of the Tonto seemed vastly preferable to the heat and dust and glare and the emptiness of the wastelands. But there was more. The ghost of his strange and only love kept pace with his wandering steps, a spirit that hovered with him as his shadow.

Madge Beam, whatever she had been, had showed to him the power of love to refine and ennoble. Somehow he felt closer to her here in the cliff country where his passion had been born. Somehow she seemed nearer to him here than in all those places he had tracked her. So from a prospector searching for gold Tappan became a hunter, seeking only the means to keep soul and body together. And all he cared for was his faithful burro Jenet, and the loneliness and silence of the forest land.

He was to learn that the Tonto was a hard country in many ways, and bitterly so in winter. Down in the brakes of the basin it was mild in winter, the snow did not lie long, and ice seldom formed. But up on the Rim, where Tappan always lingered as long as possible, the storm king of the north held full sway. Fifteen feet of snow and zero weather were the rule in dead of winter.

An old native once warned Tappan, "See hyar, friend, I reckon you'd better not get caught up in the Rim Rock country in one of our big storms. Fer if you do you'll never get out."

It was a way of Tappan's to follow his inclinations, regardless of advice. He had weathered the terrible midnight storm of hot wind in Death Valley. What were snow and cold to him? Late autumn on the Rim was the most perfect and beautiful of seasons. He had seen the forest land brown and darkly green one day, and the next burdened with white snow. What a transfiguration! Then when the sun loosened the white mantling on the pines, and they had shed their burdens in drifting dust of white, and rainbowed mists of melting snow, and avalanches sliding off the branches, there would be left only the wonderful white floor of the woodland. The great rugged brown tree trunks appeared mightier and statelier in the contrast; and the green of foliage, the russet of oak leaves, the gold of the aspens, turned the forest into a world enchanting to the desert-seared eyes of this wanderer.

With Tappan the years sped by. His mind grew old faster than his body. Every season saw him lonelier. He had a feeling, a vague illusive foreshadowing that his bones, instead of bleaching on the desert sands, would mingle with the pine mats and the soft fragrant moss of the forest. The idea was pleasant to Tappan.

One afternoon he was camped in Pine Canyon, a timber-sloped gorge far back from the Rim. November was well on. The fall had been singularly open and fair, with not a single storm. A few natives happening across Tappan had remarked casually that such autumns sometimes were not to be trusted.

This late afternoon was one of Indian-summer beauty and warmth. The blue haze in the canyon was not all the blue smoke from Tappan's campfire. In a narrow park of grass not far from camp Jenet grazed peacefully with elk and deer. Wild turkeys lingered there, loath to seek their winter quarters down in the basin. Gray squirrels and red squirrels barked and frisked and dropped the pine and spruce cones, with thud and thump, on all the slopes.

Before dark a stranger strode into Tappan's camp, a big man of middle age, whose magnificent physique impressed even Tappan. He was a rugged, bearded giant, wide-eyed and of pleasant face. He had no outfit, no horse, not even a gun.

"Lucky for me I smelled your smoke," he said. "Two days for me without grub."

"Howdy, stranger," was Tappan's greeting. "Are you lost?"

"Yes an' no. I could find my way out from over the Rim, but it's not healthy down there for me. So I'm hittin' north."

"Where's your horse an' pack?"

"I reckon they're with the gang thet took more of a fancy to them than me."

"Ahuh! You're welcome here, stranger," replied Tappan. "I'm Tappan."

"Ha! Heard of you. I'm Jess Blade, of anywhere. An' I'll say, Tappan, I was an honest man till I hit the Tonto." His laugh was frank, for all its note of grimness. Tappan liked the man, and sensed one who would be a good friend and bad foe.

"Come an' eat. My supplies are peterin' out, but there's plenty of meat."

Blade ate, indeed, as a man starved, and did not seem to care if Tappan's

supplies were low. He did not talk. After the meal he craved a pipe and tobacco. Then he smoked in silence, in a slow realizing content. The morrow had no fears for him. The flickering ruddy light from the campfire shone on his strong face.

Tappan saw in him the drifter, the drinker, the brawler, a man with good in him, but over whom evil passion or temper dominated. Presently he smoked the pipe out, and with reluctant hand knocked out the ashes and returned it to Tappan.

"I reckon I've got some news thet'd interest you," he said.

"You have?" queried Tappan.

"Yes, if you're the Tappan who tried to run off with Jake Beam's wife."

"Well, I'm that Tappan. But I'd like to say I didn't know she was married."

"Shore, I know thet. So does everybody in the Tonto. You were just meat for the Beam gang. They had played the trick before. But accordin' to what I hear thet trick was the last fer Madge Beam. She never came back to this country. An' Jake Beam, when he was drunk, owned up thet she'd left him in California. Some hint at worse. Fer Jake Beam came back a harder man. Even his gang said thet."

"Is he in the Tonto now?" queried Tappan, with a thrill of fire along his veins.

"Yep, thar fer keeps," replied Blade grimly. "Somebody shot him."

"Ahuh!" exclaimed Tappan with a deep breath of relief. There came a sudden cooling of the heat of his blood.

After that there was a long silence. Tappan dreamed of the woman who had loved him. Blade brooded over the campfire. The wind moaned fitfully in the lofty pines on the slope. A wolf mourned as if in hunger. The stars appeared to obscure their radiance in haze.

"Reckon thet wind sounds like storm," observed Blade presently.

"I've heard it for weeks now," replied Tappan.

"Are you a woodsman?"

"No, I'm a desert man."

"Wal, you take my hunch an' hit the trail fer low country."

This was well meant, and probably sound advice, but it alienated Tappan. He had really liked this hearty-voiced stranger. Tappan thought moodily of his slowly ingrowing mind, of the narrowness of his soul. He was past interest in his fellow-men. He lived with a dream. The only living creature he loved was a lop-eared, lazy burro, growing old in contentment. Nevertheless, that night Tappan shared one of his two blankets.

In the morning the gray dawn broke, and the sun rose without its brightness of gold. There was a haze over the blue sky. Thin, swift-moving clouds scudded up out of the southwest. The wind was chill, the forest shaggy and dark, the birds and squirrels were silent.

"Wal, you'll break camp today," asserted Blade.

"Nope. I'll stick it out yet awhile," returned Tappan.

"But, man, you might get snowed in, an' up hyar thet's serious."

"Ahuh! Well, it won't bother me. An' there's nothin' holdin' you."

"Tappan, it's four days' walk down out of this woods. If a big snow set in, how'd I make it?"

"Then you'd better go out over the Rim," suggested Tappan.

"No. I'll take my chance the other way. But are you meanin' you'd rather not have me with you? Fer you can't stay hyar."

Tappan was in a quandary. Some instinct bade him tell the man to go. Not empty-handed, but to go. But this was selfish, and entirely unlike Tappan as he remembered himself of old. Finally he spoke:

"You're welcome to half my outfit—go or stay."

"Thet's mighty square of you, Tappan," responded the other feelingly. "Have you a burro you'll give me?"

"No, I've only one."

"Ha! Then I'll have to stick with you till you leave."

No more was said. They had breakfast in a strange silence. The wind brooded its secret in the tree tops.

Tappan's burro strolled into camp unhurriedly, and caught the stranger's eye.

"Wal, thet's shore a fine burro," he observed. "Never saw the like."

Tappan performed his camp tasks. And then there was nothing to do but sit around the fire. Blade evidently waited for the increasing menace of storm to rouse Tappan to decision. But the graying over of sky and the increase of wind did not affect Tappan. What did he wait for? The truth of his thoughts was that he did not like the way Jenet remained in camp. She was waiting to be packed. She knew they ought to go. Tappan yielded to a perverse devil of stubbornness.

The wind brought a cold mist, then a flurry of wet snow. Tappan gathered firewood, a large quantity. Blade saw this and gave voice to earnest fears. But Tappan paid no heed. By nightfall sleet and snow began to fall steadily. The men fashioned a rude shack of spruce boughs, ate their supper, and went to bed early.

It worried Tappan that Jenet stayed right in camp. He lay awake a long time. The wind rose and moaned through the forest. The sleet failed, and a soft, steady downfall of snow gradually set in. Tappan fell asleep.

When he awoke it was to see a forest of white. The trees were mantled with blankets of wet snow, the ground covered two feet on a level. But the clouds appeared to be gone, the sky was blue, the storm over. The sun came up warm and bright.

"It'll all go in a day," said Tappan.

"If this was early October I'd agree with you," replied Blade. "But it's only makin' fer another storm. Can't you hear thet wind?"

Tappan only heard the whispers of his dreams. By now the snow was melting off the pines, and rainbows shone everywhere. Little patches of snow began to drop off the south branches of the pines and spruces, and then larger patches, until by midafternoon white streams and avalanches were falling everywhere. All of the snow, except in shaded places on the north sides of trees, went that day, and half of that on the ground. Next day it thinned out more, until Jenet was finding the grass and moss again. That afternoon the telltale thin clouds raced up out of the southwest and the wind moaned its menace.

"Tappan, let's pack an' hit it out of hyar," appealed Blade anxiously. "I know this country. Mebbe I'm wrong, of course, but it feels like storm. Winter's comin' shore."

"Let her come," replied Tappan imperturbably.

"Say, do you want to get snowed in?" demanded Blade, out of patience.

"I might like a little spell of it, seein' it'd be new to me," replied Tappan.

"But man, if you ever get snowed in hyar you can't get out."

"That burro of mine could get me out."

"You're crazy. Thet burro couldn't go a hundred feet. What's more, you'd have to kill her an' eat her."

Tappan bent a strange gaze upon his companion, but made no reply. Blade began to pace up and down the small bare patch of ground before the campfire. Manifestly, he was in a serious predicament. That day he seemed subtly to change, as did Tappan. Both answered to their peculiar instincts, Blade to that of self-preservation, and Tappan, to something like indifference. Tappan held fate in defiance. What more could happen to him?

Blade broke out again, in eloquent persuasion, giving proof of their peril, and from that he passed to amaze and then to strident anger. He cursed Tappan for a nature-loving idiot.

"An' I'll tell you what," he ended. "When mornin' comes I'll take some of your grub an' hit it out of hyar, storm or no storm."

But long before dawn broke that resolution of Blade's had become impracticable. Both men were awakened by a roar of storm through the forest, no longer a moan, but a marching roar, with now a crash and then a shriek of gale! By the light of the smoldering campfire Tappan saw a whirling pall of snow, great flakes as large as feathers. Morning disclosed the setting in of a fierce mountain storm, with two feet of snow already on the ground, and the forest lost in a blur of white.

"I was wrong," called Tappan to his companion. "What's best to do now?"

"You damned fool!" yelled Blade. "We've got to keep from freezin' an' starvin' till the storm ends an' a crust comes on the snow."

For three days and three nights the blizzard continued, unabated in its fury. It took the men hours to keep a space cleared for their camp site, which Jenet shared with them. On the fourth day the storm ceased, the clouds broke away, the sun came out. And the temperature dropped to zero. Snow on the level just topped Tappan's lofty stature, and in drifts it was ten and fifteen feet deep. Winter had set in without compromise. The forest became a solemn, still, white world.

Now Tappan had no time to dream. Dry firewood was hard to find under the snow. It was possible to cut down one of the dead trees on the slope, but impossible to pack sufficient wood to the camp. They had to burn green wood. Then the fashioning of snowshoes took much time. Tappan had no knowledge of such footgear. He could only help Blade.

The men were encouraged by the piercing cold forming a crust on the snow. But just as they were about to pack and venture forth, the weather moderated, the crust refused to hold their weight, and another foot of snow fell.

"Why in hell didn't you kill an elk?" demanded Blade sullenly. He had become darkly sinister. He knew the peril and he loved life. "Now we'll have to kill an' eat your precious Jenet. An' mebbe she won't furnish meat enough to last till this snow weather stops an' a good freeze'll make travelin' possible."

"Blade, you shut up about killin' an' eatin' my burro Jenet," returned Tappan in a firm voice that silenced the other.

Thus instinctively these men became enemies. Blade thought only of himself. Tappan had forced upon him a menace to the life of his burro. For

himself Tappan had not one thought.

Tappan's supplies ran low. All the bacon and coffee were gone. There was only a small haunch of venison, a bag of beans, a sack of flour, and a small quantity of salt left.

"If a crust freezes on the snow an' we can pack that flour, we'll get out alive," said Blade. "But we can't take the burro."

Another day of bright sunshine softened the snow on the southern exposures, and a night of piercing cold froze a crust that would bear a quick step of man.

"It's our only chance—an' damn slim at thet," declared Blade.

Tappan allowed Blade to choose the time and method, and supplies for the start to get out of the forest. They cooked all the beans and divided them in two sacks. Then they baked about five pounds of biscuits for each of them. Blade showed his cunning when he chose the small bag of salt for himself and let Tappan take the tobacco. This quantity of food and a blanket for each Blade declared to be all they could pack.

They argued over the guns, and in the end Blade compromised on the rifle, agreeing to let Tappan carry that on a possible chance of killing a deer or elk. When this matter had been decided, Blade significantly began putting on his rude snowshoes, that had been constructed from pieces of Tappan's boxes and straps and burlap sacks.

"Reckon they won't last long," muttered Blade.

Meanwhile Tappan fed Jenet some biscuits and then began to strap a tarpaulin on her back.

"What you doin'?" queried Blade suddenly.

"Gettin' Jenet ready," replied Tappan.

"Ready! For what?"

"Why, to go with us."

"Hell!" shouted Blade, and he threw up his hands in helpless rage.

Tappan felt a depth stirred within him. He lost his late taciturnity and silent aloofness fell away from him. Blade seemed on the moment no longer an enemy. He loomed as an aid to the saving of Jenet. Tappan burst into speech.

"I can't go without her. It'd never enter my head. Jenet's mother was a good faithful burro. I saw Jenet born way down there on the Rio Colorado. She wasn't strong. An' I had to wait for her to be able to walk. An' she grew up. Her mother died, an' Jenet an' me packed it alone. She wasn't no ordinary burro. She learned all I taught her. She was different. But I treated her same as any burro. An' she grew with the years. Desert men said there never was such a burro as Jenet. Called her Tappan's burro, an' tried to borrow an' buy an' steal her.

"How many times in ten years Jenet has done me a good turn I can't remember. But she saved my life. She dragged me out of Death Valley. An' then I forgot my debt. I ran off with a woman an' left Jenet to wait as she had been trained to wait. Well, I got back in time. An' now I'll not leave her here. It may be strange to you, Blade, me carin' this way. Jenet's only a burro. But I won't leave her."

"Man, you talk like that lazy lop-eared burro was a woman," declared Blade in disgusted astonishment.

"I don't know women, but I reckon Jenet's more faithful than most of them."

"Wal, of all the stark, starin' fools I

ever run into you're the worst."

"Fool or not, I know what I'll do," retorted Tappan. The softer mood left him swiftly.

"Haven't you sense enough to see thet we can't travel with your burro?" queried Blade, patiently controlling his temper. "She has little hoofs, sharp as knives. She'll cut through the crust. She'll break through in places. An' we'll have to stop to haul her out—mebbe break through ourselves. Thet would make us longer gettin' out."

"Long or short we'll take her."

Then Blade confronted Tappan as if suddenly unmasking his true meaning. His patient explanation meant nothing. Under no circumstances would he ever have consented to an attempt to take Jenet out of that snow-bound wilderness. His eyes gleamed.

"We've a hard pull to get out alive. An' hard-workin' men in winter must have meat to eat."

Tappan slowly straightened up to look at the speaker.

"What do you mean?"

For answer Blade jerked his hand backward and downward, and when it swung into sight again it held Tappan's worn and shining rifle. Then Blade, with deliberate force, that showed the nature of the man, worked the lever and threw a shell into the magazine. All the while his eyes were fastened on Tappan. His face seemed that of another man, evil, relentless, inevitable in his spirit to preserve his own life at any cost.

"I mean to kill your burro," he said in a voice that suited his look and manner.

"No!" cried Tappan, shocked into an instant of appeal.

"Yes, I am, an' I'll bet, by God, before we get out of hyar you'll be glad to eat some of her meat!"

That roused the slow-gathering might of Tappan's wrath.

"I'd starve to death before I'd—I'd kill that burro, let alone eat her."

"Starve an' be damned!" shouted Blade, yielding to rage.

Jenet stood right behind Tappan, in her posture of contented repose, with one long ear hanging down over her gray meek face.

"You'll have to kill me first," answered Tappan sharply.

"I'm good fer anythin'—if you push me," returned Blade stridently.

As he stepped aside, evidently so he could have unobstructed aim at Jenet, Tappan leaped forward and knocked up the rifle as it was discharged. The bullet sped harmlessly over Jenet. Tappan heard it thud into a tree. Blade uttered a curse. And as he lowered the rifle in sudden deadly intent, Tappan grasped the barrel with his left hand. Then, clenching his right, he struck Blade a sodden blow in the face. Only Blade's hold on the rifle prevented him from falling. Blood streamed from his nose and mouth. He bellowed in hoarse fury:

"I'll kill you—fer thet!"

Tappan opened his clenched teeth. "No, Blade—you're not man enough."

Then began a terrific struggle for possession of the rifle. Tappan beat at Blade's face with his sledge-hammer fist. But the strength of the other made it imperative that he use both hands to keep his hold on the rifle. Wrestling and pulling and jerking, the men tore round the snowy camp, scattering the campfire, knocking down the brush shelter.

Blade had surrendered to a wild frenzy. He hissed his maledictions. His was the brute lust to kill an enemy

that thwarted him. But Tappan was grim and terrible in his restraint. His battle was to save Jenet. Nevertheless, there mounted in him the hot physical sensations of the savage. The contact of flesh, the smell and sight of Blade's blood, the violent action, the beastly mien of his foe changed the fight to one for its own sake. To conquer this foe, to rend him and beat him down, blow on blow!

Tappan felt instinctively that he was the stronger. Suddenly he exerted all his muscular force into one tremendous wrench. The rifle broke, leaving the steel barrel in his hands, the wooden stock in Blade's. And it was the quicker-witted Blade who used his weapon first to advantage. One swift blow knocked Tappan down. As he was about to follow it up with another, Tappan kicked his opponent's feet from under him. Blade sprawled in the snow, but was up again as quickly as Tappan.

They made at each other, Tappan waiting to strike, and Blade raining blows on Tappan. These were heavy blows aimed at his head, but which he contrived to receive on his arms and the rifle barrel he brandished. For a few moments Tappan stood up under a beating that would have felled a lesser man. His own blood blinded him. Then he swung his heavy weapon. The blow broke Blade's left arm. Like a wild beast, he screamed in pain; and then, without guard, rushed in, too furious for further caution.

Tappan met the terrible onslaught as before, and watching his chance, again swung the rifle barrel. This time, so supreme was the force, it battered down Blade's arm and crushed his skull. He died on his feet—ghastly and horrible change!—and swaying backward, he fell into the upbanked wall of snow, and went out of sight, except for his boots, one of which still held the crude snowshoe.

Tappan stared, slowly realizing.

"Ahuh, stranger Blade!" he ejaculated, gazing at the hole in the snow bank where his foe had disappeared. "You were goin' to—kill an' eat—Tappan's burro!"

Then he sighted the bloody rifle barrel, and cast it from him. He became conscious of injuries which needed attention. But he could do little more than wash off the blood and bind up his head. Both arms and hands were badly bruised and beginning to swell. But fortunately no bones had been broken.

Tappan finished strapping the tarpaulin upon the burro; and, taking up both his and Blade's supply of food, he called out, "Come on, Jenet."

Which way to go! Indeed, there was no more choice for him than there had been for Blade. Toward the Rim the snowdrift would be deeper and impassable. Tappan realized that the only possible chance for him was downhill. So he led Jenet out of camp without looking back once. What was it that had happened? He did not seem to be the same Tappan that had dreamily tramped into this woodland.

A deep furrow in the snow had been made by the men packing firewood into camp. At the end of this furrow the wall of snow stood higher than Tappan's head. To get out on top without breaking the crust presented a problem. He lifted Jenet up, and was relieved to see that the snow held her. But he found a different task in his own case. Returning to camp, he gathered up several of the long branches of spruce that had been part of the shel-

ter, and carrying them out he laid them against the slant of snow he had to surmount, and by their aid he got on top. The crust held him.

Elated and with revived hope, he took up Jenet's halter and started off. Walking with his rude snowshoes was awkward. He had to go slowly, and slide them along the crust. But he progressed. Jenet's little steps kept her even with him. Now and then one of her sharp hoofs cut through, but not to hinder her particularly.

Right at the start Tappan observed a singular something about Jenet. Never until now had she been dependent upon him. She knew it. Her intelligence apparently told her that if she got out of this snowbound wilderness it would be owing to the strength and reason of her master.

Tappan kept to the north side of the canyon, where the snow crust was strongest. What he must do was to work up to the top of the canyon slope, and then keeping to the ridge travel north along it, and so down out of the forest.

Travel was slow. He soon found he had to pick his way. Jenet appeared to be absolutely unable to sense either danger or safety. Her experience had been of the rock confines and the drifting sands of the desert. She walked where Tappan led her. And it seemed to Tappan that her trust in him, her reliance upon him, were pathetic.

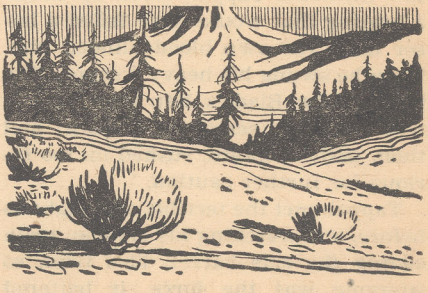
"Well, old girl," said Tappan to her, "it's a horse of another color now—hey?"

At length he came to a wide part of the canyon, where a bench of land led to a long gradual slope, thickly studded with small pines. This appeared to be fortunate, and turned out to be so, for when Jenet broke through the crust Tappan had trees and branches to hold to while he hauled her out.

The labor of climbing that slope was such that Tappan began to appreciate Blade's absolute refusal to attempt getting Jenet out. Dusk was shadowing the white aisles of the forest when Tappan ascended to a level. He had not traveled far from camp, and the fact struck a chill upon his heart.

To go on in the dark was foolhardy. So Tappan selected a thick spruce, under which there was a considerable depression in the snow, and here made preparation to spend the night. Unstrapping the tarpaulin, he spread it on the snow. All the lower branches of this giant of the forest were dead and dry. Tappan broke off many and soon had a fire. Jenet nibbled at the moss on the trunk of the spruce tree. Tappan's meal consisted of beans, biscuits, and a ball of snow, that he held over the fire to soften. He saw to it that Jenet fared as well as he.

Night soon fell, strange and weirdly white in the forest, and piercingly cold. Tappan needed the fire. Gradually it melted the snow and made a hole, down to the ground. Tappan rolled up in the tarpaulin and soon fell asleep.



IN THREE days Tappan traveled about fifteen miles, gradually descending, until the snow crust began to fail to

hold Jenet. Then whatever had been his difficulties before, they were now magnified a hundredfold. As soon as the sun was up, somewhat softening the snow, Jenet began to break through. And often when Tappan began hauling her out he broke through himself. This exertion was killing even to a man of Tappan's physical prowess. The endurance to resist heat and flying dust and dragging sand seemed another kind from that needed to toil on in this snow.

The endless snowbound forest began to be hideous to Tappan. Cold, lonely, dreary, white, mournful—the kind of ghastly and ghostly winter land that had been the terror of Tappan's boyish dreams! He loved the sun—the open. This forest had deceived him. It was a wall of ice. As he toiled on, the state of his mind gradually and subtly changed in all except the fixed and absolute will to save Jenet. In some places he carried her.

The fourth night found him dangerously near the end of his stock of food. He had been generous with Jenet. But now, considering that he had to do more work than she, he diminished her share. On the fifth day Jenet broke through the snow crust so often that Tappan realized how utterly impossible it was for her to get out of the woods by her own efforts. Therefore Tappan hit upon the plan of making her lie on the tarpaulin, so that he could drag her over the snow. The tarpaulin doubled once did not make a bad sled.

All the rest of that day Tappan hauled her. And so all the rest of the next day he toiled on, hands behind him, clutching the canvas, head and shoulders bent, plodding and methodical, like a man who could not be defeated. That night he was too weary to build a fire, and too worried to eat the last of his food.

Next day Tappan was not unalive to the changing character of the forest. He had worked down out of the zone of the spruce trees; the pines had thinned out and decreased in size; oak trees began to show prominently. All these signs meant that he was getting down out of the mountain heights. But the fact, hopeful as it was, had drawbacks. The snow was still four feet deep on a level and the crust held Tappan only about half the time. Moreover, the lay of the land operated against Tappan's progress. The long, slowly descending ridge had failed. There were no more canyons, but ravines and swales were numerous.

Tappan dragged on, stern, indomitable, bent to his toil. When the crust let him down, he hung his snowshoes over Jenet's back, and wallowed through, making a lane for her to follow. Two days of such heartbreaking toil, without food or fire, broke Tappan's magnificent endurance. But not his spirit! He hauled Jenet over the snow, and through the snow, down the hills and up the slopes, through the thickets, knowing that over the next ridge, perhaps was deliverance.

Deer and elk tracks began to be numerous. Cedar and juniper trees now predominated. An occasional pine showed here and there. He was getting out of the forest land. Only such mighty and justifiable hope as that could have kept him on his feet.

He fell often, and it grew harder to rise and go on. The hour came when the crust failed altogether to hold Tappan and he had to abandon hauling Jenet. It was necessary to make a road for her. How weary, cold, horrible, the

white reaches!

Yard by yard Tappan made his way. He no longer sweat. He had no feeling in his feet or legs. Hunger ceased to gnaw at his vitals. His thirst he quenched with snow—soft snow now, that did not have to be crunched like ice. The pangs in his breast were terrible—cramps, constrictions, the piercing pains in his lungs, the dull ache of his overtaxed heart.

Tappan came to an opening in the cedar forest from which he could see afar. A long slope fronted him. It led down and down to open country. His desert eyes, keen as those of an eagle, made out flat country, sparsely covered with snow, and black dots that were cattle. The last slope! The last pull! Three feet of snow, except in drifts; down and down he plunged, making way for Jenet! All that day he toiled and fell and rolled down this league-long slope, wearing toward sunset to the end of his task, and likewise to the end of his will.

Now he seemed up and now down. There was no sense of cold or weariness. Only direction! Tappan still saw! The last of his horror at the monotony of white faded from his mind. Jenet was there, beginning to be able to travel for herself. The solemn close of endless day found Tappan arriving at the edge of the timbered country, where wind-bared patches of ground showed long, bleached grass. Jenet took to grazing.

As for Tappan, he fell with the tarpaulin, under a thick cedar, and with strengthless hands plucked and plucked at the canvas to spread it, so that he could cover himself. He looked again for Jenet. She was there, somehow a fading image, strangely blurred. But she was grazing. Tappan lay down, and stretched out, and slowly drew the tarpaulin over him.

A PIERCING-COLD night wind swept down from the snowy heights. It wailed in the edge of the cedars and moaned out toward the open country. Yet the night seemed silent. The stars shone white in a deep blue sky—passionless, cold, watchful eyes, looking down without pity or hope or censure. They were the eyes of Nature. Winter had locked the heights in its snowy grip. All night that winter wind blew down, colder and colder. Then dawn broke, steely, gray, with a flare in the east.

Jenet came back where she had left her master. Camp! As she had returned thousands of dawns in the long years of her service. She had grazed all night. Her sides that had been flat were now full. Jenet had weathered another vicissitude of her life. She stood for a while, in a doze, with one long ear down over her meek face. Jenet was waiting for Tappan.

But he did not stir from under the long roll of canvas. Jenet waited. The winter sun rose, in cold yellow flare. The snow glistened as with a crusting of diamonds. Somewhere in the distance sounded a long-drawn, discordant bray.

Jenet's ears shot up. She listened. She recognized the call of one of her kind. Instinct always prompted Jenet. Sometimes she did bray. Lifting her gray head she sent forth a clarion *Hee-haw hee-haw-haw—hee-haw how-e-e-e!*

That stentorian call started the echoes. They pealed down the slope and rolled out over the open country, clear as a bugle blast, yet hideous in their discordance. But this morning Tappan did not awaken. THE END

FREE-FOR-ALL

THIS MONTH sees the fifth anniversary of the publication of the initial issue of ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE. By way of celebrating, and also as a special treat for ZGWM readers, we present this All-Star issue—composed entirely of top-notch stories and features by a group of Western writers who are second to none.

"Tappan's Burro" is one of Zane Grey's finest and most moving stories; since it is not readily available to readers in book form, we take added pleasure in reprinting it now.

L. L. Foreman's short novel, "Powdersmoke Empire," is a fast-moving, colorful yarn, right up to this author's well-known best. 'Nough said.

Les Savage's contribution is "Traitor Town," a novelette of Santa Fe during the troublous times of the Mexican War. Les, incidentally, has a pip of a short novel coming up soon in ZGWM.

William MacLeod Raine, dean of American Western writers, yarns about the old days of the range in "Cows and Cowmen." Perhaps to prove he's not slowing down any, Bill has published two new books in '51!

Harry Sinclair Drago, who's no tyro in the action-fiction business himself, gives us an unusual short in "All the Brothers Were Bad." Harry avers that some of his old Nevada friends will have no difficulty in recalling the real name of Peso, the quarter horse in the yarn. That title, by the way, is a phrase from Eugene Manlove Rhodes who, Harry reminds us, used it to indicate that a group he was describing in a tale were outside the law.

Tom Blackburn wrote the effective little story about "Lopez" at our urgent editorial behest, taking time out of arduous labors (screenwriting variety) to do so. The result is, we think, one of the outstanding fiction offerings of '51. *Gracias*, Señor Tom!

Thomas Thompson couldn't very well be left out of any ZGWM all-star issue; we've been saving "Memento" for this very spot. It's solid Thompson—which means A-1 in anyone's magazine.

Poet-fictioneer S. Omar Barker is represented by the fine poem, "Songs for a Land of Horseback Men." Sure sounds like Omar's heart is right in his native New Mexico, doesn't it?

Last, we can hardly overlook artist Bob Stanley, for his dramatic mountain-man cover picture.

So there it is. We've done our best, and we only hope this issue gives you folks as much pleasure in reading it as it gave us in putting it together. Your comments on it are cordially invited. The best, favorable or adverse,

or in-between, will draw three-dollar checks and be printed in this depart-

• Here's a checklist of notable new Western books published so far during '51—it's selective, comprised of titles which have come to our attention in one way or another in recent months, and offered as a handy guide to Western fans:

William MacLeod Raine's pair: *Jingling Spurs* and *Saddlebum*. Publisher Houghton Mifflin's '51 list also included *Play a Lone Hand*, by Luke Short, and *Doubtful Valley*, by George Garland.

Norman A. Fox produced two characteristically fine novels: *Tall Man Riding* and *Roughshod*. Publisher Dodd, Mead also presented *The Outlaw of Longbow*, by Peter Dawson; *The Challenge of Smoke Wade*, by Robert Hogan; and two by Max Brand: *The Hair-Trigger Kid* and *Tragedy Trail*.

Macmillan added to its consistently good Western list Dan Cushman's *Badlands Justice*, Wayne D. Overholser's *Steel to the South*, and Todhunter Ballard's *Two-Edged Vengeance*.

Doubleday rode high with two by Les Savage, Jr., *Shadow Riders of the Yellowstone* and *Land of the Lawless; Raton Pass*, by Tom Blackburn; *The Silver Star*, by Will Ermine; and *Summer Range*, by L. P. Holmes.

Grass and Gold, by Allan Vaughan Elston, and *Smoky Range*, by E. E. Halleran, came from Lippincott. Outstanding titles from Little, Brown were *By Rope and Lead*, a second collection of Ernest Haycox's short stories; and *Fighting Sheepman*, by Ray Palmer Tracy. Harper gave us *The Dude Ranger*, by Zane Grey; Dutton, *The Man from the Badlands*, by Paul Evan Lehman; Macrae-Smith, *Border Ambush*, by Walker A. Tompkins; Random House, *The Gun*, by Frank O'Rourke; and Simon & Schuster, *Red Blizzard*, by Clay Fisher.

All in all, quite a year for Westerns! We're looking forward to '52!

—THE EDITORS.

QUICKSAND

CATTLE, LIKE SOME HUMANS, will range in territory that wasn't meant for man nor beast, and it's at such times that a guardian angel in chaps and spurs shows up. Here, the cowpoke has dabbed his rope round the cow's horns and his pony is trying hard for a footing to drag her out of the quicksand she's in. The cow on the end of the whale line is wild and spooky and not at all co-operative. In her panic, the critter keeps fighting the reata and getting herself into deeper and more treacherous bogging. The 'poke, who has only limited space in which to work without getting bogged down hisself, tries to take advantage of every move the cow makes. If he's careless for one second or if his hoss isn't cow-wise, hoss and rider may be pulled over sideways or, worse, wound up in the rope. The hardest job is to get the lariat off the cow's horns after she's dragged free. The cowboy rides round and yanks her feet from under her; the pony gives him enough slack to take the rope off; then he makes a running jump for the saddle—maybe an inch ahead of a mad cow showing her thanks with sharp horns!

DAN MULLER

In This All-Star Issue:

POWDERSMOKE EMPIRE, *by L. L. Foreman*

An action novel of the Southwest, full of color and violence and high romance, in the days when the law of the six-gun ruled the wide range. Bain Foyle's days appear to be numbered when Big Mac M'Cavan, who plans to be president of a "Rio Grande Republic," sends him lonehanded to kidnap a powerful political enemy. Then, hopelessly in love with piquant Donna Reynolds, Foyle tries desperately to reform, only to find his hands more than full as gun after gun turns against him. Foyle's lone chance for survival is a crazy gamble against odds in a breath-taking, no-quarter showdown.

TAPPAN'S BURRO, *by Zane Grey*

A memorable story about a desert wanderer and the humble beast of burden who serves him loyally and well. Other human beings may deceive Tappan and betray him; his burro knows only how to obey and serve.

TRAITOR TOWN, *by Les Savage, Jr.*

A thrilling novelette. Fur trader Tony Ferrar counts on riding out American-Mexican hostilities in strict neutrality—but an ambush bullet and the murder of an old friend spur him into a whirlwind campaign of retaliation.

Also: COWS AND COWMEN, by William MacLeod Raine; LOPEZ, by Tom W. Blackburn; ALL THE BROTHERS WERE BAD, by Harry Sinclair Drago; MEMENTO, by Thomas Thompson; and SONGS FOR A LAND OF HORSEBACK MEN, by S. Omar Barker.

—the greatest value in Western fact and fiction available anywhere!