

THE STAGE TO  
YELLOW CREEK

MAX BRAND

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*Title:* The Stage to Yellow Creek

*Date of first publication:* 1933

*Author:* Frederick Schiller Faust (as Max Brand) (1892-1944)

*Date first posted:* Aug. 2, 2019

*Date last updated:* Aug. 2, 2019

Faded Page eBook #20190801

This eBook was produced by: Al Haines, Cindy Beyer & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>

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MARBLEFACE

**MAX  
BRAND**

**THE STAGE TO  
YELLOW CREEK**

**“The Stage to Yellow Creek” first appeared under the title  
“Guardian Guns” by Max Brand in *Dime Western* (8/33).  
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## Table of Contents

- I. [Cactus Terry](#)
- II. [Killers Ahead](#)
- III. [Flight](#)
- IV. [Fire and Flood](#)
- V. [Trouble on Horseback](#)
- VI. [Conference of War](#)
- VII. [Prisoners](#)
- VIII. [Treachery](#)
- IX. [Bluff](#)
- X. [Gun Talk](#)
- XI. [Cactus Goes to Pieces](#)
- XII. [Two Against Many](#)
- XIII. [Death on the Way](#)
- XIV. [Men Die](#)
- XV. [Gold Comes Back](#)

## THE STAGE TO YELLOW CREEK

In 1932 Frank E. Blackwell, editor of Street & Smith's *Western Story Magazine*, informed Carl Brandt, Frederick Faust's New York literary agent, that Street & Smith was being hurt by the Great Depression, as were all magazine publishers, and that as an economy measure Faust's rate (which had been at five cents a word since 1925) would have to be lowered to four cents a word. Faust, who was still living with his family in a Florentine villa in Italy, was displeased with this new policy at Street & Smith and urged his agent to seek other markets. It was while on a long trip to Egypt with his family that Faust wrote three short novels featuring a new character, Perry Woodstock. Carl Brandt sold all three of these Perry Woodstock short novels to Rogers Terrill, editor of Popular Publications' new pulp magazine, *Dime Western*. "The Strange Ride of Perry Woodstock," the first of these short novels, is collected in *THE FUGITIVE'S MISSION: A WESTERN TRIO* (Five Star Westerns, 1997). The second of them, titled by Faust "The Stage to Yellow Creek" and completed in June, 1932, appeared as "Guardian Guns" by Max Brand in *Dime Western* (8/33). Rogers Terrill, as was his editorial prerogative, in addition to changing the title prior to publication also altered the name of the principal character from Perry Woodstock to Tom Wells and deleted or rewrote certain sections of the text. For its appearance here, both the title and the text of "The Stage to Yellow Creek" have been restored according to Frederick Faust's original typescript.

## I

### “CACTUS TERRY”

There are so many different kinds of courage in this world that it's a dangerous thing to say right out that this man is brave and that one a coward. Take, for instance, the eleven people who started out that day, many years ago, on the stage trip from Fort Winton to Yellow Creek. I was one of the eleven, and, what is a great deal more important, I was one of the few who lived to tell of that terrible journey. Fear came to all of us before the thing was over. But what I'm trying to get across is that everyone—even the poor devils who died like cowards—showed courage of one sort or another before the end.

Take the three Mexicans whose last names we never knew, Pierre Vernon, the gambler, and the girl, Lydia Vincent. There was never a time when these five. . . . But perhaps I'd better tell the thing as it happened, starting with that fateful moment when Mike Jeffreys, as fine a driver as ever I'd ridden with, eased his six-horse team around a sharp bend in the trail and into the misty darkness of Mule Cañon. Then is when the adventure really began, for we hadn't gone more than a couple of hundred feet between those high rock walls when Mike was forced to yank his horses to a quick stop before an obstruction of branches that had been piled across the trail. At the same time a broad, powerful light, almost like the glare of a train's headlight, shot out at us. It came from the heavy shadows beside the road, and it covered us all with a broad, strong shaft.

When that light struck me, I simply stuck my hands up above my head. There seemed to be no other wise thing to do. Even at that time I wasn't exactly a young man. And, after all, I was only a passenger.

A voice came out of the shadows, strong and high. “Keep 'em covered, boys!” it said. “An' shoot the leaders if they step over that pile of brush. If anybody tries to step off on the far side of the stage, you fellows over there plant him the minute he reaches the road. I'm not over-anxious for bloodshed. But I don't care how many fools we have to kill, if they ask for it. Everybody out, on this side, if you please. That's it!”

All that we could see was a shadowy form behind the light and the gleaming muzzles of a pair of Colts leveled at us. For my part, I had nothing with me that I hated to lose. My name, by the way, is Perry Woodstock. I'd been a cowpuncher all my life up till that time. But the week before, on my fiftieth birthday, my wife, Rosemary, and I'd taken all our savings and sunk 'em in a little spread outside Yellow Creek. So I, for one, had no cash in that hold-up. I felt, anyway, that we were thoroughly trapped and that resistance was useless.

Everybody else seemed to feel the same way. I think it was the cool confidence of the bandit that convinced us we were done for. If he had raved and cursed at us, it might not have chilled our blood so much.

The Mexicans were whispering little, sibilant curses. But old George Vincent, the girl's father, choked back a groan. “God help me!” he said—not as though he were afraid of bodily hurt, but as though there was something else that he could not afford to lose. It

didn't take any great stretch of imagination to understand that money must be what he was thinking about, so much money that the loss of it would ruin him.

He got down with the rest of us, and we lined up with our hands stuck in the air, all except Lydia. The robber said to her: "It's all right, lady. You don't need to keep your hands up. I've never robbed women."

He came out from behind his light then, and we saw a black hood over his head, and one gun covering the whole of us. But that gun was enough, to say nothing of whoever might be in the brush on each side of the road, silently giving their chief all the backing necessary.

This robber, I could see, was a fellow with brains, and he used a dodge that was new to me. He went down the line of us, carrying in his left hand a number of black, cotton bags. When he ordered us to put down our arms, one after the other, he dropped these sacks over our heads and shoulders. It was a slick idea. It blanketed us all with darkness. And I stood there in that thin veil of light, suddenly realizing that we had been bamboozled and beaten and fooled by a single man. There were no backers lying in the brush. His talk and the light and our own fear had trapped us. Now, alone and unaided, he was going to go through us.

I heard a yelp from the girl, threw off the black sack without thinking, and there she was, grappling with the robber!

The bandit, of course, could have knocked that foolish girl silly. But he didn't. Instead, he tried to push her away. Lydia, her eyes blazing, was hanging on and fighting like a wildcat when about five of us hit that highway robber in one wave and put him down.

The Mexicans wanted to kill him on the spot, now that he was helpless. And two other hardcase passengers—Chick Dyne and Stuffy Bill Haines, who were little better than saloon bums—would have kicked in his face without any more to-do. But I managed to stop them, although I had to threaten to use the butt of a gun on the face of Stuffy Bill.

Lydia Vincent was standing back against the stage, panting and flushed, with her head up, her lips parted, and the shine of a daredevil tomboy in her eyes. It was a good picture that she made.

"I . . . I'm almost ashamed of myself," she said. "He could have killed me, but he wouldn't even use his fist on me, to say nothing of his gun."

There was a lot of sense in what she said. It made me, for one, feel a lot friendlier toward the bandit, to think that there was so much decency in him that he wouldn't use his knuckles on the girl when his failure to knock her away meant capture and maybe death.

Now, as he was lifted from the ground and put on his feet, I saw that he was a tall, loose-jointed fellow with the quietest blue eyes in the world and the calmest expression on his face. He looked surprised and innocent, as though he had been knocked down by a riot with which he had nothing to do.

The Mexicans and the precious pair of bums were for lynching the robber on the spot. But with the backing of Mike, the driver, and the girl and her father, I managed to get him safely into the stage. There was no need to tie his hands, I thought, because he was wedged into the midst of the lot of us, and we were all armed, and his weapons had been taken from him.

I simply said: "Look here, partner, do you want us to tie you hand and foot, or will you

promise to be a good boy till we get you safely to the cooler?”

He said: “I like coolers. They’re peaceful and quiet. I like ’em a lot.”

“And about giving your word?” I said.

“Why, certainly,” he said. “I’ll sit as quiet as can be, as long as the rest of you sit quiet.”

There might be a left-handed meaning in what he said, but I was pretty sure of him, and with his own lantern at his feet to play light on him the stage started on. Our man made himself a cigarette, and, while he was doing it, the sleeves of his coat worked back a little, and we could see that his wrists were criss-crossed with scars. Stuffy Bill wanted to know how he’d gotten them, and if he was covered all over with the same silver marks.

He said: “How’d you get your arms that way, stranger, and what’s your moniker, besides?”

“I can answer both questions together,” said the prisoner, in a voice the softest and gentlest that you ever heard, and the deepest, too. “When I was a kid, a horse piled me into a cactus patch, and I got cut up pretty badly all over. Ever since then I’ve been called Cactus Terry. The cactus scars are all over my body, about as close as writing could be crowded.”

Stuffy Bill nodded his head as though satisfied with that answer. But across the stage Pierre Vernon, the gambler, laughed. For my part, I thought that a certain round, silver band going around each wrist might have been caused by the friction of a rope or a rawhide thong, working in through the flesh toward the bone. It wasn’t a pretty thing to think about.

Just then somebody noticed the rattling of a galloping horse that was coming along behind the stage and said: “What’s that? Who’s coming up behind?”

“It’s only my horse following along, I suppose,” said Cactus Terry. He whistled, and pretty soon a black mare ran up beside the stage. Part of the lantern glow reached her head and glimmered over the beauty of it.

“What a beautiful horse!” said Lydia Vincent, her eyes shining at the robber.

“She is,” he agreed.

“And how well you’ve trained her,” said the girl.

Old Vincent cut in, asking if Cactus had any information that made him particularly eager to rob this stage. Cactus said that he had. Vincent seemed a good deal cut up by this. “Just what information?” he wanted to know.

“I knew,” said Cactus, “that there was a hundred and sixty thousand dollars traveling in greenbacks along with a fellow by the name of George Vincent on this coach. Are you Mister Vincent, by any chance?”

Vincent was knocked in a heap when he heard this, and so was everybody else. I could see Stuffy rolling his eyes up toward the stars, and the flashing teeth of the three Mexicans as they glanced and grinned at one another.

A hundred and sixty thousand dollars! Well, that’s a whale of a lot of money in any man’s life.

“I thought that I’d borrow some of that money,” said Cactus, in his gentle, cheerful way. “There’s a saying that money makes money grow, you know. I had some special

schemes hatching out to make money grow fast as wildfire, once I had a bit of capital.”

I liked his coolness. We all laughed, except George Vincent. He leaned forward and tapped our prisoner on the knee.

“Do you think that anybody else may know, or think they know, that a hundred and sixty thousand is traveling to Yellow Creek on this stage?”

“Oh, sure,” said the robber. “A lot of the boys know all about it.”

## II

### “KILLERS AHEAD”

The money was not mine, of course, but, when I heard this, it was as though somebody had tapped me gently under the right ear with a chunk of lead in a nice, soft length of garden hose. As for George Vincent, he sank back in his place and shriveled up like an apple peel that's been too close to the fire.

“Great heavens,” he whispered.

“Father,” said the girl, “in another moment they'll really begin to think that you *are* traveling with all that money.”

It was a good stab on her part, but it was too late. Her father wriggled upright and attempted to laugh and only choked himself.

“Of course, there's nothing in it,” he said. “A hundred and sixty thousand dollars! No man would be such a fool as to travel with so much money on him.”

I saw that a lot of harm might come out of this if Vincent thought he was pulling the wool over everybody's eyes, so I said: “Nobody would carry that much money on himself unless he knew how often messengers go crooked and how often the mail is robbed.”

“Eh? What's that, Woodstock?” said Vincent, blinking at me.

“Well,” I explained, “I'd swear that everybody on this stage is pretty sure that you've got the coin with you. Maybe you'd just as well know what we think.”

The girl gave me a long, level look, beginning pretty hostile but ending with a sort of friendly, hopeful expression in her worried eyes.

Vincent himself glowered at me and said nothing for a moment. Then he turned to Cactus again.

“What makes you think that a number of people know . . . think, I mean . . . that I'm carrying that fortune about the country with me?”

“You've got to look out for freckle-faced men,” said Cactus, in his gentle voice. “A freckle-faced boy is all right, but a freckle-faced man is apt to be pretty dangerous, I tell you. There was a clerk back there in the bank you had dealings with, who had freckles across his nose. Remember him?”

“A clerk? I remember, now. There was a man like that in the bank . . . the scoundrel.”

“He's a scoundrel, all right,” said Cactus. “He's such a scoundrel that he wrote to some old chums that he used to play around with in this neck of the woods. He told them all about your movements, and he suggested that they stop your stage, get your dough, and then split with him.”

“Were you one of his former friends?” asked Vincent.

“I don't herd with that kind of vermin,” said Cactus softly. “But when a bunch of the boys were talking the thing over in an abandoned shack, I was listening in from the attic, and, before they finished, I knew all about 'em.”

“And what did they intend doing?” asked Vincent, wriggling as though he were sitting on top of a hot stove.

“Why,” said Cactus, “they intended sticking up the stage, tonight. That was their idea.”

“Good God!” said Vincent. “Why didn’t you tell us all this before, man? Where are they now?”

“For a man in the hands of the law,” said Cactus, “and just about in jail already, there’s nothing so dangerous as talking. And I’m afraid that I’ve talked too much.”

“Heavens above us,” said Vincent. “Perhaps the ruffians are waiting down the road. Stop the stage, driver! Stop the stage!”

Mike Jeffreys stopped the stage, all right. We were all about as nervous as George Vincent by this time, and the Mexicans were showing the whites of their eyes. If we were stopped a second time, and by a gang, we might not get off so well as we had before. One volley to kill the horses and another to clear out the coach was the way some highwaymen worked.

Stuffy Bill said: “There had oughta be a law ag’in’ gents packing around the whole United States treasury in their vest pocket. Look at what it does to a lot of innocent gents that ain’t got more’n two bits between them and hell.”

At which point Vincent made us a little speech. He said: “Gentlemen, you can see that I’m in a terrible predicament. You also are in danger, so far as I can see. I suggest that we promise our friend, Cactus . . . who, after all, has done us absolutely no harm . . . complete freedom from the dangers of the law if he will reveal to us everything that he knows about the plot that other scoundrels have laid to stop this stage.”

Chick Dyne cracked right in with: “I’m dead ag’in’ it! When a gent steps out and takes a sock at the jaw of the law, he’d oughta have a broken hand. This here Cactus, he belongs in the jail. That’s all there is to it. He belongs in the jail, and that’s where I’m going to see that he goes.”

The driver pulled at his mustache, and said nothing.

The gambler cleared his throat and then said: “Undoubtedly there is something in what Chick says. I am the last man to wish any other fellow bad fortune, but our friend, Cactus, has broken an important law, and I think that he ought to suffer for it. As for the danger to the money, Mister Vincent ought to tell us where it is hidden, and we will all guarantee him security for it.”

I listened to that argument and would have hated him, if I hadn’t wanted to laugh. It was a pretty flimsy dodge that he was trying, and even Vincent, excited as he was, paid no attention. The Mexicans picked the idea right up, however. The tall cadaver said that all of our lives were in danger. He suggested that Mr. Vincent should be put on the horse of the highwayman and, together with his money, cut across the rough side of the country toward Yellow Creek. He, Pedro, a man of sense and honor, and a sure guide to all of this countryside, would accompany Mr. Vincent, and make sure that he safely reached his destination.

I looked at the girl. There was a faint smile on her lips, and a lot of thought in her eyes.

Stuffy and Chick both broke in here. They declared that there was something in what

the trio had said, except that, of course, the life of a white man and a gentleman could not be trusted to a Mexican, alone in the night. They, however, Stuffy and Chick, were willing to be the guard and guides for Mr. Vincent.

It seemed as though everybody in the coach was suddenly all burned up with the desire to take care of Mr. Vincent—and his money.

Mike Jeffreys said, as he still pulled at his mustache: “You pair of tramps would be worse than the Mexicans as a bodyguard! Look here, Mister Vincent, have you really got that ocean of hard cash along with you?”

Vincent groaned and looked at the girl.

In that flash, I saw who was the real man of the family. She just nodded, and he admitted: “Yes, I’ve got it with me . . . fool that I am.”

“Now, then,” said Mike Jeffreys, “it wouldn’t do any good to shell Vincent out of the stage, because if there’s a hold-up party farther down the road, they’ll stop the stage just the same and load a lot of lead into us, most likely. And if they don’t find Vincent, they’re likely to start breaking their teeth on our hides. The only thing to do is to keep together. But we’ve got to find out what Cactus, here, knows.”

Stuffy said it was a damned outrage for a freeborn, American citizen to be talked to the way the driver had talked about him and Chick, and that he, for one, would turn Cactus over to the law as soon as we hit Yellow Creek.

I admired the mean, out-and-out way that Stuffy talked. There wasn’t anything decent about him, and he hardly made any pretense of decency.

I said: “Of course, Cactus goes free if he’ll talk. You agree, Mike . . . and Vincent and his daughter agree. That’s four of us. And I think that we’re the four that will have to swing this meeting.”

“Why,” said Pierre Vernon, the gambler, easy as could be, “I agree with you, too, Woodstock.”

“That makes five,” said Mike. “And that’s enough. Look here, Cactus . . . will you out and tell us what you know?”

“Of course, I will,” said Cactus, “seeing as how you’re not going to turn me over to the sheriff.”

He pointed ahead, where two hills rubbed shoulders above the road and blotted out a couple of big half sections of stars.

“They’re down in that gorge,” said Cactus. “That’s about half a mile from here, I suppose. And some of the five of ’em are shotgun boys. One of ’em is Riley Mason, who already has half a dozen killings to boast about.”

### III

## “FLIGHT”

There was not very much doubt as to what would happen now. We could not separate. If we attempted to go down the road, it would be just like writing out our own tickets to boothill. I knew the killer, Riley Mason, and I would rather have put my foot in a nest of rattlers than to ride any farther down the road on that stage. Our best chance, it seemed to me, was to turn the stage off the road and head across country. If luck was with us and we succeeded in finding our way through the hills and arroyos, we might somehow make it across the unbeaten ways of open country to Yellow Creek. It was a pretty long chance, but it looked then like our best bet. I suggested it, and the others agreed almost at once.

Mike Jeffreys nodded his head, then made another suggestion.

“I ought to have somebody scouting ahead to pick the best ways for me,” he said. “Somebody who knows this country, and who can tell where a stage can go, and where a stage can’t go.”

Cactus Terry said: “There’s me and my horse. What about that?”

“He’d just fade away, and we’d never see him again,” protested the gambler. “I’ll take that horse, though, and scout ahead myself.”

Every one of the three Mexicans wanted the job. So did Stuffy Bill and Chick. But by this time there was a group of five of us that insisted on voting one way. That party consisted of Mike Jeffreys, the two Vincents, myself, and Cactus Terry. We forced the point through, and Cactus called up his horse and got on her back.

Stuffy Bill was very loud in protesting against this. He pointed out that there was a rifle stuck into the saddle holster and that repeating gun would be used for the stoppage of the coach and the murder of all of us.

However, Cactus not only got the horse, saddle, and rifle, but he also got his own pair of Colts that had been taken from him in the scuffle. I insisted on that. And now that he was fully restored to his horse and his weapons, I can tell you that a shade of difference came in the actions of Cactus and in the appearance of him. I said that he was a sort of long, loose-jointed fellow, on the ground. But when he sat in the saddle, he was a king, right enough. And even the features of his lean, brown face seemed to change.

He looked us up and down, and I was half inclined to believe that Stuffy Bill might be right. He waved his hand in what might be a signal for us to follow, or a gesture of farewell. Then he turned and rode off the trail.

Chick wanted to shoot him from behind. “He’s gonna do us dirty!” he said, and the rat went so far as to pull out a long-barreled Colt and level it. It was Lydia Vincent who knocked up his hand with an exclamation of impatient disgust.

He cursed, not at her, to be sure, but at the rest of us and at fate and the world in general. He said: “You don’t know what people will do for a hundred and sixty thousand dollars!”

Vincent looked even more worried. But his daughter—she was a good girl, if ever there was one—shook her head.

“We have to take some sort of a chance,” she said. “This is the best chance. If we go on down the road, we’ll be running into robbery *and* murder. And although Cactus may rob us, he won’t murder us. Personally, I think he can be trusted.”

She put such a fire into that remark she practically silenced the rest of us.

And now Mike Jeffreys took charge by turning the stage and backing it with a good deal of cursing at the wheelers. Then he drove us, groaning and lurching, up the bank and onto the rough ground above, along the shoulder of the mountain.

Nobody talked. It seemed as though dangers were crowding up close to us, and that guns were pointing through the dark. We got over the shoulder, and there we suddenly saw a big golden moon, with cheeks puffed out, standing up in the east. That was cheering, in a sense, because it would help us to find the way. It was mighty depressing in another sense, because it would show us to anybody who started hunting for our scalps.

Before us, now and then, we heard the voice of Cactus calling back directions, and I thought that he made his voice guarded—letting it be just loud enough to reach our ears. We began to climb over steep slopes and grind with fixed brakes down sharp descents, as we forged ahead through those badlands.

Every now and then Mike Jeffreys swore, and then admired. He said a dozen times: “There’s a *man*, that Cactus. There’s a man who knows himself and knows a stagecoach, too!”

I felt the same way about it. In the hands of Cactus as a guide and Jeffreys as a driver, I felt that we would get through, if getting through were possible.

The moon, as it got higher, gave us its full light only now and then, for the sky was filled with big sailing clouds, and the moon would plunge into them every now and then and be lost for a minute or two. This changing light made travel a lot more difficult, but the voice of Cactus practically took us by the hand and led us through all difficulties.

Now he would trot or gallop ahead. Now he would call directions and warnings. Now he would be back beside us, telling Jeffreys just the dangers of a certain slope. And Jeffreys would grunt out—“Gotcha!”—and go ahead.

So we came, at last, to a broad and fairly open tableland, with the moon shining brightly and unstained upon us. We hadn’t gone far across that place when little Chick Dyne jumped up and yelled: “Look! There they are!”

There they were, all right. Five riders coming full tilt out of a patch of trees and heading in front of us, to cut off our line of flight. It brought my heart up in my throat. Five of them, counting murdering Riley Mason—and God help us if that crew got us into their hands.

We had men enough and guns enough to make a fight. But in a pinch I could see the Mexicans sneaking off to join the enemy. If Vincent was any good with a gun, I would miss my guess, and that left the gambler, who was likely to take the easiest course. Stuffy Bill and Chick would do the same thing. Jeffreys and myself—practically the last two—were the only ones who counted. While I felt that Jeffreys would make a good accounting of himself, either with a revolver or a rifle, for my part I had never been better than a second-rate marksman, even in my best days.

No, our party looked strong enough to the eye, but I felt that we were a pretty weak ship. Jeffreys gave the mustangs the whip, and we started across that rolling ground like a small boat driven through choppy surf by a hurricane. I never felt such motion. Everybody had to hang on for dear life, and, if ever a Concord was tested out thoroughly in body, wheels, and springs, that coach was tested then. Six mustangs, however well intentioned and however well driven, could not keep pace with five horses that were ridden by desperate and eager men.

Suddenly Chick screamed out: "There goes that crook of a dog's hind leg . . . there goes that Cactus Terry to make up with the five of 'em. We're no better'n dead men. We gotta scatter out of the coach and take our chances!"

In fact, we could see Cactus Terry loping his horse across the plain toward the five racing horses.

But while I was shaking my head, I heard Lydia Vincent exclaiming: "He'll not join them. I know that he'll not join them."

Just then, Cactus got to a bunch of rocks and dropped off the mare, and the mare ducked down out of sight. The next instant rifle fire started, and it did us good to see the five thugs scatter. This side and that, or straight back toward shelter, they rode full tilt, while Lydia Vincent stood straight up, regardless of the danger of being jolted out of the stage. She stood up, and she cheered.

The five had started running as the rifle was turned loose on them. But although it was pretty long-range fire and only by moonlight, suddenly one of those five horses was without a rider. And we saw the dismounted man get up from the ground, try to run, and fall again.

"Winged!" said Jeffreys, as calm as you please. "That Cactus, he's a shooting fool, he is!"

## IV

### “FIRE AND FLOOD”

That was the kind of a shooting fool to have along, you can bet. It warmed my heart to see the way Cactus had handled that job, and suddenly I felt pretty small, back there in the stage, with one man, and that one a robber by trade, fighting against five for the lot of us. Presently, as we swung away across country, we saw Cactus loping the black mare after us, keeping a good distance behind. And that was the way we went on for an hour, with Cactus turning back once in another natural little fort and opening fire once more. What he accomplished that time we could not tell, for the lay of the land shut him from view.

And then it came on to rain. And how it rained. I suppose there are not many parts of the earth where the rainfall averages less than it does in the Southwest of the United States—that is, in places that are not out-and-out deserts. But when the sky makes up its mind to turn black and give a downpour, I think that the Southwest outrains every record of the tropics. The drops are bigger, and there are a lot more of 'em to the square inch.

The moon had disappeared some time before, and lightning flashes filled the sky. By those flashes of lightning we saw our way. And presently we saw the rain and heard it coming. There was a roaring wind behind it, and there was another roaring of the rain upon the ground that sounded like ten thousand distant herds stampeding.

It was an awful thing to see, mind you, with the lightning still crackling, and the face of it blurred and smeared across behind the sheets of the driving water. And when that wind and rain hit the stage, I could fairly feel the stagger of the coach and the reeling of the horses that were trying to pull us ahead. They stopped trying for a minute, and we stood still. The weight of the downpour seemed to be breaking the coach and hammering us into the ground. Then we went on again. If we spoke, we had to shout. And when the lightning glared suddenly, peering in on us, we saw frightened, distorted faces.

Presently, with a blaze of lightning over both his shoulders, I saw Cactus ride up to the stage. He was clothed in a slicker that gleamed like golden mail, and the black mare was like polished ebony with the water washing in torrents off her and the lightning glistening along her flanks.

Cactus shouted, and I made out his voice. “You’ve got to speed up, Mike!” he yelled. “There’s a dry arroyo ahead of you, and beyond that there’s a fair chance to keep going. But unless you get across the arroyo now, you won’t get across at all. It’ll be a running river in another minute or two with this storm!”

Mike, for answer, flogged the mustangs. They tried to gallop, but already the mud was deep, and the best they could do was a steady trot. We went lumbering and blundering along, with the wheels making sometimes a crackling and sometimes merely a sloshing sound as they cut their broad tires through the mud.

And so we came to the edge of the arroyo. I’ll never forget the moment when we balanced on the rim of the descending slope. Up and down the shallow ravine we saw the wet boulders, illumined by a whole cluster of ripping lightning. There were pools of water

everywhere, but no stream was running as yet. As we started down toward the bottom, we heard the thunder pounding in our ears like ten thousand thicknesses of number one canvas sailcloth being torn across by the devil's own fingers. That was a bad minute.

The overlabored coach hit the bottom of the arroyo with a stagger and a groan. Then we went bumping horribly across the flat and got to the far side. But there we found that the bank was steeper than the one that we had come down. It was almost sheer up and down. We turned and went up the arroyo to find a better place for attempting the climb. But we hadn't gone far when the near leader turned with a scream like the death cry of a wounded beast.

I looked ahead, and a white blaze of lightning showed me a six-foot head of water coming straight down that arroyo as fast as a horse could run. The flood was throwing up great muddy, shapeless arms that held big boulders suspended like feathers. Yes, sir, you could see the big rocks, and, while I watched, I saw a tree trunk with all the branches clean off of it thrown up fifteen or twenty feet.

That coach shed us faster than it ever got rid of a cargo of passengers before. I ran out with Mike, and we slashed the traces and set the mustangs loose. We got them free just in time. Those horses, five of them, climbed the bank like wildcats; the sixth one, clean mad with fear and excitement, turned and started racing down the cañon at full speed.

The bank was wet clay where I tried to climb it. I was stuck toward the top, with the water rushing right at me, when a pair of boots appeared under my nose, and I climbed over and up the body of Cactus to the top of the bank. He'd hooked on with his arms at the top and given me a natural ladder. It was quick thinking, and it was a brave thing to do.

I owed my life to the quick brain and the courage of Cactus, because the next minute that roaring water came by and threw a fifty-pound boulder slam on the spot where I had been climbing. All the devils were roaring together now—the thunder, and the wind, and the rushing, trampling rain, and the furious stampeding of the water—so that a person could not speak and hardly be heard if he did, and there was only the lightning to give us glimpses into the storm, and into the wild haggard faces of one another.

At that time I thought that only Cactus Terry remained unchanged. He was on the back of the black mare again, and he suggested that as many of us as could should mount the mustangs and ride along.

Mount them? Yes, we could mount them, all right. But it was a different thing to stick on their backs. They were broken to driving, but that had nothing to do with riding them. They fought like wildcats and spilled us all into the mud, except the three Mexicans and Mike Jeffreys. Mike sat out his bucking devil, and the Mexicans seem to be born with a sense of what's the proper thing to do when on the back of a horse. In the end, there were four of us mounted—five, counting Cactus—which left six of us to trek ahead on foot, leading the fifth of the mustangs that remained to us.

But I want to tell you a strange thing. We pushed ahead through the devilishness of that night. Slickers couldn't keep us dry, for every now and then the wind came around with an unexpected flaw, jerked open our coats, and turned in a deluge on us.

We marched by lightning light. It showed me the three Mexicans, riding last of the party, huddling close together. In front of them came Stuffy Bill and Chick, walking shoulder to shoulder, heads down, cursing so vilely that even my ears got a tingle in them

now and then. Next came me and the gambler, Pierre Vernon, walking together, and ahead of us the Vincents, and ahead of the Vincents Mike Jeffreys and Cactus Terry, our two men of action, riding briskly into the storm, cutting this way and that to find a shelter.

Cactus Terry, as one might have expected, was the fellow to find it. He came back with word of having found an old, abandoned ranch. So we followed him through that deepening mud, and after five more minutes the lightning showed up the front of a long, low building. And we all broke out into a feeble, scattering cheer and made a run for cover.

## V

### “TROUBLE ON HORSEBACK”

It was interesting to see the way the various people acted after we got to shelter. Most of us started in to make a fire, that we built right in the middle of the biggest room on the bare earth, because there was no sign of a stove left, except a few handfuls of rust and a staggering skeleton of iron. Then we left the girl by the fire, and the rest of us herded into the next room and took our clothes off and wrung them out, two men to a garment, to get them dry. We struggled back into the damp garments, then went back to the fire to dry ourselves.

There we found that the girl had gone through the same ceremony. Her clothes looked pretty wrinkled and sagging, but she wore them with just the same air of cool confidence. It takes a rare woman, like it takes a rare hen, to stand being wet and bedraggled. But she stood it and was freshening the fire with old boards and smiled a welcome at us, as though she were the lady of the place and we were house guests. She was all right, that girl. I voted again for her, right on the spot.

I said that the rest of us, after the fire was going, went to wring out our clothes, but I was wrong. Cactus Terry was not with us. The fire had no sooner been lighted than he went right outside again, and he was still gone when we came back from the other room.

Chick and Stuffey sat down together in a corner, muttering to one another. The three Mexicans sat in another corner, not muttering. But now and then the sound of their whispering cut coldly into the ear, like the drawn edge of a knife over the skin. They were an ugly picture, I tell you, like three crows huddled together on one branch and thinking bad thoughts.

The gambler was trying to talk big to the girl now that we were safe for the time in a shelter. He told her what he had done in various cities, and how he had staged all kinds of parties, and how he had laid a bet with the earl of whatnot on a horse race.

She didn't laugh at this blow-hard. She just listened, never smiling.

But there was one center of interest to which all eyes were pulled every now and again. That was George Vincent's pigskin bag. Vincent sat on the ruins of a box, with the bag between his feet, and every once in a while heads would turn and eyes would rest on that pigskin bag.

Of course, that was where the treasure lay. Inside of that leather there was a free and easy life for somebody, and a gay life, too, with plenty of spending money. I found myself, over and over again, figuring out what a hundred and sixty thousand would bring in at five per cent. Eight thousand dollars. Great Scott! In those days that seemed a whole flood of money. Nearly seven hundred a month for sitting still. Seven hundred dollars, and never a lick of work done. More than twenty dollars a day to go and blow in, living at the best hotels off the fat of the land! Not, mind you, that I really ever even dreamed of trying to steal that money. Stealing wasn't exactly my line. But I couldn't help thinking and daydreaming a little, if you know what I mean. It hardly seemed stealing, a job like that. It

was so big and important for its possible results, that it seemed more like a big financial adventure. The same difference that there is between war and murder.

Well, if I was figuring things on that scale, I could imagine how the rest of the gang in the corners would be thinking, to say nothing of the smooth-tongued gambler, now rattling away to the girl so swift and easy and sneaking glances at the bag every now and then.

“Where’s Cactus Terry?” asked Mike at last.

“Gone to play some dirty trick on us,” suggested Stuffy, who was always ready to damn everybody.

Mike looked at him and paid no attention to the remark.

“He’s gone to help us out in some way, I suppose,” said the girl in her turn.

“D’you think that they’ll be able to follow us?” I asked Jeffreys.

“You know as well as I do, Perry,” said Mike.

“It’s a pretty thick night,” I commented. “And if they didn’t get across that arroyo before we did, they’ll never hit this side before the rain stops.”

He shook his head.

“What d’you think, Mike?” asked the girl.

He looked at her and smiled, and his young-old face got very young in fact.

“I don’t know,” said Jeffreys. “You see how it is. For a gang like that, so much money is enough to give them the scent from halfway around the earth. Besides, they’ve got a blood grudge by this time. One of their partners has been knocked off his horse, and they’ll want to make that even.”

“I hope that the man was not killed,” said Lydia.

“I don’t have the same hope,” Mike said. “If he’s dead, there’s one less thief in the world. But he’s not dead . . . not by the way he stood up and tried to walk. He just got it through the leg. I think they’ve had enough lightning to show ’em the way we came. The arroyo might stop them, but, then again, they might go upstream or down and find shallows that they could ford.”

He had hardly finished speaking when Cactus came through the empty doorway and stood within the firelight, gleaming like gold in his yellow slicker.

“What have you been scouting around for?” asked Mike.

“For trouble,” said Cactus.

“Find any?”

“Yes.”

“What sort of trouble?”

“Trouble on horseback, with four pairs of hands,” Cactus informed them.

That did me no good, to hear him say that. It took some of my breath from me.

“You mean they’ve found us?” said Mike.

“Not yet, but they’re going to,” said Cactus.

“Then for God’s sake, let’s put the fire out!” said Vincent.

“Why?” asked Cactus. “They’re going to find us, I think, anyway. The lightning is spraying all over the face of the earth. And the tracks we made coming up through the

mud are enough to be read from half a mile up in the air. They're going to find us, all right, and we're going to have to fight."

"But not in here . . . with the firelight shining on us!" exclaimed Vincent.

"We won't have to stay in here," said Cactus. "We can go other places." He ran his eyes over the lot of us. "There are enough of us to eat them alive . . . if we've all got healthy appetites. But that's what I'm not sure of. You have to have a lot of hunger to eat boys like Riley and his gang. Mike and Perry Woodstock, we'd better put our heads together . . . with Mister Vincent . . . and see what's to be done. Excuse me, Vernon. I include you, too, of course."

## VI

### “CONFERENCE OF WAR”

We gathered together and left the three Mexicans in their corner, still whispering and rolling their eyes. Stuffy and Chick went on with their mutterings together, too. I was mighty worried by the look of those fellows. And there was Pierre Vernon, the gambler, who seemed to me just the sort of a crutch that will break when you trust your weight to it.

Cactus took control of things at once. “Riley Mason and his boys are pretty sure to find their way here,” he said. “Partly because they know about the money, and partly because they hate me.”

“Would they know that it’s you?” asked Vernon sharply.

“They would. They wouldn’t recognize me in the distance by the moonlight, likely,” said Cactus Terry. “But they’d know the look of my horse, Patty. She’s pretty well known.”

“Why do they hate you?” asked Vernon, scowling. “What have you had to do with Riley Mason?”

Cactus looked at Vernon for a minute as though he were considering making no answer. But then he shrugged his shoulders and said: “You have a right to know because it’s the business of all as long as I’m in the party. I’ve been on Mason’s trail for more than a year, and he knows it. I want his scalp, and he knows why.”

“What for? Friends that fell out, you and Riley Mason?” asked Vernon.

There was a good deal of sting in the question. Cactus shrugged his shoulders again.

“Riley happened to shoot a friend of mine, and he did it like the bushwhacker he is, through an open window. That’s all.”

“Who was this friend?” asked Vernon.

It angered me to hear Vernon’s questions. But Cactus endured them with a fine self-control.

He merely said: “Jigger Davis. That was the friend.”

“I’ve heard that name,” said Vernon quickly, and he looked toward the girl as he spoke. “Jigger Davis was a bank bandit.”

“Yes, he cracked safes,” said Cactus Terry, as quietly as before.

“And he was a friend of yours?” repeated Vernon, glancing at the girl again.

“I don’t see that it matters,” said the girl, breaking in. “The point that counts is that Riley Mason has two reasons for catching us. One is money, and the other is hate. And the question is . . . what are we going to do about it?”

“That’s the most important question,” said Pierre Vernon. “We’ve simply got to dig in and fight. That’s all there is to it.”

“If we dig in and start fighting,” said Cactus, “we’ll have enemies in the camp. The Mexicans and those two loafers yonder will all throw in against us.”

“Why, they don’t look pretty, but I don’t think that they’re so bad,” said Vernon. “Perhaps they’ll stand by and do their share.”

“Perhaps,” said Cactus, and stopped talking.

Vincent appealed to him at once, recognizing in him the natural leader of us all.

“Go on, Cactus!” he exclaimed. “We need all our hands and all of our brains, too, in a crisis like this. Tell us what you think is the best way out.”

“I don’t see any good way out,” said Cactus simply. “We can’t run far through this mud. And even if we could, our tracks could be seen easy on a night like this.”

“True,” said Vincent.

“True as the devil!” I agreed. “I wish that this here house was smaller. Then we could defend it better.”

“I don’t wish that it was smaller,” said Cactus. “The way it stands, there’s a chance that we may slip from room to room defending the place, if they begin to press us with guns and numbers.”

Vincent raised his hand and struck himself on the forehead. “I’m practically helpless with either a rifle or a revolver,” he admitted.

“That’s no great news to us,” said Vernon. Then he glanced toward the girl and bit his lip.

She stared back at Vernon and replied, for herself: “Father is really not much with a rifle or a revolver, but I can handle them both pretty well.”

“D’you think that you could shoot at a man?” asked Vernon, smiling a little.

“At some men . . . yes,” she said steadily.

The fool ought to have seen that he was being put in his right place, but he was too full of himself to see anything.

He responded with: “What does Woodstock think about all of this?”

I couldn’t help it. The words just burst out of me. “I think you’re a damn’ fool!”

He started, then he recovered himself, and looked at me with a scowl and a sneer.

“You’re small enough to say that.”

“You big drink of water,” I said, “you may be taller than me, but I know how to whittle you down to my own size.”

I shouldn’t have said either of those things, but you know how you can be irritated until the passion goes right up to your head? That was the way with me, at least. I apologized on the heel of it—not to that scamp of a Vernon, but to the rest of the company.

“I’m sorry, everybody. But this fellow rubs me the wrong way. He’s a four-flushing gambler, the way that I make him out. And yet he’s trying to talk down to everybody in the room.”

It wasn’t much of an apology, perhaps, and it was wrong of me to make more trouble when we had more than enough already.

Vernon put on a lot of extra dignity and said that, when our troubles permitted, he would pay attention to me, and not before. He was willing to swallow an insult or two in the meantime. He spoke with a good deal of dignity, I must say. But I looked behind his

words and seemed to see a yellow liver. I thought him a coward, out-and-out.

I saw Cactus turn away from the group and begin to walk up and down, keeping always in earshot of what might be said.

Vernon said, loudly and nobly, that it was simply a matter of fighting to the death when the time came. I said that death was easy to talk about, but damned hard to face. I said that I was badly scared right then, but that I thought I could fight in the pinch. But I would like to have some sort of a plan of defense.

Then Lydia Vincent said: "I think that Cactus has an idea. Will you tell us what it is, Cactus?"

He came back and stood with us, frowning at the face of the girl, and plainly seeing nothing but his own thoughts. Then he said: "Well, I have an idea, but it's not a very cheerful one for Perry Woodstock, here."

He looked at me, and I winced a little. I wondered what sort of trouble he was going to propose for me.

"Will you go on?" asked Vincent, with a sort of nervous eagerness.

"I'll go on, all right," said our friend, Cactus. "My idea is that we're blinded by the walls around us, while we stay in here. I suggest that some of us go out and explore."

"Explore for what?" snapped Vernon.

"For Riley Mason, of course," said Cactus.

"And what's to be done if you can find him?" asked Vernon.

"He's to be killed," responded Cactus gently.

Vernon drew in a quick breath.

"Mason is a dangerous ruffian," he said.

"So am I," replied Cactus.

That gave us all a good sharp turn, I'm sure. One good thing came out of it though: it silenced Mr. Vernon on the spot.

Cactus went on: "I suggest that Woodstock and I go out and scout about, if Perry is willing to take the chance with me."

I swallowed with a good deal of difficulty, before I was able to answer: "Yes, I'll go."

I remember how the eyes of the girl rested on me, understanding my fear and pitying it without despising it. I felt small, but I knew then that I'd be able to go through the motions of filling out a man's part. Anyway, Cactus slapped me on the shoulder and smiled.

"We may be able to wangle somebody important out of this," he said. "At any rate, it's better than waiting here to be surrounded and dropped like a lot of helpless sheep."

I got a rifle. He took another. We waved to the rest of them, and I went out with him into the night, feeling that death was only a step ahead of me.

## VII

### “PRISONERS”

Things had been letting up a good deal just before we left the house, but, as soon as we poked our noses outside, the wind squalled and jumped straight in our faces with a howl, and the rain came and clawed us. And then on a flood of lightning the mountains seemed to rush at us out of the darkness. The thunder seemed to be spilling off those mountain heads straight above us.

My courage was knocked in the head, right then and there. I got my companion by the arm, and I said to him: “Look here, old-timer, is it right for us to go away alone and leave the girl and her father back there with those hounds?”

He listened to my shouting, then he put his lips close to my ear. “I know that it’s dangerous to leave ’em,” he said. “But there’s no way out for us, I’m afraid. We must catch the Riley Mason outfit off guard and smash them. If we just wait here for whatever may happen, we’ll be caught between the Mason gang on the one side and our own crooks on the other, and we’ll be done in.”

Of course, I could see that there was a lot in what he said, but, nevertheless, that didn’t make the howling devil of a night any more satisfactory to me. I kept going forward, steadily enough, wherever he led, but my heart was not in the work, and my eyes were trying to look in four directions all at once.

We edged around to the rear of the house, then climbed a little hill into a thicket of trees and big brush. Up there on the hill, with every spurt of lightning like the scratching of immense matches on the ceiling of the sky, we would have a chance to look across the lowlands all around us. But I wondered what would happen if, while we walked up the slope, the Riley Mason outfit were lying in wait for us, within the brush, ready to mow us down when we got within a good, easy distance. Fighting men have to take chances like that, and they’re welcome to them. I only fight when I have to.

We had got right up to the line of the bushes when the sky broke in two and let through four or five cascading streams of lightning along with peal after peal of thunder that came bumping and banging down like ten thousand barrels rolling downstairs from the moon. And in that second or two of bright light I saw two men standing in the bushes just ahead of us.

My partner saw them, too, and his gun cracked quicker than I could have snapped my fingers. Then the noose of a rope jerked tight around my chest, and I was yanked forward on my face into the mud. By the time I got my wits about me, I was tied in a bundle. I looked aside, and the light of the storm showed me that the very same thing had happened to Cactus. I can’t tell you how incredible it was to me, when I saw that he had gone down almost as easily as I had. Because, up to this moment, he had seemed pretty nearly invincible to me. I took off my hat to Riley Mason, though, scared as I was. Shooting at a target by lightning flashes, of course, was not likely to accomplish half as much as reaching for it with a forty-foot rope and a big noose on the end of it.

They carried us back into the middle of the grove and put us down in a place where the beat of the rain was kept from our bodies. Then they worked up a fire, not big enough for much heat, but big enough for light. Riley Mason stood over the fire, holding out his hands to warm them, and the shadows of his hands kept brushing back and forth across his handsome, vicious face.

We were in the center of a group of five or six big trees whose branches interfaced and made a green roof over us. The firelight showed us very little more than Riley, because the others kept in the background. But when the sky opened and spilled half a million quarts of electricity at a splash, then we could look around into the depths of the wood about us and see the three other men in the gang.

I knew them all, and knew no good of them. Big Josh Carey had been a bad actor all his life, and Slugger Watts, with his dark, broken face, was known to be a bank bandit and all kinds of a scoundrel. Then there was Stew Bailey, who was one of those happy, round, little, fat men who are capable of smiling their way through all sorts of villainy.

Mason seemed to be content just to stand there and look us over for a long time.

Slugger Watts was the first one to speak. "Look here, Riley," he said, "you got the two of 'em at once. Why not clear 'em away. Then we'll go on and gather in the cash. No use wasting time."

Riley did not turn his eyes from Cactus.

"There's plenty of time," he said quietly. And then he laughed.

You could see that he felt the way a cat does, when it has the mouse between its paws. No use hurrying with the meal.

"I'm for hurrying," said Watts. "No use lingering over a gent like Cactus. He's got too much slickness up his sleeve."

"That's why I wanta linger," said Riley Mason. "I wanta see if he can work himself or talk himself loose from those ropes before he gets a slug through his brain." And he smiled again. "You didn't think that it would come out this way, Cactus, did you?"

I waited for the voice of Cactus, hoping that it would be steady. It was, all right. It was as steady and calm as could be.

He said: "Why, Riley, I really thought that it might wind up like this. I thought so from the first."

"You did?" exclaimed Riley Mason. "Come now. Cactus. That don't sound likely, does it?"

"Why not?" said Cactus. "I'd been chasing you so long, and you'd been running away so fast, that I knew you'd never stand and make a fair fight of it against me."

Riley's hands, stretched above the fire, turned suddenly into fists.

"I been on the run before you, have I?" he asked fiercely.

"Well, what would you call it?" went on Cactus. "What would you call it, Josh?"

Josh called it nothing at all. The three in the background smiled a little, however, I noticed. Riley did not look to see what their facial expressions might be. Perhaps he guessed.

"I never ran away from anybody in the world!" he said harshly.

"All right," said Cactus. "There's no use arguing. I simply knew right from the first

that you'd never stand up to me. You'd have to back up and get a chance at me through a trick that would hand you an advantage."

"You knew that right from the first, did you?" Riley Mason said, with a whining note in his voice.

It was rage, that whine. Some dogs make the same sound when they start a fight. In Riley Mason, it simply meant that he was ready for murder, and I got even sicker than I had been before.

"I knew it right from the first," said Cactus Terry. "If you were afraid to meet up with Jigger, then you'd be afraid to meet up with me. That was plain enough."

"Me? Afraid to meet up with Jigger?" shouted Riley Mason, maddened with shame and with anger. "Why, I met up with him and bumped him off, didn't I? That's how much afraid I was of him."

Cactus shrugged his shoulders. "Why do you keep on whining such lies as that, Riley?" he asked. "Everybody knows that you're no fighting man . . . you're just a murderer that takes advantages and shoots in the dark."

"You lying fool!" yelled Riley Mason.

"It's pretty easy to call names, when you got the other fellow tied up," said Cactus. "But the facts are what everybody knows. You found poor Jigger sitting down with a light in the room and an open window, and you just rested your gun on the windowsill and shot him."

"You lie!" yelled Riley again.

He was so enraged that he began to shake and shudder all over.

"There was a mark on the windowsill, you sneaking throat-cutter," answered Cactus. "There was a mark made by your gun when you fired. So that's proof enough."

"It's a lie. Everything that you say is a damned lie," cried Mason. "Look what I tell you . . . this time you lie biggest and loudest of all. I didn't rest the gun on the sill of the window."

"You must have. You couldn't shoot that straight without a rest," declared Cactus.

"Couldn't I? Couldn't I?" exclaimed Riley. "Now, I'm gonna tell you something, you bright guy . . . you fat-headed fool. I was standing a good three paces outside of that window, when I shot Jigger. And I used up only one bullet on him!"

I saw, of course, how Riley Mason had been trapped into the confession. Now Cactus allowed himself a slow smile of contempt.

"So it's out at last," he said. "Everybody knew it before, though."

"What?" said Riley Mason.

"That you stood outside the window and killed him. That you didn't dare to come into the room and fight it out with poor old Jigger."

"I didn't . . .," began Riley Mason. And then he paused, and made a choking sound.

He saw that he had let himself in for it with his own foolishness in talking so much. But I didn't see how this victory in words helped the position of us two captives at all. We were dead men—any way you looked at it.

## VIII

### “TREACHERY”

It's a bad thing to have to jump from one place to another, but, unless I do that, I don't know how I can bring all the threads together. For while things were happening out there in the muddy dark of the night to me and Cactus Terry, other things were happening inside of the house that promised to turn out just about as bad.

It was Pierre Vernon that started the trouble going. I had had him most in mind when I told Cactus that, if I were he, I would think twice before going off alone and trying to tackle the Mason gang. And the minute that Pierre saw us disappear in the black night, he started his work going. He got very blustering and familiar, at first, and assured George Vincent and the girl that he would be able to take care of them, and that, although he was not a man to display weapons and skill, he always went armed in this rough part of the world. Then he slicked out a brace of pistols and put a slug as neat as you please right through an old tin can that stood rusting in a corner of the room.

The sudden explosion wasn't any too good for the bad nerves of Vincent, and he snapped out a wish that Pierre Vernon would stop showing off. There would be time enough for shooting, he said, when the bandits showed up and attacked them.

Vernon seemed glad to get a chance to talk about the danger that threatened and what they ought to do about it. He said that, for his part, he never had really approved of the halt in the ranch house. He, for his part, thought that they should leave the house at once and continue the march toward Yellow Creek.

George Vincent said that he would not dream of stirring from the ranch house except with Perry Woodstock and Cactus Terry along.

Vernon took another line then and began to show his hand. He turned to Stuffy Bill and Chick.

“Well, boys,” he said, “you hear what Mister Vincent says. But it seems to me that we all have a vote in this matter. It's his money that's bringing danger and not on his own head only, but on the rest of us as well. We ought to be able to cast our votes about what's right, and what's wrong. What do you boys think?”

Of course, Stuffy and Chick were only waiting for a chance to horn in, and I can imagine the grin that must have come on the black, greasy face of Stuffy when he was appealed to in this way.

He said: “Why, there ain't anything to it, from my way of thinking. We just ought to get out of the house at once and march.”

“And what,” put in the girl, “will become of Cactus and Perry Woodstock when they come back and find out that we've moved on?”

“Maybe they won't come back,” said Stuffy, with relish in his voice. “Maybe they won't come back at all. And if they don't, it's better for us to be on the way than just to be sitting here waiting for Riley Mason's gang to eat us all alive.”

The three Mexicans rose then like one man. They said they were for marching at once. Vernon, of course, was delighted.

He turned back to Vincent. "You see how it is," he smiled. "We get six votes against the two of yours. That settles it. This is a democratic country, Mister Vincent."

It wasn't hard to guess how those democrats would work together. Before they had been long on the way, a tap on the head would finish poor Vincent. And that precious pigskin case would then be in the hands of the six thugs, led by Vernon. And the girl would either stay behind or follow them.

That was clear enough to Vincent, and he, saying nothing at all, but cornered and desperate, got ready to fight. His face was white and his hands trembled, but he pulled out a revolver.

Stuffy simply laughed out loud. "You gotta come where the majority votes," said Stuffy, the democrat.

Lydia Vincent picked up a rifle that had been leaning against the wall and threw it expertly into the ready position. She stood close to her father, saying: "There's nothing but a fight that will accomplish anything, Father. Keep back from me, Stuffy, or I'll. . . ."

She jerked the butt of the gun to her shoulder, and Stuffy walked straight in upon her, an odd, sneering smile on his face. He came with one hand stretched out toward the gun.

"If you come another step . . . !" she cried out.

"Get back, you scoundrel!" cried George Vincent.

But Stuffy answered: "I know you kind of birds. You ain't got the nerve to shoot. Gimme that rifle!"

He closed in on Lydia Vincent, and grasping the muzzle of the rifle, while she, with face white and contorted, seemed striving to pull the trigger, tore the weapon from her hands. It exploded in the midst of this flourish, and the bullet clipped through Stuffy's coat, close to his ribs. A yell of fear and rage came from him and from Chick who, being just behind his friend, was almost struck by the same bullet. As Stuffy staggered back from the danger that had threatened him so closely, Chick, with a wild yell, threw himself in and flung his revolver into the face of George Vincent.

The older man went down on one knee, his hands pressed against his face. The blood from a cut across his forehead made by the impact of the heavy gun streamed down and blinded him. Half stunned, totally helpless, he crouched back there against the wall.

Stuffy leaned over and picked up the fallen pigskin case, then made for the door.

I suppose that Lydia hardly knew what had happened to the valise that held the money. She was more than stunned by the attack that had taken the gun from her. And then she saw the gleam of the gun as it whirled through the air and beat against her father's head. She was on her knees at once, beside him, paying no regard to the rest of the world, when the Mexicans, Stuffy and Bill, and big Pierre Vernon got through the door of the house and out into the open.

The rain was beating on them as they ran, but they felt as though they had gone out into the spring sunshine—a hundred and sixty thousand dollars, and only six ways to divide it.

Inside the house, poor Vincent recovered his wits a little, and his girl tied a

handkerchief as a bandage around his bleeding head.

It was he himself, as his eyes cleared, who cried out: "And the money, Lydia? The money?"

She looked about her with a gasp. "They have it! They've gone with it," she groaned.

George Vincent, throwing his hands above his head, suddenly ran out from the house.

At the door Lydia overtook him, crying out that it was useless for one man to pursue six scoundrels, all armed.

But he only struck her hands away from him and ran on furiously through the mud and the whipping rain, with the lightning to show him the path.

And she? Well, what could she do but follow him?

The last man to leave that place was Mike, the driver. He had been standing against the wall, in a trance, all the while. I think I know what was going on inside of him. He was a good enough fellow, but he was terribly tempted to cut in with the thugs and get away with a share of the spoils. Between that and the decent heart of him wanting to help the Vincents, he had been paralyzed. One call from the girl to him, by name, might have got him out of the trance and into proper action. But he didn't get that call. Only after all the others were gone did he come to with a groan. And he went lurching out into the darkness after them.

## IX

### “BLUFF”

And now I must go back to the situation out there among the dripping trees, in the dull, trembling light of Riley Mason’s little fire.

I couldn’t see what Cactus was driving at with all his talk about the murder of his friend, Jigger, except that perhaps he wished to enrage Riley Mason to such a point that he might kill us instantly and so spare us the agony of whatever tortures they might cook up for us.

“Come along, Riley,” Big Josh Carey bawled out impatiently. “Bash in his head and finish his tongue wagging.”

Riley turned savagely on the speaker. “Shut your face, will you?” he snarled.

“There you are,” said Cactus. “Bluff again. Always bluff. There’s nothing to this fellow’s reputation for standing up to gunmen. He’s killed his men, but he’s always done it when they were helpless.”

“I never stood up to any man, eh?” growled Riley Mason.

“Come, come, Riley,” said Cactus. “Why keep up the bluff among men who know you?”

“I’ll tell you this,” said Riley Mason, “. . . and you know damn’ well it’s true. I was the only man that ever dared stand up to Jim Welch, when he was shooting them up pretty near every week in old Fargo.”

“Jim Welch?” asked Cactus, smiling. “Why, Jim’s the fellow you shot down in the Perkins Saloon in Fargo, wasn’t he?”

“He was. It wasn’t night, neither,” said Riley, boasting. “It was broad daylight, and there was twenty men that seen the draw and the shooting.”

“I know all about that,” said Cactus sadly. “It’s too bad for you, Riley, that you have to pick out cases I know so well.”

“It wasn’t daylight, eh?” said Riley Mason. “And there wasn’t eighteen or twenty men in there that saw the shooting?”

“Yeah, and I’ve talked to some of those men,” said Cactus.

“You have? And what did they say?”

“You oughtn’t to ask me to tell what I know of the shooting of Jim Welch in the Perkins Saloon,” said Cactus. “It’ll be bad for the hold that you have on these fellows.”

“Will it?” said Riley Mason, his lip curling.

I got the strong idea, right then, that Riley Mason hadn’t lied about the killing of Jim Welch, and that he knew that he was in the right. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have stood his ground and let Cactus go on talking and plaguing him.

“Yes, it will,” said Cactus. “They’ll find you out one of these days, and one of ’em will turn you over his knee and spank you.”

“One of ’em will, eh?” said Riley Mason.

He was a pale, mean green, now. He turned his head slowly and looked from one face to another among those fellows who were sitting back on the outside rim of the firelight.

I noticed, pretty carefully, that they were looking straight back at the leader. Not as though they were defying him, mind you, but as though they were mighty interested in anything that he might have to say to ’em. And as though they wanted to hear some more about the past history of this fellow, and about what had happened in that fight between him and Jim Welch.

Something in the looks of those three men at the edge of the firelight must have turned Riley Mason’s head for a minute. After all, he was a gunman and a killer, and like all such men he was proud of his reputation. What he should have done, of course, was kill Cactus Terry and me at once. And once we were out of the way, it would have been no trick at all to laugh off a dead man’s charges.

But Riley Mason saw the growing doubt in the eyes of his men, and that must have got under his skin and turned his head for a minute. He had killed Jim Welch in fair fight—and his pride made him want, more than anything else in the world, to prove Cactus Terry a liar. He licked his dry lips and grinned crookedly.

“I’ll tell you all what happened,” he said. “And I’ll make Cactus swallow his lying tongue before he dies!” He took a deep breath, and the grin left his face. “I had a friend by the name of Chile Smith,” he said. “Chile, who was only a kid, barged into Fargo one day and got into an argument with the redhead, Jim Welch. Welch throws a chair at him, knocks him down, and then kicks him in the head while he’s lying there. And the kid dies of that kick. It cracked his skull for him. When I heard about it, I buckled on my guns, got on a hoss, and rode right into town.”

“Regular hero, eh, going out to revenge a friend’s death?” Cactus commented. “Listen, boys, to the way he tells it. He could always tell things pretty well.”

“And when I’m through telling this,” continued Riley Mason, “I’m gonna cut the ears off your head so you won’t hear much more before you die, and, after that, I’m gonna cut the tongue out of your lying black mouth and make you eat it.”

He meant what he said.

“Well, then,” said Cactus. “Why not go ahead with your story and get it over with?”

“This is what happened,” said Riley Mason, controlling his anger with a mighty effort. “When I got into town, I inquired around, then sent out word that I was after Jim Welch. When the sheriff heard that, he rode out of town, because he said that a fight between us two would be a good thing, no matter who was killed.”

“Anyway, I finally got wind that Welch was in the Perkins Saloon, and that he’d wait for me there. I looked my guns over, walked down the street, and went in. And just as I stepped through the swinging doors, I see Jim Welch taking a drink that he don’t finish. He spots me, throws the glass of whiskey at my head, and pulls his six-gun with the same move.

“That’s about all,” went on Riley Mason. “The whiskey didn’t get in my eyes and blind me, as Welch had hoped it would, and I beat him fair and square to the draw. I put a bullet through his right shoulder.

“That spoiled his gun hand, but he was game, all right. He picked his gun out of his

useless right hand with his left, and took another shot at me. But the bullet only plowed up the floor, while I put my second slug straight through his stomach.”

“Well,” said Cactus, “I’ve heard liars before, but I never heard a better lie than this one, because most of it is the truth. Everything happened the way he said, except that there was *more* happened!”

“What?” said Riley.

“You really want me to tell?”

“Why, damn you, you’ve got nothing to tell,” snarled Riley.

“You knew a fellow called Steve Pepper, down there in Fargo?” asked Cactus, calm and judicial in his way of speaking. And then, before Riley could answer him, he went on in a quick rush of words. “Yeah, you bet you did,” he snapped. “And it’s him that told me the truth that you left out!”

## “GUN TALK”

It’s hard to give an idea of the suspense that was eating at my heart while I listened to the way Cactus was badgering that man-eater, Riley Mason. The killer’s three gunhands, you could see, were by now just as much interested in what my partner had to say as were Riley and myself.

“You met with Steve Pepper the day before you killed Jim Welch, and you talked to him like this,” said Cactus. “‘Steve,’ you said, ‘I’m going to meet Jim Welch, and it’s better for me to find him drunk than sober. You’ve got all night and tomorrow morning to do the job.’”

“‘How am I going to get that Welch drunk?’ said Steve, ‘when I have no money. I couldn’t get him drunk except on free liquor, and nothing’s free in Fargo but the air.’”

“‘That’s all right,’ you said to Steve. ‘Here’s a hundred bucks. Take it and get Jim plastered. But mind your own hooch and how you handle it. Understand?’”

“So Steve, he said that he understood, all right, and he went and did a good job. The party started one afternoon and went on to the next, and during that time it cost Steve the hundred bucks. They were so plastered that it took two weeks before Steve Pepper’s hands stopped shaking. Two weeks before he could drink coffee without spilling it onto his vest. That’s how much hooch was in the pair of them . . . and that’s the condition that big Jim Welch was in when you stepped through the swinging door into the Perkins Saloon. You knew damn’ well that Welch was paralyzed, or you’d never have dared to come in sight of him. Even then you were scared white, just to stand up and face a helpless hulk like him.”

Riley Mason, too angry for words by now, had begun a sort of choked-up growling, deep in his throat. His right hand was on his gun.

“Don’t talk to me like that,” said Cactus, seeming sort of disgusted. “You can cut my throat now, and I suppose that you’ll do just that. But I’ve told the truth about you, and I know damn’ well that you never stood up to any man in your life, except some green kid of a tenderfoot that didn’t know one end of a gun from another. You’ve shot gents from behind, and when they were drunk, and all that. But the reputation that you’ve built up as a gunman is all wrong. You’re no gunman at all. You’re just a plain, dirty, cheap murderer!”

That last was what did it. The words hit me with a slam and a bang—and I saw Riley Mason beginning to lean a little toward Cactus—just leaning gradually and slowly, without moving his feet. I knew then that when he leaped, he would jump like a wildcat. Sick? Yes, I was sick all right. I was so dog-gone sick that I could hardly see. After Cactus was clawed to death, my turn would come. All I could think to pray for was a quicker finish than would come to poor Cactus. I prayed for that, and hoped that no matter what happened, I would be able to keep my jaws locked and not howl or beg like a dog.

But just as the knees of Riley Mason sagged a little—just as he was about to spring for Cactus—I heard Stew Bailey say: “Aw, leave him be, Riley.”

Suddenly I understood everything, and it staggered me—the brilliance of it, and the cool thinking of it. You see the idea. Cactus had set out to talk down Riley Mason so much that his three pet man-killers would all despise their chief. They would despise him so much that they'd find the nerve to make a stand against him. And when they made the stand—why, then, of course, friend Cactus and I would have some sort of a chance.

Chance? I saw then that we'd have better than that. For as Stew Bailey spoke, I noticed Cactus's right hand. It was free and stealing down into a pocket of his coat. And his hands had been bound with rope at least as tight as the ones that now bit into my arms and worked toward the bone with a bulldog grip.

Riley Mason, in the meantime, had been stopped in the very act of leaping at Cactus. And now he whirled, in a blind, devilish temper.

“Did you tell me to leave him be?” howled Riley.

“I told you that, and I meant it,” said Stew Bailey.

“You fool! You crack-brained fool!” cried Riley Mason. “Do you believe the lies he's been telling?”

“You were just now gonna prove him right by murderin' another helpless gent,” said Stew Bailey. “That's why I say . . . leave him be.”

“I got a good mind to leave him be and get at *you*,” said Riley Mason. “Except that I see what he's after now. He wants to get me scrapping with the three of you. Then he'll be happy. He wants to see the four of us murdering one another.”

Slugger Watts, his hideous face more ugly than ever, said: “Look at that! Riley sees that *your* hands ain't tied, Stew, and he's gonna make sure that he don't mix with you . . . not where both of you have got an even chance.”

“You, too?” shouted Riley Mason.

He stammered, and his teeth beat together. I never saw a man in such a wild fury, and yet I've seen plenty in the craziest rages. I think that the others may actually have thought that it was fear that was working in Riley Mason.

Josh Carey said suddenly: “Aw, shut up, Riley. You've four-flushed long enough. There ain't anything to you but bluff.”

“My God, all three,” gasped Riley Mason.

Yes, he might have seemed afraid, but he was *not* afraid. I could tell, looking at him, that the story Cactus had told about Steve Pepper, if ever there was such a man, must have been one long lie. At any rate, I know that Riley had no fear as he stood there before his men. No, I think that he was almost glad—glad that, being in such a rage, he had three new and fresh victims to tackle.

“You started this, and I'll take you first,” he snarled at Stew Bailey.

Then I saw that Cactus, armed with a knife, was slashing at the ropes that bound his legs. A minute later he slid his hand across and cut the cords that bound my hands together. I'll never forget how I felt then—as hope rushed in on me, like a bright river, a river of glory worth drowning in. I could have laughed or cried, like a baby.

Stew Bailey was talking now. “I started it first, and I'll finish it first, too. I always had a hunch that we were fools to work for you. Cactus is right. He's bound to be right. He's got brains, and he sees what we all ought to have seen long ago.”

“He’s got brains, has he? Oh, damn him! He’s got brains, has he?” Riley Mason yelled. “I’ll have those brains out where they can be weighed and looked at, pretty soon. I’ll have them opened up so that the buzzards can enjoy ’em. But he comes after you, Bailey. Fill your hand!”

Even then the three of them didn’t understand that Riley Mason was all they’d ever dreamed him to be—and a lot more. He might have murdered in the dark, but he was able to fight in the open, too. And he was about to show that trio of devils the truth about himself.

Free of the ropes that had bound me, I gathered myself to jump for cover when the explosion came. Right then I was appreciating Cactus as no man was ever appreciated before.

This fellow, Bailey, stood with his hands on his hips, sneering at his boss. “Don’t go and invite me to fill my hand first,” he snarled. “Fill your own, you damned fake. I’ll match you at the draw.”

“You will, will you?” screamed Riley Mason, the pitch of his voice jumping up the scale a notch or two with every word. “Take it, then, and be damned!”

It wasn’t a draw he made. He just wished, and the gun was in his hand.

Fat Stew Bailey was quick enough, quick as a tiger, in fact. But he seemed to be slow as molasses compared with the gun speed of Riley Mason. The poor fellow didn’t even have his shooting iron clear of leather when Riley Mason finished his draw and fired.

I was jumping for cover at the same moment, but I couldn’t take my eyes from what was happening.

Bailey was hit, and hit hard. His body jerked halfway around. He threw out his hands and started falling sidewise, just as the second bullet hit him.

I was behind a tree, then, and turning to run. Back in the clearing I heard Mason screaming like a man gone mad: “Who’s next? Who’s next, damn your eyes!”

Stew Bailey, on hands and knees, was dragging himself away from the devil that raged there in the firelight. And the other pair, Josh and Slugger, had seen enough to make them realize that they’d been sadly deceived. They were diving blindly for the deepest shadows.

I heard more gun shots behind me, rapidly fired. Then I started making tracks so fast that the wind of my own running blurred everything else for me—even the rumble of the thunder, that began just then to roar and beat more heavily than ever. I ran faster than I ever ran in my life, before or since. But there beside me was Cactus, taking time to look back and running easily.

“No use getting winded,” he said at my ear. And he touched my arm, and made me slow down.

I saw, in the flare of lightning, the smile on his face. And it seemed to me, just then, and it has always seemed to me since, that it was the proper sort of light to show one the smile on the face of Cactus Terry.

## XI

### “CACTUS GOES TO PIECES”

“We’ve had the luck, and we’ve done our job,” said Cactus to me. “If Riley Mason comes on tonight, he’ll be coming alone. And maybe he won’t come at all. Maybe one of those boys will tag Riley with a lucky shot, while he hunts for them through the trees.”

I could hardly think about anything else, I was that taken up with wonder concerning this fellow who stepped along so cheerfully beside me.

But I said: “They won’t hurt Riley Mason. They’re numb, they’re so scared. I’ll never forget the way he drove the three of ’em before him. He’s a great fighting man, Cactus.”

“You bet he is,” said Cactus. “He’s one of the best in the world. He can be a sneaking devil, too. But he’s also a grand, fighting man.”

I swallowed hard. “That stuff about Steve Pepper,” I said. “That was all made up, wasn’t it?”

“Of course,” said Cactus. “There never was a fellow by that name, so far as I know. I wouldn’t have named a real man, unless I was sure that Riley would be dead before he got a chance at him.” Suddenly he was laughing. “Pride is the worst of all faults, Perry,” he told me. “Pride is the thing that knocks us over. Look at Riley there, with three good men behind him, and you and me in his hands safely. Then, when his pride was touched up, he turned blind as a bat and went all to pieces. He’s lost us . . . he’s lost his mob. And for the first time, we’ve got a fighting chance.”

“Cactus,” I said, and I talked from my heart, “a few minutes back I knew that I was a dead man. I knew it so well, that I don’t feel that I *can* be here, walking back to the ranch house. And I owe it to you that I’m alive. You’re the smartest devil in the world. I never met anybody like you.”

“If you had, you might have lost your wallet. Don’t make me proud, Woodstock. You keep on talking like that, and I’ll be as blind as our friend, Riley Mason.”

We came at last to the house. As we paused before it, Cactus said to me: “We haven’t much time. Riley will probably run the three of ’em to death, or lose all track of ’em in the woods. And then he’ll come like a greyhound after us. And you’ve seen what he can do when he cuts loose.

“Now our job,” said Cactus, “is to move fast and make decisions. We’ve got to split up the party. The Mexicans, Stuffy and Chick, and Pierre Vernon are spoiled meat, I guess. We’ll cut them out and leave them alone. The rest of us . . . that is, Mike and you and I and the Vincents . . . are going to march along together. No matter what the weather is, we’ve got to go. And as for the bad eggs, we’ll hold them off, if we have to, with a little shooting. We’ve come to the crisis, old son.”

We had come to the crisis, all right. For he’d hardly finished saying this when we got through the door of the old deserted shack of a house, and, inside, we found what I’ve already prepared you for—nothing but the flicker of the shadows that the dying fire threw

along the walls. It was a shock for me, but what I went through seemed nothing compared with what happened to Cactus. There was the man of steel nerves, iron mind, and adamant will now with a hand against the wall and shaking all over.

He saw something glimmer on the floor, ran suddenly, and picked it up—a revolver, not far from the fire. He looked down at it, then up at me.

I knew what it meant. People don't rush out of a place and leave their guns behind them unless there's a good deal of excitement in the air. I went over and lifted a rifle that lay in the dust. A bullet had been fired from it. I told him so.

He seemed totally dazed, and he began to walk up and down with an irregular step, simply saying: "I'm too late. I'm too late. And she's gone. My God, Perry, I'm too late!"

A terrible panic began to rise in me. It wasn't, I'm afraid, so much concerning what might have happened to the others, as it was the sight of what was happening to Cactus. He came up to me suddenly and grabbed my arm, looking at me with a wild, unknowing eye, like a crazy man.

"Perry," he said, "what if something should happen to her? What if something should happen to her?"

He stood there with his mouth open, looking as though I could tell him about the end of the world.

I got colder and colder. I said: "Pull yourself together, old son. Now's the time when we have to do something."

"Yes, but what?" he asked me.

I grew more panicky still. Think of a man like Cactus, with the brain he had in his head—think of him asking directions of me.

"Why, man, we ought to try to find out where they went . . . they've certainly left a trail in the mud."

He gripped my arm hard. "That's it," he said. "God give me light enough to follow her. God give me luck enough to find her." And he made a rush out of that house.

I felt that I was tagging along with a man partially mad. And through my fear and disturbance, I did a little thinking. It was plain as your face that Cactus had lost his head and his heart over the girl. And what would that lead to? It was a dizzy thing to think about. A girl like Lydia Vincent, and a stage robber—well, just the saying of the problem was enough to finish it. But just the saying of it would not finish it for a fellow like Cactus. If he could talk himself out of ropes and the hands of Riley Mason and Mason's gang—what would he do when it came to talking himself into the good graces of Lydia Vincent? Well, the future, I decided, could take care of itself. We had a job ahead of us that was like looking for bats in the dark.

One thing, there was plenty of light for seeing now. The storm was breaking up, and its breaking was even wilder and grander than its coming, for the whole western half of the sky tumbled into separate clouds, and the solid wall of leaden gray and black retreated toward the east rapidly, letting the moon show through again. So by moonlight we started out to find the trail left by the Vincents and the others.

Right at the start Cactus went down on his knees, cursing because one pair of high-heeled Mexican boots made tracks almost as small as those of the girl. However, he

disentangled the two quickly enough, and then began one of the hardest trips I ever made. It was a job, let me tell you, just keeping up with that fellow while he raced along like a foxhound on a hot scent. I paid no attention to the trail, because I was too busy following my companion.

He ran stooped over a good deal, staring at the ground. And once he came to a full stop on a gravelly patch where the sign practically disappeared. I was glad of the pause, because my lungs were burning up. And I heard him say: "They're not together. Most of the gang have gone on ahead. The girl's behind with one man . . . that must be her father. They're trailing the rest of 'em. You see what that means?"

"What?" I panted.

"Why," he said, "it simply means that the crooks have the loot, and the Vincents are following along after 'em. Might as well set a pair of puppies to following the trail of a pack of wolves."

Then he was off again, at the same hot pace, with me staggering along behind. Finally, after what seemed hours, I heard a wild yell of joy from Cactus and saw him pointing. And well off ahead of us I made out the figures of two people who were going quite slowly up the slope of a rain-drenched hill. The Vincents?

We put on steam, both of us. But that fellow, Cactus, he left me behind the way a greyhound might leave a cocker spaniel. As I came up to them, panting, I saw that it was, indeed, the Vincents, father and daughter, that we had run down.

## XII

### “TWO AGAINST MANY”

There was plenty of light from the moon to show us that George Vincent himself was close to a collapse. I'll never forget the look on his face, the grim and set jaw of him, and the way his head was canted to the side with sheer exhaustion. He had to keep his fists clenched in order to force himself on. But you could see that he would rather have died than give in—and dying was what it looked like he might do.

We learned from Lydia Vincent what had happened in the old ranch house. She told us the whole thing in about ten words. I never saw anybody as cool and calm as that girl was on that crazy night. There are a lot of girls who need to be housed and warmed, delicately fed and watched over, and loved and tended every moment. Those girls may be all right. But give me a girl like Lydia Vincent. She could be a helpmate for a prince or a pauper. As the wife of a pauper she would share his poverty, put her shoulder to the wheel, and make her weight felt in working uphill till they got to better times.

There was this girl out in the middle of hell with her father, and not looking a bit out of place—because her place was the exact moment of his greatest need. Where he was in trouble, that was where she would be. I also thought that if a girl like this hooked up even with a man like Cactus Terry, it would be all right. He had plenty of strength, and strength was what she knew how to handle. If he was a wild hawk, why, she might tame him into a hunting falcon that would bring all sorts of wonderful things out of the sky and right down to her hand.

Vincent began to break out into a tirade to Cactus Terry. But the girl got me to one side and said in my ear: “You’ve been a kind friend to us, Perry. Be a still kinder one, and make my father stop this rush through the mud and the night. He’s exhausted, and exhaustion and exposure can kill a man of his type . . . as quickly as water can kill a hen. He’s got to be stopped.”

I could see that she was right. And I noticed that even as she made this appeal on behalf of the father who meant so much to her, there was no tremor in her voice, and her eyes met mine without any frantic entreaty.

I went up to Vincent and said: “Look here. We’ve got to try to get on the trail of those rats, but there’s only one good way to do that. We’ve got to have a center for our operations, and then we’ve got to throw out feelers.”

“What do you mean by that, Woodstock?” he said to me.

“Why . . .,” I said, talking with a little irritation, as though what I had said ought to be perfectly clear to any sensible man, “why, Vincent, what’s the use of all of us swarming into the mountains in one party? That’s a crazy idea. The best way is to locate them. Then the lot of us can go ahead and close in on ’em and smash ’em up.”

Cactus looked at me and said nothing.

Vincent began to shake his head and argue. He said: “I’ve got to keep on. There’s

nothing to compel you fellows to keep on with me. The affair is mine. It's caused you trouble enough already. I know that. But I must go on. I'm not tired."

"Of course, you're not," Cactus said suddenly. "But Woodstock is right. We've got to have a central point. Right here . . . right yonder in that patch of poplars. That's the place. You stay there, and, if the thugs try to double back from one of those ravines, you can block 'em and turn 'em back toward us."

I thought of poor George Vincent trying to block and turn back that herd of well-armed scoundrels, and wondered how I kept from laughing.

Cactus went on: "You'll hold the center, that way. You'll be the point from which old Perry Woodstock here and I can go out and rummage through some of those ravines. Then, when we find them, we'll come on and get you, and the whole lot of us will go ahead together, just as Woodstock says. He's got a head on his shoulders."

"I don't like it," said Vincent. "I don't like it a bit. There would never be time to come back and get us. We're lucky enough if we can overtake 'em, by going straight on with the march." He swayed as he talked. He was ready to drop with fatigue.

"We have plenty of time," said Cactus. "They're sure to camp. They'll never dream that we'll follow 'em . . . a handful like us against their army. They'll want to camp when they get off to a good place, because they're all keen to divide the spoils."

That was a good argument, and it was a settler to Vincent. His weariness must have been fighting on our side all the time. When Lydia horned in and said the plan was the only thing to try, George Vincent gave in at last.

We got him to the poplar grove and started a fire for him that would keep him warm and gradually dry him off. Then we went off together, Cactus and I, and the last thing I heard from them was the crackling of the fire and the cheerful voice of Lydia Vincent talking to her father.

Cactus strode along with his head thrust forward. I said: "Damn it, if there's plenty of time, why d'you want to run the legs off of me?"

He slowed up a little, but only to say: "I made a fool of myself. Why did I go storming along at her like that? I came rushing up to her . . . I played the fool. She was as cool as could be. I made a howling fool of myself. Damn it!"

I thought it was as well to pretend not to hear him, for I could see that he was writhing with shame.

"Now," I said, "what do we do? Here's the trail, pointing as plain as day straight toward that cañon yonder. But what's the good of going up there, just the two of us? Even if we could overtake the gang, what's the good of that, anyway? They could eat us as soon as they saw us."

"Maybe they won't see us," he said. "Anyway, we'd better go on and get in touch with 'em. You don't have to, though, Woodstock."

I said that I would go along, just the same. So we trekked on together, and came into the cañon's mouth. It was one of those dry cuts that saw into the side of a mountain, without a drop of water in the bottom in ordinary weather and a whole river running after a heavy rain. We had had the rain, and now there was a booming stream that came galloping through the gorge and made the ground tremble under our feet. We had gone a good distance up the gorge, when we came to a branch gully that ran off to the left and

turned a corner and went out of sight. Down that branch went the trail we were following.

Cactus Terry paused and pulled up his belt. I knew he felt that we were about to run straight into a lot of trouble.

He said to me: "You've got a gun there that you know how to use, Woodstock, haven't you?"

I said that I was a fair hand with a rifle, but that a long-range gun might not be of much account in a hand-to-hand scrap. He nodded. He was thinking his own thoughts and not about me.

"If the pinch comes," he said, "you try to account for one of 'em. That's all. I may have luck with a couple more. And when you salt away two or three out of a dozen at the first fire, the rest may break up and run for it. Come on."

I was wondering how often he had dropped "two or three out of a dozen, at the first fire," when, walking up, we rounded the corner of the branching ravine and saw the fine, strong flare of a fire before us, with the dark shapes of men all around it.

## XIII

### “DEATH ON THE WAY”

I'll never see a campfire in my life without thinking about that scene up there among the rocks of that little cañon. It seemed to me that the light fell right on me and showed me to every eye around the fire. But that fellow, Cactus Terry, walked straight on. I got to my hands and knees long before he suddenly took the same posture. Even then he worked carefully forward, straight on toward the fire.

Finally he waited for me to come up to him. Already the voices of those around the fire were pretty loud and clear in our ears. Cactus said, in a whisper: “They've picked up a new man. I wonder which one?”

I gasped as a sudden thought sent new fear through me.

“There are the two bums,” said Cactus, “and the three Mexicans. And there's Mike Jeffreys and Pierre Vernon. That makes seven. But there are eight fellows around that fire.”

“And there's only two of us here,” I reminded him.

He shrugged his shoulders as though what I had said could not be considered important in the least. He began to edge again, until we got to a perfect spying station, between two boulders, with a screen of brush before us that would hide our faces, but let us look through the irregular veil of branches and see what was happening around the fire.

Then we could see who the eighth man was. And it didn't cheer me up a bit to find myself staring at the handsome, weak, vicious face of Riley Mason. He was standing making a cigarette, rolling it in one hand. I could see at once that he was in the middle of an argument—an argument that looked as though it might have to be finished with gun play. He was talking to Pierre Vernon, and the gambler, not knowing his danger, was sneering openly at him.

“If you could talk money out of our pockets, you could have a split of the cash,” said Vernon, and I saw that the pigskin case was resting at *his* feet.

The three Mexicans and the two tramps seemed perfectly happy to let Vernon play kingpin. They would let the talking be done by the slickster, Pierre Vernon, while they themselves just waited for the dividing of the coin. I wondered how even a tiger like the great Riley Mason would be able to cut in on such a deal as this. There was only one uncertain card in the pack, and that was Mike Jeffreys. That big fellow sat on a stone with his chin resting on a fist, and his face puckered with thought and doubt. I couldn't help feeling that Jeffreys wanted to be on the right side more than he wanted a cut in that money.

Riley began to answer the last remark of the gambler. “You boys think, then, that I don't deserve a cut in the money, eh?” he asked quietly.

“You don't,” said Vernon tersely. “And neither does Mike Jeffreys. The only good thing he did was not helping the Vincents when the pinch came.”

Jeffreys looked up with a scowl. His forehead was like the forehead of an angry bull.

“Well,” said Riley Mason, “I don’t guess that me and Jeffreys yonder could force you boys to divvy up, could we?”

“You could try,” said Vernon, sneering.

Riley Mason only nodded in answer to this invitation. At last he said: “I can’t force you. But I can persuade you, because you fellows are a good enough bunch. You’ll see reason.”

“Go on and make us see what your cut should be,” sneered Vernon.

“I’ll make you see, all right. What give you your big chance . . . the chance that let you get the coin from the Vincents without any real trouble, eh? It was because the two fighting men of the gang . . . the only two that didn’t want to rob the Vincents, according to the lot of you . . . had gone out to look for me. They found me, too, and a sweet hell of a time I had with ’em. But the reason that you’re here with the coin is because I was working on that pair.”

“That sounds kind of reasonable,” admitted Chick, the tramp, breaking in.

“Does it?” snarled Pierre Vernon. “You going to make a fool of yourself, maybe?”

“Oh, maybe I am, and maybe not,” said Chick. “He done a good job for us. I wish that he’d cut their hearts out . . . that would have been a better job still.”

“Look!” exclaimed Vernon. “You tell what you’ve spent to get us here, will you? We took chances, and we grabbed the loot, and here we have it. What did you spend that you should get in on the split?”

“I’ll ask you right back,” said Riley Mason, “what was the chief job you had in getting the coin for yourself?”

“Why, our job was to get Cactus Terry out of the way,” said Vernon. “What of it?”

“Well, you got him out of the way at last. And how? Because I spent all four of my men on the job. There ain’t a one of ’em that ain’t got a bullet sunk through him, somewheres.”

“You mean to say that Cactus shot ’em all?” demanded Vernon.

“He didn’t shoot ’em all,” said Mason, his face contorting with fury at the memory. “He talked. That’s what he did. His tongue does more for him than his guns. Anyway, there’s one of the three likely to die, and two more pretty badly winged.”

That, then, had been the final outcome of the dive that Mason took after the others into the dark of the brush. The devil had wounded them all before his senses came back to him. He seemed to me as dangerous a man as ever I had seen in the world as he stood there by the fire and admitted that his entire gang was down.

“You lost some men, and it just happened to be useful to us,” said Vernon. “You weren’t thinking about us, my friend, while you were spending your men so free and easy. You were thinking about the hard cash.”

Riley Mason did a strange thing then. He lifted his right hand to the sky and shook his fist at the moon.

“I swear to God,” he said, “that I’d rather have a slice of the heart of Cactus Terry, and eat it raw, than have all the money in the valise yonder!”

He meant it. He was shaking with the earnestness of his passion. And I looked aside at

the face of my friend, and saw that Cactus was smiling gently, almost tenderly.

“The job’s done. It’s too late to get your hand in,” Vernon said tersely.

“The job’s not done,” answered the great Riley Mason.

“What d’you mean?”

“Why, you fool,” said Riley Mason, “ain’t Cactus still loose, along with the other gent? I don’t give a damn about the other one, but so long as that fellow, Cactus, is loose, he’s on your trail. And so long as he’s loose on your trail, you’ve just got your hands on the cash, but it’s not yours. He’ll run the lot of you down, and he’ll bring you to time.”

Stuffy Bill stood up and struck his hands together. “By God,” he said. “There’s a lot in what Mason says.”

“You lie,” said Pierre Vernon. “And Mason lies, too.”

I gathered my muscles tight, waiting for the noise of the shots that were bound to follow.

## XIV

### “MEN DIE”

Of course, there had to be a gun play. There was nothing else for it, when things had got to that point. I don't know why it is that in the West a man will let you call him by any name in the world so long as you call the names in the right way. But the moment that you call him even the mildest bit out of the way and do it in the *wrong* manner, then there has to be a fight. And a fight, among people like these, could only be with knives or guns.

It's easy enough to sit still in a comfortable room and talk about a gun fight, but it's a mighty different thing to stand close by and see the guns actually come into action. I remember that I crouched there, shuddering, and kept saying to myself: *One of 'em is going to die . . . maybe both of 'em are going to die.*

Now all of this thinking and this talking to myself occupied only a second or so. During that time, Pierre Vernon and the great Riley Mason stood and glared at one another. The gambler was the fellow who amazed me. I had taken him to be simply an ordinary crook who stole from working men with the cleverness of his fingers and the aptness of his wits. But now I had to guess at something else. He knew who Riley Mason was, and, therefore, he knew what Mason could do with a gun. And yet he was not afraid to face him. It was a pretty awful thing to see the pair confront one another, each of them so sure and calm that he was in no haste to put the battle into actual progress. Each delayed and was foretasting the death of the opponent.

In the meantime, the bystanders were quietly occupied in their own ways. It seemed as though every one of them expected that trouble might rain on his own head in very short order, and, therefore, they all set about shifting themselves into positions of defense. The tall Mexican cadaver pulled out a gun almost as long as his arm. One of his friends got out a knife just as generously built as the gun, and the other let the light glint on a little stiletto that he held like a weltering white flame in the palm of his hand, ready to throw. The two tramps, Stuffy and Chick, backed off together, each with a revolver in his hand. Only Jeffreys did not stir. He remained as before, with his chin resting on his fist, and his eyes looking far away beyond all of these petty troubles at something else.

Just then, the fire laid hold on the tips of a big pine branch, or some such thing, that had not been fed into the flames. With a great crackling, it blazed up in a huge, yellow sheet of illumination.

“Now!” yelled Riley Mason, his voice high and shrill. “Now, you damned . . . !”

I watched them with eyes frozen to hard glass and saw everything. A great man was Riley Mason and wonderfully quick on the draw. But on my word of honor, he was not a shade faster than that unknown gambler, Pierre Vernon. They got out their guns at the same moment. But then Riley's practice stood him in good stead. He got the bullet away from the muzzle of his gun a thousandth part of a second faster than the gambler fired his, and the body of Pierre Vernon felt the shock of the heavy slug pounding home against his flesh and jerking him off balance, just as he pulled his own trigger. He missed, but he did

not miss by far. His bullet took the hat off the head of Riley as slick as you please.

The weight of the .45-caliber slug had knocked Pierre off balance. He managed to fire, as I said, but then he toppled backward, and the agony of his wound made him yell from the pain of it.

Riley Mason went over and kicked the gun out of the hand of Pierre Vernon. He leaned over and smiled like a devil into his eyes.

“You ain’t seen or heard the last of me, neither, Mister Vernon,” he growled. “I’ve just started to open up hell for you.”

Vernon didn’t howl any longer. Neither did he speak. He simply made a face like a cat about to spit, and he grabbed his wound, that was in his thigh, with both hands, to stop the flow of the blood.

“You made all the trouble, you sneak thief,” snarled Riley Mason. “You wanted to get your hands on the coin and keep it all for yourself.” He laughed, still leaning over Pierre Vernon. “I’m gonna make an example out of you,” said the gunman. “And then. . . .”

Now I had no liking for Pierre Vernon. But for the first time since I started to look on at this scene, I really felt a desire to cut in and take a hand. However, there were other things beginning to happen just then. I saw the two tramps had come a little closer with their guns. And the three Mexicans made an oblique movement that put them shoulder to shoulder with the tramps. I could understand that. It was plain that Riley Mason was of a higher order, and being the lion among them, the rats and the jackals would unite against him. I could understand the five weaker crooks, well enough. But I’m confounded if I could understand the actions of Mike Jeffreys, for he had not changed his attitude, even during the actual moment when the guns exploded. Instead, he remained there like a statue of thought.

Then I saw, suddenly, that the five who had gotten shoulder to shoulder meant to act. I half rose, but Cactus was on his feet before me.

“Behind you, Riley!” he shouted, in a voice that would have cracked the very gate of hell.

Riley Mason, acting on the instant, wheeled and fell on his face, as the guns of the crooks spat fire and lead. And he was shooting as he dropped. That was a thing to see and remember. His first bullet smacked right into the middle of the tall Mexican and folded him upon the ground. His second knocked the hat from another Mexican, and his third took Stuffy the tramp clean between the eyes. It was fast and beautiful work. But the three remaining were not stopped. They came in, and they came fast. And what chance had one man, no matter how good he might be, against three?

I didn’t think of what I was about to do. I only know that instinct made me do it. I didn’t like Riley Mason, but I liked the three against him still less. At any rate, with one step I was beyond the rocks and had caught up the thick end of the blazing pine bough. I swung that flaming branch straight across the faces of the three, as they came on in a line with nothing but the great Riley Mason in their minds.

The effect was terrific. All three of them had their fur singed, I suppose. And they acted like madmen, falling down and springing up again, and then turning tail and running off into the darkness, still yelling and groaning and jumping as they ran, until the darkness swallowed them up. As they disappeared, I was taken with a crazy fit of laughter. And the

great Riley Mason, I discovered, was standing beside me, with an arm on my shoulder, laughing, too—as though he would die of mirth.

What I saw from the corner of my eye removed my laughter with one gesture. It was big Mike Jeffreys, who had come to life at last. And now he sat on the same rock that had been his chair before, and the pigskin valise was between his feet, and in his hand he held a long-barreled .45 Colt revolver. And as we eased up in our noise-making, Jeffreys spoke quietly.

“Boys,” he said, “it was a good fight, but all that’s over now. The coin is going back to Vincent, where it belongs.”

I understood, then, what it was that had been working so hard in the mind of Jeffreys all this time. He had been fighting against temptation from the start. He had wanted his split of the loot as much as anybody else. But when the pinch came, the honest soul of him stood up and rebelled against crookedness. I think it’s that way in the West. Honesty is closer to the heart than crookedness. Anyway, here we were brought to a full standstill.

Then Riley Mason looked around and saw the man he hated most in the world, Cactus Terry.

## XV

### “THE GOLD COMES BACK”

Everything else went out of the bandit’s brain, plainly enough, when he saw Cactus. Here before him was his major enemy, and I don’t know whether I saw fear or joy in the face of Riley Mason, or both combined.

There was no question about Cactus, though. He was simply the happiest man in the world. He had his man after a long, long trail. Now he was ready to eat him.

“It’s been a long time, Riley,” he said. “But now I have you where I want you. Get out your gun . . . fill your hand, you dirty scoundrel!”

I waited to hear Riley Mason protest that he would not take the draw from any man. I was wrong. He had no intention of refusing any advantage that he could get from the savage generosity of Cactus Terry. Half crouching, he stared at Cactus, and I hardly blamed him for having no more honesty and integrity than a wildcat in that moment.

For when I looked across at Cactus Terry, I could see that the man would not be beaten, even by tricks.

He said again: “Fill your hand whenever you’re ready, Riley.”

Riley Mason nodded. There was no doubt about what was in his face now. It was sheer despair and savage rage and terror combined. He knew that his time had come. He was willing to face it and fight until he dropped.

I heard Pierre Vernon snarling with deep content at the side, where he swayed his body back and forth and gripped with both hands upon his bleeding wound.

Then, for the second time, Mike Jeffreys stepped in.

“The minute you pull a gun, you’re a dead man, Mason,” he said sternly.

I was amazed. It hadn’t seemed to me possible that any human being could interfere between two such men as faced each other there in the firelight. But here was big Jeffreys standing up now, his head lowered and thrust forward, his face an ugly thing to see. He was coming into his own. All his doubts and indecision were left behind him. He seemed more important, more dominant, than the great Cactus Terry himself.

Riley Mason did not answer, did not move his glance from the face of Cactus. But Cactus himself turned squarely to the side, giving Riley a terrible opening for a snap shot, and faced Jeffreys.

“Mike,” he said, “are you crazy? Are you asking for trouble from the pair of us?”

“I don’t ask for trouble from nobody,” said Jeffreys. “But I’ll tell you this . . . there’s been shooting enough. The coin’s been swiped, and now it’s come back again. The job’s done when this satchel gets back to George Vincent, and I get my horses together. I’ve lost a lot. I ain’t gonna have the reputation of a snake in the grass. When folks find out that I’ve lost a lead hoss and my stage, it’ll be bad enough. But, anyway, there ain’t anybody more gonna lose a penny tonight, or an ounce of blood, except them as rate the losing of it.”

There was a good deal in this speech. There was authority behind it and confidence—and the strength that comes with being right.

Suddenly I saw Riley Mason turn his back on the scene and walk off, saying over his shoulder: “I’ll find you some day when you ain’t got three cronies hanging around you, Cactus. I’ll shoot it out with you then.”

“Mason, I’ll let the world know that you’re a sneaking, murdering coward!” shouted Cactus Terry.

But already the form of Riley Mason was dim in the moonshine. We heard his laughter come back to us, like the distant snarling of a beast.

“By God,” said Cactus, “I’m going after him.”

He had leaned forward to break into a run when Jeffreys spoke again. “You want to go back and see her, when you’ve got blood on your hands, Cactus?” he asked.

It stopped the great Cactus, I can tell you. He halted in his tracks, then turned about and clapped a hand on Jeffreys’s shoulder.

“You’ve got a brain in your head,” he said. “You’ve got the kind of a brain that I envy any man having. And I’m going to start in and try to pile up some common horse sense.”

It was like the break-up of the storm in the sky, sudden and swift, and unexpected. While we’d been rubbing elbows with all sorts of death and danger the moment before, now we were suddenly free from all trouble. There was only the long hike left before us, all the way to Yellow Creek.

When I get this far, it always seems to me that the story is finished. But other folks never think so. My friends have heard the yarn a thousand times, I guess, because it’s one of the most exciting things that I was ever neighbor to. But still they linger over the ending. As a matter of fact, I think they like the ending better than any of the action, because they roll the tender morsels over their tongues, and particularly they like to hear about how we came back with the money and found poor George Vincent sound asleep with his daughter watching over him, a rifle in her hands. And they like to hear how she hushed us, and wouldn’t let us disturb her father from his sleep, and how we gave her the valise.

And in the morning—but what’s the use of telling of the doubt and the joy of George Vincent when he saw that his life’s work had been brought back to him? Or how he wrung his hands and couldn’t speak a word? No, that is not what folks most want to hear about. Like my wife, Rosemary, they prefer, generally, that I should tell how Cactus Terry gave up the wild life and became a thorough-braced, honest rancher in the hills. They beg me to take them to see him and his wife and his kids, the way Rosemary and I’ve done. But, somehow, I’m sorry to think that the robber who held up the stage to Yellow Creek is no more, riding, masked, along the dim trails.

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *The Stage to Yellow Creek* by Frederick Schiller Faust (as Max Brand)]