

VULTURES' SANCTUARY

Robert E. Howard

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ROBERT E. HOWARD

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Vultures' Sanctuary

A vagrant wind stirred tiny dust-eddies where the road to California became, for a few hundred yards, the main street of Capitan town. A few mongrel dogs lazed in the shade of the false-fronted frame buildings. Horses at the hitching-rack stamped and switched flies. A child loitered along the warped board walk; except for these signs of life, Capitan might have been a ghost town, deserted to sun and wind.

Along the road from the east, a covered wagon creaked slowly. The horses, gaunt and old, leaned forward with each lurching step. The girl on the seat peered under a shading hand and spoke to the old man beside her.

"There's a town ahead, Father."

He nodded. "Capitan. We won't waste time there. A bad town. I've heard of it ever since we crossed the Pecos. No law there. A haunt of renegades and refugees. But we must stop there long enough to buy bacon and coffee."

His tired old voice encouraged the laboring horses; dust of the long, long trail sifted grayly from the wagon-bed as they creaked into Capitan.

Capitan, baking under the sun that drew a curtain of shimmering heat waves between it and the bare Guadalupe, rising from the rolling wastelands to the south. Capitan, haunt of the hunted, yet not the last haunt, not the ultimate, irrevocable refuge for the desperate and damned.

But not all who came to Capitan were scarred with the wolf-trail brand. One was standing even then at the bar of the Four Aces saloon, frowning at the man before him. Big Mac, cowpuncher from Texas, broad-shouldered, deep-chested, with thews hardened to the toughness of woven steel by years on the cattle trails that stretched from the live-oaks of the Gulf marshes to the prairies of Canada. A familiar figure wherever cowmen gathered, with his broad brown face, volcanic blue eyes, and unruly thatch of curly black hair. There were notches in the butt of the big Colt Forty-five which jutted from the scabbard at his right hip, but that butt was worn smooth from much usage. Big Mac did not notch his gun, but it had blazed in range wars and cow-town feuds from the Sabine to Milk River.

"You're Bill McClanahan, ain't you?" the other man asked with a strange eagerness his casual manner could not conceal. "You remember me?"

"Yeah." A man with many enemies must have a keen memory for faces. "You're the Checotah Kid. I saw you in Hayes City, three years ago."

"Let's drink."

At the Kid's gesture, the bartender sent glasses and a bottle sliding down the wet bar. The Kid was Mac's opposite in type. Slender, though hard as steel, smooth-faced, blond, his wide gray eyes seemed at first glance guileless. But a man wise in the ways of men could see cruelty and murderous treachery lurking in their depths.

But something else burned there now, something fearful and hunted. There was a nervous tension underlying the Kid's manner that puzzled Big Mac, who remembered him as a suave, self-possessed young scoundrel of the Kansas trail-towns. Doubtless he was on the dodge; yet that did not explain his nervousness, for there was no law in Capitan, and the Border was less than a hundred miles to the south. Something else was up.

Now the Kid leaned toward him and lowered his voice, though only the bartender and a loafer at a table shared the saloon with them.

"Mac, I need a partner! I've found color in the Guadalupe! Gold, as sure as hell!"

"Never knew you were a prospector," grunted Big Mac.

"A man gets to be lots of things!" The Kid's laugh was mirthless. "But I mean it!"

"Why'n't you stay and work it, then?" demanded the other.

"El Bravo's gang ran me out. Thought I was a sheriff or something!" Again the Kid laughed harshly, almost hysterically. "You've heard of El Bravo, maybe? Heads a gang of outlaws that hang out in the Guadalupe. But with a man to watch and another to work, we could take out plenty! The pocket's in a canyon just in the edge of the hills. What do you say?"

Again that flaming intentness. His eyes burned on Big Mac like the eyes of a condemned man, seeking reprieve.

The Texan emptied his glass and shook his head.

"I'm no prospector," he rumbled. "I'm sick of work, anyway. I ain't never had a vacation all my life, except a few days in town at the end of the drive, or before round-up. I quit my job at the Lazy K three weeks ago, and I'm headin' for San Francisco to enjoy life for a spell. I'm tired of cow-towns. I want to see what a real city looks like."

"But it's a fortune!" urged the Kid passionately, his gray eyes blazing with a weird light. "You'd be a fool to pass it up."

Big Mac bristled. He'd never liked Checotah anyway. But he merely replied: "Well, mebbys, but that's how she stands."

"You won't do it?" It was almost a whisper. Sweat beaded the Kid's forehead.

"No! Looks like to me you could find some other partner easy enough."

Mac turned away, reaching for the bottle.

It was a glimpse of the big mirror behind the bar, caught from the tail of his eye, that saved his life. In that fleeting reflection he saw the Checotah Kid, his face a livid mask of desperation, draw his pistol. Big Mac whirled, knocking the gun aside with the bottle in his hand.

The smash of breaking glass mingled with the bang of the shot. The bullet ripped through the slack of the Texan's shirt

and thudded into the wall. Almost simultaneously Mac crashed his left fist full into the Kid's face.

The killer staggered backward, the smoking pistol escaping his numbed fingers. Mac was after him like a big catamount. There could be no quarter in such a fight. Mac did not spare his strength, for he knew the Kid was deadly—knew he had killed half a dozen men already, some treacherously. He might have another gun hidden on him somewhere.

But it was a knife the Kid was groping for, as he reeled backward under the sledge-hammer impact of the Texan's fists. He found it, just as a thundering clout on the jaw knocked him headlong backward through the door, to fall sprawling in the dusty street. He lay still, stunned, blood trickling from his mouth. Big Mac strode swiftly toward him to learn whether or not he was possuming.

But he never reached him. There was a quick patter of light feet, a swish of skirts, and even as Mac saw the girl spring in front of him, he received a resounding slap on his startled face.

He recoiled, glaring in amazement at the slender figure which confronted him, vibrant with anger.

"Don't you dare touch him again, you big bully!" she panted, her dark eyes blazing. "You coward! You brute! Attacking a boy half your size!"

He found no words to reply. He did not fully realize how savage and formidable he looked, with his fierce eyes and dark scarred face as he stood there with his mallet-like fists clenched, glaring down at the man he had knocked down. He looked like a giant beside the slender Kid. Checotah looked boyish, innocent; to the girl, ignorant of men's ways, it looked like the brutal attack of a ruffian on an inoffensive boy. Mac realized this vaguely, but he could not find words to defend himself. She had not seen the bowie knife, which had fallen in the dust.

A small crowd was gathering, silent and inscrutable. The loafer who had been in the saloon was among them. An old man, his hands gnarled and his bony shoulders stooped, came from the store that stood next to the saloon, with bundles in his hands. He started toward a dust-stained wagon standing beside a board fence just beyond the store, then saw the crowd and hurried toward it, concern shadowing his eyes.

The girl turned lithely and knelt beside the Kid, who was struggling to a sitting position. He saw the pity in her wet, dark eyes, and understood. Checotah could play his cards as they fell.

"Don't let him kill me, Miss," he groaned. "I wasn't doing anything!"

"He shan't touch you," she assured him, flashing a look of defiance at Big Mac. She wiped the blood from the Kid's mouth, and looked angrily at the taciturn, leather-faced men who stood about.

"You should be ashamed of yourselves!" she stormed, with the ignorant courage of the very young. "Letting a bully like *him* abuse a boy!"

They made no response; only their lips twisted a little, in grim, sardonic humor she could not understand. Big Mac, his face dark, muttered under his breath. Turning on his heel, he reëntered the saloon. In there the voices reached him only as an incoherent murmur—the faltering, hypocritical voice of the Kid followed quickly by the soothing, sympathetic tones of the girl.

"Hell's fire!" Big Mac grabbed the whisky bottle.

"Wimmen are shore funny critters," he remarked to the bartender, scouring the bar. Mac's snarl discouraged conversation. The Texan took the bottle to a table at the back of the saloon. He was smarting mentally. The slap the girl had given him was no more than the tap of a feather; but a deeper sting persisted. He was angry and humiliated. A slip of a girl had abused him, like, as he would have put it, an egg-suckin' dog. Like most men of the wild trails, he was extremely sensitive where women were concerned. Indifferent to the opinions of men, a woman's scorn or anger could hurt him deeply. Like all men of his breed, he held women in high esteem, and desired their good opinion. But this girl had condemned him on the appearance of things alone. His sense of justice was outraged; his soul harbored a sting not to be soothed by the thought of the thousand-odd dollars in greenbacks in his pocket, nor the anticipation of spending them in that faraway city which he had never seen.

He drank, and drank again. His face grew darker, his blue eyes burned more savagely. As he sat there, huge, dark and brooding, he looked capable of any wild, ferocious deed.

So thought the man who after awhile entered furtively and slipped into a chair opposite him. Big Mac scowled at him. He knew him as Slip Ratner, one of the many shady hombres haunting Capitan.

"I was in here when the Kid drewed on you," said Ratner, a faint, evil smile twisting his thin lips. "That girl sure hauled you over the coals, didn't she?"

"Shut up!" snarled Big Mac, grabbing the bottle again.

"Sure, sure!" soothed Ratner. "No offense. Sassy snip she was—you ought to of smacked her face for her. Listen!" He hunched forward and lowered his voice: "How'd you like to get even with that fresh dame?"

* * *

Big Mac merely grunted. He was paying little attention to what Ratner was saying. Get even with a woman? Such a thought had never entered his mind. His code, the rigid, iron-bound code of the Texas frontier, did not permit of retaliation against a woman, whatever the provocation.

But Ratner was speaking again, hurriedly.

"I don't know why the Kid tried to drill you, but that gold-talk of his was a lie. He's been in the Guadalupe, yes, but

not after gold. He was trying to join up with El Bravo. I have ways of knowing things....

"Checotah hit Capitan just a few days ago. He's just a few jumps ahead of the Federal marshals. Besides that, there's reward notices for him stuck up all over Mexico. He's killed and robbed on both sides of the Line till there ain't but one place left for him—El Bravo's hide-out in the Guadalupe. That's where men go when both the United States and Mexico are barred to them.

"But El Bravo don't take in no man free. They have to buy into the gang. You remember Stark Campbell, that robbed the bank at Nogales? He got ten thousand dollars and he had to give every cent of it to El Bravo to join the gang. Tough, but it was that or his life. They say El Bravo's got a regular treasure trove hid away somewhere up in the Guadalupe.

"But Checotah didn't have nothing, and El Bravo wouldn't take him. The Kid's desperate. If he stayed here the law would get him in a few days, and there wasn't no place else for him to go. When I seen him playing up to that fool girl, I figgered he had something up his sleeve. And he did! He begged them to take him out of town with them—said he was afraid you'd murder him if he stayed in Capitan. And you know what they done? Invited him to go on to California with them! They laid him in the wagon, him pretending to be crippled, and pulled out, the girl washing the blood off his face, and his saddle-horse tied to the tail-board.

"Well, when they took him to the wagon, I sneaked up behind that board fence and listened to them talk. The girl

told Checotah everything. Their names is Ellis; she's Judith Ellis. The old man's got a thousand dollars he saved up, working on a farm back in Illinois or somewhere, and he aims to use it making first payment on a piece of irrigated land in California.

"Now, I know the Kid. He ain't goin' to California. Why, he don't even dare show himself in the next town, out beyond Scalping Knife. Somewhere along the trail he'll kill old Ellis and head for the Guadalupes with the money and the girl. He'll pay his way into the Bravo gang with them! El Bravo likes women, and she's purty enough for any man.

"Here's where we come in. I don't figure the kid'll strike till after they're passed Seven Mule Pass. That's nine miles from here. If we get on our horses and ride through the sagebrush, we can get past them and waylay them in the pass. Or we can wait till the kid kills the old man, and then crack down on him. We kill the Kid, and that evens you up with him. Then we split the loot. I take the money. You take the girl. Nobody'll ever know. Plenty of places in the mountains you can take her, and—"

For an instant Big Mac sat silent, glaring incredulously at the leering face before him, while the monstrous proposal soaked in. Ratner could not properly interpret his stunned silence. Ratner credited all men with his own buzzard-instincts.

"What do you say?" he urged.

"Why, you damned—!" Big Mac's eyes flared red as he heaved up. The table crashed sidewise, bottles smashing on the floor. Ratner, almost pinned beneath it, yelped in fright and fury as he jumped clear. He snatched at a pistol as the berserk cowman towered over him.

Mac did not waste lead on him. His movement was like the swipe of a bear's paw as his hand locked on Ratner's wrist. The renegade screamed, and a bone snapped. The pistol flew into the corner, and Big Mac hurled the snarling wretch after it, to lie in a stunned, crumpled heap. Men scattered as Big Mac stormed out of the saloon and made for the hitching-rack where stood his big bay gelding.

A few moments later the giant Texan thundered out of town in a whirlwind of dust, and took the road that ran west.

East of Capitan, the road stretched across a dusty level and was visible for miles, which was an advantage to the citizens, for it was from the east that sheriffs and Federal marshals were most likely to come riding. But westward the terrain changed to a broken country in which the road disappeared from view of the town within a mile. Miles away to the southwest rose the grim outlines of the Guadalupe, shimmering under a sky tinted steel-white by the morning sun. Haunt of fierce desert killers they had always been—painted red men once, and later sombreroed *bandidos*—but never had they sheltered more deadly slayers than the gang of the mysterious El Bravo. Big Mac had heard of him, had

heard, too, that few knew his real identity, save that he was a white man.

The town disappeared behind him, and after that the Texan passed only one habitation—the adobe hut of a Mexican sheep-herder, some five miles west of Capitan. A mile further on the trail dipped down into the broad deep canyon cut by Scalping Knife River, in its southerly course—now only a trickle of water in its shallow bed. Three miles beyond the canyon lay a chain of hills, a spur of the Guadalupes, through which the road threaded by Seven Mule Pass. There it was that Ratner had intended to lay ambush. Big Mac expected to overhaul the slow-moving wagon long before it reached the Pass.

But as he rode down the eastern slope of the canyon, he grunted and stiffened at the sight of the form lying limply on the canyon floor. The Kid had not waited to get beyond the Pass.

Mac bent over old man Ellis. He had been shot through the left shoulder and was unconscious. He had lost a great deal of blood, but the thrum of his old heart was strong.

The wagon was nowhere in sight. Wheel tracks wandered away up the canyon; the tracks of a single horse went down the canyon. Big Mac read the sign easily. Ratner had prophesied unerringly the ways of wolves. Checotah had shot the old man—probably without warning. The team, frightened, had run away with the wagon. The Kid had ridden down the canyon with the girl, and, without doubt, the old man's pitiful savings.

Mac stanchd the flow of blood with his bandanna. He lifted the senseless man across the saddle and turned back on his trail, leading the big bay, and cursing as the rocks of the flinty trail turned under his high-heeled boots. Back at the sheep-herders hut, a mile from the canyon, he lifted the wounded man down and carried him in, laid him on a bunk. The old Mexican watched inscrutably.

Mac tore a ten-dollar bill in two, and handed one half to the peon:

"If he's alive when I get back, you get the other half. If he ain't, I'll make you hard to catch. There's a wagon and team up the canyon. Send a boy to find 'em and bring 'em back here."

"*Si señor.*" The old man at once gave his attention to the wounded man; more than half Indian, his knowledge of primitive surgery was aboriginal, but effective.

Mac headed back for the canyon. The Kid had not bothered to hide his sign. There was no law in Capitan. There were men there who would not have allowed him to kidnap a girl if they could have prevented it; but they would not attempt to follow him into the outlaw-haunted Guadalupe.

The trail was plain down the canyon. He followed it for three miles, the walls growing steeper and higher as the canyon wound deeper and deeper into the hills. The trail turned aside up a narrow ravine, and Mac, following it, came out upon a benchland, dry and sandy, hemmed in by the slopes of the mountains. At the south edge of the flat

buzzards rose and flapped heavily away. They had not feasted; they had been waiting, with grisly patience, for a feast.

A few moments later Big Mac looked down on the sprawling form of the Checotah Kid. He had been shot in the open, and a smear of blood on the sand showed how he had wriggled an agonized way to the shade of a big rock.

He had been shot through the body, near the heart. His eyes were glazed, and at each choking gasp bloody bubbles burst on his blue lips.

Big Mac looked down on him with hard, merciless eyes.

"You dirty skunk! I'm sorry somebody beat me to it! Where's the girl?"

"El Bravo took her," panted the Kid. "They saw me riding—with the flag. Came to meet me. I gave him the girl—to pay my way into the gang. Tried to hold out the thousand—I took off the old man. They grabbed me—searched me. El Bravo shot me—for trying to hold out."

"Where'd they take her to?"

"The hide-out. I don't know where. Nobody knows but them." The Kid's voice was growing weaker and thicker. "They watch the trails—all the time. Nobody can get—in the Guadalupe—without them knowing it. I carried the signal flag—only reason I got this far." He gestured vaguely toward

a cottonwood limb with a shred of white cloth tied to it, which lay near him.

Curiosity prompted Big Mac's next question.

"Why'd you try to shoot me? We never had no trouble in Kansas."

"You was going to be my price," gasped the Kid. "That's why I tried to lure you into the hills. El Bravo had rather have you alive. But when you wouldn't come, I thought if I brought him proof I'd downed you, maybe he'd take me in anyway. He's Garth Bissett!"

Garth Bissett! That explains many things. There were reasons why Bissett should hate Big Mac. They had first met in a Kansas cow-town at the end of a cattle-trail from Texas. Bissett was marshal of that town. A hard man, wary as a wolf, quick as summer lightning with the ivory-butted pistols that hung at his hips—and withal as rotten-souled a scoundrel as ever ruled a buzzard-roost trail town. It was Big Mac who broke his dominion. Going to the aid of a young cowboy, framed by one of Bissett's gun-fighting deputies, the big herd-boss had left the deputy dead on a dance-hall floor after a blur of gun-smoke, and in the dead man's pockets were found letters revealing the extent of Bissett's crookedness—proof of theft and murder. A Federal marshal stepped into the game. Bissett might have escaped, but he paused at the cow-camp at the edge of town to even scores with the big trail-driver.

Big Mac came out of the gun-play that followed with a bullet in his breast-muscles, while Bissett, his leg broken by a slug from Mac's Forty-five, was taken by the Federal man. He was tried and sentenced to life imprisonment, but on the way to the penitentiary escaped, and dropped out of sight. Rumor said he had fled to Mexico, and become involved in a revolution.

Big Mac absently noted that the Kid was dead. Without another glance he mounted and rode deeper into the hills, following the faint trail the slayers had left. His face was darker and grimmer, but the shadow of a sardonic smile played about the corners of his hard mouth, and in one hand he carried the make-shift flag the Kid had borne. He had made his plan, a desperate, reckless plan, with one chance in a thousand of success. But it was the only one. He knew that he could not go into the Guadalupes shooting. If he tried to force his way to the bandit hangout, even if he should find it he would be shot from ambush long before he got there. There was but one way to reach the heart of El Bravo's stronghold. He was taking that way.

He did not ask himself why he followed the trail of a girl who meant nothing to him. It was part of him that he should do so—part of the code of the Texas Border, born of half a century of merciless warfare with red men and brown men, to whom the women of the whites were fair prey. A white man went to the aid of a woman in distress, regardless of who she might be. That was all there was to it. And so Big Mac was going to the aid of the girl who had despised him, instead of riding on his way to the far-off city where he expected to squander the wad of greenbacks he carried in his

pocket. Only he knew how much hard work and self-denial they represented.

He had left the flat a few miles behind him and was riding through a rugged defile, when a harsh voice bawled an order to halt. Instantly he pulled up and elevated his hands. The command came from a cluster of boulders to the right.

"Who're you and whatta you want?" came the crisp question.

"I'm Big Mac," answered the Texan tranquilly. "I'm lookin' for El Bravo."

"What you got for him?" was the next demand—a stock question, evidently.

Big Mac laughed. "Myself!"

"Are you crazy?" There was a snarl in the voice.

"No. Take me to Bissett. If he don't thank you, he'll be crazy."

"Well, he ain't!" growled the bushwhacker. "Get off yore horse! Now unbuckle yore gun-belt and let 'er drop. Now step back away from it—further back, blast you! Keep yore hands up. I got a forty-five-seventy trained on yore heart all the time."

Big Mac did exactly as he was told. He was standing there, unarmed, his hands in the air, when the man came from behind the rocks, a tall man, who walked with the springy tread of a cougar. Mac knew him instantly.

"Stark Campbell!" he said softly. "So this is why they never got you!"

"And they never will, neither!" retorted the outlaw with an oath. "They can't git to us, up here in the Guadalupes. But a man has to pay high to git in." Bitter anger vibrated in his voice as he said that. "What you done, that you want in?"

"Never mind that. You just lead me to Bissett."

"I'll have to take you to the hangout, if you see him," said Campbell. "He just taken a girl there. He don't let nobody see the hangout and live, unless they're in his gang. If he don't let you join us, he'll kill you. You can go back, though, if you want to, now. I won't stop you. You ain't no law."

"I want to see Bissett," replied the Texan.

Campbell shrugged his shoulders and drew a pistol, laying aside the rifle. He ordered Big Mac to turn around and put his hands behind him, and the outlaw then bound his wrists—awkwardly, with one hand, for he kept the pistol muzzle jammed in Mac's back with the other. But when the Texan's hands were partly confined, he completed the job with both hands. Then Campbell led his own horse, a rangy roan, from behind the rocks, and hung Mac's gun-belt over the roan's saddle-horn.

"Git on yore horse," he growled. "I'll help you up."

They started on, Campbell leading the big bay. For three or four miles they threaded a precarious path through as wild and broken a country as Big Mac had ever seen, until they entered a steep-walled canyon which, apparently, came to a blind end ahead of them, as the walls pinched together. But as they neared it Big Mac saw a cleft in the angle, fifty feet above the canyon floor, and reached by a narrow, winding trail. A man hailed them from above.

"It's me, Campbell!" shouted his captor, and a growling voice bade them advance. "This is the only way into our hangout," said Campbell. "You see how much chance a posse'd have of gittin' in, even if they found it. One man with plenty of shells could hold that cleft ag'in a army."

They went up the trail single file. The horses crowded against the wall, fearful of the narrow footing. Mac knew that Campbell spoke the truth when he said no posse could charge up that trail, raked by fire from above.

As they entered the cleft a black-whiskered man rose from behind a ledge of rock and glared suspiciously at them.

"All right, Wilson. I'm takin' this fellow to Bissett."

"Ain't that Big Mac?" asked Wilson, in whom Mac recognized another "lost outlaw." "What's he got for Bissett? You searched him?"

"You know damn' well I ain't, only for guns," snarled Campbell. "You know the rule, well as me. Nobody takes

money off 'em except Bissett." He spat. "Come on, Mac. If you got somethin' Bissett'll accept, I'll take yore ropes off. If you ain't you won't be carin' anyway, not with a bullet through yore head."

The cleft was like a tunnel in the rock. It ran for forty feet and then widened out into a space that was like a continuation of the canyon they had left. It formed a bowl, its floor higher than the floor of the canyon outside by fifty feet, walled by unbroken cliffs three hundred feet high, and apparently unscalable. Campbell confirmed this.

"Can't nobody git at us from them cliffs," he snarled. "They're steep outside as inside. It's jest like somebody scooped a holler in the middle of a rock mesa. The holler's this bowl. G'wan. Git down."

Big Mac managed it, with his hands bound, and Campbell left the horses standing in the shade of the wall, reins hanging. He drove Big Mac before him toward the adobe hut that stood in the middle of the bowl, surrounded by a square rock wall, breast-high to a tall man.

"Last line of defense, Bissett says," growled Campbell. "Even if a posse was to git into the bowl—which ain't possible—we could fight 'em off indefinite behind that wall. There's a spring inside the stockade, and we got provisions and ca'tridges enough for a year."

The renegade marshal had always been a master of strategy. Big Mac did not believe the outlaw hangout would

ever fall by a direct attack, regardless of the numbers assailing it—if it were ever discovered by the lawmen.

A man whom Campbell addressed as Garrison came from the corral, adjoining the wall, where a dozen horses grazed. Another met them at the heavy plank gate, built to turn bullets.

"Why, hell!" ejaculated the latter. "That's Big Mac! Where'd you catch him?"

"He rode in with a flag of truce, Emmett," answered Campbell. "Bissett in the shack?"

"Yeah; with the girl," grunted Emmett. "Doggone—I dunno what to make of *this!*"

Evidently Emmett knew something of Bissett's former life. The three men followed Mac as he strode across the yard toward the hut. Stark Campbell, John Garrison, Red Emmett; back there at the tunnel; Wolf Wilson. He had indeed come into the last haunt of the hunted, last retreat of these, the most desperate of all the Border renegades, to whom all other doors were barred, against whom the hands of all men were raised. Only in this lost canyon of the Guadalupes could they find sanctuary—the refuge of the wolf's lair, for which they had forfeited all their blood-tinged gains.

Theirs could be only a wolf-pack alliance. Bissett dominated them by virtue of keener wits and swifter gun-hand. They hated him for the brutal avarice that stripped

from them their last shred of plunder, in return for a chance of bare life; but they feared him too, and recognized his superiority, knew that without his leadership the pack must perish.

Campbell pushed the door open. As Big Mac loomed in the doorway, the man in the room turned with the blurring speed of a wolf, his hand streaking to an ivory-handled gun even in the instant it took him to see the stranger was a captive, with his hands bound behind him.

"You!" It was the ripping snarl of a timber wolf. Bissett was as tall as Big Mac, but not so heavy. He was wiry, rangy; yellow mustaches drooped below a mouth thin as a knife gash. His pale eyes glittered with an icy, blood-chilling fire.

"What the hell!" His hand paused; he seemed stunned with surprise.

Big Mac looked past him to the girl who cringed in the corner, her eyes wide with terror. There was no hope in them when they met his. To her he was but another beast of prey.

Big Mac grinned at Bissett, without mirth.

"Come to join your gang, Garth," he said calmly. "Heard you had to have a gift. Well, I'm it! I've heard you'd bid high for my hide!"

He was gambling on his knowledge of Bissett's nature—on the chance that the outlaw would not instantly shoot him down.

"Where'd you get him, Campbell?" Bissett snapped.

"He come in under a flag of truce," growled Campbell. "Same as any man that wants to join up with us. Said you'd be glad to see him."

Bissett turned on Mac, his eyes shining like a wolf's that scents a trap. "Why did you come here?" he ripped out. "You're no fool. You wouldn't put yourself in my power unless you had a damned good reason—some edge—" He whirled on his men, in a frenzy of suspicion.

"Get out to the wall, damn you! Watch the cliffs! Watch everything! This devil wouldn't come in here alone unless he had something up his sleeve—"

"Well, I—" began Campbell.

"Shut up, damn you! Get out there! I do the thinking for this gang!"

Mac saw the unveiled hate in Campbell's eyes as he slouched silently out after the others, saw Bissett's eyes dwell burningly on the man. Bad blood there. And Campbell feared Bissett less than the others...

As the men left the building, Bissett picked up a double-barreled shotgun, and cocked it.

"I don't know what your game is," he said between his teeth. "You must have a gang following you, or something. But whatever happens, I aim to get *you*!"

Mac appeared helpless, unarmed, his hands bound; but a wolflike suspicion of appearances was at once Bissett's strength and his weakness.

"You're no outlaw," he snarled. "You didn't come here to join my gang. You knew I'd skin you alive, or stake you out on an ant-bed. What are you up to?"

Big Mac laughed in his face. A man who followed the herds up the long trail, year after year, learned to judge men as well as animals. Bissett was reacting exactly as Mac had expected him to. The Texan was playing that knowledge blindly, waiting for some kind of a break.

"You ain't got a very big gang, Bissett," he said.

"They're not all here," rapped the outlaw. "Some are out on a raid, toward the Border. Never mind. What's your game? If you talk, your finish will be easier."

Mac glanced again at Judith Ellis, cowering in a corner. The stark terror in her wide eyes hurt him.

"My game, Bissett?" asked Big Mac coolly. "What could it be? Nobody could get past Wilson in the tunnel, could they? What good would it do if I did have a gang followin' me, like you think?"

"You wouldn't come here without an ace in the hole," Bissett all but whispered.

Big Mac played his ace. "*What about your own men?*" he asked.

Bissett blanched. His suspicions crystallized, for the moment—suspicions of Big Mac's coming, suspicions of his own men, which forever gnawed at his brain. His eyes, glaring at Mac over the shotgun's black muzzles, were tinged with madness.

"You're trapped, Bissett!" Big Mac jeered, playing his hand from minute to minute, for whatever it might be worth. "Your own men have sold you out! For the loot you took from them and hid—"

And at that moment the break came. Outside Campbell had turned back toward the adobe, and Mac saw him and yelled: "*Campbell! Help!*"

Bissett whirled like a flash, shifting the shotgun to cover his amazed follower. It was an instinctive movement. Even so he would not have pulled the triggers—would have seen through Mac's flimsy scheme, recognized it as a trick to get him off-guard, had he had time to think.

But Mac saw and took his desperate chance. He hurled himself headlong against Bissett.

At the impact the shotgun hammers, hung on hair-triggers, fell to the involuntary, convulsive jerk of Bissett's fingers. Both barrels exploded as Bissett went down under Mac's hurtling body, and buckshot blasted Stark Campbell's skull.

He died on his feet without knowing why. That was chance; Mac did not, could not have planned his death.

As they went down together, Mac drove his knee savagely into Bissett's belly. He rolled clear as the outlaw doubled in gasping agony. Mac heaved up on his feet somehow, roaring at the terrified girl: "His knife, quick! Cut these cords!"

The impact of his voice jolted her into action. She sprang blindly forward, snatched the knife from Bissett's boot, and sawed at the cords that held Mac's wrists.

It had all happened in a stunning instant. Outside, Garrison and Emmett were running toward the house with guns in their hands. Some of the strands parted under the blade, and Mac snapped the others. He stooped and dragged Bissett to his feet. The half-senseless outlaw was clawing dazedly at his pistols. Mac jerked them from him and swung the limp frame around before him.

"Tell your men to get back!" he snarled, jamming a muzzle hard in Bissett's back. "Tell 'em, quick!"

* * *

But the order was never given. The men outside did not know what had happened in the hut. They had only seen Campbell blasted down by a shot through the doorway, and they thought their leader was turning against them. Emmett caught a glimpse of Bissett through the door and fired. Mac felt Bissett's body jerk convulsively in his hands. The bullet had drilled through the outlaw's head.

Mac threw the corpse aside, and fired from the hip. Emmett, struck in the mouth, went down heavily on his back. Garrison, as he saw Emmett fall and Mac loom in the doorway, began to fall back, firing as he went. Wilson would be coming up from the tunnel. If it came to a siege, the girl would be endangered by the raking lead.

Mac sprang recklessly into the open, shooting two-handed. He felt hot lead rip through his shirt, burn the skin on his ribs. Garrison snarled, whirled, sprang for the wall. In mid-stride he staggered drunkenly, hard hit. He wheeled and started shooting again, even as he crumpled, holding his six-shooter in both hands. His pistol snapped on an empty chamber before he lurched to the ground and lay still, in a spreading red puddle.

Mac heard Judith scream, and simultaneously came a report behind him and the impact of a blow that knocked him staggering. He came about in a drunken semi-circle, glimpsing Wilson's black-bearded face. The outlaw was straddling the wall, preparing to leap down inside before he fired again. Mac's last bullet broke his neck and dropped him at the foot of the wall, flopping for a dozen seconds like a beheaded chicken.

In the deafening silence that followed the roar of the guns, Mac turned back toward the hut, blood streaming down his shirt. The pale girl cowered in the door, still uncertain as to her fate. His first words reassured her.

"Don't be scairt, Miss. I come to take you back to your dad."

Then she was clinging to him, weeping in hysterical relief.

"Oh, you're hurt! You're bleeding!"

"Just a slug in my shoulder," he grunted, self-conscious. "Ain't nothin'."

"Let me dress it," she begged.

He followed her into the hut. She avoided looking at Bissett, sprawling in a red pool, as she bound up Mac's shoulder with strips torn from her dress.

"I—I misjudged you," she faltered. "I'm sorry. The Kid—he was a beast. My father—" She choked on the words.

"Your dad's all right," he assured her. "Just drilled through the shoulder, like me. Some rotten shootin' in these parts. Couple of horses saddled at the mouth of the tunnel. Go on out there and wait for me."

After she had gone, he began a hasty search. And presently he desisted, swearing. Neither the pockets of the dead chief nor a hasty ransacking of the rooms rewarded him with what he sought. The money taken from Ellis had gone to join the rest of Bissett's loot, in whatever crypt he had hidden it. A man might hunt it for years, in vain.

Big Mac had not time for hunting. Bissett might have been lying when he said he had other men, out on a raid; but with

the girl, Mac could not take the chance of being caught by returning outlaws. He hurried from the hut.

The girl had already mounted Campbell's roan. A few minutes later they were riding together down the outer canyon.

"I found that thousand Checotah took off your dad," he announced, handing her a wad of dingy greenbacks. "Next time don't tell nobody about it."

"You're a guardian angel," she said faintly. "It was all we had—we'd have starved without it. I don't know how I can ever thank you—"

"Aw, shucks, don't try!"

His shoulder hurt, but another, deeper sting was gone. Big Mac grinned contentedly, even as he slapped his flat pocket, and reflected on the dusty miles back to the Lazy K in Texas where the job he had quit still awaited him. After all, he reckoned he could get along another year without a vacation.

[The end of *Vultures' Sanctuary* by Robert E. Howard]