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CACTUS AND RATTLERS

By

H. BEDFORD-JONES

Here's a real thriller for you—a double-action, big-caliber novelette of adventure in the West, by a writing man who knows his business, the distinguished author of "Sixteen Miles," "Brome's Luck," "Shadows of Saffron" and other noted stories.

At least twice a year, when he came in to Stovepipe Springs to get his mail and flour, Sagebrush answered to the cognomen of George Beam. This was one of the occasions. To his acute consternation, he had discovered that "The Springs" was crowded with life and gayety, for there was a strange female stopping at the hotel, and another pilgrim was coming in by stage this same afternoon.

Sagebrush presented a general vista of whiskers, red nose and nondescript garments, bleached by sun and white with alkali dust; yet it was his proud boast that he was the only man between Death Valley and the big bend of the Colorado who kept abreast of the times. Subscribing to several weekly magazines, he came in once every six months to get the accumulated copies. Then he sat down and answered the advertisements, requesting circulars. Thus he had a burro-load of magazines to read for six months, then a burro-load of circulars wherewith to while away the next six months—an involved and vicious circle in which Sagebrush was always trying to catch up with himself. He kept the post office on the map, however.

"Now, dog-gone it," he observed to his three patient burros, as he tied on his grub and magazines and a bundle of postal cards, "you and me got to hike out again in order to git our correspondence goin' in peace! Dad blame this dad-blamed town! What in hell is folks crowding in this country for, anyhow?"

Haywire Johnson, assistant postmaster and general utility man about the hotel, showed up in time to answer this query.

“Hi, Sagebrush! Aint you stoppin’ over in town? Things is pickin’ up right fast. We got a settler yesterday, and we got a tourist comin’ today.”

“That’s jest it,” growled Sagebrush. “A feller can’t have no peace no more. That makes three women in town now, not countin’ them females over to José Garcia’s shack.”

“Well, listen!” Haywire laid his hand on the desert rat’s arm. “Where’d you get that dust you weighed in over to the store, eh? Let’s you and me go in and talk, Sagebrush. If you aint got no objections to wettin’ down them whiskers with a mite o’ licker, s’pose we go inside and arbitrate.”

Sagebrush grunted, hitched his three burros to the rail, and vanished in the hotel.

Once Stovepipe Springs had been a boom mining town, but now it was dead and dried out. To west and north lay desert, to the south lay more desert and the Colorado. To the east was the Chuckwalla Range—in it and beyond it rich cattle country with water galore. Here in Stovepipe Springs, and over across the Chuckwallas, men talked different languages, had different customs and were themselves different. No cow-men came over this way unless they were well ahead of the sheriff; and Stovepipe Springs, having its own railroad connections at a distance of twenty miles, was supremely independent of the remainder of the county, and heartily despised all ranchers and cow-men.

Here, besides the hotel, were five inhabited houses and two stores, a bank and a garage. Had it not been for the literary enterprise of Sagebrush Beam, even the post office would have long since been wiped off the map. The town was a point of call for desert rats, and being at present on a detour of the cross-continent automobile highway, had more business than its looks would warrant. Its inhabitants lived only for the day when some one would strike it rich and bring back the boom.

It was three in the afternoon and blazing hot when the exhaust whistle of the autostage announced its arrival. The entire dozen persons of the local constituency gathered to watch. One of these onlookers was a small man in rusty and dilapidated attire. He stood barely five feet six, his face was a grayish mask from which shone two bright and glittery gray eyes, and there was a stoop to his shoulders—but he was not crowded. He was not only the most flourishing, but he was the most respected citizen of all Chuckwalla County.

The stage whooped out a final whistle and came to rest amid a whirl of dust in front of the hotel. The driver flung off a mail-sack, handed off an empty express-box, then swung down and vanished abruptly into the hotel. His solitary passenger, meantime, descended before the assembled gaze of Stovepipe Springs, staring around with unassumed interest. And Stovepipe Springs, after the first gasp, stared back—hard.

The pilgrim was apparently a young man, though little could be seen of his features. He wore an enormous pith helmet which shaded his face, tinted yellow goggles which hid his eyes, and from the collar of his khaki coat to the tip of his nose was wound a bright green shawl which draped back over his shoulder. Just then Haywire and Sagebrush came out the side door of the hotel, and Sagebrush halted as though smitten.

“My gosh, Haywire!” he exclaimed. “What was in that there licker? I never seen nothing like this before—not even from tequila! Is that thing really there?”

“She is,” said Haywire, with a startled look. “Wait—it’s goin’ to talk!”

The arrival had unwound the green shawl, to disclose a mouth and chin which were certainly square-cut enough for anyone. He glanced around the circle of staring faces, and his

goggles fastened upon the little man in rusty attire. Toward him the newcomer stepped, met the glittery gray eyes, and spoke.

“Am I correct in assuming that this is Stovepipe Springs?” he asked.

“Yep,” returned the small man curtly.

“Excellent! An admirable spot. I am Percival Henry J. Tompkins, a humble member of the American Society of Mammalogists, in search of material for a paper on the fauna of the great American desert.” Mr. Tompkins spoke in a precise, neatly clipped voice. “I seek a temporary domicile here—”

“Git over to Mormon Wells, then,” snapped the small man.

“You misapprehend my meaning,” said Mr. Tompkins patiently. “I seek rooms at your hotel, and a guide. I want a man who knows the desert, who can lead me to the haunts of its creatures. Particularly I desire to study the habits of the *crotalus cerastes*.”

With a flick of his shoulders, the small man turned as though to leave. Mr. Tompkins reached out and laid a restraining hand on his shoulder, unwarned by the gasp from those near by.

“My dear sir, I am addressing you—”

What happened was startling to see. The little man moved with a swiftness that the eye could not follow, then stood snarling, his gray mask of a face glittering with sheer malignity. Tompkins, knocked sprawling half across the road, rolled over, sat up, and then struggled to his feet. He stood blinking around.

“That—er—that was a most remarkable thing!” he exclaimed in his precise tones. “Did somebody run into me?”

With a sneer and a snap of his teeth, the little man turned and departed toward the bank, which he owned. Haywire drew the old desert rat hastily aside.

“Look out! Sidewinder’s feelin’ mean today. Him and that female woman have been talkin’ chicken-ranches, I reckon. Oh, my gosh! Now that there mistake for a human is headin’ this-a-way—”

Mr. Tompkins, indeed, seemed to sense a general lack of cordiality all around him, except in the gaping countenance of Sagebrush, whom he now approached.

“My friend—”

“Pilgrim, don’t bother me!” said Sagebrush defensively. “It jest can’t be true!”

“I’ll pay three dollars a day to a man who knows the desert.”

Sagebrush changed countenance. So did the remainder of Stovepipe Springs. There was a general forward movement, but the desert rat was the first to recover voice.

“You’re done, pilgrim, you’re sure engaged! What was it you wanted to find?”

“*Crotalus cerastes*. Undoubtedly you can introduce me to specimens?”

Sagebrush swallowed hard, but had a reputation to sustain, and upheld it nobly.

“You bet!” he announced promptly. “Lots o’ them specimens up around Marble Cañon, and over by Lost Waterhole I’ve seen ’em so thick you couldn’t hardly move without steppin’ on ’em. I’ll take you right where them things breed, Perfesser.”

The “Perfesser” looked slightly startled, but nodded assent.

“Very well; you are engaged. We shall have to hire an automobile.”

“You got to see Sidewinder Crowfoot about that. He owns ’em all.”

“Very well. Come to my room in an hour, when I have had a chance to remove the stains of travel. By the way, where is the hotel? I wrote to engage rooms, but see no hostelry.”

“Right yere under your nose, Perfesser. Hassayamp is takin’ in the mail—thar he is.—Hey, Hassayamp! Meet my friend the Perfesser. This is Hassayamp Foster, Perfesser. The Perfesser’s a bug-hunter, Hassayamp, and wants a bed.”

“My beds wont help him none,” said Hassayamp, a lean and melancholic individual who came forward, chewing a ragged mustache. “I got a room for you, Puffesser.”

“With bath,” said Tompkins. Hassayamp halted and blinked.

“Bath? Good gosh, we don’t allow no washin’ in the springs this time o’ year! Got to use a cream separator to git enough drinkin’ water. Rains are over, but they aint filled the springs yet—not for another two weeks, I reckon.”

“I refer, sir, to a bathroom attached,” explained Tompkins.

“Well, there aint none,” said Hassayamp. “Whar’s your grips?”

Two enormous and bulging suitcases, each as big as a small trunk, were in the stage boot, and Hassayamp hauled them out with antagonistic air, and led his victim away.

The Stovepipe House was built for desert use, not for looks. The front building contained post office and hotel dining-room; and passing through this, Tompkins descended the rear steps and found two long adobe structures stretching in front of him, each divided into cells; between them drooped some parched flowers and shrubs. He was shown to his cell, a room twelve by twelve, furnished with all the comforts of home.

“Don’t do no cussing nor singing after midnight,” warned Hassayamp as he shoved in the two enormous grips, “ ’cause a lady’s got the next room. When the bell rings for supper, you show up prompt; my old woman’s liable to be real ornery if folks don’t ’preciate hot vittles. Two-fifty a day. What did you go tangle up with that old desert rat Sagebrush for? I’d ha’ been glad to pilot you around my own self. Int’rested in mines, are you? Don’t let him show you no specimens, Puffesser. That old rascal would salt hell and unload it on a pilgrim. Don’t you trust nobody around here but me. I got two quartz lodes and a placer location that’ll make your eyes water—”

“Not interested in mines, thanks,” said Tompkins, cutting short the flow of talk. “If I saw a good chicken-ranch, I might invest, but not otherwise. Ever hear of anyone around these parts by the name of Ramsay? Alec Ramsay. Might have passed through here a year or so ago.”

“Nope,” said Hassayamp, shaking his mustaches. “Well, if ye want anything, come and holler for it.”

Hassayamp withdrew; in more haste than he had previously displayed, he ducked around the side of the hotel, rambled down the desert sands of the nominal alley, and in three minutes was rapping sharply at the back door of the adobe bank. This was opened to him by the small gray-faced man, who was no other than Sidewinder Crowfoot. Hassayamp slid inside and closed the door behind him.

“Well?” rasped Sidewinder. “What’s up?”

“That bug-hunter,” said Hassayamp agitatedly. “What ye think he said? That if he knowed where there was a good chicken-ranch, he might buy it!”

A thin smile appeared in the gray mask.

“That so? We’ll see about it.”

“And he asked if I knowed anyone around here, a year back, name of Alec Ramsay.”

The smaller man started, and his eyes glittered venomously.

“So that’s it—so that’s it!” murmured Sidewinder. “I thought he didn’t act right natural. By gosh, I’ll look into him!”

“Wa’n’t Ramsay the one,” began Hassayamp, “that bought that there claim from Mesquite up in Pinecate Cañon, and got mixed up with—”

“Shut up!” snapped the other man suddenly. “Listen to me, now. I’ll attend to this gent myself, if he needs it. Let him run as far’s his hobbles will let, for a while. First we got to fix up Miss Gilman. You got to take her out day after tomorrow—*sabe*? I’ll have her all primed up about the location—you sell it to her. Take her up the Chuckwalla road, then off to Pinecate mesa and up the cañon to that big boulder. Sell her the same ground we sold that Ramsay fool. There’d ought to be water in it right now, and it’ll look mighty pretty. Sell her any location she picks out. *Sabe*?”

“All right,” said Hassayamp. “And ye needn’t worry much over that bug-hunter. He’s jest a natural-born fool.”

“Maybe,” was the response. “But don’t be too durned sure.”

Sidewinder’s doubts would have been verified could he have seen Professor Tompkins at the same moment. Tompkins had removed goggles and helmet, to reveal snapping blue eyes which looked anything but weak, and close-cropped red hair that spelled trouble. Also, from underneath his shirt he had produced an automatic pistol, and was now carefully examining its load. When he spoke to himself, his voice lacked all the precision and clipped utterance it had displayed in public.

“Confound it, there’s one thing I sure overlooked!” he was musing as he frowned at a silver plate set into the butt of the pistol. “If I take it off, dust will get into everything; if I leave it on, I’m running risks. Well, guess I’ll run risks! If I need you, my friend, I’ll sure need you real bad.”

The initials on the silver plate were P. A. R.—which by no stretch of the imagination could be made to fit the name Tompkins.

CHAPTER II

The usually free-and-easy dining-room of the Stovepipe House was hushed and uneasy when supper came around, before the unwonted presence of a strange female. Tompkins had a table to himself, and at the next table was Miss Gilman; there were only two other occupied tables.

Tompkins was interested in his fellow-pilgrim. She was a young woman; she was possessed of an indoor complexion; and if not exactly beautiful she had an air of character and firmness; when she smiled, indeed, as she did whenever Haywire came to her table with his tray, a dancing light came into her eyes, and Haywire was straightway confused and flustered. Seated with his wife at another table was Hassayamp, and Tompkins observed that the proprietor addressed his better half in a tone of voice intended to reach other ears.

"Marier, we got to improve on Manuela's cookin' 'fore next week, when them road-workmen git here. I aint stuck on Mex cookin' my own self. We'll be right crowded up with folks workin' on the highway next week. Mose Pincus tells me today there's a feller name o' Rosenblum comin' in from Meteorite, goin' to open up a army goods store for this here district; wants him a shack big enough to hold six kids and a missus, and a store front. Speakin' as the president of the Stovepipe Springs chamber o' commerce, I'd say this here town is started on her boom. They tell me Sagebrush Beam weighed in a right quart o' dust today, too. Wouldn't s'prise me a mite if a rush'd start this way that'd de Gold Hills a mile! Dang it, I wisht we didn't have to ship in these here aigs; somehow, they don't taste like aigs should, as I remember 'em."

Miss Gilman departed, and thereafter Hassayamp essayed no more information at large. Tompkins, who was decidedly hungry, was the last out of the dining-room. He came through the post office lobby, performed the delayed ceremony of registering, and was then escorted outside to the street by Hassayamp. They found Miss Gilman standing under the tin sun-shade and looking up at the glorious sunset that flooded all the sky with gold and scarlet. She turned at their approach, and Hassayamp performed the introductions.

"Miss Ethel Gilman, lemme make you acquainted with the Puffesser. You folks want to make yourselves to home in Stovepipe Springs. We don't put on no airs here, and everybody's sociable. Miss Gilman, she figgers on startin' a chicken-ranch and settlin' in our midst, and I dunno but what we might make her our school-teacher. This time next week we'd ought to have six Rosenblums, and we got four little Garcias right now, and Manuela tells me her brother is liable to come over from Chuckwalla City next month, and he's got five more. That looks right healthy, don't it? Then take the old Alcora Dance Hall down the street, it'd make a right smart school, if we fix her up and spill a little paint around and so forth. The Puffesser is likewise int'rested in hen chickens, Miss Gilman. He's lookin' up bugs right now, but—what did you say your name was, Perfesser?"

Tompkins cleared his throat and bowed to the young woman.

"Percival Henry J. Tompkins, entirely at your service, madam. May I solicit the pleasure of your company in a short walk, to breathe the inspiring evening air and view the noble aspect of the Creator's handiwork in the heavens?"

"Gosh!" murmured Hassayamp in awe. Miss Gilman gave Tompkins a curious glance, as though wishing to peer past those tinted goggles; a smile was in her eyes, as she made demure

assent.

“Thank you, I’d enjoy showing you the sights. You just arrived today?”

“Only this afternoon, madam,” returned Tompkins. “Mr. Foster, if you apprehend any specimens of *crotalus cerastes* in the near future, I should be glad if you would confine and preserve them for me.”

“I’d sure like to, Puffesser,” said Hassayamp, blinking, “but we aint got a bug in the house. If you was to go up to Garcia’s, you might have some luck.”

Tompkins waved his hand, and strode off beside Miss Gilman, who seemed rather red in the face.

Neither of them broke the silence. They passed down the street, came to the fast-disappearing rows of ancient buildings, relics of boom days, and presently were walking along the open desert, following the white road that went straight as a die across the horizon. The silence became oppressive, until suddenly Tompkins chuckled and spoke in his natural voice. It was a drawling, rather whimsical voice, and drew a swift glance from the girl.

“Our friend Hassayamp is a human phonograph,” he said.

“You’ll go too far one of these days,” said Miss Gilman. Tompkins stopped short and stared at her.

“Eh? Just what do you mean?”

“Nonsense!” exclaimed the girl sharply, yet with a laugh in her eyes. “That red hair and your natural voice and the shape of your head don’t go with your assumed character, Mr. Tompkins. Take off those glasses and let me see what you look like. And stop fidgeting with that pipe in your pocket. Take it out and smoke. I’d like you to.”

Tompkins broke into a laugh, reached up and removed the goggles, and met the curious regard of Miss Gilman.

“What do you wear them for?” she demanded. “You look better without ’em.”

“Protection,” he drawled, bringing forth his pipe. “You’re an observant young woman, but I trust fervently that you’ll keep your observations to yourself. I look very much like another man, and do not care to be recognized for him—or mistaken for him.”

The girl laughed. “You don’t look like a criminal, Mr. Tompkins!”

“I’m not. I’m really a mammalogist. Now, everybody here is positive that a bug-hunter is crazy, so I’m making it easy all around by playing up to the part. You, however, don’t look like a chicken-raiser.”

“But I am—at least, that’s what I’m going to be. I’ve come from Los Angeles to start a ranch here. Land is cheap; there’s no fog; the climate is ideal, and for a while I can sell all I can raise right here in town.”

“D’you mean it?” asked Tompkins incredulously.

“Of course I do. The prospect looks a whole lot better to me than the prospect of your finding any animals or bugs out on the desert.”

“You don’t know a whole lot about the desert, do you?” he asked dryly.

“No. Do you?”

“A little.” Tompkins puffed at his pipe rather hard for a moment, frowning at the sunset, then he came to a halt, and turned to the girl with an air of decision.

“See here, Miss Gilman, really I don’t want to intrude into your affairs, but I think that you’re going ahead rather blindly. Are you all alone here in town?”

“Yes.” Her eyes dwelt on his strong, rather harsh features, with questioning scrutiny. “But I’ve lived on ranches, I’ve taught school, I have some money saved up—and really, Mr. Tompkins, I’m able to look out for myself.”

“No, you’re not,” he said quietly. Suddenly a look came into his eyes that made the girl catch her breath, so furious and deeply filled with passion was it. “You’ve got to get out of here!” he exclaimed with abrupt anger in his voice. “You don’t know what sort of a place this is—what sort of men are centered around here! There’s a gang of the vilest murderers somewhere about Stovepipe Springs that ever saw the light of day! The whole place is a decoy-trap for the unwary—for people like you! If that town knew what my real name was, what my errand is here, my life wouldn’t be worth a plugged nickel.”

Startled by his vehemence, sobered by his words, the girl met his gaze for a moment, then frowned.

“Why do you speak this way?” she demanded calmly. “I think you’re far off the mark, Mr. Tompkins. I’ve met everybody in town since arriving yesterday. They’re good, simple people—ignorant if you like, but at heart really fine. I’m afraid you’re an un-American sort of person. Do you regard everybody outside of New York with the same savage intolerance? Do you think that because nobody speaks French in Stovepipe Springs, everybody is a poor hick?”

Tompkins stared at her for a minute.

“Good Lord—my dear girl, get me right!” he exclaimed. “I mean literally what I say. I don’t know what you’re talking about, but I know what I’m talking about!”

“What, then—bands of outlaws and robbers?” She smiled ironically, and the smile stung Tompkins.

“Something like that, yes.”

“Then I simply don’t believe you,” she said with quiet finality. “Shall we go back now?”

“As you prefer. I hope you don’t have any cause to remember my warning with regret.”

To this she made no response, and they returned in silence to the hotel, Tompkins inwardly cursing his very undiplomatic way of presenting the warning. Upon nearing the hostelry, they encountered Mose Pincus, an earnest, alert little man who kept the general store, and he immediately cornered Miss Gilman with a request that she send all orders for chicken equipment through his agency. Tompkins went on alone to his own place, and when the lamp was lighted, he picked up his newspaper and went definitely to work. He knew what to look for now.

It was a Los Angeles paper, which he had bought on leaving the railroad at Meteorite because it was the latest sheet to be had. Now he searched the advertising columns, and after a moment chanced upon the very thing he sought. It was a large display advertisement, and after reading it, Tompkins clipped it out and then perused it more carefully and with keen appreciation. It read as follows:

CHICKEN RANCHERS
Come To Chuckwalla County!

No California fogs in this State; an ideal climate for chickens. Stovepipe Springs will welcome you. Local demand for eggs is heavy. Not a chicken within a radius of thirty miles in one direction and 250 miles in all others.

Off railroad but on State highway. Land from \$1 to \$50 per acre. Taxes so light they make you laugh. Correspondence invited. The Stovepipe Springs Chamber of Commerce will cooperate with you in every way; write the secretary, M. J. Crowfoot, First State Bank, Stovepipe Springs.

Putting the clipping away in his pocket, Tompkins got his pipe going and puffed for a while in frowning reflection. At length he sighed.

“Well, I suppose I can’t help her any—and I don’t know that I blame her for feeling as she does. To all appearance, this is a harmless little desert town and nothing else. I don’t even know that I’m right; haven’t a darned bit of proof to lay before her! But this Sidewinder Crowfoot sure lays a clever trap for suckers. Not a chicken around here, eh? He’s dead right, at that. What with coyotes, skunks, lynx and snakes, not to mention rats, any chickens would have a hard struggle. And the advertisement doesn’t mention water. Hm! I wonder how many poor flies have been drawn into this spider-net and sucked dry? And I wonder how many poor devils have gone out into that desert around here and never come back—like my brother Alec Ramsay?”

He puffed on, a somber frown darkening his keen eyes.

CHAPTER III

When Percival Henry J. Tompkins, mammalogist, walked into the First State Bank the next morning, he wore his best professorial air.

Moses J. Crowfoot, more generally known as Sidewinder, was his own banking force, and sat alone at a desk behind a grill which hedged off most of the bank. He was not afraid of robbers. No professional robber in the combined areas of Nevada, Utah and New Mexico would have dreamed of tackling the Stovepipe Springs bank, because Sidewinder Crowfoot was an old-timer who knew his business. Three amateurs had undertaken the job two years previously, and each of them received a forty-five slug squarely between the eyes.

The nickname was highly appropriate. Like his namesake, Crowfoot was highly venomous, he struck without warning, and he struck to kill; he was not a pleasant man, and he did not care to be pleasant. He lived alone. In the old dim days, Sidewinder had been a monte dealer in the Alcora Dance Hall; when the law clamped down on gambling, he had owned the Oasis Saloon; when the law clamped down on liquor, he had gone into banking. Some people would claim this was natural evolution.

He looked up at his visitor without speaking. Tompkins, entirely ignoring what had happened upon his arrival in town, came forward to the grill and smiled.

"This, I believe, is Mr. Crowfoot? I have been referred to you, as owner of the local garage. I desire to rent an automobile with which to survey near-by areas of the great American desert and pursue my investigations of the fauna—"

"Can't be done," said Sidewinder curtly. "We only got one rent car, and that's engaged. The other's a demonstrator, and we can't rent it or we'd never sell it."

"Ah! Thank you very much indeed," said Tompkins, and turned to the door. "In that case I had better buy it."

Before Sidewinder could call up any suitable retort, his visitor was gone to the garage next door; before Sidewinder could get there, money had changed hands and the shiny flivver reposing on the garage floor was the property of the Professor. Finding himself too late to prevent the purchase, Crowfoot put on his best air and engaged Tompkins in amiable talk, while the mechanic in charge filled the car with oil and gas and put in half a dozen water-bags.

"Hassayamp was telling me," observed the banker, "that you were askin' about a man named Ramsay. Seems to me like I recall the feller. Friend of yours?"

"A mere acquaintance," said Tompkins. "I met him at Palmdale, on the other side of the Mohave, while I was engaged in a study of the curious flora over there. Poor fellow, I felt sorry for him! He had lost one eye, and was afflicted with tuberculosis, and was at the age of sixty-five with not a cent in the world. He mentioned that he thought of coming in this direction to locate, having been here some twenty years ago during the mining boom."

"Oh!" said Sidewinder, with a relieved air. "Then it aint the same one. The one who went through here last year was a right young feller, red-haired and active. If I was you, Perfesser, I'd get loose of that Sagebrush. He aint only a desert rat, and folks tell mighty queer stories about him. All desert rats are queer in the head, you know."

"Why—er—that's very good of you, indeed!" said Tompkins gratefully. "Still, I have engaged the man, perhaps heedlessly, and must keep my promises for a certain time. I suppose, if I were to deposit my money and valuables with you, I'd be in no danger!"

“Right good plan,” said Sidewinder. “Step into the bank, and we’ll arrange it.”

Tompkins obediently retraced his steps, and when he displayed his two certified checks and his roll of loose bills, the banker became almost affable. Tompkins, meantime, was quite conscious that he was being closely studied, and did not hesitate to shove out all his chips and play the game of innocence. He agreed at once that the best scheme was to deposit all his money in care of Mr. Crowfoot, taking the latter’s receipt for it, and his air of eager gratitude was pleasant to behold.

“Whom would you recommend as a guide?” he inquired, when the transaction was completed. “After a trip with the person I have engaged, I might find it advisable to take another cicerone.”

“Right good idea,” said Mr. Crowfoot. “Hassayamp’s a good man— I tell you! There’s a feller will be in town next week. I’ll speak to him about it. Harrison, his name is—Mesquite Harrison.”

A slight pallor crossed the face of Tompkins, but he responded gratefully:

“By all means. Kindly engage him for me. I shall expect to use him at once, and thank you again for your kindness in the matter.”

“Don’t mention it,” said Sidewinder, and grinned to himself when his caller had departed. There was no longer any doubt that the Professor was what Hassayamp proclaimed him—a natural-born fool, like all bug-hunters. No one else would have handed over his money so readily.

Tompkins walked back to the hotel, and on the doorstep of his own cell found Sagebrush awaiting him. Inside, with the door closed, the desert rat chuckled.

“I reckon Hassayamp is right uppity over losin’ the chance to guide ye, Perfesser,” he announced. “But you done jest right. Hassayamp don’t know nothin’ about the desert.”

“No?” Tompkins lighted his pipe. “He lives here, doesn’t he?”

“Sho! He’s like José Garcia; let a vinegaroon git on him, and he throws a fit. No sir, Hassayamp jest plumb aint a desert man. He knows a sight o’ locations. Him and Sidewinder have sold a hell of a lot, too. Folks buy a place and set awhile, and next time I come in to town, they’re gone. Thar’s cabins all over betwixt yere and the Chuckwallas, where the ground has been sold and deserted. Hassayamp hires fellers to prove up on homestead rights, then buys the homestead off’m ’em and sells it again. He aint no guide, though. All he knows is roads. Git him off’m the road, or show him a t’rant’ler in his blankets, and gosh! Hassayamp is worse’n a tenderfoot. Say, I heard a good one on him this trip!”

Sagebrush chuckled again, spat on the floor, and scratched his whiskers.

“Met up with two fellers in the Salt Pans—ol’ Hardrock Miller from Tucson, and another feller. Hardrock used to be a Mormon ’fore they run him out of Arizona for bein’ too durned Mormonistic. He tells me Hassayamp used to be one too, away over to St. John’s, ’bout fifteen year back. ’Cordin’ to him, Hassayamp vanished real sudden one night, and so did all the money belongin’ to the church, and several head of hosses belongin’ to other folks. May not be true, though. Hardrock Miller saved hisself from bein’ lynched once by tellin’ the truth, and aint never done it since. Afraid his luck’d turn, maybe.”

Tompkins smiled. “Know a fellow by the name of Mesquite Harrison?”

“Do I?” Sagebrush scowled and spat again. “Is that skunk in town? Then by gosh, I’m goin’ for him!” The desert rat shot a hand to his waistband, where there was a swelling about the size of a revolver. “Why, Perfesser, Mesquite is rank pizen! Yessir. I’ve knowed him to rob

prospectors of their grub—it's a fact! And once he changed the signs over in the Salt Pans, so's a poor pilgrim took his team the wrong way and durned near died, and that skunk Mesquite robbed him bare. By gosh, anybody who changes water-hole signs in the Salt Pans gits shot on sight! Mesquite knows it, too. He don't come to town when I'm due, usually—”

“He's not here now,” said Tompkins. “I heard the name mentioned; that's all. I've bought a flivver, and I wish you'd purchase all supplies necessary and get them loaded into the back seat. Strap her down good. We can get off in the morning.”

“Gosh!” said Sagebrush, a far-away look in his eyes. “It'll seem lonesome as hell without them burros—well, s'pose I got to do it. Where we goin' to?”

“Don't know yet.”

“I'd sort o' like to look over them ledges jest this side the Chuckwallas—over by Pinecate Cañon,” said the desert rat thoughtfully.

“Can we find any *crotalus cerastes* there?”

“I reckon so. Find most anything there.” Sagebrush inspected his employer curiously. “Say, you aint so bad a feller when you git off to yourself, Perfesser. You talk real human. Kind of put on dog when there's any folks around, don't you?”

Tompkins laughed. “I expect I do, Sagebrush. How about water over by that place you mentioned—Pinecate Cañon?”

“Plenty right now. Rains aint only jest quit. Another two weeks, and we wont find nary a drap. Cañon ought to look right pretty, too, with the flowers. The desert sure is handsome this time o' year. All the bugs comin' out, too, so's you'll feel to home. Lots o' tumble-bugs over by the mesa and cañon—that's how come it's called Pinecate, bein' the Mex name for tumble-bug.”

“Ever hear of a fellow named Ramsay, who was interested in mines around here?”

“Nope.” Sagebrush rose. “Well, I reckon I'll go git them supplies, then git my correspondence finished today. See you around sunup tomorrow.”

He departed. Tompkins, left alone, opened his two large grips and began to pack one of them for the trip. The larger part of the contents consisted of supplies such as could not be purchased in Stovepipe Springs; there was even a large alcohol stove with plentiful fuel. The packing finished, from a secret pocket inside the grip Tompkins took a letter and began to peruse it carefully, not for the first nor the tenth time. The envelope had been postmarked “Stovepipe Springs” and bore a date of a year past. It was the final portion of the letter which attracted the rereading of Tompkins, however.

Enclosed is the deed to the property. I am more than satisfied with the prospects of the location. You will notice that the mining rights revert to the State in most instances, but here I have bought the land outright so there is no question of mineral rights. A man called Mesquite Harrison owned it.

I have seldom seen a more beautiful spot, even after the desert rains, for it is filled with all kinds of flowers. What a pity that flowers and water cannot last! Halfway up the cañon there is a huge boulder of pink granite, split squarely in two, with three piñons growing out of the split, and a tiny spring trickling from the piñons. Really a marvel! I understand the spring never fails, though it is too tiny to be of much use. Well, good-by for this time. I'm going to spend two months at the location, and if it has any gold I'll know by that time.

Your loving brother,

ALEC.

Tompkins folded the letter and put it away again, then sat down and sucked at his empty pipe.

“Poor Alec—what happened to him, I wonder!” he muttered. “And not a thing to go on. Deed to the property lost. No way of finding its location. Never recorded the deed. How was that deed lost? The letter was mailed here. It must have been in the letter. Therefore—but I’ve no proof. Hell! Once let me get a grip on something definite!”

He seized his glasses impatiently, donned them, and left the room. Outside he almost ran into Miss Gilman. She greeted him brightly.

“Good morning, sir! I hope your digestion is better today?”

“No, it’s worse.” Tompkins smiled. “Please remember to say nothing of my remarks.”

“I’ll have no chance,” she returned. “We’re leaving after breakfast tomorrow. Mr. Foster—otherwise Hassayamp—is taking me over toward those hills in the east. He knows of a splendid location for my chicken-ranch. Pinecate Mesa—isn’t that a romantic name?”

“Very,” said Tompkins gravely. “Very romantic. It means tumblebug. I may be going in that direction myself, so I’ll hope to see you again.”

And before she could say yea or nay to this, he went on his way.

CHAPTER IV

Sunrise found Haywire serving an early feed to Tompkins and Sagebrush, while the laden flivver rested out in front of the hotel awaiting them. Tompkins expected to drive the flivver—in fact, he was forced to drive it. When they had about finished their breakfast, Hassayamp appeared, yawning.

“You gents sure are industrious critters,” he observed casually. “Which way you headin’ for?”

“West,” said Tompkins promptly. “We shall impersiflate the great and boundless expanses of the arid lands beneath the setting sun.”

“That’s good.” Hassayamp bent a significant eye on Sagebrush. “It’s right healthy out in the flat country. I got to go east my own self today. Well, so long, and good luck to you, Puffesser! Hope you find lots of bugs.”

“Travelin’ with me,” said Sagebrush, “the Perfesser wont find nothing else.”

“I believe it,” returned Hassayamp acidly. “I sure believe it.”

“Meanin’ what?” demanded Sagebrush, one hand slipping toward his waistband.

“Meanin’ that you sure know the desert, o’ course! What else would I mean?”

Sagebrush grunted and departed, while Hassayamp muttered inaudibly and glared.

Tompkins climbed into the flivver; Sagebrush climbed in after him; and with a roar the little car started out of town. One mile north of Stovepipe Springs the main highway turned abruptly to the right, for the Chuckwalla range, and beyond it, the civilized purlieus of Chuckwalla City, thirty miles away. The desert highway continued on ahead, and ran, a flea-bitten track, straight over the northern horizon.

“I suppose,” asked Tompkins as they rattled out of town, “you never happened to meet up with a large pink granite boulder, halfway up a cañon, split in two, with three piñons growing out of it, and a little spring at the foot of the piñons?”

“Nope,” said Sagebrush after a moment. “Nope, can’t say that I have, but that don’t signify much. Aint no piñon trees around yere except toward the Chuckwallas. Pink granite is most anywheres. I’m right disappointed you aint headin’ east. I’d kind o’ set my notions on looking over that there Pinecate section.”

Tompkins chuckled. Then, as they approached the turn in the highway, he swung the car to the right and headed for the distant peaks of the Chuckwallas.

“That’s where we’re going, Sagebrush.”

“How come you told Hassayamp—”

“Because I was telling Hassayamp.”

Sagebrush grinned, got out a black plug of navy cut, and bit happily at it.

“You and me sure is goin’ to get on, Perfesser. Whoop her up!” Then he grunted. “You heard what he said ’bout it bein’ healthy out to the desert? Durn him! Durn him and Sidewinder and all the rest o’ them galoots! They been tryin’ to keep me out o’ the Chuckwallas for quite a spell back. I bet Hassayamp’s got some claims over there hisself.”

“Why have they been trying to keep you out of there?”

“Dad-blamed if I know. Jest plumb ornery, I reckon. Maybe they’re afraid I’d meet some o’ the pilgrims they gets located over there, and talk. They allus locates some over there this time o’ year, when there’s lots o’ water and things look good.”

Tompkins, who had removed his yellow blinders, squinted out at the desert with frowning eyes, and drove on in silence. He was reasonably sure that in Sagebrush Beam he had chanced upon the one man who might be of incalculable value to him. However, he was not disposed to take any premature chances. His own real business here was a matter for himself alone.

The flivver ate up the miles rapidly, ever advancing upon the Chuckwalla hills, which appeared to recede as it approached. To one acquainted with the desert only from the window of a railroad car, this morning's ride would have been a tremendous surprise. Under close inspection, what appeared to be ground flat as a billiard table was shown to be in reality dissected by almost invisible arroyos and crowned by slight rises. The blinding white desert glare was in fact a spectrum of brilliancy, only visible to accustomed eyes. The eastern horizon was barred by the Chuckwallas, a rather high range which on their western slopes presented only a bleakly dun expanse streaked with purple. To west and north were scattered buttes in splendid colorings of scarlet and lavender and gold, while the patches of cacti across the desert floor made brilliant carpet-spots of vivid green, sprinkled with the raw yet blending hues of an Oriental rug. Here were ocatilla sprays, towering up many feet in glowing blossom; here were opuntias gorgeous with red and yellow clusters, gaunt Joshua trees gay with bloom—all the brief flower-time of the desert was at its height. In a few more days the blossoms would be gone, the myriad flowers springing from the earth would be withered, and the white glare would break only over the brownish-green verdure of brush and cactus in summer garb.

Hot as that glare might be, the motion of the car kept its occupants comfortable; and the flivver itself, specially equipped with water-pump for desert use, made no complaint as the miles dropped behind. Now and again Tompkins asked a question, Sagebrush responding curtly. Garrulous as he was at times, the old desert rat was for the most part silent as the desert itself, whose quiet was broken only by the angry chattering of cactus wrens or the occasional shrill call-whistle of a thrasher.

Twenty miles had been covered, and the Chuckwalla slopes, apparently as distant as ever, were now broken up into foothills and deep cañons, all a dead dun glare under the white sun, when Sagebrush touched the arm of the driver.

"Half a mile ahead the trail branches off to Pinecate Mesa. That's it, off to the left—reg'lar saddletop. Look out for a dry wash, soon's ye leave the road."

Tompkins looked at Pinecate. This was a great gaunt saddleback that ran off into the range; he set it down as about ten miles distant, and well to the left. The cañon which gave access to the mesa itself was, as Sagebrush informed him, on the north side and therefore out of sight at present.

The turnout was almost invisible, but Tompkins caught it, swerved the car into the looser sand, and was aware of a grunt of assent from beside him. Then he jammed on the brakes and slid into a "dry" wash which at the moment was a foot deep in water, splashed through, and climbed out on the other side.

"Hold on a minute," spoke up Sagebrush. "Let's have a look at this yere trail."

The car halted, and both men got out. Here, off the highway and sheltered by the mesquite on either hand, the loose earth would bear any "sign" indefinitely, for nothing less than a sandstorm would wash over the tracks. Sagebrush examined the sand attentively, then expectorated and turned to Tompkins, who had donned his yellow blinders as a protection against the glare.

"What d'ye make of it?"

“Automobile,” said Tompkins. “How long ago, I can’t say.”

Sagebrush grunted, at this, and pointed to a series of scroll-like markings which followed the right-hand tire-rut. Then he indicated further prints in the shape of a Maltese cross, which had obviously been made over the scrolls.

“Flivver come along yere yestiddy,” he stated. “Last night a sidewinder come along and follered the ruts. Then this mornin’ early a roadrunner come along likewise.”

“All obvious but the time, Sherlock,” said Tompkins gravely. “How do you know it was yesterday and not last week?”

“’Cause I seen that thar cuss Hassayamp ridin’ out this-a-way yestiddy mornin’ as I was comin’ in to town to mail my postcards. Some skullduggery goin’ on.”

“Hm!” Tompkins frowned. “Sagebrush, that mesa up ahead would make a fine place for a chicken-ranch, wouldn’t it?”

“Hell of a fine place,” affirmed the desert rat, squinting at the long saddleback. “Danged fine place, Perfesser! Every wildcat and coyote in the Chuckwallas would be pointin’ that way, inside of a week. If a gent was feelin’ real philanthropic and wantin’ to help out the pore desert critters, I’d say start him a chicken-and-egg factory right up yonder. Yessir. That’s like Haywire Johnson done, time he was livin’ down to Meteorite. He started him a egg-ranch—done it to get ahead of some other folks and kep’ it real quiet. Got all his chickens clear from Phoenix and Yuma, danged near a hull carload of ’em, and set up incubators and all that truck. Then he begun to figger on how rich he’d be. Every oncet in a while he’d go out to look for eggs, but dad blame if he got any. He fed them chickens on everything from ground-up lizards to eggplant, and nary a egg come along. Finally he got desp’rit and called in help—and durned if all them birds wasn’t roosters! Yessir, not a female chicken in the lot. That’s how come Haywire went broke and had to come over yere to work for Hassayamp.”

Tompkins grinned despite himself. Then he sobered.

“Look here, Sagebrush. Remember that young woman at the hotel? They’ve framed up a deal on her. They’re trying to sell her a chicken-ranch on this mesa.”

“Sounds like them city fellers. Dad blame, they’d rob a dyin’ man! Serves the female right, too, for havin’ that much money. Females ain’t got no right to have money. Oncet when I was married and livin’ down to Umatilla, my ol’ woman got ten dollars from one of her relations and went to Phoenix, and durned if she didn’t spend it all in three days. When I trounced her for it, she up and run off with a Mormon from Yuma, and that’s the last of her. Twenty years ago that was, and I been happy ever since, and ain’t looked twice at no females.”

“That’s a novel argument, certainly,” said Tompkins. “But I’m going to try and keep Miss Gilman from getting robbed. Are you with me?”

Sagebrush rubbed his whiskers, squinted at the sand, expectorated over an unwary Chuckwalla lizard, and then responded without enthusiasm.

“Nope! Quicker that there female gits skun and gits out o’ this country, better off I’ll be. I don’t hanker after no females spoilin’ the scenery. Besides which, I aint pinin’ to start no argument with Sidewinder Crowfoot and his crowd, not without they force me into it. Leave the other feller alone, I says, so long’s he don’t crowd ye none.”

“All right, then,” said Tompkins briskly, and turned to the car. “Let’s get moving.”

They drove on in renewed silence. Tompkins had a new angle on his companion, and was not sure that he liked it; at all events, he perceived that Sagebrush knew his own mind and was not to be depended upon as an assistant under the present completion of things. The desert rat had a certain peculiar philosophy of his own, like all old prospectors, and arguments against it would be as useless as the teeth of a coyote against the shell of a tortoise. So Tompkins held his peace.

The flat desert gave way to hills and depressions as they drew closer to the range, and by the action of the engine Tompkins knew that they had been on a steady climb. Also, he began to sight scattered piñon trees, indicating a higher altitude, and was conscious that they were following an ancient road. Presently the car was climbing along a well defined valley, which Sagebrush called Mint Cañon.

“Ol’ stamp-mill ahead of us,” he announced. “Fellers used to bring quartz down to it from all around, in the ol’ days. Got to leave the car there. Job Carter put up that there mill; four-stamp crusher, she was—dad blame, how Job did like his lick! Used to make mint juleps in a bucket. That’s how come he growed mint. Job, he used to whiff the mint and then throw down the lick while he held his breath. One night he wakes up with a pain in his stummick and mixes him a julep in the dark, and got him the cyanide bottle by mistake, and he’s buried somewhere back o’ the mill right now. That’s what comes o’ not stoppin’ to appreciate your lick as it goes down.”

They rounded a low hill and halted by the remains of the stamp-mill—a structure of weather-beaten boards, open in front, with the remains of a shed adjoining. The machinery was rusted and strewn about the place haphazard, and the whole place was the epitome of desolation. To one side was a board floor—the only relic of what had once been a roadside saloon, adjoining the mill.

Sagebrush pointed out that by leaving the car here in shelter of the shed, they could then shoulder packs and cover the last three miles to Pinecate Cañon on foot. The Professor took one look at the duffle in the rear of the car, and threw in the gears.

“Not by a blamed sight!” he said cheerfully. “Looks like Hassayamp’s car has gone ahead, so we’ll do likewise. Did I mention that Hassayamp is bringing Miss Gilman out today to look over the cañon for a chicken-ranch site?”

“Dad blame it!” groaned Sagebrush. “Then I’m goin’ to take my pick and go look over the north end o’ the mesa. You can pester around that female if ye like, Perfesser, but not me. Send up a smoke when they’re gone and I’ll come in.”

“Agreed,” and Tompkins laughed as he sent the car ahead in the faint tracks left by the other flivver.

CHAPTER V

Noon was past and over. Tompkins, ensconced in a niche of the cañon, was delightedly observing the scene before him. Sagebrush was gone. The flivver was laid up out of sight a half-mile away in a thicket of cactus and piñon.

It was peaceful here in the cañon, and hot. Tompkins lay shaded by an overhanging rock which concealed him and enjoyed himself while he waited. He was a third of the way up the cañon, which wound upward for another mile before opening on the mesa. Here it was fairly wide, and the sun had excellent chances to radiate from the bolders, and the spring life of the place was warmed into activity. Patches of cacti and jack-pine abounded. No water was in sight, but Tompkins had a water-bag within reach.

He lay perfectly quiet, watching a trade-rat whose nest lay in a cranny of the rocks just to one side, and a young coyote which was vainly endeavoring to investigate the rat and nest. It was obvious that this particular rat had migrated from the desert below, for while his nest was composed of pebbles and sticks and all manner of queer objects, it was protected after the peculiar fashion of his desert brethren. Two runways entered the nest, itself nearly out of sight under the rocks; and about these runways, laid with mathematical precision, were hundreds of terrible *opuntia* joints.

To Tompkins, as to every other naturalist, it was an unsolved mystery how the pack-rat, with delicate and unprotected paws, could handle these joints of cactus. No other living creature can face the *cholla* cactus, whose spines, as the Indians declare, jump at one, inflicting acute agony; even the rattler avoids it gingerly. Here for a space of ten feet around the nest were heaped the matted *cholla* joints, while the pack-rat who owned the establishment sat out in full sight and insulted the hovering coyote with angry taunts.

That the coyote was young and hungry was obvious, or he would not have attempted to molest so well-entrenched a rat. Oblivious to the presence of Tompkins, who sat perfectly motionless, he charged again and again on those defenses. Each time his courage failed at the last moment and he would draw off, snarling and snapping in futile rage, before his nose touched the *cholla*.

In a cool niche between two rocks, in sight of Tompkins above but concealed from the furious coyote, lay a fifteen-inch sidewinder, safely sheltered from the deadly rays of the sun, his brown-and-gray length practically invisible against the rocks. He lay stretched out, head lifted ready to strike, a venomous and malignant thing beyond all words with his horned features and green jewels of eyes. The coyote, unconscious of this lurking death, continued backward and forward, now rushing and now sending a flurry of sand flying in his anger. One such flurry had aroused the sidewinder, and Tompkins waited for the inevitable, since the coyote was drawing closer and closer to the unseen death.

Now it came, with such rapidity that the eye could scarcely follow. Pawing the sand, the coyote came sidewise toward the niche of the sidewinder, then went forward in another rush, stopped short, snarled, and took courage again. His leap brought him past the niche; and the sidewinder, after the fashion of his kind, struck without warning or coiling. There is nothing swifter than the strike of a sidewinder—but the coyote saw the lurking death just in time. A frantic yap of fear broke from his jaws. He gave a desperate twist sidewise in mid-leap—a

doubling-up of his body that evaded the reptile's blow—and in mad panic came down and leaped again, blindly. He landed squarely in the matted *cholla*.

Agonized howls rent the air, and sticks and bones and odd objects from the pack-rat's nest were hurled about; the coyote became a whirlwind of furry agony from which proceeded howl upon howl of anguish. Then, tail between legs, wailing to high heaven with every leap, the wretched coyote went down the cañon like a streak and was gone.

Tompkins caught up the stone under his hand and hurled it, then rose. Crushed, the sidewinder lay quivering. A glittering object had caught the eye of Tompkins, and now he raked it forth from the *cholla* with a long stick. It was one of the mass of objects which had formed the rat's nest, flung about by the agonized flurry of the coyote. When he had it within reach, Tompkins picked it up and stood staring at it, incredulity and horror mingling in his eyes. It was a small tarnished cigarette case of silver, and upon it he made out the initials "A. R."

"The case I gave Alec for Christmas two years ago!"

The words died on his lips. It was the property of his vanished brother Alec Ramsay. Holding the case in his hand, he stared over the desolate, empty cañon until the heat of the sun roused him. He stooped, donned his pith helmet, and then looked again at the metal case. Mechanically he pressed the spring, which refused to work. Taking out his knife, Tompkins pried the case open—and beneath the spring-holder discovered a folded paper, on which was scrawled in pencil the writing of his brother.

His blurred eyes cleared. At the top was written:

Send this to Pat Ramsay, Glendale Apts. Denver.

And below, scrawled more sharply, but ending with an uncertain dash:

Dear Pat: Forgot to mail this. Too late. They got me. Shot through lungs. 3 men in party. Bad gang here. All located Hourglass Cañon, N. E. of here. Box cañon. Cholos and whites. Sidewinder—

That was all. Lips compressed, Tompkins read and reread this fateful message, which now he knew to be a message from the dead. Then, in that cold certainty, he opened the folded paper and found it to be a deed, made out by Mesquite Harrison to Alec Ramsay.

"By glory—the deed to Alec's mining property!" he ejaculated, as he conned the writing therein. Then, when he had finished reading, he folded up the deed, replaced it in the cigarette case, slipped the case into his pocket, and stood staring up the winding reaches of the green cañon.

That property was located in this very cañon. Stunned as he was by surprise heaped on surprise, he realized this only too clearly. His brother was dead. The property in question had been bought from Sidewinder Crowfoot for whom Mesquite Harrison had acted as a blind. It lay somewhere up there toward the mesa—marked by that split pink granite boulder, perfectly described in the deed as to bounds and extent. It was this identical cañon for which he had come searching so blindly. Had he gone on around the next bend, he would have found the boulder with its piñon trees.

Tompkins sank down and took his head between his hands, striving hard for sanity. His first impulses were not sane at all; they were murderous. His brain was seething in tumult. He was not red-headed for nothing.

By slow degrees his thoughts settled down into grim coherence. Now he knew what he had long ago presumed to be the case—that his brother was dead. But here in his pocket was evidence as to who was responsible. There was no direct evidence against Sidewinder Crowfoot, but Tompkins brushed this impatiently aside; he was perfectly convinced that Crowfoot was the man behind everything going on here.

“At the same time, I’ve got to be sane—got to be!” he thought desperately, fighting for self-control. “I can’t go off half-cocked. They’ve got brains. They’ll get me if I let out a peep. Nothing but my own brains will save me now, and if I don’t go slow, I’m a goner sure! This changes my whole program. Now I know everything—and it’s up to me to get busy. First thing to do is to get back to town and get this deed recorded—send it in by registered mail. The stage goes out in the morning, so any time will do for that. Chuckwalla City is the county seat; might run over there in the flivver, only I’d better see Sidewinder Crowfoot, get my money, and sever connections. And I’ll want a rifle, before I go up against that crowd in Hourglass Cañon, wherever it is. Then—”

He was abruptly startled from his reflections by an eager hail, and looked up to see Miss Gilman approaching, with Hassayamp trailing behind her. He had forgotten the girl, and now an exclamation of dismay broke from him. Then he rose, donning glasses and helmet again, and nervously lighted up his pipe.

“We didn’t see you till we were almost on top of you,” exclaimed Miss Gilman. “Were you asleep? What makes your face look so white?”

“A touch o’ sun, madam. No, I was not asleep. I was watching the peregrinations of yonder pack-rat. Not so fast, Mr. Foster—there is a large *crotalus cerastes* just by your left foot.”

“A which?” demanded Hassayamp, by no means pleased to see the professor.

“I believe you would term the reptile a sidewinder—”

“Oh, my gosh!” Hassayamp saw the dead snake and did an acrobatic stunt that removed him some distance away, while a revolver came out in his hand.

“Don’t shoot!” said Tompkins. “He’s dead. I killed him.”

“Why in hell didn’t you say so first?” snapped Hassayamp angrily. “What you doin’ up this-a-way? Thought you was headin’ into the sink-holes?”

“I changed my mind,” said Tompkins. He showed Miss Gilman the pack-rat’s nest. “That’s worth seeing. I have a particular reason for asking you to remember it. But may I inquire whither you two are heading?”

“Up the cañon to look at a chicken-ranch site,” said the girl, glancing from him to the nest and back again. “Will you come along? Or don’t you feel well? Really, you looked almost ghastly at first, Mr. Tompkins!”

“Reckon the climb would be too blamed hard on the Puffesser, ma’am,” struck in Hassayamp, who did not desire company. “And there aint no bugs up there.”

“All the more honor in discovering some, sir! I accept your invitation, madam, and shall accompany you a little way.”

“We’ve brought lunch along, if you’ll join us,” invited Miss Gilman, starting off again with Tompkins at her side. He glanced around and saw that Hassayamp had paused to wipe a

dripping brow and bite off a fresh chew, and was momentarily out of earshot. Swiftly, he took the cigarette-case from his pocket and passed it to the girl.

“Open this and read it—quick, now! I found it in that rat’s nest. When I tell you my real name is Pat Ramsay, you’ll be able to guess why I came here—and whether my warning was well founded. Read the deed carefully, then see whether the place you’re going to buy corresponds with it. Quickly! I’ll hold this rascal engaged. Read and give it back to me. I must get back to town at once.”

With this rapid utterance, he turned abruptly from the girl and walked back to Hassayamp, halting the latter’s advance with upraised hand.

“Mr. Foster!” he said solemnly. “May I inquire, sir—ah, that is a very interesting creature on your collar, very interesting indeed!”

Hassayamp screwed his head to look at himself, but could see nothing.

“What is it?” he demanded nervously.

“A beautiful little creature, peculiar to our deserts,” said Tompkins in bland accents. “Undoubtedly it has sought refuge from the sun under your shirt-collar. You know, of course, that the *solpugid* is really an insect, having tracheal tubes instead of the spider’s book lungs —”

“A spider!” exclaimed Hassayamp. “Git it off’m me, Puffesser, quick!”

“Not a spider at all, my dear sir, and quite harmless, I assure you, despite local superstition. Ah, there it goes about your collar—no wonder the dear little creatures are called wind-scorpions or vinegaroons—”

“A *matavenado*—wow! My gosh, git him off’m me!” Hassayamp let out a yell and began to claw at himself. “I’m a dead man—git him off’m me—”

Tompkins seized him and brushed vigorously at his back.

“There—he’s gone. Pay no more attention to the matter, I implore you. I was about to ask whether you ever indulge in spiritous liquors, Mr. Foster? In such case, I have in my pocket a small vial of medicinal whisky. I understand that it is the custom in the desert to offer a drink —”

Hassayamp, who like many another man with slight experience of the harmless but frightful-looking vinegaroons believed them to be deadly creatures, was pale with emotion. And with more than emotion, too.

“If you got a drink, Puffesser,” he implored, “for gosh sake give it here! I swallered my plug.”

Tompkins produced a small pocket-flask and began to unscrew it. Hassayamp became yet more pale and agitated.

“Oh, gosh!” he groaned. “I’ll never eat no more tobacker—”

He reached out and took the flask. He sniffed it, and into his melancholic eyes came a glow of warmth and happiness. Tompkins beamed upon him, as he lifted the flask.

“I forgot to mention, Mr. Foster, that you must use your mustache as a strainer, because in that whisky I am preserving a very fine specimen of rock scorpion which I recently discovered, and I should be very sorry to have it lost—”

Hassayamp jerked the flask from his lips. He looked at the Professor with slowly distending eyes, then thrust the flask at him; and, with one agonized groan, retired among the near-by boulders.

Tompkins turned and rejoined Miss Gilman.

“Hassayamp will rejoin you shortly,” he said. “He unfortunately swallowed his chew of tobacco—an accident which will unnerve the strongest man, I assure you—”

The girl looked at him with strained and anxious eyes.

“But this—this paper! Do you mean to tell me that this man Alec Ramsay was your brother?”

Tompkins nodded quietly. “Yes, Miss Gilman. I came here to trace him—and by a stroke of sheer luck I found this cigarette-case. You have read that deed? Then I advise you to go on up the cañon and see if the description fits. I haven’t been up there. Be very careful to say nothing to Hassayamp about this. I’ll see you tonight, if I may, and we’ll talk over what is to be done. Now I must get off—you’d better keep a sharp lookout for rattlers among these rocks. Don’t wait for Hassayamp; he’ll be along as soon as he’s able. *Hasta la vista!*”

She made no response, but stood gazing after him thoughtfully as he turned and departed.

CHAPTER VI

As Tompkins climbed down the rock-strewn cañon toward the thorny growth which hid the flivver from sight, he came to a decision upon his course of action, forcing himself to determine upon a caution which was distasteful and yet necessary.

“*Hasta mañana!*” he resolved. “Until tomorrow, at least, I must remain Percival and so forth Tompkins—and then I’ll become Pat Ramsay once more, and get into action. The damned murderers! I wonder how many men have gone the way of poor Alec? I wonder how many people have been decoyed into this spiderweb to lose everything they had? Alec must have gone investigating, must have discovered the headquarters of this gang—and so they finished him. He’s probably lying somewhere up that cañon now. Well, time enough to look him up; just now I’ve got to watch my step mighty close.”

He was now assailed by the problem of locating Sagebrush, since he could not well run off with the car and leave his companion to rusticate in the desert solitudes. As he came in sight of the patch of piñon and cactus which enshrined the flivver, he caught no sign of the desert rat. He knew that he could recall Sagebrush with a smoke, but this he did not desire to do unless necessary.

When he drew near the clump, he perceived Hassayamp’s flivver on the other side, with strips of canvas flung over the tires to protect them. An unusual object beneath this car attracted his attention, and upon closer approach he discovered it to be no other than Sagebrush. He gave a hail, and the old desert rat crawled out into the sunlight.

An exclamation broke from Tompkins, and he hurried forward. The left arm of Sagebrush was out of its shirt-sleeve and roughly bandaged, and the bandage was dark with blood.

“What happened?” he demanded. “How’d you hurt yourself, old-timer?”

Sagebrush clawed at his whiskers and flung the inquirer a pained look.

“You got it plumb wrong, Perfesser,” he observed. “I aint been meanderin’ around these parts for fifteen year or more ’thout learnin’ how not to hurt myself. I aint no pilgrim, by gosh!”

“My humble apologies,” said Tompkins dryly. “May I ask, then, who hurt you?”

Sagebrush grinned.

“Another of these yere smart gents who think that ’cause a man’s a prospector and don’t wear galluses, he’s a babe in arms. I aint right certain as to this feller’s name, but when I was over to Mohave six months ago, I seen a picture of him in the sheriff’s office. Name was Joe Mendoza, or some such *cholo* name.”

The speaker enjoyed hugely the bewilderment of Tompkins.

“You don’t mean you had a scrap, Sagebrush?”

“Nope.” Sagebrush expectorated, wiped his lips and grinned. “I was peckin’ away at a ledge in a cañon a couple mile east of yere, when durned if that feller Mesquite Harrison didn’t come ridin’ down the cañon on a hoss! Yessir! Right on top o’ me, ’fore I seen him, too. He started throwin’ lead, and I covered up, and ’fore I could git into action, the coyote was gone. Then along come another feller that I hadn’t seen, this yere *cholo*, and durned if he didn’t pick on me too. But I was ready for him, you betcha! I gives him jest one crack from ol’ Betsy,”—here Sagebrush patted his waistband significantly,—“and he flops. I walks over to

him and seen he looked like this *cholo* Mendoza, and then I come back yere and set down to rest a spell.”

“Killed him?” asked Tompkins curtly.

“Hope so. He was some dead when I left him, anyhow, but you never can tell ’bout them *marihuana*-eaters. I knowed a *cholo* over to Mormon Wells, oncet, that et *marihuana* and smoked it likewise. Fin’ly one night he got plumb filled up on it, and jumped into the corral and begun to slash the hosses with his knife. Sheriff and two other fellers sat on the bars and pumped lead into him for as much as five minutes, but he didn’t quit till he’d slashed every hoss there; then he quit. Sheriff allowed he’d been dead with the first shot, but the *marihuana* had kep’ him goin’, same’s a rattler keeps a-twitchin’ till sundown after he’s dead. That there hop is powerful stuff, Perfesser.”

Tompkins stood staring at the desert rat for a moment. Then:

“The whole gang will be after you now, wont they?”

Sagebrush gave him a queer look. “How come you know so durned much, Perfesser?”

“That’s what I’m here to know,” snapped Tompkins suddenly. “Remember my asking you about a boulder with piñon trees growing out of it? Well, that place is up yonder in Pinecate Cañon. My name isn’t Tompkins at all. It’s Pat Ramsay. Last year my brother Alec came over here to spend a year in the desert and clear up his lungs. He bought a place and vanished—clear vanished, and couldn’t be traced. The last heard of him was from Stovepipe Springs. He wrote me about a place he had bought, describing that boulder. I found this up the cañon in a pack-rat’s nest. Look it over while I get the car ready.”

He gave the cigarette-case to the staring desert rat, then turned and went back to his own car. When he got this out of the brush, he removed most of the load and hid it securely among the trees. This done, he returned to Sagebrush, who was sitting on the running-board of Hassayamp’s car examining the deed.

“Anything I can do for your arm?” he asked.

“Nope. Bone aint hurt. Say, Perfesser, you’ve sure struck me all of a heap! Still, I knowed you wasn’t the danged fool you looked.”

“Thanks.” Tompkins laughed curtly. “Now, Sagebrush, I’m going to town, speak easy to everyone, and slide back here. First I want to investigate that Hourglass Cañon, wherever it is ___”

“I know where it is,” said Sagebrush, scratching his wealth of whiskers.

“All right. Where do you come in on the program? Want to be left out?”

Sagebrush produced his pipe and sucked at it. At length he made slow answer.

“Perfesser, there’s some folks around here jest pining to be left alone, and most gen’ally they gets left alone. That *cholo* Mendoza was one such, and killin’ him aint botherin’ me none. Most likely you’ve discounted Sidewinder Crowfoot?”

“My guess is that he’s the head of the whole gang.”

“Reckon ye aint far off. Now, so long as I aint bothered, I aint troublin’ nobody. My motter is never to bother a rattler what’s a gent and sounds his rattles—but if he acts like a sidewinder, then bash his head, and do it pronto! Yestiddy you asks if I’ll help keep this yere female from gettin’ skun, and I says no. I still aint int’rested nohow. But two of that danged crowd have set in on me with a cold deck this mornin’, and I’m plumb riled. Yessir, I’m riled!”

Sagebrush stood up. His bent figure straightened a trifle, and a sudden savage expression showed in his eyes, half masked behind the hairy growth of whiskers. In a flash all his dirt and squalor, all his unkempt and sun-bleached appearance, was gone in the eyes of Tompkins; he saw there a desert man who cared nothing for externals, but who could cope daily with the bitterest and most fearful forces of nature—and who was now ready to turn his inward strength against men. The drab and plodding desert rat suddenly showed, for one flashing moment, what unsuspected depths of character lay within him; and a rush of anger unbarred the floodgates of his reticence.

“Yessir, I’m riled! I’ve seen them goin’s-on and said nothin’. I’ve seen them outlaws rulin’ the roost around yere and said nothin’. ‘Twan’t no skin off’m my nose. I hadn’t no call to butt in. I’ve seen folks come in yere right happy, and seen ’em go out skun and mis’able and busted. I’ve seen one feller after another come in yere with the law two jumps behind him, and he goes over to Hourglass Cañon and lives happy. No law reaches in yere; nobody dast to interfere; and nobody knows about it anyhow. Stovepipe Springs, dad blame it, is jest a blind! If any law-off’cer comes pirootin’ around, he gits steered plumb careful and goes away ’thout learnin’ nothin’. But now, by gosh, I’m riled! Yessir. Perfesser, I’m with ye six ways from Sunday. Them skunks have sold us chips in this yere game, and by gosh I’ll play them chips till hell freezes over! Name your ante, Perfesser, and let’s go.”

Sagebrush relaxed. He stuck his pipe in his pocket, brought out his plug and bit off a large section. Tompkins, taking the cigarette case and pocketing it, nodded.

“Good. I’m going to get a rifle in town and come back tomorrow morning without anyone suspecting what I have in mind. Then I’ll be Pat Ramsay once more. Want to go to town with me?”

“Reckon not,” said Sagebrush reflectively. “Mesquite was headin’ for town, and him and me would sure collide. That might spoil your hand. And say! I remember that brother o’ yours. I seen him with Mesquite one time. He looked a heap like you do ’thout them spec’s and all.”

Tompkins produced his pocket flask, opened it and held it out.

“Here’s to our luck, Sagebrush! Good hunting!”

With a grunt of delight, Sagebrush lifted the flask and absorbed his share of the contents; Tompkins finished it off, undisturbed by any thought of rock scorpions, eyed the empty glass container, and with a laugh tossed it into the clump of trees.

“Then I’m off. I’ll be back in the morning. Have to send that deed to be recorded. Anything you want from town?”

Sagebrush wiped his lips and nodded.

“Yep. There’s jest one feller there ye can trust—Haywire Johnson, up to the hotel. Register that deed and send it by him and tell him to shet up about it. Otherwise, that durned Hassayamp will poke his nose into it. Then tell Haywire to give you that there gun he’s keepin’ for me. I don’t aim to carry more’n one gun these days, not havin’ much use for it, and Haywire has been keepin’ my other one. I’ll mosey up this yere cañon and have breakfast ready for ye in the mornin’. Git out early.”

With another nod, Tompkins climbed into his car, started the engine, and started away. He knew well enough that Sagebrush would carefully avoid meeting Hassayamp and Miss Gilman.

What most stirred in his mind, however, as he headed for town, was that mention of his brother and Mesquite Harrison—and Mesquite was now in town. Taken in conjunction with Crowfoot's recommendation, here was a chance not to be missed.

"I'll sure interview Mr. Harrison and give him the time of his life before I'm done with him!" thought Tompkins, and he glanced at the sun. "Hm! I can get to town and clean up everything before supper. Then I'll want to see Miss Gilman. She must be persuaded to get out of here at once. Hm! Queer how old Sagebrush showed up. To all appearance, he's a comic-supplement character; put him on a city street and he'd gather a crowd—but how many of that crowd would last a week with him on the Mohave? These smart Alecs back East who think Europe is better than America and who part their hair the way the Prince of Wales does it, and who look on everyone west of Newark, N. J. with supreme contempt—wouldn't I like to see 'em get out in the desert with old Sagebrush, though! They'd find out what sort of man it was who made this country what she is."

It did not occur to him that in undertaking to play a lone hand against the Hourglass Cañon gang, he was likewise carrying out certain traditions of Americanism.

CHAPTER VII

The First State Bank of Stovepipe Springs had no banking hours, but was open whenever Sidewinder Crowfoot was there. It was nearly supper-time when Percival Henry J. Tompkins entered; and Sidewinder gazed at him in astonishment.

"Thought you were off bug-hunting!"

Tompkins shook his head sadly.

"I regret to say, sir, that the man whom I had engaged proved to be an unworthy rascal. I refer to Mr. Beam. In common parlance, he was drunk, insisted on taking me in the contrary direction to that which I desired, and even threatened me with a revolver. I abandoned him in the desert, but had I not encountered Miss Gilman and Mr. Foster, I might never have found my way back to town. Here is your receipt, sir, and I shall have to withdraw my money temporarily until I can recompense Mr. Foster for his assistance and make certain purchases. Tomorrow I hope to start off again with a new guide."

The glittering gray eyes of Sidewinder were masked for a moment, then shot up.

"That's right good news!" he exclaimed. "That feller I recommended to you, Mesquite Harrison, is here in town right now. Want to see him?"

"By all means!" said Tompkins gratefully. "If he can come to the hotel later on this evening, I shall be very glad—or, let us say, early tomorrow morning. I shall be up with the sun, and I trust early rising will not discommode him?"

"None to mention," said Sidewinder, and took an envelope from his safe. "Here's your money. Bring back what you got left tomorrow, and we'll take care of it."

"Thank you—thank you very much," said Tompkins, and departed.

Halting at the garage to see that fresh supplies of fuel were put aboard the flivver, which he left standing in the street, he walked on down to the hotel and found Haywire Johnson in the office, alone. Mr. Tompkins produced a ten-dollar gold-piece and laid it under the eyes of the startled Haywire.

"Want to earn that, partner?" he asked in his natural voice.

"Gosh, yes!" said Haywire promptly. "Whose mail d'ye want?"

"Nobody's. Give me an envelope and some sealing-wax." When he was supplied, Tompkins wrote a short note, inclosed with it the deed to Alec Ramsay's property in Pinecate Cañon, addressed the envelope to the recorder in Chuckwalla City, and sealed it up. Then he gave it to Haywire.

"Register this, and slip it into tomorrow morning's mail-sack without giving Hassayamp a squint at it. That earns the first ten." Tompkins now produced a second gold-piece, at which Haywire goggled frantically. "Here's another you can earn. Go over to Pincus' store and buy me a rifle with a box of cartridges—"

"Hold on, Puffesser!" broke in Haywire quickly. "I got one I'll sell cheap. Good gosh, yes! Five year old, but better'n they make 'em now. Distance sights."

"All right. Sneak it into my room with a box of cartridges to fit, and I'll pay you for it; bring along that gun you're keeping for Sagebrush Beam, too. He wants it. There's the other ten. You'll earn it by keeping your mouth shut real tight. And listen! Will you or Hassayamp be on deck along about sunup in the morning?"

“Hassayamp wont; that’s certain,” said Haywire, staring at Tompkins. “I’m liable to be, if ye want me.”

“All right. You know Mesquite Harrison? He’s coming to see me. Bring him right to my room, savvy? Then if you hear him yell, be deaf in both ears, and if you see anything funny going on, be blind in both eyes.”

“All right, Puffesser. Gosh, ye don’t talk like the same feller ye was—”

“Never mind. Your job is to be a human sphinx. Supper ready?”

“Bell’s just about to ring, Puffesser. I’ll be along d’rectly.”

Seeking his own cell, Tompkins enjoyed a thorough wash-up, and before he finished heard signs of life in the adjoining room which tokened that Miss Gilman had returned. On his way to the dining-room he encountered Hassayamp, looking more melancholy than ever, and was given a cheerless nod; then a flicker of interest seized the hotel-proprietor.

“Say, Puffesser! Thought you aimed to stay awhile in the desert?”

“So I did, Mr. Foster,” said Tompkins blandly. “So I did. But I regret to say that I had trouble with my companion. Perhaps you observed that I was alone when we met each other this afternoon? Luckily I was able to follow the tracks of your car back to town, or I might have been lost. I trust your stomach trouble has quite passed over?”

“More or less,” said Hassayamp, and went his way.

Tompkins went in and dined heartily, now confident that even if Hassayamp and Sidewinder got together in conference during the evening, they would be unable to figure him out to any great extent.

When Miss Gilman appeared at her table, she gave Tompkins a smiling nod, and he perceived that her day on the burning sands had done its work well.

“Cold cream is recommended,” he exclaimed. “May I inquire whether you will view the beauties of the sunset this evening in my company, madam?”

“I shall be charmed—Perfesser,” she responded, and Tompkins grinned.

There was no sunset to view that evening, however. When they met in front of the hotel, a keen wind was coming down off the Chuckwalla hills, and clouds had appeared like magic in the sky. They walked together in silence toward the deserted buildings of the old boom town, until Tompkins spoke.

“We’ll have snow upon the desert’s dusty face in the morning. Old Omar Khayyam sure had been there! I’ve seen an inch of snow on the Mohave at sunrise, and it’d be gone in an hour. This is probably the tail-ender of the season—rains are all over now. Well, how did you find everything up the cañon?”

“It was just as described in that deed,” she said soberly. “Oh, I’m sorry for the way I spoke the other night! I didn’t think it could be possible, Mr.—shall I call you Tompkins or Ramsay?”

“Neither one,” he responded with a whimsical smile. “Call me Pat.”

“No. I think you don’t need any encouragement to impertinence.” And she laughed. “But really—that cañon was a dream of beauty! There was water, running and in pools, and all sorts of lilies were there, and flowers—”

“Sure, a regular desert cañon after the rains,” said Tompkins. “And not very far away, a dead man.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean that! I didn’t want to think of your brother as—”

“I’m not talking about him. Another man.”

She gave him a startled look. "You mean a man was killed out there?"

"Yes, and another wounded. Several are going to be killed in the near future, if I'm any judge. You needn't look alarmed about it, Miss Gilman; they're outlaws. I've opened up the whole situation pretty well, I think. Now, I hope you'll take my advice and get out of this town tomorrow morning on the stage. I expected to be gone about sunrise, as I have work waiting for me out yonder, but if you think you'll need any moral backing in drawing out of the game, I'll stay and see you through."

"No, thanks," she returned quietly. "I'm staying."

"After what I've told you and showed you?" he said with a frown.

"Yes. Now let me explain, and don't get too bossy. Hassayamp wanted to sell me that claim belonging to your brother; it's one of the most beautiful spots I ever saw. However, I made some excuse about it not being suited to chickens, and I'm going to buy the five acres adjoining it and just above. You wait till you see that place! It's got—"

"My dear girl," said Tompkins, "don't you know chickens can't be raised here, without large and expensive precautions?"

"Oh, I'm not quite a tenderfoot. Chickens or not, I'm going to own that piece of land! And I've taken warning from you, too, because I'll not turn over the money until the title is clear and the deed recorded. The five acres cost me three hundred dollars, mineral rights and all. Hassayamp owns it. He showed me where a mine used to be—it's played out now. I don't care a bit if the place is never any real good to me; I'm going to keep it just to live on when I get old, and enjoy it. Why, you get a wonderful view from the upper cañon out over the desert!"

"Well," said Tompkins reluctantly, "since your eyes are open, I can't of course make any more objections, though you can buy plenty of desert cañon for less money. But what about transport?"

"I've bought Hassayamp's car. It's an old one, but I know all about a flivver and it will do me. Then, I'm going to get a big tent set up there—"

Tompkins groaned inwardly, but presently changed the subject. It was no use whatever to raise up practical objections; the girl would have to find things out for herself. She was obviously determined on her course, and the more he saw of her, the more he began to feel that she was a pretty competent young woman. In fact, as they walked and spoke of cabbages and kings, he was distinctly and unpleasantly surprised to find that it had grown dark and very cold, and that they must return to shelter immediately. When they had reached the adobe cells that constituted the hotel, he paused at her door and shook hands.

"From now on, Miss Gilman, my name's Ramsay—only you'll come to calling me Pat, especially if we're to be neighbors. If you have any need of me, don't hesitate to summon me. I believe Haywire Johnson is a good sort, and you may confide in him any time. And by the way, if you hear any queer noises early in the morning, don't call for help."

"I usually don't," she said, smiling. "Why?"

"One of the men who murdered my brother is coming to call on me, I hope."

The smile died on her lips. Her eyes widened on him.

"You mean it? But—but surely you—you don't intend—"

"We're going to have a talk; that's all," said Tompkins. "Good night, and pleasant dreams! I'll see you again. Don't forget to look through your blankets for stray lizards."

He went on to his own cell, and in twenty minutes was sound asleep.

With dawn, Tompkins, or as he was now to become, Pat Ramsay, wakened to a glorious sunrise just breaking over a transformed world. As he had predicted, snow had come during the night. Everything was covered with a soft white garment, unusual but by no means unheard-of in the desert, which would be gone again in an hour.

He shaved and made his ablutions and got ready to travel. He inspected the rifle which Haywire had left in his room, and found it good. He was still looking it over when Haywire himself knocked at the door.

“Say, Puffesser! Mesquite is out there—”

“All right, bring him right along. Hold on! I want to settle with you for this gun. And where’s that revolver that Sagebrush wanted?”

“Got it right here, Puffesser—”

Taking the old forty-five that was handed him, Ramsay paid for his rifle and then swiftly made ready for his visitor. He pulled down the blind of the window, partly darkening the room, then rubbed his face with talcum powder and seated himself without glasses or helmet, with his back to the door, the rifle in his hand. After a moment came steps, then a knock.

“Come in,” he said.

Mesquite Harrison stepped into the room and stood blinking at the swift transition from snow-dazzle to this obscurity. He was a cadaverous person with straggling mustache and rudimentary chin, adenoidal mouth and projecting front teeth; his entire countenance was stamped with viciousness and weakness, and one glance showed Ramsay that his ruse was bound to succeed.

“Heard ye wanted a guide,” said Mesquite.

“I wanted you,” said Ramsay, “and I came back to get you.”

He swung his chair around so that the light struck his face.

Mesquite Harrison uttered one low gasp, and then stood absolutely petrified, struck into helpless, motionless silence. His mouth opened, and his piggish eyes widened into round disks. He stood with hands thrown back against the door, and a ghastly pallor crept across his horrified countenance.

“Thought you were safe when you knew I was dead up there in Pinecate Cañon, didn’t you?” said Ramsay, in a hollow voice. “You thought that after shooting me through the lungs you were safe, eh? But you’re not. I’ve come back to get you! Don’t move a muscle, or I’ll put a bullet through you.”

His likeness to the vanished Alec Ramsay was strong—so strong that the wretched Mesquite Harrison made no query about how a ghost could shoot a rifle. This interesting conundrum was about the farthest thing from Mesquite’s mind at the moment. His distended eyes were fastened in horror upon the face of Ramsay, and now a low wail broke from him.

“Leave me be, fer Gawd’s sake!” he howled. “It wasn’t me! It was Cholo Bill and Tom Emery done it—I was jest trailin’ along with ’em that day! It was Tom Emery fired that shot! Leave me be and I’ll be good—”

He plumped down on his knees, and his teeth began to chatter with fright.

“All right,” said Ramsay in contempt. “Get up! Turn around and walk out that door and walk out to the street. Then start going—and keep going. Head for Meteorite, and don’t stop. I’ll be right back of you until you get there. You can’t see me after we get out of town, but I’ll be there. Get going!”

The unhappy Mesquite lost no time in obeying. He flung open the door, darted outside, and started for the street. Ramsay followed more leisurely. When he passed through the hotel

front, he saw Mesquite standing outside, staring back, and as Ramsay appeared in his wake, the thoroughly frightened rascal uttered another howl and started for Meteorite.

“Don’t ever come back here or I’ll get you!” called Ramsay, and the last he saw of Mesquite Harrison, the latter was plugging along through the snow, head down and arms going as he ran. Ramsay turned back into the hotel office, and met the stare of Haywire.

“Gosh!” said the latter. “What’d ye do to him, Puffesser?”

Without replying, Ramsay went on back to his room. There he got his belongings together and carried them to the car, which was standing in the street. While he was putting them into the flivver, he saw Hassayamp appear at the front door of the hotel, yawning mightily. Ramsay jerked off his glasses and sun-helmet, and went up to Hassayamp. In the latter’s startled gaze he read instant recognition, for this was the first time Hassayamp had ever seen him without the yellow goggles.

“Listen here!” said Ramsay, tapping melancholy Hassayamp on the arm and boring into him with stern gaze, “I suppose you thought that little escapade of yours back in St. John’s, Arizona, a good many years ago, had been forgotten, eh?”

Hassayamp turned white. Whether or not he recognized his interlocutor as singularly like the vanished Alec Ramsay in looks, he certainly recognized the remarkable change of voice and manner in the supposed professor. Mention of St. John’s brought the pallor to his cheeks. Over his shoulder gaped Haywire, intensely interested.

“Well,” continued Ramsay, “it hasn’t been forgotten, my friend. One of my errands here was to remind you of the occurrence. If I were you, I wouldn’t rely too much on the protection of Sidewinder Crowfoot. The theft of horses may be forgotten with the years; but what about that church money you stole, eh?”

“I—I’ll pay it back,” stammered Hassayamp, now convinced that the Mormons were on his trail.

“You wont get the chance. If I didn’t have other and more important fish to fry, I’d attend to you right now. But I guess you’ll keep until I get back. Then you’ll come along with me.”

Hassayamp turned yet whiter. The Southwest has by no means forgotten the days of Mountain Meadow and the avenging angels of Mormon; and while in these more settled times the followers of that faith are certainly guiltless of any ill-doing, there is an heritage of uneasiness that lingers about the very name of Mormon and will not be stilled.

So Ramsay strode out to his car, donned goggles and helmet, and went chugging away to get his breakfast at Pinecate Cañon.

CHAPTER VIII

Sagebrush, who had camped at the entrance of the cañon, listened with hearty approval to Ramsay's recital of the morning's events. His roar of laughter echoed back from the rocky walls and went thundering away up toward the mesa.

"Durned if I've laughed so much since my ol' woman run off!" he exclaimed. "Shootin's too good for that coyote Mesquite, anyhow. He'll run into jail to Meteorite, 'cause he's wanted there for robbin' an Injun off the reservation last year. Yessir! That's how mean that pesky critter is. Done robbed an Injun squaw what had been sellin' beadwork to tourists on the trains."

"Do you know those men he mentioned as the actual murderers?" queried Ramsay.

"Nope. Never heard o' Cholo Bill—most likely he's a halfbreed greaser, same's that cuss Mendoza. Tom Emery's different. He's a bad man, real bad. Got out o' jail in Arizona two year back, murdered a rancher in the White Mountains, and skipped out. I reckon there's a reward for him."

"All right. You collect all the rewards—what I'm after is scalps."

"That suits me, Perfesser. She goes as she lays. What's the program?"

Ramsay, having finished his breakfast, lighted his pipe and considered.

"The thing to do, of course," he said tentatively, "is to apprise the nearest legal officers of conditions, get the sheriff to work, and round up the gang."

Sagebrush eyed him askance, in no little astonishment.

"Is that there your program, then?"

"No." Ramsay's blue eyes twinkled. "No, it isn't. I only mentioned it as the proper thing."

"If we all done the proper thing, this would be a hell of a world," and Sagebrush sighed in relief. "I nominates that we light a shuck out o' yere, go over to that there Hourglass Cañon, and clean her up. Everybody there is wanted, you betcha! We don't need no warrants, nor no officers fussin' around to see things is done right."

"Nomination seconded," said Ramsay promptly. "How far is it from here?"

"Hold on," warned the desert rat. "This aint no picnic party, Perfesser. We got to git busy 'fore Sidewinder gits busy, but there's no sense to rushin' things. We can't take no autybile over there. We got to hike. Ground's durned rocky and rough. Yessir! We're headin' east on a rough and rocky road, and no mistake. That's one reason nobody aint never follered none o' that gang to the roost. Nobody much aint been along this yere range for ten or twelve year—she's got the repytation of havin' petered out. You and me can prob'ly git there sometime tonight, ease up the cañon, git the lay of the land toward sunup, and git into action. Wipe out the hull durned batch!"

Ramsay frowned. "That's a trifle bloodthirsty, isn't it? I want those two murderers; if I can get 'em alive to stand trial, all right. If not—"

"They're all in the same kittle," snapped Sagebrush. "Wipe 'em out! Yessir! I'm riled. But no sense goin' too fast. We got to see who's there and how many, and what things look like. That there cañon is shaped like the figger X, and where the lines cross is a right narrer gap. The back end is a box cañon, all right, with durned steep walls and lots of timber. Only green spot this side o' them hills. Last time I was there was ten year back, when Chuck Martin busted his whiffletree, and we rode over yere to find a new stick. We had some liquor along

them days, and Chuck he took a drap too much and went to sleep in an ol' shack, and when he woke up it was dark, and they was a hull passel o' 'phoby skunks holdin' a carnival, and Chuck busted up the dance 'fore he knowed what it was. Gosh, I can smell him yet when I think of it. Yessir, 'Look 'fore you sleep' is a dad-blamed good rule to foller in these ol' shacks—and anywheres else too, I reckon. Well, I'll git the packs made up while you clean camp."

The two men set to work. After the flivver was laid out of sight in the clump of piñon trees and thorny mesquite, the loads were assembled, and within twenty minutes the partners were on their way. What with grub and blankets, rifle and water-bag, Ramsay had all the weight to carry that he wanted, and he faced the prospect of a full day in rocky desert ground with a grimace.

His expectations were entirely fulfilled. Sagebrush led the way, skirting the high and precipitous mesa for a time and then striking directly off toward the hills to the northeast. The abundance of rocks showed Ramsay that no flivver could hope to cover this ground; the snow had all vanished long since, and no trace of moisture remained to mark its passing.

Fortunately for Ramsay, the old desert rat was used to the slow burro pace, and shuffled along at a steady plodding gait which was not difficult to sustain, and which ate up the distance slowly but surely. To anyone not used to it, there was something terrible in the thought of thus shuffling across the desert day in and day out for years, eternally seeking the yellow dust; and yet men did it, hundreds of them, and were not happy unless doing it.

Pat Ramsay faced the project which lay ahead of them, unblinking the facts, and not shirking what was to be done. He now knew what before he had only conjectured. Impossible as it seemed, he knew it to be true. Here at this back door of civilization existed a number of men whose business in life was robbery and if necessary murder—an abnormal situation, to be handled with other than normal methods. Ramsay was no innocent in the waste places. He knew that in these vast stretches of desert country there existed strange things, that in this apparently empty basin of forgotten seas there were still unsolved problems and undiscovered wonders. If he was to go seeking the men who had murdered his brother, he must put away all thought of haling them before the bar of justice; the only justice which obtained in the desert was that of the strong hand and the inexorable requisitions of nature. If men offended the laws of nature, a terrible punishment was exacted from them. If they offended the laws of man, as they did every day, the ordinary machinery of man's justice could not always reach them—and they knew it.

"By gosh," said Sagebrush, when they halted at noon in the shade of a towering pinnacle of rock, "ye done a good stroke when ye got to work this mornin' and cut off Sidewinder from them fellers yonder! Yessir! I'd think twicet or maybe three times 'fore I tackled that there gent. Most likely that *cholo* and Mesquite rode in to git supplies, and cuttin' them off was a right smart piece o' work. Wisht we had a hoss apiece! Sing out next you see a nice fat chuckwalla. I'd like to git me a good chunk o' lizard-tail for supper, Perfesser."

Before they had left the overhanging rock, indeed, Sagebrush located a fine big lizard and staged a battle royal. The lizard, ensconced in a rock cranny, inflated himself and could not be dislodged for all the tugging of Sagebrush, who in the end was content with taking the tail. This the chuckwalla gladly surrendered, and Sagebrush stowed it away in his pocket after Ramsay refused to share the delicacy.

The afternoon drew on. They did not hurry; yet the ground was covered steadily, and no moving object broke the dun expanse of glaring rock and sand. Gradually they approached a patch of green high on the hills, which served as landmark, but the entrance to Hourglass Cañon itself did not open up before them. When the sun was drawing down to the western horizon, Sagebrush halted.

“No use goin’ on now—we’ll be in the cañon in half an hour and can’t take no chances. Goin’ to be a clear night, and cold as hell. Why don’t preachers make hell a cold place, Perfesser? Dad blame if I can see anythin’ ornery in hell the way it’s laid out. I bet it aint no hotter’n the Ralston Desert up in Nevada, and that don’t stack up noways alongside what Imperial Valley used to be ’fore they started growin’ melons and garden truck there. Reckon I’m goin’ to freeze tonight ’thout no fire, but can’t be helped. Let’s git our victuals washed down, and then we’ll mosey along and take it easy till dark.”

When the sun was down, they moved on again, and before the last of the daylight died into the starry radiance of night, Ramsay descried the lines of the cañon opening out from the general mass of hills ahead. The night was clear, with a thin green-silver crescent of moon hanging high, but nothing could be seen of the environment, though old Sagebrush plodded along without a pause. A little later he broke into speech.

“Trail. No talkin’, now. Watch out underfoot.”

A trail indeed—at least, a path beaten by the hoofs of horses. Sagebrush had need to mind his own warning, for the next moment he jumped sharply aside, dropped his pack and picked up the nearest rock to crush a sidewinder in his path. After this both men kept a sharper watch for the nocturnal reptiles than on the surrounding scenery.

They had proceeded perhaps two miles when Ramsay found the cañon walls closing in ahead, apparently forming an unbroken barrier. Then he began to appreciate the strategic value of the place, which to anyone on the search would appear to be an empty cañon, while in reality there was a narrow passage opening into a second but completely hidden cañon. This was a freak of erosion and wind-carving, for the trail led them sharply to the right, and then into a black hole—a widening cleft in the rock, ten feet in width and twenty through to the other side. Sagebrush halted his companion and stole forward cautiously, then summoned Ramsay. The opening was unguarded.

Passing through, both men came to an astonished halt. They stood in an almost circular bowl which, so far as the deceptive light told them, was not more than a mile in diameter, closed in by gigantic walls of rock which, on the side opposite them, presented only blackness which was illumined by three yellow pin-points.

“Lamps,” said Sagebrush. “Got some shacks over there, by gosh!”

It was not this which had startled them both, however. In their immediate vicinity were great masses of jumbled rock, fallen from the walls that hemmed in the entrance. At a distance of fifty feet from them the scattered rock and sand gave place to a thick green carpet which seemed to cover the entire bowl, and across this carpet moved masses of horses, quietly grazing.

The explanation was simple. Just now, immediately after the rains, this hidden box cañon was saturated with drainage from the slopes above and behind. Either the growth of grass here was natural, or as was more likely, it had been sown by the occupants of the cañon.

“Set,” said Sagebrush, slipping off his pack and squatting down. Ramsay followed suit, and the desert rat softly elucidated the situation.

“We got things straight now, Perfesser. This yere crowd is right happily located, for a fact! The idee is, they slide acrost the hills to the Chuckwalla range and slide back with a few hosses picked up over there. When they get a right good *remuda*, they drive ’em over to the railroad at Meteorite, or maybe up north acrost the Salt Pans to Silver City. They keep ’em yere maybe six months till the hair’s growed out over the rebrand, and by that time everybody’s give up looking; they prob’ly git a lot o’ foals, too.”

“With a base of supplies at Stovepipe Springs, they’re safe,” commented Ramsay. “And Sidewinder Crowfoot is the brains of the outfit. All right. What d’you want to do?”

“Sneak up and look things over. Better let me do it when we git right close. Then I’ll come back yere and lay up in these yere rocks with both guns handy. You cut around and open fire on them shacks. You’ll jest naturally catch ’em penned up, and if they git away, I’ll catch ’em yere. If they don’t bust loose, I’ll come over and help you. How’s that strike ye, Perfesser?”

“First rate,” said Ramsay. “What does Tom Emery look like?”

“Red whiskers. Can’t miss him. Let’s mosey along.”

They rose, picked up their loads, and set forth.

In the darkness of the upper cañon, with the stars glimmering far above, the scout was made, and all things considered, it was a good scout. But when it had been ended, the two men drew off together for consultation, upon both of them settled a silent consternation. For here was a factor they had not reckoned on.

Three cabins, and in one of them four men sitting playing cards, a lantern swinging from a rafter. One was Tom Emery—a brutal giant of a man with a great fringe of flaring red whiskers and matted red hair, a murderer and escaped jailbird with a price on his head. One, whom old Sagebrush did not know, was a swarthy halfbreed, doubtless the Cholo Bill mentioned by the dying Alec Ramsay—a slender, furtive man, on the surface all smiles, and all deviltry beneath. The third card-player was identified as Gentleman Jimson, an elderly man with handsome, ascetic features and the general air of a benevolent preacher. He had escaped from a California penitentiary three years previously, where he was serving a life term for murder and forgery. The last of the four men was a pure Mexican, one Manuel Ximines—a scowling, sullen scoundrel from below the border, a murderer of women. Not all this had given the two friends pause, however, but the shrill wail of an infant from one of the other shacks, and the thin voices of two Mexican women.

“Women everywhere. Aint it hell?” demanded Sagebrush, when they were at a safe distance. “And now what?”

“Walk in on the four of them,” said Ramsay promptly. “And we have ’em.”

“Nope. Them *cholo* women would jump us in the back in a minute. Then, if anything went wrong, the bunch would scatter in the darkness. We don’t know the lay o’ the ground.”

“All right. Then stick to our original plan.”

Sagebrush dissented with a grunt. “Pardner, it means the females fight with the men. Now, I jest naturally can’t abide that notion nohow. When it comes to puttin’ a bullet into a female, I pass. We got to sep’rate them fellers from the females.”

“Granted,” assented Ramsay at once. “How?”

“There aint but one way out o’ this yere cañon—the front way. Let’s you and me go back through that hole in the wall and wait. If anybody comes, we got him; if anybody leaves, we got him. Then, come sunup, we lights a fire out beyond. They see the smoke, and most likely

that feller Ximines comes out to investigate. We got him. The other fellers come out when he don't return—and we got 'em all.”

“Good,” said Ramsay. “Let's go.”

CHAPTER IX

All that night coyotes howled dismally upon the hills; and Ramsay, stretched out beside Sagebrush near the “hole in the wall,” wakened from time to time at their almost human cries.

The scheme proposed by the old desert rat was simple and promised to be highly effective. It had only one drawback, common to all human propositions—it failed to take into account the dispensations of Providence, not anticipating the unexpected.

The misty gray darkness that precedes dawn was over everything when Ramsay, on watch, wakened Sagebrush, and the desert rat sat up, shivering.

“Gosh, it’s cold!” he observed, throwing off his blankets and pulling on his boots. Thus finishing dressing operations, he rose. Their camp was just outside the rock crevice which gave access to the inner cañon. “Might’s well git us some hot coffee while we’re makin’ that fire. I’ll rustle up some bresh along the slopes while you’re gittin’ the grub. Little skillet layin’ in my pack for the side-meat. We got lots o’ time—they wont disciver our smoke until after sunup.”

He shuffled off toward the slopes on the right, and disappeared in the darkness. Ramsay went to work at breakfast, preparing the coffee with the last of their water, and slicing up some bacon.

Getting some dry and dead twigs together, Ramsay heaped them in readiness to build a fire. As he rose, a voice suddenly impinged sharply on his consciousness.

“Up with ’em, stranger—reach high and quick!”

He put up his hands, and turned. There, standing at the rock opening through which he must have come unobserved, stood the tall, stooped figure of Gentleman Jimson, his pistol covering Ramsay.

“What you doing here?” demanded Jimson. “Who you looking for?”

His rifle out of reach, Ramsay knew himself caught. His brain worked swiftly.

“I’m looking for Tom Emery,” he said, raising his voice in order to warn Sagebrush, whose proximity was evidently unsuspected.

“Oh, looking for Tom, are you?” Jimson sneered. “On what business?”

“That’s for him to hear,” returned Ramsay. “Sidewinder told me to camp here until morning. You’re Jimson, I s’pose?”

The other was momentarily astonished.

“What! Sidewinder sent you here, did he? Where’s Mesquite?”

“Gone to jail in Meteorite, I guess. That greaser with him was killed.”

“What!” Jimson looked startled; then he frowned. “You’re a cussed liar! What’s this you’re pulling off, anyhow? Sidewinder would never have told you to wait out here before telling us all this. March over here—leave that rifle where it lays! Quick, now, or I’ll drill you!”

The voices had risen shrill and distinct on the quiet air of the dawn, and had quite accomplished the purpose for which Ramsay hoped. Jimson caught a movement on the hillside from the corner of his eye, and turned—but his pistol did not swing quickly enough. The roar of a forty-five crashed out, then again. Gentleman Jimson, with a look of frightful astonishment, dropped his automatic, took two staggering steps, then slumped face down.

Sagebrush, standing on the hillside to the right, emitted a whoop of exultation.

“Ye will crowd me and my pardner, will ye? Reckon that’s one reward I’ll collect.” Suddenly his voice rose shrill. “Hey, Perfesser! Look out—hosses comin’!”

Ramsay, already scrambling for his rifle, heard the pounding of many hoofs and sprang up, wildly startled by that shrill cry. He saw, coming in upon him from the desert, a mass of horses. One glance at Sagebrush, and he caught sight of the latter staggering out of sight—then rifles cracked. A bullet sang past his head.

With a leap, Ramsay darted toward his only protection, the hole in the wall. He jumped the motionless body of Jimson, turned, and began firing. The scream of a frantic horse answered his first shot; then bullets began to whang on the rock around him. He saw that a dozen or more horses were charging in, had a vision of two men firing; then he slipped back into the ten-foot passage, with the rush of animals at his very heels.

As he ran for the other side, a curse broke from his lips. Sagebrush was shot down, and their whole scheme of action was disrupted. It was plain enough that two of the gang were returning with stolen horses—

They were upon him, and nothing saved him from trampling but a hasty shot from under his arm. At the report, a horse leaped high and then came down kicking. Something struck Ramsay as he gained the inner opening of the passage, struck him and sent him headlong to one side. He crashed down, rolled over, picked himself up. A rifle roared above him; the bullet sang by his face; and as he himself fired, he had a swift vision of a bearded rider flinging out arms and pitching forward. Then he was working the bolt, looking for the other horsethief, as the rush of animals swept past and went pounding up the grassy cañon. No other appeared.

Ramsay stood panting, waiting, rifle ready. Twenty feet away lay the outlaw he had shot from the saddle—but where was the other? From the other end of the cañon lifted faint shouts of men; the gang there were alarmed, but it was still too dark for them to make out anything.

Something flickered from the black depths of the passage. Before Ramsay could comprehend its import, a lariat settled over his shoulders and was jerked taut. He was fighting it instantly, trying to whip around his rifle—fighting it furiously, fiercely, vainly. A hoarse laugh made answer; then he was drawn off his feet and hurled sprawling. Next instant, a horse came leaping through the opening and started away, the rider holding the rope with Ramsay dragging behind.

In the space of a few seconds terrible things can come to pass. Arms caught just above his elbows and fast bound to his body with the rope cutting into the flesh, Ramsay was dragged along for half a minute, jerking and helpless, clothes ripped away, death threatening with every rock that loomed in his path; he came to the grass, slid over it more easily, heard the outlaw yelling at his mount to increase its speed—and all the while held on to his rifle, though it was nearly torn from his hand.

And then came a merciful relaxation. The horse stumbled suddenly, was reined sharply in—the lariat slackened. Ramsay rolled over on his side, gained his feet with a leap, cocked and fired the rifle from his hip. It was a chance shot, but a good one. The poor horse sank forward. Its outlaw rider, leaping from the saddle, turned and threw up a pistol. But Ramsay, working up the lariat, had ejected the shell and now fired again. The outlaw pitched forward on his face, shot through the brain.

All this took place with incredible rapidity. Indeed, it must have passed swiftly, for no man can long survive the dragging at a lariat’s end. As it was, Ramsay knew himself bruised and

hurt, torn and scratched—but in essentials undamaged. He was not thirty yards from the passage, and turned to it. As he did so, that dark cleft in the rock wall vomited a spat of flame, and to the smashing report of a pistol, a bullet whined past him.

Instantly Ramsay whirled, threw himself at the dead horse, gained it, and took shelter. Another report, and another bullet went screaming over him. He answered it with a blind shot. Panting, he realized his intolerable position. He was out here in the open, trapped, and from the shouts at the other end of the cañon, he knew the three men there would soon be sweeping down on him. Swiftly he weighed the chances for a dash toward one of the side slopes—and then he saw a grim thing, yet one which spelled his salvation.

He had supposed that these shots from the passage must have come from a third horsethief. Now he perceived a figure take shape in the grayness, and was about to fire when he saw it staggering forward, and checked himself. It was the tall figure of Jimson, mortally wounded and yet still alive, blindly reeling on, pistol in hand. As Ramsay waited, the pistol dropped. For a moment Jimson stood there, swaying, then dropped slowly to his knees and fell in a limp heap.

In a flash, Ramsay visualized what was now sure to take place. It was his one chance, and a sure chance. None of those three outlaws at the head of the cañon would know what had happened here. He leaped up, and imagined that he could see riders coming from the gray background of the cañon. That he was unseen, he knew well enough. Next instant he was running for the heaped-up rocks near the passage. As he went by Jimson, he saw the dying man was still alive and trying to rise, but kept on, and a moment later threw himself down in cover of the boulders.

“No time to ask after Sagebrush now—here’s the great chance to clean up the whole gang!” he thought, as he reloaded his rifle and drew long deep breaths to calm himself. “By glory, we haven’t done so badly so far, either! Three of them done for now. They came asking for it, and they got it. If things work right, I’ll get these last three scoundrels alive—ah! They’re coming, all right.”

He waited, eyes glittering, bloody and bruised figure tense, rifle ready. Now the gray darkness was clearing off, and the clearer light of day was breaking through. Coming across the grassy cañon at a breakneck gallop were three riders, impeded at first by the mass of frightened and rushing horses. Now, free of the *remuda*, the three were plunging toward the passage and the three outstretched figures lying there in the open; one of those figures was moving, slowly crawling upward. Jimson, dying hard, got to one knee and remained thus, swaying.

The three outlaws swept on, straight for the figure of Jimson, and the man in the lead was Tom Emery, his mass of flaming whiskers marking him clearly. All three had rifles and were girded with gun-belts. Ramsay grinned excitedly as he waited, out of sight.

“They don’t know what’s happened!” he thought in exultation. “Jimson is baiting them right into the trap—”

Jimson was not forty feet away from him, and the three outlaws came thundering down with shouted queries and wild oaths of rage. As they drew closer, Ramsay could see them looking from Jimson to the girdling masses of rock, and knew that he was out of their sight. Tom Emery was in the lead, riding like a Centaur, his face like a red blur; behind him were the sullen, scowling Ximines and the more dapper halfbreed Cholo Bill, eyes glittering like dots of jet.

They came hurtling down upon Jimson, threw themselves from the saddle and gathered around him with a burst of excited speech. But they came too late; for Jimson, swaying, toppled over as they reached him, and lay quiet—this time forever. The three stared one at another, but only for an instant.

“Stick ’em up—*pronto!*” commanded Ramsay’s voice. “Drop the rifles.”

A raging oath burst from Emery. All three turned, facing the rock wall and the passage; dismounted, caught in the open, their three dead comrades to serve as warning, they comprehended instantly that they were trapped, snared mercilessly. In silence they obeyed the mandate, but their faces were eloquent as they dropped the rifles and elevated their arms.

“Tom Emery,” continued Ramsay, his voice cool and deadly in its slight drawl, “you and Cholo Bill are wanted for the murder of Alec Ramsay last year. Ximines, you can come along on general principles. You take your own pistol and drop it overboard, then relieve your two friends of their weapons. Leave ’em all in a pile. I don’t need much of an excuse to put a bullet into you, so watch out you don’t give it to me.”

The scowling Mexican deposited his own pistol and those of the others in the dust.

“Now step forward!” Ramsay rose, rifle at his shoulder. “Step forward, please! All three—that’s right. Walk right through the hole in the wall, and don’t walk too fast. The hand is quicker than the foot, gentlemen. Now into the hole—you first, Señor Ximines, then Cholo Bill, and Mr. Emery last. Close together, and slowly.”

He strode forward as the three came to the passage that gave on to the outer cañon. Their eyes glittered on him with unspeakable rage, but they said not a word. In the order assigned, they entered the cleft, and Ramsay brought up the rear with the muzzle of his rifle thrust against the back of the gigantic Emery, whose red whiskers were bristling with suppressed fury. Ramsay chuckled, as he marched them forward.

“I expect you’re due for a shave before long, Mr. Emery, and a free haircut to boot. Keep right ahead of each other, gentlemen, and walk straight out into the daylight. When you are safely taken care of, we’ll all start out and have a nice little walk over to town, and interview Mr. Crowfoot. Now, everybody, four steps forward, then halt and about-face.”

By this time the full morning light was spreading over everything, and the three captives left the rock-cleft and marched forward as directed. Ramsay, not daring to take his eyes from them, followed for a pace or two and then halted as they turned and faced his rifle. For a moment he met the savage gaze of Emery—then the latter suddenly looked up, behind Ramsay, and his eyes widened in surprise.

Ramsay cast one startled glance over his shoulder. He saw, to his utter consternation, a horse close pressed against the rock wall to the left of the opening; and holding the reins in one hand, and in the other a leveled pistol—Sidewinder Crowfoot. For an instant those glittery gray eyes held Ramsay paralyzed.

“Careful with that gun!” warned Sidewinder, a deadly whine to his voice. “Grab it, Tom. Then grab this gent—and do it careful. He’s got to do some talkin’ real soon. Tie him up and leave him be.”

Ramsay knew better than to resist. Utterly dismayed, dumbfounded by the simple manner in which he had been trapped in the very moment of victory, he let himself be seized, hurled to the ground, and then none too gently be bound hand and foot. A swift search, and he was disarmed.

A flood of curses burst loose, and for a moment he thought the Mexican would stamp on him in rage, but Sidewinder interfered and quieted the noise.

“What’s happened here?” he snapped. Emery made profane response.

“Dunno! The boys come in with them hosses they went after, but they come dead. Jimson come out to meet ’em, and he’s dead. This feller jumps us. Says we’re wanted for killin’ Ramsay last year. What is he—sheriff or detective?”

“That’s what we’ll find out,” said Sidewinder. “He sure played hell around here, didn’t he? Well, I’m dead for something to eat. Any of his friends around?”

“Nope. I reckon he done played a lone hand,” said Emery, not without a trace of admiration. “You aint seen no one out here?”

“No,” said Sidewinder. “Nary a sign. This hoss of mine is clear done up and staggering. I seen what happened from the passage, and come back to lay for him—and got him. Tom, take charge of him and walk him in. I’ll take your hoss and ride over to camp. This gent has played hell in town as well as here. I been on my way since yesterday noon—had to come all the way on hossback. Leave the hoss here—he’ll wander in after he comes around. All ready, boys—let’s go!”

Emery jerked Ramsay to his feet, cast loose his ankles, and propelled him forward into the passage; he went dumbly, unresisting, appalled by the disaster which had overwhelmed him.

Behind them, the outer cañon was empty of life save for the horse which Sidewinder had ridden, and which stood with legs wide apart, head drooping, exhausted and spent. Red and gold streaked across the sky, as the first fingers of sunrise reached up to the zenith. Presently the horse, still saddled and bridled, made a convulsive movement and came out from among the rocks, and stood, white with lather. He was still standing there twenty minutes later, when the first rays of sunlight struck down from the hilltops and smote all the desert spaces into gold and purple, and up on the hillside stirred something that presently took definite shape. This was Sagebrush Beam.

The desert rat painfully gained his feet, staggered forward, lost his balance and came sprawling down among the rocks. He lay quiet for a while, blood spreading across the grizzled expanse of his tangled beard. Then, warmed by the sun, he lifted himself again, feebly gained his feet, and came tottering across the sand to where the horse stood watching him. For a little he clung to the saddle, helpless. After a time he made an effort to draw himself up, cursed vividly if weakly, and at the second effort made shift to mount.

The exhausted horse submitted to its fate and started out into the desert, with Sagebrush limp and clinging to the pommel.

CHAPTER X

The three shacks at the head of Hourglass Cañon were set amid trees and near a trickling brook, which in another three weeks would be only a summer's memory, and which was lost in the grass a hundred yards distant. Ramsay was allowed to sit against a tree, and was set free of his bonds, while his four captors surrounded him. The two frightened Mexican women, wretched creatures who belonged to Ximines and Cholo Bill, fetched coffee and tortillas.

Ramsay had been studying his captors. Ximines was the most dangerous, because the most vicious and debased. Cholo Bill was far above him in character. Tom Emery had some traces of humor in his brutal countenance. All three of them were distinctly perturbed and uneasy, yet deferred everything to Sidewinder. And Ramsay perceived that Crowfoot himself, beneath that grayish mask of a face, was more alarmed than he cared to betray.

"Now, you going to talk or do we got to make ye?" demanded Sidewinder, his reptilian gaze fastened on Ramsay. The latter smiled slightly.

"You give me a share in your breakfast and let me get my pipe going, and I'll swap all the information you want."

"Fair enough," grunted Sidewinder, and summoned one of the women.

Ramsay found his tortillas excellent and the coffee passable, and attacked his breakfast heartily. His chief concern was for Sagebrush. The latter was either dead, in which case he could not be aided, or else was wounded, in which case he was better off without Sidewinder's help; in either event, his participation in the morning's affair was not suspected and must not be suspected. In all other respects, frank speech was the best policy.

The meal finished, Ramsay got his pipe going while the other four rolled cigarettes, and Sidewinder started his catechism.

"First off, what kind of an officer are you, anyhow? County, State or Fed'ral?"

"Neither one," Ramsay chuckled. "My name's Pat Ramsay. I came here to get Mr. Emery yonder, also Cholo Bill, for the murder of my brother Alec last year. You were a party to it also."

Emery started to speak, but Sidewinder flashed him a look that held him silent.

"It wasn't no murder," said Sidewinder. "It was a straight killin'—"

"No use passing any lies," said Ramsay quietly. "Let's all stick to the truth. Alec left a message for me, also the deed to that property he bought from Harrison—told me all about it. I found 'em in Pinecate Cañon the other day. The deed's gone in to the recorder's office. So has an explanation of the circumstances. I expect the sheriff will be along any time to look things over."

An outburst of startled oaths broke from the three outlaws, but Sidewinder only grinned and put a hand to his pocket. He drew forth an unopened letter. Ramsay, in dismay, recognized it as that containing the deed, which he had registered with Haywire Johnson.

"Here y'are," said Sidewinder, and tossed it to him with a malignant grin. "I reckon ye might's well keep it. Serve for identification. Darned good thing I took a look through that mail-sack 'fore it went out yesterday, eh? What'd you do to Hassayamp, anyhow? He got Miss Gilman's money, took Mesquite's hoss and beat it for parts unknown."

Ramsay, although he flinched under the blow, rallied quickly.

"I jogged his memory about a job he pulled off down in Arizona before coming here."

"And ye sure give Mesquite a scare. Reckon he's still goin'. So you aint no officer, eh? You just come nosing in here on your own hook, eh? Well, you've sure played hell. I wonder how you can set there and eat and smoke and laugh, after wipin' out three good men this morning! Aint you got no conscience? Don't it mean nothin' to you that ye've killed three men?"

Ramsay shrugged.

"It doesn't worry you to bring in people from outside and cheat them or murder them, does it?" he retorted. "And it doesn't worry anyone to wipe out a rattler. You fellows and desert rattlers are about in the same class."

"And you'll be in the same class with your brother when we get through with ye," said Sidewinder acidly.

"He knows too much," said Ximines in Spanish. "Kill him now, quickly."

"You back down and rest your heels," snapped Sidewinder. "I'm running this show. Now, Ramsay, you're alone in this deal—you and Miss Gilman—"

"She's not in it," broke out Ramsay quickly, alarmed by the man's look.

"Don't ye lie to me! You and her have been carryin' on together. Got to town about the same time, and been thick ever since. She fooled me at first, all right, but now I'm wide awake and ready to strike. You've earned your victuals. Now shut up."

With this, Sidewinder turned to the three outlaws and briefly described Miss Gilman's activities, while Ramsay listened in acute anxiety.

"All good things have an end," he finished. "We've just about reached the end of our rope. The thing to do now is to bust up camp. Better get them women and the kid off right now, with hosses. Let 'em ride in to town, and José Garcia will take care of 'em until you're ready to send for 'em. Then get busy with a running-iron and a knife, and we'll go over them hosses on hand. Any that can't be worked over, leave here. You'll have a right good remuda, and you three fellers can run 'em up to Silver City. Emery, you know how to get there across the Salt Pans, don't ye?"

Tom Emery nodded in silence, but jerked his thumb at Ramsay.

"Don't worry none about him. First, get them women off. Then get busy with the irons. We'll be until night gettin' the remuda worked over and in good shape. Then, early in the morning, we'll ride over to Pinecate Cañon with this inquisitive pilgrim. That fool woman is goin' out there sometime today, to camp and see about where to build a shack. We'll nab her and her car.—Hey, Ramsay! Where's that rat Sagebrush?"

"Last I saw of him was out in the desert," said Ramsay truthfully. "He didn't fancy any acquaintance with Miss Gilman, and got right huffy over her being around."

"So he run off, eh? Blamed if that aint old Sagebrush all over!" Sidewinder chuckled dryly. "Where's your car?"

"At Pinecate Cañon."

"All right." Sidewinder eyed his three men. "Ye see, we can't afford to take no chances. If we kill this *hombre*, there may be questions asked—and what'd we do with the Gilman woman? I don't aim to murder a woman."

"Give her to me," suggested Ximines, with a grin.

"You go plumb to hell," snapped Sidewinder. "I don't guess any of us want a double murder charge follering us. So here's the program with them two: Leave 'em in Pinecate Cañon, with some grub. They aint going to walk away from there in a hurry—"

"Hamstring him!" Ximines gave Ramsay a scowling glance.

"Good idea," approved Sidewinder, with a nod. "Fix him so's he can't travel, anyhow. Then I'll have José Garcia come over there from town and camp out to keep an eye on the two of 'em. You boys run the remuda up to Silver City, sell her, and then scatter. I'll get sold out in Stovepipe Springs, and disappear. Three weeks ought to fix us up all around. Then Garcia can remove himself likewise. By the time Ramsay and that fool woman get out to where they can tell their story—let 'em tell it! That's the general scheme. We can fix the details later. How's it suit?"

"Fine with me," said Tom Emery, pawing his red whiskers.

Cholo Bill nodded. "*Bueno!* But my woman, she go with me and the remuda."

"Mine too," growled Ximines.

"Then get busy." Sidewinder rose. "Tie up this gent."

Ramsay, despite his protestations, was seized and lashed firmly to a tree, after which he was ignored for the remainder of the morning. He was somewhat relieved by the exposition of Sidewinder's plans, since these did not at least include murder; this relief was more than balanced, however, by the menace directed toward Ethel Gilman.

The hours dragged past, while Sidewinder and his three companions worked like slaves. The entire band of horses, numbering nearly forty, had to be gone over. Each animal had to be examined carefully, and his brand worked upon with running irons to make it accord with the brands used by Sidewinder, while the other marks also had to be altered to suit.

There was an hour's lay-off at noon, when Ramsay was given temporary liberty. Then he was closely confined again, and the work went on. Five of the unavailable horses were turned into a small corral behind the shades, and one of the women was sent to the outer cañon to bring in the horse which Sidewinder had left there. She returned later with word that the animal had wandered off out of sight.

It was nearly sunset when the work was concluded, and the four men, weary to the point of exhaustion, came in and flung themselves down. The two women had prepared a meal which was eaten hurriedly; then Ramsay, who had been released temporarily, was again bound and relegated to his post against the tree. Ordering the women to wake them at midnight, Sidewinder and the others rolled up and were asleep at once.

Benumbed by his many and tight lashings, stiff and sore with his hurts and bruises, Ramsay resigned himself to the inevitable, and after a little dropped off into a doze. From this he was wakened to find Ximines cutting him free and playfully jabbing him with the point of a knife as he cut.

"So, leetle señor, you come weeth me, eh?" In the starry darkness the white teeth of the swarthy Mexican outlaw flashed faintly. "You ride with Manuel," continued the man in Spanish, which Ramsay comprehended perfectly. "And while you ride *conmigo*, we shall talk, eh?"

Ramsay, rubbing his stiffened limbs, glanced around and saw that they were alone. He gathered his muscles—

"Careful, señor!" The muzzle of a pistol touched him. "Turn and walk to the horses."

"Five hundred dollars and a get-away, Ximines," he said softly, "if you turn me free."

The other growled. "Bah! If you have that much money, I shall take it anyway, and take the pretty señorita too! When we get to that cañon of *pinecates*, eh? Then this Sidewinder will go away, and maybe Manuel will come back, eh? And you will not be able to object, my little señor. *Vamos!* To the horses!"

Sidewinder called. Ramsay, hopeless, turned and went to the horses, saddled by the other men. He was put into a saddle, his feet roped to the stirrups, and his arms bound. Then Ximines, without orders but for reasons of his own, improvised a dirty bandana into a gag, which he lashed about the jaw of Ramsay.

"Bring him along," said Sidewinder impatiently, and mounted, leading the way. The others trailed out after him. After Cholo Bill rode Ramsay, the reins of his horse held by Ximines at his stirrup. As they rode out across the grassy cañon, the Mexican laughed and spoke softly to the captive.

"Ho, little señor! What is it I read in the newspaper, that the wise men say in your town of New York, eh? They say that the *Americano*, he is not civilized—that the *Americano* of the West, he is an animal. Ho! Well, when I come back to that cañon of the little tumbling bugs, señor, you shall see how we treat gringos, dogs of *Americanos*, in my country! And you will not be able to walk, for I shall cut your legs behind—*que lástima!* What a pity, little señor! And when I kiss the señorita, eh? It will be amusing to hear you curse, uncivilized *Americano!*"

Ramsay now perceived why he had been gagged by the Mexican. And beneath the raging fury that the taunts and threats roused in him, beneath wonder that on the lips of such a man he should find the smart sayings of the radicals of New York's East Side, slowly mounted a growing horror at the prospect. For he comprehended that this swarthy Mexican, whose cigarettes had such a queer and unholy odor, was a smoker of the *marihuana* weed—a monster beside whom the cocaine fiend was as a pale angel, a creature debased and degenerate whose one craving was for blood, for cruelty, for torture.

So the five riders passed through the hole in the wall, and came out upon the lonely starlit desert, and headed for the Pinecate mesa. And upon the hills the coyotes howled dismal orisons to the stars.

CHAPTER XI

Another dawn was breaking when the five riders approached Pinecate Cañon, and the sun-spears were thrusting across the eastern sky. The lower reaches of the rocky cañon were desolate and empty, save for the figure of a saddled and bridled horse moving about. Sidewinder, with a grunt of recognition, broke the silence.

"There's that cayuse of Mesquite's now—started for town and stopped on the way. Prob'ly smelled water here."

"And yonder's the auto," said Tom Emery with a jerk of his head. "Two of 'em!"

There was no need to question Ramsay about his car, for that of Ethel Gilman had been thrust beside it into the cover of the trees and mesquite clump, so that both cars stood protected from sun and dew, but plain to be seen. Sidewinder flung them a glance, then turned his horse into the cañon.

"Come along—ride as far as we can, anyhow. Her place is quite a ways up."

The five rode slowly up the cañon, until they came to the spot where Ramsay had found that cigarette-case. Here Sidewinder drew rein, since it was becoming increasingly harder for the horses to climb. Ahead was the bend in the cañon.

"Manuel, you stay here with Ramsay. You'd better stick here too, Tom. Come ahead when I call. You come with me, Bill."

Sidewinder dismounted, and with the dapper Cholo Bill swinging along beside him, ascended the rocky floor of the cañon on foot. A faint thread of smoke began climbing into the sky from somewhere around the bend; sunrise in all its glory was spreading a riot of color across the heavens.

Some distance above them was a great boulder, huge as a house, in the center of the rapidly narrowing cañon. It was a rich and ruddy rose-pink in the first sunlight, and was split squarely in two, with a number of small piñon trees growing from the split. Water came from it, came from the cañon above it also, and ran down into several pools and short falls; it was the evanescent water of the desert springtime, giving a short-lived existence to lilies and masses of flowers on either hand. Above this boulder, and to its left, could be seen the brown outline of a small tent, with the figure of Ethel Gilman tending a fire close by. Sidewinder raised his voice in a hail, and waved his hand.

"Leave the talk to me, now," he growled. "It's all right—she's alone here. Don't want to frighten her. Scare a fool woman, and she's like a locoed horse."

"*Seguro, señor,*" assented the halfbreed with a flash of his white teeth. Sidewinder, now that the girl had seen them, turned and sent a stentorian hail down the cañon, bidding Emery come along up. Then he started climbing again to where the girl stood beside her little fire, staring at the arrivals in alarm and fear that could not be wholly veiled.

"Morning, miss," called Sidewinder as they approached her camp. "How's everything?"

"All right, thanks," she returned, low-voiced, obviously startled.

"I was goin' by with some friends o' mine," said Sidewinder, puffing with the climb, "and thought we'd stop in and see if you were all right—Bill, rustle up some firewood for the lady!"

Cholo Bill smiled and went about his task. Sidewinder approached the girl.

“We’re going to leave Ramsay with you a spell,” he said. “He’s a mite scratched up, but aint hurt to speak of. Fell off a hoss, I reckon. Miss, where’s that pistol of yours? Let’s have a look at it.”

He did not miss her start at Ramsay’s name. His gray eyes glittered on her, bored into her, and as she met that deadly gaze, there was a struggle in her face.

“You want—my pistol?” she faltered.

“If you please, ma’am.”

Her hand went to her bosom and produced a small, flat automatic. Still she hesitated, a surge of anger coming into her eyes—then as she looked past Sidewinder, she saw the other three figures turning the bend. At once she held out the weapon.

“There. Now what? You need not pretend that you want to help me.”

Sidewinder took the weapon and thrust it out of sight.

“We aint goin’ to hurt ye, not a mite,” he said harshly. “We got Ramsay where we want him, and neither one of ye is going to do any talkin’; that’s all. We’re goin’ to leave him and you here, and fix it so’s ye’ll stay here a spell. Nothin’ to be scared of, miss. If you’ve got any grub, let’s have some. I’ll send ye out plenty from town, as soon as we get back. The water’ll last ye long enough, so there’s nothin’ to be scared of.”

“I’ll get what I have,” she said quietly, then turned and went into the tent—whence she presently reappeared, with coffee and bacon, coffee-pot and skillet. Cholo Bill came in with an armload of brush, which he heaped over the fire, arranging several stones to hold the coffee-pot. A moment later Tom Emery strode up, followed by Ximines and Ramsay, who was still gagged and his arms bound. Miss Gilman stood staring at him, wide-eyed—this scratched and bruised and helpless man, with the garments hanging in shreds about him, was somewhat different from the Pat Ramsay she had known previously.

“I reckon he needs a shave, ma’am.” Sidewinder chuckled. “But that’ll keep. Set him against that rock, Manuel. The lady can let him loose after we’re gone. Get some water, Tom—the quicker we get a bite to eat and get off, the better.”

Disregarding their curious glances, Miss Gilman, looking only at the figure of Ramsay, returned to her tent and sat down before it. Sidewinder and his companions managed a makeshift bite to eat and a swallow of warm coffee apiece; then Sidewinder rose.

“We’ll leave the hosses here. Which of you boys can drive a car? Got to take ’em both to town with us.”

“I can,” said Tom Emery.

“All right—”

“Somebody better stay and watch things, and attend to the horses,” spoke up Manuel Ximines, who was rolling one of his evil-smelling cigarettes. “It would be foolish to leave horses here. Why not let me stay? I have nothing to do in town.”

Sidewinder nodded, with a slight look of chagrin at the slip he had so nearly made. To have left the horses here unwatched would indeed have been fatal.

“All right,” he said curtly. “You stay. Don’t bother the lady none. Better go on down to the lower cañon. I’ll send a driver back with the other boys and a load of grub in one o’ the cars. Then you boys get back to Hourglass in a hurry, and get started. I’ll have José Garcia out here by morning to ride herd on things.”

“And shall I hamstring this *hombre* now?” asked Ximines, gesturing with his cigarette toward Ramsay, who was glad that Miss Gilman could not understand the Mexican tongue.

“Let him wait till tonight. You’ll likely need help to hold him down, and we aint got any time to waste now. Come on, boys.”

With this, Sidewinder started down the cañon, Tom Emery and Cholo Bill at his heels. Manuel Ximines, however, remained sitting where he was, a thin smile on his black-avised features, in his glittering dark eyes the wild cruelty and the cunning that mark the *marihuana*-smoker.

Not until the three departing figures were out of sight around the bend did the girl move. Then, as Ximines showed no intention of leaving, she rose to her feet.

“Well?” she demanded sharply. “I suppose I may release Mr. Ramsay?”

Ximines turned his head and surveyed her. Under that gaze she shrank, and the color ebbed from her cheeks.

“You stay quiet or I shoot heem.” With this, the Mexican resumed his cigarette and stared again down the cañon.

The girl flashed a terrified, wondering look at Ramsay, who had drawn closer a step or two. His eyes, vainly trying to give her a message of warning, terrified her the more, and she stood motionless before the tent. Ximines, who perhaps wanted to let Sidewinder and the other two men get well away, paid her no attention but smoked on reflectively and stared down the cañon. He had drawn his pistol, however, and now held it idly in his lap.

Ramsay, arms bound and gagged as he was, was more terrified than the girl. He knew that Ximines might at any instant leap into stark blood-madness or wild passion. Alienists declare that the man who thinks himself about to explode is the most dangerous of all maniacs; but men on the border know that more dangerous than any maniac is the smoker of *marihuana*. So, with the intention of quietly working his way toward the girl, in a desperate hope that she might be able to release his bound arms, Ramsay continued his slow forward advance.

Then, sudden as the flashing stroke of a snake, Ximines was on his feet, pistol out.

“One more step, little señor, and I cut your throat and drink your blood!” he exclaimed, a wild and lurid glare in his eyes. A cry broke from the girl.

“Stop! Leave us alone—go on down and look after those horses!” She faced him as he turned to her, grinning. Despite the terror that was upon her, she met his grin defiantly, bravely. “Go on down the cañon as you were told to do!”

Ximines thrust away his pistol and took a step toward her, glaring eyes gripped upon her.

“Manuel has come to take you, little señorita of the white throat,” he declared in soft Spanish, and if the girl could not understand his words, his manner was beyond all mistake. “Come to me, little cooing dove! I shall show you how we treat the gringo señoritas in my country.”

Ramsay hurled himself forward, frantic with horror, flung himself at the Mexican. Ximines grinned, avoided the rush, deftly tripped the bound man and then struck him with an open-handed blow that sent him headlong among the rocks. Next instant, with a sudden and unexpected lurch forward, he was upon Ethel Gilman and had caught her in both arms.

“Come, señorita—”

She struck him across the face, staggering him, and struck him again so that he loosed her and fell back, hand to eyes. A wild scream burst from him, and he whipped out a knife, swaying as he stood.

“Ha! I shall drink your blood for that blow, white-throat!” he yelled.

Ramsay, pulling himself up, saw the Mexican start forward, knew himself helpless to intervene; then he saw something else.

The flap of the brown tent was shoved aside, and in the opening protruded the red nose, the tangled whiskers, the sharp little eyes of Sagebrush Beam. The Mexican saw that movement also, and furious as he was, halted and shifted hand to pistol. But he was too late.

“I reckon ye’ve crowded us far enough,” growled Sagebrush. The roar of a forty-five barked out, and lifted thunderously along the cañon walls.

CHAPTER XII

Sagebrush, dragging himself from the tent but not rising, called to Ramsay.

“Kick that skunk’s knife over yere, and I’ll cut ye free.”

Ramsay, who had been stupefied by the appearance of the desert rat, obeyed the order, and in another moment was rubbing his arms to get rid of the numbness. Ethel Gilman had dropped in a heap, mercifully unconscious; and almost at her side lay Manuel Ximines, his contorted features staring at the sky.

“Where on earth did you come from?” demanded Ramsay. “Man, I thought you were dead!”

“So I was,” and Sagebrush chuckled, “but I come to life again, found a hoss and got over yere. The lady give me a lift up the cañon and took care on me. I got a busted head and a bullet in the gizzard, but I’m gettin’ all right. Yessir! Like Yavapai Ferris, down Phœnix way. Time o’ the border raids, some greasers drapped him into a dry wash with two-three bullets; then some sojers come along, and the greasers crawled into the wash for shelter, and Yavapai set up with a gun in each hand and plugged ten of ’em. The ’leventh got away, and Yavapai said he’d ha’ been cured pronto if he’d got the ’leventh. Yessir, same here. Pluggin’ that there p’izen skunk sure done me good. I’d have done it earlier, only I didn’t figger on drawin’ Sidewinder back yere. S’pose you drap him into the cañon ’fore the lady wakes up. Git his gun, too.”

Ramsay stooped above the dead Mexican and found that the latter’s automatic was his own pistol, which had been taken from him when captured. At one side of the upper flat was a great bunch of yucca, its spiny perpendicular leaves topped by the remains of a glorious cluster of creamy, bell-like blooms. Carrying the body to this, Ramsay dropped it out of sight.

“Don’t forget the spot,” said Sagebrush anxiously. “I reckon there’s a reward for that gent down south.”

“Never mind talking now,” said Ramsay, with a glance at the unconscious girl. “Got any more grub in there? Then lay it out—get breakfast started, anyhow.”

He went to the pool below, sluiced head and neck and arms with the cold water. Then he turned to the girl and lifted her head in his arms. He was about to bathe her face, when her eyes opened and looked up into his, startled and wide in recognition.

“You’re all right,” he said quietly, and smiled. “Sit still a minute, young lady, and take it easy.”

Color rising in her cheeks, the girl sat up, then sprang to her feet, staring around.

“Where is he?”

“He done went away, ma’am,” said Sagebrush solemnly. “Yessir. That Mex done seen the error of his ways and got converted. I never seen a Mex get converted so sudden before, neither, nor with such good results.”

“And we owe Sagebrush a vote of thanks for converting him,” added Ramsay, turning to the fire. “Breakfast ready in a minute, Miss Gilman. Have you any biscuits cooked up?”

“Yere’s some store biscuits.” Sagebrush tossed out a package. “Say, Perfesser! I’m right worried about somethin’.”

“About what?” asked Ramsay.

“Why, d’you s’pose that cuss Sidewinder will steal them magazines o’ mine? I left ’em to the hotel in my pack. I got six months’ store o’ magazines there, and I’m readin’ a long story in one of ’em. I been thinking a lot about that there story in the last six months, and I’m gettin’ real anxious to finish it. If Sidewinder steals ’em—”

“He wont,” said Ramsay, laughing to himself. “He wont. I’ll nab those two friends of his when they come back with the car this afternoon, and we’ll all drop in on Sidewinder tonight and surprise him.”

Sagebrush was sitting up, and they joined him, all three feeling considerably benefited by the coffee and a bite of food. Miss Gilman asked no more questions about Ximines, and Ramsay outlined what had taken place in Hourglass Cañon.

“How badly is our friend here hurt?” Ramsay asked of Miss Gilman after he had ended his story.

“He’ll be on his feet in a few days. I took out the bullet—I’ve had a little experience nursing—and there’s nothing very much the matter with him. He lost a good deal of blood.”

“Blood’s cheap.” Sagebrush grinned, as he leaned back comfortably. He seemed to have quite gotten over all his aversion to this particular woman. “Best thing for blood is good fat lizard-meat. I’ll get me a likely chuckwalla and lay him in the ashes, and feed up. Some says pack-rats make good meat, but I dunno. I’ve et rattlesnake, but my gosh! A feller has to draw the line somewhere, and I draws it at pack-rats. So you’re figgering on roundin’ up Sidewinder tonight, Perfesser?”

“Yes,” responded Ramsay. “If I can get Tom Emery and Cholo Bill—”

“Ye can’t do it noways,” said Sagebrush with savage emphasis. “Don’t be a durned fool and try it, Perfesser. Even if ye got them two fellers covered, would they give in again? Not much. They’d figger that one of ’em would go down, the other might plug ye—and they’d take the chance. Yessir. After all that’s happened, they’d go for ye, gun or no gun. Ye took ’em by s’prise the first time, but there wont be no second time. The only way to get ’em is to drop ’em cold and get ’em dead.”

“I’m no murderer,” said Ramsay quietly. “And I’m going to get ’em, one way or the other; so stop your argument. Miss Gilman, why didn’t you put Sagebrush into your car and take him to town when he showed up here?”

“He wasn’t in shape to stand it,” said the girl. “He got here only last night, half dead and very weak from loss of blood. I had to give him instant attention, get out the bullet, and bandage him up. I should think you’d compliment me on the recovery of my patient, instead of finding fault!”

Ramsay smiled. “I’m not finding fault, except that I wish you were out of here. Well, shall we go down and attend to those horses? We’d better rid them of saddles and bridles and herd them as far up the cañon as possible. We have until tonight to lay our plans, and we must get the flivver that brings those rascals back here, as well as the two men themselves.”

“Then ye’d better figger on shootin’ first and fastest,” snapped out Sagebrush.

Ramsay laughed and made no response, as he started down the cañon with Miss Gilman at his side. When they stood beside the great boulder of pink granite, with the piñon trees growing out of the cleft above, he paused.

“This is where my brother came,” he said, looking around. “I suppose he’s buried somewhere near here—if he’s buried at all. And there’s gold in these rocks.”

"It's a beautiful place," said the girl softly, staring at the pool with its great clusters of yucca flowers and lilies. "I suppose these flowers will all be gone in a few weeks, Mr. Ramsay?"

He gave her a whimsical look. "Can't you make it Pat, yet?"

She shook her head, gayly enough. "Not yet. Look up there above the boulder—what a site that would be for a house!"

"You can have it," he said, starting on again. "I want none of this place—I'd never get away from the thought of poor Alec. No, the place you should see is Hourglass Cañon. There's a real beauty-spot, with water the year around. If I were you, I'd grubstake old Sagebrush and set him to work looking for gold in this cañon. My brother Alec was no fool, and if he thought there was gold here in paying quantities, it is probably here. Then you come over to Hourglass Cañon with me and start your chicken-ranch."

She gave him a laughing look. "You own that other place, then?"

"No, but I will own it as soon as the papers can be put through. Do you want half?"

"Tell you later," she returned, and pointed. "There are the horses."

During the next half-hour Ramsay and Miss Gilman were busy in the extreme. They unsaddled the five horses, got the poor beasts free of bridles, and then started to drive them up the cañon as far as the bend. Having found some of his own supplies lying cached among the trees, Ramsay left the girl to handle the horses and himself turned back down to the mouth of the cañon.

There, where the cañon gave on to the open desert, he approached the clump of piñon and mesquite, and dragged forth the pack of supplies which he had seen. It had evidently been flung out of his car by Sidewinder. He stooped to open the pack and examine its contents—then he suddenly stood up. A queer noise had startled him, a noise which made him glance incredulously at the sky. An airplane?

No. He turned and stood transfixed. There, approaching at full speed, leaping and bounding on the rough desert floor, was one of the two vanished flivvers, and all three men were in it.

He stood staring, helpless, not daring to produce the pistol from his pocket and open fire. That might have been his best chance; yet he neglected it. With a grinding squeal of brakes, the car rushed down to a halt ten feet away. Sidewinder leaped out in the cloud of dust, followed by Tom Emery and Cholo Bill.

"Manuel! Where's Ximines?" demanded Sidewinder hastily.

"Up the cañon." Ramsay waved his hand. "What's the matter?"

Sidewinder turned to the two men, who had rifles in their hands. Obviously, something very much was the matter, for they were pouring out oaths at sight of the horses, and were in frantic haste.

"Go get Manuel and the hosses—quick!" snapped Sidewinder. "This is as far as they can get in their car—we got the hosses, and they aint got any. Move, durn ye!"

The two men stood their rifles against the car and started away, toward the staring figure of Miss Gilman and the slowly moving horses.

CHAPTER XIII

Sidewinder stood snarling malevolently at Ramsay, his glittering gray eyes filled with a greenish light, his gray mask of a face bitter to see.

“What’s happened?” demanded Ramsay.

“Hell’s to pay, that’s what! If I thought you were behind it, I’d leave you here to the buzzards. Dunno but what I will anyhow.”

Ramsay, frowning in perplexity, came closer to him.

“What do you mean?” he inquired. Sidewinder flung out a hand toward the desert behind him.

“I mean that the sheriff’s got on our trail; that’s what! Prob’ly trailed that last bunch of hosses. Now we got to get along to Hourglass Cañon, and we’ll take you and the girl so’s ye wont do no talkin’.”

“Oh!” said Ramsay, and then lifted his eyes to the desert. “Is that dust caused by their car?”

An oath on his lips, Sidewinder whirled—and Ramsay struck.

He struck straight and hard, mercilessly so, and his fist caught Sidewinder just behind the ear. The little man was knocked off his feet, knocked headlong into the radiator of the car, and fell in a limp and senseless heap, stunned.

Ramsay, carried off his balance by the furious energy of his own blow, staggered. As he did so, a pistol barked and a bullet scraped his very hair. He came around, to see Tom Emery and Cholo Bill, who were not yet fifty feet away, in the act of firing on him.

A leap, and he was behind the car. No protection here from heavy bullets—but he had his own pistol out now, and was taking his chances. A bullet crashed into the frame of the car. Another smashed the windshield. Ramsay was firing, rapidly but coolly. Now he ducked swiftly to the other end of the car, darted out into full sight, took two quick, sure shots. He saw Cholo Bill go down and lie quiet; then Emery came for him on the run, red whiskers flaming in the sunlight, pistol spitting.

Ramsay stepped out, deliberately, and took aim.

A bullet streaked fire between arm and side, searing his ribs—but to his shot Tom Emery’s giant figure came crashing forward, rolled over once and then lay sprawled out. For a moment Ramsay stood quiet, scarcely daring to realize that he was unhurt save for scratches, until he saw Ethel Gilman running down the cañon toward him.

Then he sprang forward and leaned over Emery, only to rise at once and hurry to the side of Cholo Bill. Just in time, too, for the halfbreed, leg broken by a bullet, was trying to reach his fallen pistol. Ramsay kicked the weapon away, and Cholo Bill, with a low groan, relaxed into unconsciousness. As Ramsay obtained the outlaw’s knife, the girl arrived on the scene. He looked up at her with a slow laugh.

“Sagebrush said it couldn’t be done, but he was only partly right. Emery’s gone. Can you fix up some sort of bandage for this chap, after I get his arms lashed behind him? His leg’s broken, I think. The sheriff is on his way here, according to Sidewinder—and I’ll have to attend to that gentleman before he wakes up. We’ve got him, and we’ve got Cholo Bill, and it’s a good haul.”

As the white-faced girl nodded and knelt, Ramsay lashed the arms of the wounded man firmly behind him with the gay silk kerchief that had been at Cholo Bill's neck, then rose and ran back to the car. Here again he had not an instant to lose, for Sidewinder Crowfoot was stirring, was clinging to the car and trying to haul himself up. Knowing with what incredible swiftness the man could strike, Ramsay did not hesitate, but stooped with a blow that drove Sidewinder prostrate again, then flung himself upon the fallen man and in five minutes had him disarmed and firmly bound hand and foot.

He rejoined the girl, to find her finishing her task as well as circumstances would permit, and as she took his hand to rise, he saw a change come into her face.

"Another car—there!"

Ramsay swung around, and a laugh broke from him at sight of another flivver bearing down for the cañon, crowded with men.

"Good! It looks as though the law had come to Pinocate Cañon at last, young lady!"

Fifteen minutes afterward Ramsay and the grizzled sheriff from Chuckwalla City were accompanying Miss Gilman up the cañon toward the girl's camp, while below them the deputies were getting the prisoners loaded up and were bringing the five horses to the cars. All five of those horses had been among the bunch recently stolen from the other side of the range, and two of the deputies were preparing to ride on to Hourglass Cañon and take possession of the herd there.

As the three came to the bend in the cañon, Ramsay halted and drew from his pocket his brother's deed, still in its torn envelope.

"Sheriff, here's evidence of a Federal charge to lay against Sidewinder Crowfoot—mail-robbery. I think it will serve to give him a long time in the penitentiary to think upon his sins. Suppose you look it over, while I say a word to Miss Gilman, will you?"

The sheriff met his whimsical gaze, grinned, and then strode on around the bend with the evidence in his hand. Ramsay turned to the girl.

"What do you say about Hourglass Cañon, young lady? Do you want to share it with me?"

"Well, I'll go and look at it, but I wont promise anything."

"All right. That's fair enough. And you'll call me Pat?"

Her eyes surveyed him merrily.

"Not until—you get a shave!" she said, and then was gone, running after the tall figure of the sheriff, a laugh floating back to Ramsay.

He followed, smiling.

THE END

[The end of *Cactus and Rattlers* by Henry Bedford-Jones]